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You can't be Shakespearean talking about the institutionalisation of sex offenders: Creativity and creative practices of multilingual doctoral writers

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ABSTRACT

The enigma of creativity is rarely discussed in doctoral education, yet it nestles snugly against the term originality, a key criterion for thesis assessment. This article engages with this occluded topic through an investigation of how four L2/multilingual PhD candidates studying in the Faculty of Arts in an Australian university perceive the presence of creativity in their doctoral writing. It also explores how and when these writers feel they can be creative in their writing practices. Methodological approaches included a workshop program designed around the concept of creativity for Arts doctoral students, followed by individual and group interviews. The findings indicate that while each doctoral writer actively engaged with the idea of creativity they also encountered social, cultural, political and other environmental barriers. These constraints often led to a lack of writer agency which, in turn, led to self-censorship. Nevertheless, several enablers to their creativity were uncovered with participants recognising the usefulness of learning specific writing practices and other strategies to allow creativity to emerge in their work. The article also offers a model of creativity that may provide a useful starting point for others to use in understanding the highly complex role creativity holds for doctoral writing.

1. Introduction

Creativity is a term that resists neat definitions. Its 'buzzword' status bleeds across and within academic, professional and self-help contexts engendering what Marsen (2014) terms a "false sense of transparency" (p. 90) and thereby allowing most commentators to avoid a direct definition. Despite this, some scholars view creativity as an important resource that deserves attention. Kramsch (2009), writing about the relationship between creativity and language, reminds us of the ability of language not only to produce texts, but to reframe human thought. Jones (2016) also strongly believes in the potential of creativity to alter the status quo: "Just as creativity in linguistic form disrupts our expectations about language, creativity in language use has the potential to disrupt habitual social practices, social orders and relationships of power" (p. 6). One possible affordance of creativity is that it can help us to work around the constraints of intellectual life. This transformative property of creativity is summed up by Blommaert (2005) who sees it as "situated within existing hegemonies yet attempting to alter them by shifting borders and by creating new (contrasting) forms of consciousness" (p. 106). The concept of creativity, although occasionally positioned as a problem itself, may also help solve problems and provide solutions and, therefore, needs to be explored more fully.

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Although it is not the goal of this article to provide a 'watertight' definition of creativity, at this stage it could be useful to unpack our key terms a little further; namely what we mean by the terms 'creativity', 'creative practices' and 'doctoral writing'. Firstly, it should be stated that the study's primary goal was to discover the perceptions held by Arts PhD students regarding the presence of creativity in their written work. Although many definitions and explanations of creativity exist, we avoided a 'top-down' approach during this investigation; rather, we were content to allow understandings of the term emerge in a more organic and gradual way through in-class discussions and follow-up interviews with writers. We were also conscious of not restricting our investigations to one specific genre within doctoral writing. Our investigation sought holistic comment by student writers on the many and varied types of written work they produced throughout their candidature − not only the final 'thesis document.' Secondly, by creative practices, we mean the specific writing practices that students undertake while producing their work. This could, for example, include the use of 'creative' writing techniques such as scene-building, characterisation or extended, creative use of voices from the literature in 'dialogue' with each other. However, similar with Chanock (2007), we also see creative writing practices as emerging whenever thesis writers take 'creative choices' over the construction of their written work, not so much because the writing itself is creative but because the writer engages "in a creative way of carrying out the work of the thesis" (p. 37). Finally, although we acknowledge the hugely important role of supervisors in prompting and shaping students' doctoral writing, our focus remains firmly on the doctoral writers themselves, so the ideas of doctoral supervisors regarding creativity, although critical in many respects, lie outside the scope of this article.

Although subtly 'camouflaged' in the assessment criteria for the doctoral thesis (Lovitts, 2007; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Phillips & Pugh, 2005), creativity becomes crucial in both the production and assessment of textual worth at this highest level of academic achievement. Interestingly, it is often used synonymously with 'innovation' and 'originality'. The latter term is of special interest to this study. This close 'cousin' of creativity is important as the PhD is awarded for 'an original contribution to knowledge' by universities based in the western tradition. Philips and Pugh (2005), who routinely conflate originality with creativity, assert that originality can entail much more than "setting down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time" (p. 62) and list more than fifteen different definitions of originality. They also note how definitions of originality can change dramatically over the course of a typical candidature. This is important for our understanding of creativity as we believe, in most cases, the valuable fruit of originality in doctoral writing results from the prior germination of sustained creativity and creative writing practices.

In higher education contexts, creativity tends to have more a practical application. Indeed, the application of creativity to solve a problem, create a solution or help in the creation of new knowledge often viewed as an essential part of the academic 'apprenticeship' or initiation to the academy (Gorman, 2015). Consequently, notions of creativity are often tied to the idea imaginative effort subject to evaluation or expert judgement. In the Arts, similar with other disciplines, issues of judgement of written work are often tied to considerations of discourse community and genre. However, it is difficult to speak of one, uniform discourse community in Arts with its own set of prescribed genres as our research site shelters many diverse disciplinary traditions, thus rendering the task of describing typical 'genre' features in the doctoral writing produced there difficult. Indeed, doctoral writing in the Faculty of Arts covers a range of genres from more traditionally structured and executed theses to 'creative practices' theses – those consisting of part 'creative work' and part written exegesis (most notable in the field of 'Creative Writing'). Notwithstanding this diversity, our study focuses on doctoral writers producing a more traditional type of thesis – those which Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Tuckwell (2012) might call 'simple conventional' or 'complex conventional' and not 'topic-based' or based on 'creative practice/s' (see also Ravelli, Paltridge, & Starfield, 2014).

In our experience, a pronounced lack of understanding exists regarding the place of creativity in both the process and practice of doctoral writing, with its role and impact left largely unexplored. This is manifested in mismatching perceptions of what creativity is and could be. What candidates may perceive of as creativity in their doctoral writing may be very different from what supervisors or disciplinary 'others' consider creative. In addition, many doctoral students return to their studies as advanced-level academic writers with strong views about how academic knowledge should be constructed. Another potentially fraught connection exists between students re-commencing study and the broader social, political or cultural forces at work in the academy. These impacts may have a restraining influence on writers and could pressure them to be more risk-averse in their work and in their general attitudes towards creativity.

The wider literature of doctoral writing (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Casanave & Li, 2008; Kamler & Thomson, 2014) acknowledges that multilingual doctoral writers – defined in this article as those writing in a second or additional language – can experience more difficulties and of a different type than monolingual/L1 writers. Paltridge and Starfield (2007) list these difficulties under four main types; psycho-affective, behavioural, rhetorical (i.e. language-based persuasive strategies) and social issues (p. 43). Routinely 'parachuted' into a doctoral environment in a new culture, these writers may commence work without the disciplinary and cultural knowledge that many local doctoral students take for granted. For example, uncertainty about who their readers will be and what expectations these readers will have of their work can be particularly daunting for L2 doctoral writers. Of course, these and other issues are exacerbated due to the isolated nature of the doctoral experience.

How multilingual doctoral writers perceive the role of creativity in their writing lies at the core of the current study. To accomplish this, we first present a detailed conceptual framework followed by an explanation of methodological approaches. The experience of creativity by four multilingual doctoral writers is explored more fully in the results section through the lens of our four components of creativity. This section details how these writers utilise or reject these components in the intense lived experience of their doctoral studies. The discussion section highlights specific enablers and constraints on creativity as identified by the four doctoral writers and pedagogical strategies that could address these. The struggle to find and maintain a confident writer's voice is a feature of our respondents' emerging perspectives around creativity in this section. A conclusion revisits the area of perceptions and blockages around creativity in doctoral writing and offers suggestions about how we might usefully respond to these.