Right before Writing

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Summary

The Department of Arts and Culture has formulated the objective of "stimulation and development of South African culture and identity through the development of writing, literary expression and literature" (*The Cultural Strategy Group Report*, DACST 1998: 28). This is linked to a programme which seeks to "[contribute] to the ability of South Africans to be innovative and competitive" and "promote innovation and new literary forms and genres" (DACST 1998: 31). Creative writing programmes are flourishing at major South African universities and creative writing remains a heavily weighted part of the matriculation examination. How we teach creative writing is thus a matter of national concern.

Evidence suggests that the process of writing requires more preparation and time than is sometimes budgeted for when it is taught. Furthermore, this time before writing needs to be carefully managed and planned for, if teachers are to *teach* creative writing and not simply *ask* it of their learners. As Donald Murray (1982: 141), author and teacher of writing, says, we need to study the activity "at the workbench in the skull". This article forms part of the preparation for a qualitative investigation of the writing processes of successful publishing authors in South Africa and seeks to nuance this field of knowledge and to challenge reductive, undynamic ways of thinking about it.

Opsomming

Een van die oogmerke van die Departement van Kuns en Kultuur is om die Suid-Afrikaanse kultuur en identiteit te stimuleer en te bevorder deur die ontwikkeling van die skryfkuns, literêre ekspressie en letterkunde (*The Cultural Strategy Group Report*, DACST 1998: 28). Dit sluit aan by 'n program wat daarop gemik is om by te dra tot Suid-Afrikaners se vermoë om innoverend en mededingend te wees, en wat innovering en nuwe vorme van letterkunde en letterkundegenres bevorder (DACST 1998: 31). Die belangrikste Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite het florerende skryfskole, en kreatiewe skryfwerk dra steeds baie gewig in die matriekeksamen. Die wyse waarop skeppende skryfkuns onderrig word, is dus 'n saak van nasionale belang.

Daar is blyke dat die skryfproses meer voorbereiding en tyd verg as waarvoor daar tydens onderrig voorsiening gemaak word. Boonop moet dié tyd voor die skryf-aktiwiteit met omsigtigheid beplan en bestuur word sodat onderwysers kreatiewe skryfwerk kan *onderrig*, en dit nie bloot van hul leerders *vra* nie. Donald Murray (1982: 141), 'n skrywer en dosent in die skryfkuns, sê ons moet die skryfaktiwiteit by die "werksbank in die skedel" bestudeer. Hierdie artikel is deel van die voorbereiding

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vir 'n kwalitatiewe ondersoek na die skryfprosesse wat suksesvolle, gepubliseerde skrywers in Suid-Afrika volg. Die ondersoek is daarop gemik om hierdie kennisveld te nuanseer en om reduktiewe, niedinamiese denke daaroor te bevraagteken.

1 Right before Writing

1.1 Why Creative Writing is Important

A decade ago, the Department of Arts and Culture formulated an objective of "stimulation and development of South African culture and identity through the development of writing, literary expression and literature" (The Cultural Strategy Group Report, DACST 1998: 28). This is linked to a programme which seeks to "[contribute] to the ability of South Africans to be innovative and competitive" and "promote innovation and new literary forms and genres" (p. 31). Creative writing programmes are flourishing at major South African universities, and creative writing remains a heavily weighted part of the matriculation school leaving examination. How and why we teach creative writing is thus a matter of national concern. Sadly, however, it does not always attract the close attention it warrants, and the writing process is often poorly conceptualised and oversimplified.

Cultural psychologist, Jerome Bruner (in Armstrong 2007: 5) argues that "storytelling is implicit to the creation of human culture. The process of creating and telling stories appears to be fundamental to understanding of not only *what* it is to be human, but *how* it is we are human". He declares the "narrative gift" we all possess to be "as distinctly human as our upright posture and our opposable thumb and forefinger". However, as anyone who has attempted writing will testify, there is an enormous challenge when it comes to writing down these stories, so, as one teacher put it, "even though [novice writers] might be sure they have an important story to tell, they are often disappointed at how flat and uneven the story seems when they write it down" (p. 6). This is because "the craft of the written narrative is extremely complex, and uses very different skills than oral storytelling" (p. 6).

Evidence in fact suggests that the creative process of writing requires more preparation and time than is sometimes budgeted for in the teaching of creative writing, particularly in school. Furthermore, this time before writing needs to be more carefully managed and planned for, if teachers are to *teach* creative writing and not simply *ask* it of their learners. In order to better understand the writing process, a great deal of research has been conducted.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which writing is studied. The first is to focus entirely on what happens in the classroom at school or at university and to experiment with various techniques for teaching writing, to see which didactic method yields the best results. The other method is to study what successful writers in the world outside the educational institution are doing and to see whether their techniques and tips can be used in the classroom. Both types of research are important, as "[w]e need to know what separates expertise from mediocrity and what is needed … to foster continuing growth in competence" (Scardamalia 1993: 19).

There are distinct differences between how novice writers write and how expert writers write (cf. Kaufman 2002); these need elaboration if teachers are to understand where they are going with their students.

2 Some General Problems in the Teaching of Creative Writing

The thorny issue of talent has to be tackled head-on as it impacts on creative writing. Far too often one hears primary and high school teachers dismiss or praise learners for their talent or lack of it and say things like, "Wow, you are so creative!" or, "You will never be a writer," as if they have a divine intuition about these things and no further job to do. This has been referred to as "the Romantic legacy within English departments, characterized primarily by the notion that one either is or is not a writer, and that this cannot be changed by any amount of schooling" (Mayers 1999: 84). As one writing teacher and researcher puts it,

> I believe [talent] is a most devastating element in the classroom, causing many writers to give up, often before knowing whether they have *it* or not. It is too easy for a teacher to focus on the "talented ones" and make them the examples. And what happens to the rest of the class? They all sit around in awe …. The "untalented" writers begin hiding their work.
>
> (Teichmann 1994: 218)

This attitude does not serve those who are designated "talented" either, in my experience. I was fortunate enough to be labelled a "talented" writer in high school. I won poetry prizes and essay competitions and was praised mightily for all my efforts. However, I was not *taught* creative writing either. I was given topics and opportunities to write, but no help with technique based on what real writers do. When I arrived in the world outside of school, I was daunted by the amount I still had to learn and completely unaware of where to get such training. I realised I was apparently quite good at something I didn't understand at all.

I thus firmly believe that our teaching of creative writing in school needs to draw on what successful writers have to tell us. Neither one's aspiring nor one's reluctant young writers in school are served by a programme that tests what it does not teach. Educationally, this is a bit like holding a beauty contest and giving marks for good skin, hair and legs. We have to take more responsibility for this thing we call creative writing, especially seeing as many emotions are tied up in the often deeply personal topics given to learners. The intellectual and the cognitive are closely connected in the writing process, as Donald Murray (1982: 142) asserts when he points out "writing is an intellectual activity carried on in an emotional environment, a precisely engineered sailboat trying to hold course in a vast and stormy Atlantic" (p. 142).

South Africa's celebrated author and teacher of writing, Dorian Haarhof, writes in his book, "The Writer's Voice" (1998: 5), "I share with Peter Elbow the "assumption that virtually everyone has available great skill with words. That is, everyone, can, under certain conditions, speak (and write) with clarity and power". He also points out that, in his experience in southern Africa, "we are expected to write creatively but no one teaches us" (1998: 11):

> My teachers had no training in this area nor were any of them practising writers. They dished out the topic – "A Visit to the Farm" – and wanted the essay by the next day. Weeks later the teacher returned the piece of writing with a severe case of red-ink chicken pox. "Spelling weak. 57%." Charlie K who had a "natural talent" always scored in the 70s. Writers were born not made. So I'd better try something else. Mark Twain once said that if we were taught to speak in the way we were taught to write, we would all stutter.
>
> (Haarhof 1998: 11)

3 Teaching Creative Writing in South Africa

So how, if at all, *are* we *teaching* creative writing in South Africa at the moment? A teacher trainer at UNISA wrote in the PGCE study guide: "I assert that many learners are hopelessly misguided by their teachers when it comes to writing. And because many educators have modelled the process wrongly in their own minds they are unable to give their learners the guidance they need" (Brown & Viljoen 2003: 174). Even professional writers who teach confess that it is difficult not to oversimplify things. Donald Murray wrote, "Too often in my teaching and my publishing I have given the false impression that we do one thing, then another, when in fact we do many things simultaneously" (Berkenkotter & Murray 1983: 172). The next question is: how are teachers modelling the process in their minds?

One model I saw greatly advocated by the curriculum implementer in the Mpumalanga circuit I belonged to when teaching at a government school was the outmoded stage process model. The creative writing or "third" exemplar paper for the first Grade 10 new curriculum examination in 2006 sounded a warning bell that this curriculum implementer was putting a national policy into practice. Someone influential has noticed that "pre-writing" is important to the writing process, so they have made this OFFICIAL. Where Paper Three from the previous Senior Certificate (last written in 2007), did not include any instructions as to how a candidate ought to go about the writing process, apart from admonitions to "plan the content of each answer carefully" and ensure that "your writing should demonstrate a clear understanding of the language choices you make so that register and tone are appropriate" (Department of Education 2007: 2), the new national curriculum exemplar paper given to us for the national senior certificate Grade 10 Paper three in 2006 has an entire point of the "instructions" page devoted to "the writing process". This states that "there must be clear evidence that you have planned, proofread and edited your work" (Department of Education 2006: 2). Under each question in the paper, there is the instruction: "You are required to show ALL aspects of the writing process: planning, writing, proofreading and editing" (Department of Education 2006: 3, 4, 6, 8).

The worrying thing about this is the underlying assumptions about writing hidden beneath it. The notes on how to teach essay writing in the new curriculum handed out at that Mpumalanga Nkangala district cluster training session reflected the following thinking, drawn out of the assessment standards of the revised national curriculum statement: teach separate, distinct processes – brainstorm, organise, write a rough draft, edit this and produce a final draft for evaluation. Because the planning is important, we must allocate marks for this, forcing teachers to teach this "good" writing behaviour. Is this model up to the task of more complex writing where one is not simply trotting out rehearsed facts, and, in particular, is it up to the task of *creative* writing? Research indicates otherwise in both cases, as will be discussed.

Research on basic writers in school has shown that "English teachers under-conceptualise and over-simplify the composing processes: planning degenerates into outlining; reformulating becomes the correction of minor infelicities" (Brown & Viljoen 2003: 174). The model I have just elaborated on – brainstorm, organise, rough draft, edit, final draft – is referred to as a "stage model" and research into how writers write has indicated clearly that writers do not compose in clean-cut stages (Flower & Hayes 1981: 365). This research "discredited the linear model of the composing process" (Humes in Fitzgerald 1987: 482), because it offers an inadequate account of the … intellectual process of composing" (Flower & Hayes 1981: 367).

Furthermore, a lot of this planning goes on in a writer's head, as protocol analyses of writers have shown. Protocol analysis, briefly, involves recording writers who have been asked to say aloud what they are thinking as they write (Murray & Berkenkotter 1983: 56). It is fairly impossible, therefore, to show "ALL aspects of the writing process" in a senior certificate examination or creative writing lesson. Even if you tried to, how exactly would an examiner make much sense out of this messy, recursive process? As my Unisa teacher trainer astutely pointed out, "[t]eachers who check plans to see whether learners have adhered to them and deduct marks for deviation invite their learners to fill in the plans at the end" (Brown & Viljoen 2003: 174).

4 How Can We Do Better?

We need to "compare the composing strategies of good and poor writers" (Flower & Hayes 1981: 368) to learn more about the writing processes discussed above. As Donald Murray (1982: 141), author and teacher of writing, says, we need to study the activity "at the workbench in the skull".

In the psychologist, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's, definitive work on creativity (1996: 10) he justifies his focus on exceptionally "creative individuals [including writers] and the contexts of their accomplishments" as a focus on what he calls "Creativity" with a capital C, which is the exceptional creativity of subject specialists, as opposed to our everyday creativity (for example, thinking up "original ways of decorating the living room for a party" – 1996: 8). He postulates that this "creativity with a small *c* … is an important ingredient of everyday life". However, if we are to enhance it, "to do so well it is necessary first to understand Creativity" (1996: 8). He goes on under the heading, "What's the good of studying creativity?" to add that "[t]he results of creativity enrich the culture and so they indirectly improve the quality of all our lives. But we may learn from this knowledge how to make our own lives directly more interesting and productive" (1996: 10).

Like Csikszentmihalyi, I feel much can be gained from a study of what the experts do. In my literature study, the vast majority of information I could find on how expert writers write fell under one of the following categories:

a) *Autobiographical works or biographies*, such as Margaret Atwood's "Negotiating with the Dead", Paul Gallico's "Confessions of a Storyteller", Garcia Marquez "Living to Tell the Tale" and others. The advantages of such sources is the rich, in-depth personal insights of writers as they put their writing lives under the microscope. Where they are sometimes problematical is that they are also books which must sell, and are therefore highly subjective accounts of the writing process, likely to highlight the extraordinary and the eccentric in great detail, and to leave out anything that might seem urbane or ordinary. They are also likely to be more deeply embedded in metaphor than ordinary writing, as Atwood's and Garcia Marquez's titles suggest, which can provide both insights and challenges for a researcher attempting to tease out and clarify the writing process in academic terms.

b) *Interviews with authors*: these are, as a pamphlet advertising the 2008 Franschoek literary festival proclaimed, often "an art form in themselves" and, like autobiographical and biographical works, can provide deep insights into the writers' methods and personal style. The shortcoming for comparative information gathering is that a consistent group of questions are not asked of more than one person, as the interview itself must often entertain either a live or a reading audience. As a result, these sources of information hold the same problem of subjectivity as for a). Interviews with authors by academics, such as Susan Day (2002), while also very valuable, have their own shortcomings for the purposes discussed here and were often focused on the individual author's psychology in relation to creativity or writer's block, rather than on their overall writing process as such (Kaufman 2002). Where interviews do focus on writing processes, there is a challenge typical in the humanities: the fallibility of human memory: "[A]fter-the-fact, introspective analysis by writers of what [they] did while writing is notoriously inaccurate and likely to be influenced by their notions of what they should have done" according to Flower & Hayes (1981: 368). For this reason, protocol analysis evolved to study the cognitive processes at work while expert authors write.

c) *Research conducted using protocol analysis*: This has the problem that it tends to lean towards "context stripping" (Berkenkotter & Murray 1983: 156) as writers are put in unnatural settings and given artificial tasks to complete with artificial topics and time constraints. These go to the opposite extreme of a) and b) – in their search for objectivity; they ignore the fact that "each writer's processes are unique and why it is important that we pay close attention to the setting in which the writer composes, the kind of task the writer confronts and what the writer can tell us of his own processes" (Berkenkotter & Murray 1983: 156). However, historically, much was learnt from thinking aloud protocol analyses as "[they] allow the researcher to eavesdrop at the workplace of the writer, catching the flow of thought that would otherwise remain unarticulated" (Berkenkotter & Murray 1983: 167).

Despite the limitations of each method of gathering information and insights into the writing process, they have achieved much in terms of underlining how complex the process is. "Writing is a recursive, cyclical process rather than a linear sequence of steps (people simply do not 'think', 'outline', 'write', 'revise' and then 'edit') and … writers move back and forth from one subprocess to another as they shift their attention among matters of content, structure, tone and style" (research by Beach, Bechtel, Harvey, Matsuhashi, Mischel, Newkirk, Perl, Pianko, Sommers, Stallard, in Brown & Viljoen 2003: 174). Furthermore, while a large amount of individual idiosyncrasy is to be expected in creative individuals, there are common threads that can be teased out of the various sources of information on their lives and work (cf. Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 78).

The distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate during the act of composing "have a hierarchical, highly embedded organisation in which any given process can be embedded within any other (Flower & Hayes 1981: 366). In fact, "writers are constantly planning (pre-writing) and revising (re-writing) as they compose (write)" (Flower & Hayes 1981: 365). For example, revision is "something that [can] be embedded in other subprocesses of writing, such as planning … revision means more than making minor editorial changes" (Fitzgerald 1987: 438).

Flower & Hayes (1981) drew up a model of the cognitive writing process as they saw it, based on the kind of research mentioned above, and relying very heavily on protocol analysis (see Appendix). They call this the cognitive process model. Please note, this model is not intended to be read as a simple, one-way flow of events; it is a process model, in which different processes interacting in a variety of different ways at any time are embedded in one another. Flower and Hayes discuss the various processes in great depth in their article and I feel it will not add to our understanding if I repeat their clearly explained model here.

5 The Knowledge Gap

Although there has been valuable research on creative writing since the 1970s, Kaufman (2002: 27) asserts that a significant knowledge gap remains:

> Research on creativity, in general, has increased over the past few decades, but there are still many questions to be answered about creative writing …. Although the amount of research being done on creative writing has increased since 1991, it still suffers in comparison with other areas of research in creativity …. Most studies that incorporate creative writing do so merely to use writing as a way of studying larger issues in creativity.
>
> (Kaufman 2002: 27-28)

As Murray said in his "Response of a Laboratory Rat – or, Being Protocoled" in which his writing process was studied in his natural writing environment, "more research has to be done … into those conditions, internal and external, that make effective writing possible or impossible" (Berkenkotter & Murray 1983: 171).

A preliminary review of some autobiographical literature by writers themselves in which they discuss their writing careers and habits (among others, Atwood, Garcia Marquez, Gallico, Keyes), as well as a brief review of some of the transcripts of interviews with professional writers (such as Dahl, Pratchett, de Romanet, Lee & Dutrait) indicated that there is much clarifying to be done and that this is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon with perhaps many answers to the problem, or raising of more questions than answers being a distinct possibility. While many books by authors teaching writing (such as Cameron, Keats, Mills, and Haarhoff, and authors generally discussing writing in the sources mentioned above) these writers tend to couch their descriptions in richly varied, and often somewhat cryptic metaphorical language which sounds poetically inspiring to an aspiring writer but leaves one in the dark as to precisely what processes unfold physically and mentally as these writers write. Underlying assumptions about the writing process are often not explicated. These are "how to" books which take a workshop approach, not critical reflections on how the author does what he or she does or why he or she has chosen a particular exercise to overcome, for example, writer's block. This is perhaps not surprising given the creative nature of writers, according to the study by Kaufman (2002), and these books are, of course, intended for a novice-writer- or blocked-expert-writer audience and not academic enquiry.

One of the major problems in studying creative writers – the fact that they are, by definition, creative and use divergent, original thinking (Barron 1966: 158-159) means that their methods and writing processes are likely to be difficult to pin down. Furthermore, the fact that creative writers embed their descriptions of writing in richly creative language does not mean that it is impossible to explore their writing processes in more pragmatic terms. As Kaufman (2002: 28) so succinctly puts it: "Some may claim that trying to study the creative mind is impossible, but as Feist (1999) argued, studying the behavioural dispositions of the creator is not". While this is an excerpt from a psychology journal, the same reasoning arguably applies to this research: it may be impossible to know exactly what is in an author's mind as he or she works on a piece of creative writing, but it is not impossible to study their behaviour or descriptions of their thinking about their writing processes.

What I hope I have highlighted is that, at this stage, we have a reasonable working model of the cognitive processes involved in writing, but I believe these processes need putting back in context, specifically being tested as hypotheses against some current, South African, successful writers who went to South African schools and who write in South Africa.

The purpose of this research is to perform a qualitative investigation into the writing processes of successful publishing authors in the South African context, with an eye on possible implications of the methods of training of novice creative writers. Four authors will be interviewed using interview schedules based on a literature review of research on writing. The intention is to garner current, South African, insights into the creative writing process in order to nuance this field of knowledge and to challenge reductive, undynamic ways of thinking about it.

It is my belief that if writers' methods were more systematically compared in an academic setting, perhaps useful similarities could be unearthed and learnt from. Even listing important differences could be of enormous value in pointing to the fact that there is perhaps no *single* ideal method of writing creatively, a conclusion that would, hopefully, put a stop to writing processes being falsely standardised and tested in our exams.

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