

A Writer's Education: Learning and mastering the domain of Australian fiction writing

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Abstract

Using Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) systems model of creativity as a broad framework and drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with 41 Australian fiction writers, this paper investigates how these writers learned the art and craft of fiction writing. As will be shown here, writers internalise the content and symbol system of the domain, including its rules and procedures, in order to then use that database of information to craft their own work. Through immersion in and mastery of the domain, the individual may gradually develop a 'feel' for their work, where writing appears 'automatic' or 'intuitive'. Before this can occur, however, an individual must acquire the relevant domain knowledge and skills. In this study, domain acquisition occurred across a range of formal and informal processes of socialisation and enculturation, including reading and schooling as well as self-directed learning, mentoring, and specific and additional training.

Introduction

In research and theorising about creativity, there has been a shift towards confluence type models where multiple components are at work. The systems model is provided by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) who sees creativity as the complex interaction between an individual, a domain of knowledge and a field of experts. By combining all three components, the systems model provides a meaningful approach to understanding how individual, social and cultural elements interact to produce creative works. In the systems model, the domain refers to the discipline or discourse of a particular area and includes all the knowledge, symbol systems, culture and conventions an individual is immersed in when working in that area. Individuals must access and then build on the domain of a given area if they hope to be creative within it. The field refers to the social world in which the person operates and is comprised of all those who can affect the structure of the domain. These individuals, groups and organisations provide both support and judgement, acting to stimulate or filter innovation that passes into the domain according to an (often internalised) set of criteria for judging what is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, new or old.

This paper represents part of a much larger study that utilised this systems model approach to provide a richer understanding of contemporary Australian fiction writers and their practices. The data used in this study was collected using a combination of methods, including interviews with 41 published writers and six writing industry professionals, attendance at writers' festivals and over 30 readings, lectures and panels, a survey of coverage of Australian fiction in national and state-based newspapers, and analysing artefacts such as secondary interview material, how-to manuals and personal websites. The analysis of the collected data demonstrated that the individual's ability to contribute to the domain depended not only on traditional biological, personality and motivational influences but also socially and culturally mediated practices and processes, which often helped to explain a range of issues that were rarely talked about in other research. The issues include how these writers became interested in writing in the first place, how they learned to do what they do, how people other than themselves affected the written work, how readers affected creativity "after-the-fact", and many others.

Like other creative producers, writers are not born knowing everything they need to know to write. The questions explored in this paper specifically address how writers learn to write, and if there are any factors that are necessary or sufficient to become a writer. In answering these questions, this paper shows how each writer internalised the content and symbol system of the domain, including its rules and procedures, in order to then use that database of information to craft their own work. This domain acquisition occurred across a range of formal and informal

processes and included schooling as well as some degree of self-directed learning, mentoring, and additional training. Through immersion and mastery of the domain, the individual may gradually develop an automatic or intuitive feel for their work.

Before they contributed an original work, the interviewed writers first engaged with, then learned and mastered the skills and knowledge of the domain. With the domain of fiction writing based firmly in language and the written word, writers can be seen to undertake a long process of acquisition, beginning in early childhood and continuing into their adult lives. As infants, these individuals were exposed to the English language, absorbing not only its vocabulary but also its rules of grammar and usage. For most, this was followed by an early exposure to storytelling, reading and writing, developing an interest that was generally facilitated or encouraged by the family. "It started, I think, with my mother telling bedtime stories and reading stories to my sister and me. So I was fascinated from the start with books and the process of storytelling. We were quite a storytelling family; it was a normal thing that we did" (W12).¹ Although several were early readers, most of the writers acquired both reading and writing skills in a school environment.

English curriculum

Given the previous lack of commonality in high-school English curricula, it is unsurprising that the writers in this study, educated across several decades and in different systems (public, private, religious), are divided on the impact such learning had on their ability to write. Few, for instance, were given any explicit instruction in creative writing in primary or high school. As is the case with most students prior to current education reforms, these writers were more likely to be instructed on analytical and technical writing than narrative forms.

Kress (1982) argues a child's initiation into non-fiction forms 'subordinates' creative ability to the mastery of fixed and formalised rules of writing. This notion that learning through fixed and formalised rules hinders creativity, however, is flawed. Rather than subordinating their creative ability, all of the writers in this study went on to produce and publish narrative works after learning the rules and procedures of writing, even if only in non-narrative contexts. This appears to align with the position of Sharon Bailin, who argues that the learning of formal rules actually enables creativity to occur: "It has been shown that there is not a real discontinuity between achieving highly within the rules of a discipline and achieving highly when it entails going beyond or changing some rules... Furthermore, one never breaks down all the rules, since to do so would be to abandon the discipline" (Bailin, 1988: 96-7). Although creativity, from this

perspective, may be more about mastering rules than breaking them, the writers' views of this perceived subordination of creative ability in their education are mixed.

Perhaps the biggest division in opinion in this study involves the usefulness of formal grammar lessons in preparing writers for later work. As noted by Nan Bernard (1999), the explicit teaching of grammar was missing from Australian schools, particularly during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Changes in educational philosophies saw many students miss out on the systematic grammar instruction received by older writers in this survey. Writers such as W39, W21, W14 and W10 were forced to compensate for this lack of foundational instruction at later stages in their writing careers, by self-teaching or attending 'refresher' grammar courses.

On one side of the argument, writers such as W25, W40 and W08 believe grammar is a fundamental tool for fiction writing. According to W08, "[w]ithout the basics of grammar and spelling a writer can't produce their best work, no matter how creative the text". This ineffective communication of story ideas through a general deficit of language knowledge is frustrating for some of those writers who also teach creative writing. W11 argues that the lack of basic grammar principles he sees in his students' work can stop a writer's career before it even starts: "The entire writing-for-publication industry places great store on grammar and syntax and anyone who can't get it right more or less puts themselves out of the race".

Given that grammar acts as the rules and procedures governing word usage, it was expected that formal grammar training in the English classroom would be seen as useful. In direct opposition to this view, however, writers such as W17, W16, W06 and W34 argue that grammar and spelling are irrelevant or less important components of writing fiction when compared to the ability to tell a good story: "Publishers employ editors to check these if you can write a damn good story that catches the imagination and then holds the reader" (W34). Rather than the systematic teaching of grammar in schools, some writers believe these structural elements of language can be picked up informally, absorbed 'by osmosis' from reading: "That's why I write grammatically well because I read a lot, so you learn about sentence construction by absorption rather than by rules. I read a lot, so I understand sentences, but I couldn't tell you the rules that apply to them" (W02). Although the usefulness of formally studying grammar is contentious, what this quote by W02 indicates is that grammar itself is important. Whether it is learnt formally in school or absorbed through more informal social and cultural processes by children or adults, it can be argued that all writers, regardless of genre, have some fundamental knowledge of grammar. Without at least a basic (even if an automatic and therefore

incommunicable) understanding of how language functions, a writer would not be able to tell a 'damn good story'.

Unlike the teaching of grammar, the systematic analysis of fiction works has not gone similarly in and out of fashion. Some writers in this study felt analysis, particularly thematic analysis, of the books they studied made the experience less enjoyable. For others, the level of analysis was inadequate: "in our study of literature we probably looked at great themes but we didn't actually study the mechanism of how you actually articulated those great themes" (W17). Although they too found the experience dull or unenjoyable, W40 and W31 both saw the benefit of such study: "I was compelled to read a lot of books in school that I would not have read otherwise. I think that this was good, in terms of broadening my style and outlook" (W31).

Whether reluctant or voracious readers of the chosen school texts, approximately half of the writers interviewed believe the study and reading of fiction books as a part of the high school English curriculum did help develop either their own writing skills and knowledge or their appreciation of others' work in some way. For W05, analysing novels was "much more useful than grammar because it exposed me – us – to the beauty and power of crafted language". For others, understanding how great writers utilised particular styles and techniques to craft their most influential works was important: "I began to understand that fiction wasn't simply telling great make-believe stories. Great writers, such as Thomas Hardy, used all manner of ways to make that story come to life through magnificent settings, characters you cared about, dialogue that leapt off the page and could provoke intense emotion in me" (W30). W16 believes her experience with critically reading fiction in school laid a solid foundation for her writing in adulthood: "reading and studying books inspired me and I believe gave me the craft to write later in life".

Building on the foundation of skills and knowledge provided by their English curricula, many writers continued their formal and informal analysis of books outside of the school environment. Rather than undertaking training in creative writing, several of the writers in this study benefited from university-level study of English and Literature: "When I was about 16, I was given some excellent advice, which was that the only way to learn to write well was to study the work of great writers... I found that absolutely inspiring and very worthwhile" (W14). This experience aligns with the work of JA Appleyard (1990), who argues that a university-level student typically approaches the study of literature "as an organized body of knowledge with its own principles of inquiry and rules of evidence, learns to talk analytically about it, acquires a sense of its history and perhaps even a critical theory of how it works" (1990: 14-5). This is the

view put forward by W14 and W39, who both believe the analytical study of books provided a more beneficial locus for domain acquisition than taking a university-level course in creative writing.

Adult Reading

With each individual novel embodying domain conventions regarding elements such as language, grammar and genre, reading provides access to the rules and knowledge needed to produce, understand, compare or evaluate creative works of fiction. Almost all of the writers interviewed stated that reading was fundamental to acquiring a range of domain knowledge and skills that directly inform their writing practice. They used reading to learn how to write: “not only to learn the craft but also to learn what to write and what not to write” (W25). Reading may also help the writer develop “models for rhythms of prose or plot, for uses of imagery, for permission to do things in new ways” (W33), or an “innate sense of style by observing what you think is good or bad about other people’s writing” (W15). For W30, reading broadly within the fantasy genre provided essential knowledge and skills that enabled her to produce her best-selling trilogies: “I couldn’t have attempted a fantasy novel without being a fan of the genre and understanding some of its conventions, what a reader expects from a good fantasy novel. You learn so much from reading the quality writers in each genre”. For writers such as W30 who have cornered a specialist market or genre, reading provided a specialised learning experience unavailable as formal instruction until recently.

For those writers, in particular, who received no formal instruction in creative writing at school, books acted as a surrogate teacher, master or mentor: “no-one taught me how to do that; plenty of great writers showed me how to do that” (W12). Simonton (1984) uses the term ‘paragon’ to describe those creators (whether living or deceased) who may still be admired and provide instruction from a geographical or temporal distance. Francine Prose (2006) argues writers have been learning from such paragons for centuries: “And who could have asked for better teachers: generous, uncritical, blessed with wisdom and genius as endlessly forgiving as only the dead can be?” (Prose, 2006: 2-3). From this perspective, individuals are able to learn from these paragons of writing through an ‘interrogation’ of their works, investigating style, technique, language and content. Here, the books already accepted into and embodying the domain of fiction writing provide writers with the opportunity to engage in some way with those who have already mastered the domain but may no longer be accessible members of the field. Some writers, however, were able to learn the skills and knowledge of the domain directly from a living writer.

Mentoring

According to Throsby and Zednik's (2010) survey of Australian professional artists, 32% of writers had some form of private tuition or mentorship with a living or known person, a figure matched by the writers interviewed here. Although these numbers are not statistically significant and mentoring is not a necessary condition for creativity, mentoring can act as an important locus of social interaction that leads to acquiring knowledge and skills relevant to the Australian fiction writing domain. In this study, mentoring relationships can be divided into three categories: technical help and skills development; providing knowledge of or access to the industry; and encouragement to write and publish.

For those writers who experienced skills-oriented development, the mentoring process was more formal, often mediated by writers' organisations. W27 had a short-term mentorship through the Australian Society of Authors, working on a specific project; W20 and W36 were introduced to their mentors through writers' centre programs; W33 experienced a sense of mentorship through a university course in creative writing taught by a critically acclaimed author. "He offered me practical knowledge about the craft and the process of managing a long work: 'this is what a draft looks like'; 'this is how you might consider editing it'" (W33). In these cases, mentors acted as unofficial editors, providing feedback on first drafts or developing manuscripts.

Similarly, some mentors offered information on or access to the publishing industry. Both W21 and W15 paid to participate in writing workshops, connecting with the established writers who ran them. After attending an intensive course, W21 finished her first fiction manuscript and sent it to the author, who then passed it on to a publisher. For W15, the professional mentor-like connection was an important one for both his career and development as a writer: "He greased the slide of my passage into publication and helped me get my head into the space that suits me best while I write".

The other writers' experience with mentoring was a more personal one, primarily providing encouragement to continue with the writing process. W09 was introduced to a fellow writer through their mutual agent, and suggests that this 'mentor' was a role-model through her early career: "So it wasn't so much critiquing as moral support, emotional support to keep going because, very often, you don't really need critiquing while you're drafting, you just need to keep going". The personal mentor role, however, was not always filled by another writer: both W12

and W06 found their publishers served this purpose while W11's postgraduate supervisors were significant to his writing career.

Additional tuition

The writers in this study did not always directly pursue creative writing in their further education. Some studied and completed degrees or their equivalent in areas as disparate as Business, Science, Medicine, Law, Fine Arts, History and Education. Others undertook writing-related degrees in Communication, Journalism and English. In equal portion, though, are those writers who pursued specific creative writing courses within these degrees at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions and specialist schools or completed studies in dedicated Creative Writing degrees at the Honours, Master and Doctoral level. This level of higher education is unsurprising, with numbers in this study (68%) close to the 64% of writers found to have some university or TAFE level qualification in Throsby and Zednik's (2010) survey of Australian artists. The figures for training in non-award study such as workshops, retreats, master-classes and short courses differed more, with approximately 40% of writers in this study compared to the 57% in the 2010 Artists Survey (Throsby & Zednik, 2010).

Despite these figures, only 34% of writers surveyed by Throsby and Zednik (2010) believed formal or qualification studies to be the most important form of training. For W14, a higher degree was useful to her development as a writer, but not essential: "I did an MA in Writing - which taught me a great deal about the discipline of writing, as we had to produce a piece every week for our writing workshop, and also taught me how to take criticism, another invaluable lesson. I could have learnt these things without going to uni, of course, but not so quickly".

The 16 writers who undertook non-award study in creative writing encountered varying levels of effectiveness, though many suggest it was of qualified value. Most of these writers immersed themselves in multiple workshops and courses to develop a general set of writing skills, knowledge and contacts: "I became a magnet for writing information for a few years in the beginning. I went to every workshop I could find, day courses at TAFE and heaps of festivals and conferences" (W15). Others used the experience to learn or master specific skills they felt they lacked, targeting themed workshops or those run by particular people: "when I was writing my first book, I saw [Named Instructor] was running two hours over four weeks on something on writing the senses and that was something I really wanted to develop, writing about smells and writing about textures and things like that" (W21).

Finding the right workshop or teacher appears to be the primary problem for those who questioned the effectiveness of creative writing workshops and courses. Some writers warned against such courses where tuition from inexperienced or non-writers could not only be unsatisfying but harmful: “I think anyone going to a workshop should check out the credentials of the presenter. How can anyone teach you to write fiction who hasn’t done so successfully themselves?” (W25). Several writers were similarly dissatisfied with ill-matched instructors and workshops that did not meet their needs. For these writers, creative writing instruction did not improve their writing ability. This does not, however, indicate that they are of no value. Rather, they represent a potential site of domain acquisition where, given the right combination of personalities, motivation and teaching experience, writers are able to acquire and develop the skills and knowledge necessary for Australian fiction writing.

Practice and mastery

Alongside reading, the writers interviewed named writing practice as a fundamental method of domain acquisition. Many have a number of finished but unpublished (or unpublishable) manuscripts they consider their apprenticeship in the craft: “I’d done more than 10,000 hours of writing before I was published and I learned a lot about the art of storytelling” (W24). Bloom (1985) verified that the achievement of master status in a range of professions was often foreshadowed by years of intensive practice and immersion in the domain, a pattern also found among the writers in this study. Gardner (1993) found a similar pattern in his study of seven eminent people, finding it took 10 years to move from novice to master. Similar time frames were mentioned by writers in this study: “getting my novels published came about because I worked for 10 years, getting rejections that were nicer and more encouraging as the years went by. I was determined to get published. So I worked damned hard” (W25).

While not significant of themselves, these early minor works are often crucial in laying the groundwork for the works that came next. With 90% of the writers interviewed first published in a form other than the novel, it is clear that they took advantage of shorter-form writing opportunities to practice their craft and build on their skill and knowledge of fiction writing. As well as writing stories nobody ever read, these writers entered a range of writing competitions and repeatedly sent work to literary journals, magazines and newspapers. As W40 notes:

I worked my way up from the fanzines, to semi-prozines, to magazines paying pro rates for short stories; then, when I had enough of a reputation in Australia, I jumped to novel publishing for [Publishing Company] Australia (but also with a local small press). From there, I

secured a U.S. agent and began making sales in the U.S. This process took about eight years.

These writers accumulated greater levels of skills and knowledge through immersion in the domain and continued their practice over time, leading to an expertise in the domain of Australian fiction writing and the eventual publication of one or more novels.

This continued immersion in the domain of Australian fiction writing through reading, schooling, training and practice gave many of the writers interviewed an intuitive feel for their work that was not present when they began. As W09 notes, “now I really don’t tend to make a lot of decisions. I have an idea of how it’s going to go... But most of the time it’s just the characters dictating what happens next and me not really looking at it until I’ve got the whole draft and looking at the structure”. Such statements correspond with Donald Schön’s (1983) argument that producers often develop an internalised sense of their own work, which allows them to instinctively judge what is good or bad even if they have forgotten how they learned how to do so. This intuitive sense develops through continued practice and familiarity, where the skills and knowledges acquired become tacit and appear as seemingly spontaneous action. As W26 comments:

Over time, with practice, I think I installed a series of filters, which have different labels. Clumsiness is one, I think. Elegance is another. Metaphor might be one more. Consistency, Character's Self-Interest and Rationality might be others. Mostly, I now don't have to consciously refer to these. They work of themselves.

Like Schön, Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer (1995) argue that this type of intuition is a non-mystical system of judgement, developed from familiarity and expertise with domain knowledge and skills rather than an extraordinary or even paranormal ability. While it may seem at times mystical or inexplicable to the writer, the writing process can be seen as a logical and dedicated application of the skills and knowledge acquired during a writer’s ‘education’ in the domain.

Conclusion

What this discussion highlights is that the writer’s ‘education’ is a complex and lengthy one, with the learning process occurring both consciously and unconsciously in childhood and adulthood. The writers acquired both reading and writing skills in a school environment, developing and formalising the learning processes of early childhood. Opinion was divided on the usefulness of a formal education in grammar and literature studies but these classes can still be viewed as potential sites of acquisition, depending on the curriculum, their own attitudes and

that of their teachers. At a fundamental level, knowledge of the general writing domain is essential in order to be creative within it. All of the writers in this study received a solid grounding in English language and writing skills in their childhood and schooling, internalising these symbol systems until they became seemingly 'natural' abilities. The skills and knowledge beyond this acquisition, however, diverge in their levels of domain specificity or generality with the writers taking many different paths to creativity within the domain of Australian fiction writing. Of these learning processes, almost all of the writers interviewed agreed that reading is fundamental to acquiring domain knowledge and skills that directly inform their work, while a large majority also undertook a considerable amount of writing practice before publishing their first novels, consolidating formal and informal processes of acquisition.

The writer's education, however, does not stop there. Several additional areas of learning were cut from this paper because of space restrictions, including the earliest experiences of language and storytelling and learning in writing-related and non-writing related professions. I have also discussed the idea of developing intuition through mastery and the idea of the book or the characters taking over in more depth (Paton 2012a), as well as how writers may learn from their readers after publication and also acquire further skills and knowledge in the process of publication from feedback by critics and the media, and through interaction with their peers in a variety of settings (Paton 2009; Paton 2012b). Further discussion in these areas shows that writers must engage with, learn and master the rules and knowledge of the domain before they can contribute their first original work to it. As each new work changes the shape or boundaries of the domain, they must continue to learn from a variety of sources, including the field, if they wish to have future works accepted as well.

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¹ Each writer has been assigned an alphanumeric code to protect their identities in this paper. Where other identifying information has been included in a quote, these are replaced with a generic description (e.g. *Book Title*).