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What's in a name? Discipline nomenclature as rhetorical construct

Abstract:

The title and themes of the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference for 2010 – Strange bedfellows or perfect partners – the role of literary studies in creative writing programs – imply both uneasy and harmonious relationships between two pedagogic territories that are independent yet destined to co-exist. Also suggested by the conference is that those who claim citizenship of literary studies and creative writing are involved in ongoing processes in which boundaries are drawn and decisions taken about why, how and when paths between the two territories should be opened up and travelled. Such processes take many forms and respond to many needs, both practical and rhetorical, to define areas of teaching and scholarship. Common to all of them, however, is the adoption, use and, in some cases, adaptation of discipline nomenclature.

This paper explores discipline nomenclature as a rhetorical construct and, in so doing, seeks to inform the ‘dialogue between writing and literary studies’ that is an intended outcome of the conference. Moving beyond populist and pejorative views of rhetoric, the paper draws on rhetorical theory to demonstrate the ways in which such titles as ‘creative writing’ and ‘literary studies’ are used to denote specialised fields in response to particular circumstances, but are also malleable constructs. By applying the work of theorist Richard Weaver, the paper also discusses the use in discipline titles of ‘ultimate terms’, or ‘god terms’, to connote fields of undeniable status within the academy, as opposed to those that might be perceived as being more prosaic. The paper also draws attention to problems inherent in the use of ‘ultimate terms’.

Consideration of the rhetorical implications of ‘creative writing’ and ‘literary studies’, and cognate titles, is timely. Australia is moving to a deregulated system of higher education and the adoption of national curricula for English in primary and secondary schools, both of which prompt reflection on the positioning of writing as a discrete pedagogy and field of scholarship. In addition, the preparation of the AAWP’s written history, itself an important rhetorical artefact for the discipline of writing in this country, prompts reflection on the ways in which the association and its members define and promote their discipline.

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Keywords:

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The title and themes of the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference for 2010 – Strange bedfellows or perfect partners – the role of literary studies in creative writing programs – imply both uneasy and harmonious relationships between two pedagogic territories that are independent yet destined to co-exist. Also suggested by the conference is that those who claim citizenship of literary studies and creative writing are involved in ongoing processes in which boundaries are drawn and decisions taken about why, how and when paths between the two territories should be opened up and travelled. Such processes take many forms and respond to many needs, both practical and rhetorical, to define areas of teaching and scholarship. Common to all of them, however, is the adoption, use and, in some cases, adaptation of discipline nomenclature.

Rituals of naming, and declaring citizenship, are common in the Australian higher education sector. Primary places of residence are declared when researchers choose field names and codes. Institutional restructuring and the renaming of organisational units call for the adoption of new ‘home’ names. Courses are coded so that systems work and resources can be allocated. New course titles might need not only to reflect content but also to signal status, novelty or relevance. These are only a few examples. Naming is fraught, tied as it is to several objectives that sometimes conflict: inclusiveness, distinctiveness, practicality and identification.

Contentious as they may be, rituals of naming also represent the overt use of language to define communities, here using communities broadly, to mean a group of people bound by shared characteristics of some sort. Ways in which communities are constituted or threatened by language are explored in a collection of essays edited by J Michael Hogan, *Rhetoric and community: studies in unity and fragmentation* (1998). Hogan states:

Recognizing that communities are largely defined, and rendered healthy or dysfunctional, by the language they use to characterize both themselves and others, all [contributors to the collection] share an abiding concern with how communities are constituted and sustained – or, in some cases, threatened and disrupted – by the words their leaders choose to characterize both themselves and others. (xv)

This paper shares that concern. The focus of the paper is the discipline of writing as an academic community, and the implications of the ways in which the community defines itself and its neighbour, literary studies.

Writing boundaries

Contributing to the definition of the discipline of writing in Australia have been the AAWP and its journal *TEXT*, initially subtitled *The journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs* and later changed to *Journal of writing and writing courses*. *TEXT* is a controlled public space for the scholarly community to which it addresses itself. Its title, and that of the AAWP, takes an inclusive approach through the use of ‘writing’ to define a discipline territory, or community, open to diverse membership.

Reflection on writing as a discipline has characterised *TEXT* since it began in 1997. This is hardly surprising, given the emphasis placed by *TEXT* on creative writing, which emerged as a ‘new’ discipline (as documented by Dawson 2005). Contributors to *TEXT* have considered the implications of writing’s affiliations with other disciplines; for example, an early editorial suggests that creative writing might survive the then changes to research funding that were disadvantageous to the creative arts, ‘[b]ecause of its proximity to English/literary studies and communications; because its domain of enquiry overlaps with sociology, psychology, ethics and cultural studies; because it is textual; because it uses the same language and media typically used by the “recognised” research areas...’ (Brady & Krauth, October 1997), and Webb (2000) later draws attention to the relevance of cultural studies to students in writing. *TEXT* has published articles that survey writing from different perspectives; for example, these might take stock of discrete fields within writing (as does Krauth 2000 in relation to creative writing), define and legitimise certain specialisations (as does Surma 2000 in relation to professional writing), or reposition within writing objects of study normally associated with other disciplines (as does Williamson 2008 in relation to special-interest magazine writing). Collectively, such articles explore, map and, in some cases, remap the territory of writing.

The metaphor of disciplines as territories is central to this paper, but it is not original. For instance, Van Loon comments, in an article on writing theory and literary theory, that the AAWP ‘has worked to define and map out a number of territories’ and refers to ‘the new crossroads that teachers of writing are meeting’ (Dibble & van Loon 2000), and Surma (2000) refers to ‘marking the territory’ of professional writing. The discipline-as-territory metaphor usefully lends itself to metaphors of travel and discovery, which also have been used by others. In an issue of *College English* devoted to the evolution of creative writing, editors Ritter and Vanderslice state that ‘creative writing as a discipline is at a crossroads’, and that it is timely ‘to look back at where creative writing has been and forward to where it is going, as part of this noisy and powerful humanities caravan’ (2009: 213). They refer to the ‘critical landscape of creative writing’ and ‘set[ting] a new course’ (2009: 213). To move to a related discipline, cultural studies was, according to Warner and Siskin, ‘a hitchhiker’s dream’ for anybody ‘looking to leave the canonical home of literary studies in the late twentieth century... it promised ... a journey beyond the then current horizons of literary study’ (2008: 94). It seems from these rather lively metaphors that those who look to new discipline frontiers are a bold, adventurous lot.

The corollary of this, however, is the difficulty of naming territories and defining borders. Surma, in her advocacy of professional writing as a legitimate academic field, draws attention to ‘a problem with naming and categorising, typical of our postmodern predicament, where “the very idea of a discipline must be open to critique” (Blake 1997: 164), and with distinguishing, in particular, professional writing from creative writing’ (2000). Surma cautions against adopting ‘crudely reductionist’ and contestable oppositions: ‘creative writing is allotted to the exclusive, abstract realms of art and culture, professional writing to that of business and the “real” world’ (2000). It is through naming, the articulation of one as opposed to the other, that such oppositions are expressed.

The naming of disciplines, and specialisations within them, could be seen to be counter-productive beyond its practical utility in an organisational sense. As Hogan notes (1998: xv), however, the use of language is instrumental to the cohesion or division of communities, and, in this sense, the naming of disciplines is an essentially rhetorical act. Rhetoric is conceived here not in its popular, pejorative sense of being inconsequential public discourse, but as understood within contemporary rhetorical criticism. Underpinning the many definitions of rhetoric that inform this field of enquiry are notions of choice or change for an audience; rhetoric engenders certain actions or views of the self. It is the task of rhetorical critics to identify and explain the ways in which this occurs, across many types of communication that extend well beyond the speeches with which rhetoric was traditionally associated. In terms of discipline nomenclature, the question to ask is how language is used to define academic communities, and what 'words ... leaders choose to characterize both themselves and others', to cite Hogan once more (1998: xv).

The concept of a discipline is, itself, open to interpretation. Over time, large, traditional disciplines dissect themselves into smaller areas of specialisation. Nations form states, cities form suburbs, and so on. Chick, writing from a north American perspective, illustrates this well through her definition of English:

The discipline we call English or English Studies is actually a collection of several disciplines, including literary studies, composition studies, creative writing, and linguistics, with the first two [literary studies and composition studies] representing the majority. Literary studies revolves around the interpretation of literary texts and is often divided into areas of specialization... (2009: 39)

Chick then lists the areas of specialization, which include 'nationality and geography ... chronology ... politics ... and perspective or theory' (2009: 39), all of which intersect with fields beyond literary studies. Chick writes in a collection of essays that explores 'signature pedagogies', which is informed by a central question: 'How does each discipline foster deep learning and help students think like disciplinary experts?' (Gurung, Chick & Haynie 2009: xvii). Behind this question, however, is that of what constitutes a discipline, and at what point a specialisation becomes a discipline. The obvious answer, at least communally if not necessarily institutionally, is that a discipline is something that is named as such by those who perceive themselves to reside within it.

The discipline lexicon

Involved in processes of naming is the use of a lexicon, here defining lexicon as 'words that are unique to a group or individual and that have special rhetorical power' (Hart & Daughton 2005: 152). Within the lexicon used by those who teach English (in its broadest sense), the word 'studies' is especially useful to connote a field characterised by critical, analytical enquiry; it needs only an adjective added to it to denote a new field (for example, in 2006, Latham and Scholes announced in *PMLA* the rise of periodical studies in an article of that name). Mayers notes that in the United States, 'almost all of the disparate areas covered by the umbrella of 'English' are commonly referred to, or at least understood as, types of "studies"' (2009: 217).

To illustrate, Mayers mentions ‘composition studies, literary studies, film studies, cultural studies’, and in commenting that these ‘should be familiar to any reader of [College English]’ (2009: 218), he specifies the ‘group’ for which the discipline lexicon is meaningful. ‘Writing’ is another noun used within the lexicon, but it signals doing, rather than responding to something that has already been done. Mayers (2009) extrapolates this distinction to within writing itself, when he advocates ‘creative writing’ as a field distinct from ‘creative writing studies’. Here, words within the lexicon are arranged in various permutations to create nuances of meaning.

‘Ultimate’ terms

While words within the lexicon all have ‘special rhetorical power’ (Hart & Daughton 2005: 152) for the communities bound by them, some of these words inherently connote certain status, at least superficially. In *The ethos of rhetoric* (1953), Richard Weaver refers to ‘ultimate terms’. These

are terms to which the highest respect is paid in a culture and to which the populace appears to attribute the greatest sanction. Such terms are rhetorical absolutes in that they generally are uncontested and are widely accepted by members of a culture. (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 2002: 172)

Weaver identified three types of ultimate terms: god, devil and charismatic, of which the god term is superior. Weaver considered ‘progress’ to be a god term of the 1950s. Foss, Foss and Trapp identify ‘technology’ as a twenty-first century god term (2002: 172). Sustainability could be regarded as another.

Elsewhere (Williamson 2010), I assert that ‘creativity’ and ‘creative’ have become god terms in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As with any ultimate term, the god term is easily comprehended and has distinct connotations, and it has high status in terms of social values. Rhetorically, it can define boundaries (Hart & Daughton 2005: 155-56). To give some examples, the Australian government named a cultural policy statement *Creative nation*, and Richard Florida (2002) named the ‘creative class’. Perhaps the best example, however, is the naming of the ‘creative industries’.

Because of their very qualities, god terms lend themselves to overuse and exploitation. That is nothing new in relation to ‘creativity’; over three decades ago, Raymond Williams (1965: 19) expressed concern about the word’s ubiquity and dilution of meaning. Creativity now sells products from washing powder to sewing machines (Williamson 2010). The god term ‘creative’ can even combine with others of high status to produce, for example, Creative Freedom or Creative Technology (the names of companies in the UK) or Creative Sustainability (the name of a masters degree program offered by a Finnish university). That we are encouraged to see ourselves as essentially creative beings, albeit ones whose creativity may be dormant, is shown through clichés such as ‘unleash your creativity’ or ‘release your creativity’. Entering these into a Google search reveals an array of printed material that illustrates this point, as well as the high social value afforded to creativity. Similar results are returned by a search for ‘how to be creative’. The ‘how-to’ phenomenon is, of course,

represented in books and magazines on writing, as Brophy observes (2000). Creativity now has populist appeal.

Weaver suggests that the rhetorical use of ultimate terms brings with it an ethical responsibility, and that because of that ‘ultimate terms [should] be ultimate in some rational sense’ (1953: 232). While his statement would hardly stop in their tracks those who exploit ‘creative’ and ‘creativity’ for commercial or other ends, it does prompt questions about contemporary uses of these words, including within higher education. This is especially so in the discipline of writing. Influencing students’ perceptions of creative writing taught in universities, and their own engagement with writing, are preconceptions about writing and creativity, which Freiman (2003) refers to as a type of ‘dangerous dreaming’. Exacerbating this is what Freiman calls the ‘vexed question’ of defining and measuring creativity that, as she notes, is discipline specific (2003).

‘Literary’, too, can be regarded as a god term, but it differs from ‘creative’ in several notable respects. To be creative is an undeniably higher-order attribute across many enterprises, such as education, management or the arts. ‘Literary’, on the other hand, has fewer applications, being confined as it is to works of literature (however defined) and situated, therefore, within the domain of the arts. Despite its cultural status, ‘literary’ suffers less from pervasive and populist use.

Implications for disciplines as communities

It could be argued that when used in a specialised and informed context, as in university teaching and research, any populist connotations of such words as ‘creative’ hardly matter, especially when the word qualifies another. Discipline names, however, articulate and are used by communities comprising not only permanent residents (those who teach and research) but also many temporary residents (students), for whom their communities may be formative, whether personally or professionally. A common understanding of what it means to be part of ‘creative writing’ or ‘literary studies’, or the overlaps between them, cannot be assumed.

In relation to literary studies, Chick warns against ‘packing’ disciplines in such ways that those who teach pass on their own practices and views. She, along with others, calls for a signature pedagogy in literary studies that is characterised by classroom conversations about, and interrogations of, what literary studies is, does or should be or, in other words, replicating in the classroom the types of conversations had by leaders of the discipline, including conversations about interdisciplinary relationships. The same could be said of writing, especially given its acknowledged affiliations with other disciplines, and no doubt such conversations already occur in some Australian universities. Impediments will, nevertheless, arise because of entrenched institutional practices that reinforce disciplines as independent territories. Gerald Graff, for example, expresses amazement ‘by the things that college faculties never talk about, apparently just because nobody makes us talk about them’ (2009: 271). More specifically, he states that ‘[t]he connection between creative writing and conventional literary study is another of the many questions about writing – and more

broadly about the nature of academic intellectual culture – that we avoid discussing just because we can' (2009: 271). Any relationship, according to Graf, is left to students to perceive, rather than articulated by 'working together or having sustained conversations with our colleagues about what our goals are and how well we are achieving them' (2009: 273). In relation to creative writing and literary studies, Graff concedes that dividing specialisations realistically reflects the needs of complex organisations, but he also advocates connecting the two through a collegial approach to teaching. Implied here is an ethical responsibility associated with the use of discipline nomenclature that, in an institutional context, potentially reveals itself in complex and ongoing ways.

Through its identification and exploration of creative writing and literary studies as neighbouring and mutually enriching territories, the 2010 AAWP conference represents national recognition by those in writing of this responsibility. The ways in which the two disciplines can productively realise their relationship have been expounded by others in *TEXT* (as in, and as noted by, Woods 2002), and in individual papers at the conference, and are beyond the scope of this one. This paper does, however, encourage reflection on the rhetorical implications of nomenclature, especially as Australia expects to move to a deregulated system of higher education and the adoption of national curricula for English in primary and secondary schools, both of which prompt reflection on the positioning and shaping of writing as a field of pedagogy and scholarship. In addition, the preparation of the AAWP's written history, itself an important rhetorical artefact for the discipline of writing in this country, prompts reflection on the ways in which the association and its members define and promote what they do.

This paper does not advocate a sudden and spectacular change of discipline nomenclature; however, it does draw attention to nomenclature as a rhetorical construct and, in so doing, seeks to inform the 'dialogue between writing and literary studies' that is the intended outcome of the conference. Titles such as 'creative writing' and 'literary studies' are used to denote specialised fields in response to particular circumstances, but are also malleable constructs around which are ethical responsibilities associated with their use.

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