Weaving Words

Weaving Words:
Personal and Professional Transformation through Writing as Research

Edited by

Janice K. Jones

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

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FOREWORD

At the heart of all imaginative writing – and all writing makes demands on the imagination to a certain extent – is a mystery: whatever it is that the writer is trying to reach or touch in herself/himself in the process of writing.

One way of naming this mystery is to call it 'voice' – the voice of the writer that is making itself heard in the world, or is already a powerful presence, or whose small utterances are all but stifled, or are audible mostly as the echoes of other voices; but nonetheless possessing the idiosyncratic rhythms and timbre of its owner-maker, what the poet and novelist Helen Dunmore calls each writer's 'linguistic register', more vital in establishing his or her distinctiveness than content (Dunmore 2012). Think how a baby's cry, devoid of any words, is instantly recognisable to the baby's mother.

Writers, unlike other artists, Dunmore reminds us, use the common or garden medium of language, a doughty work-horse of an instrument, pressed into service by everybody for everything from shopping lists to car manuals, news bulletins, protestations of love, of rage. Despite the instantaneousness of digital communication, ours remains a text-based, in the old sense, society – in our education systems, credentials are still awarded on the basis of discursive text in forms like the one-hour essay composed under examination conditions or a doctoral thesis painstakingly put together over several years. For those employed in higher education, in the civil service and in most professions, the authored text – journal article, ministerial speech, application for grant-funding, end-of-project report, edited book, counsel's brief, detailed lesson plan – continues to serve as a principal marker of status attained or credibility sought. Because such discourses are by and large instrumental, people may experience writing within them as imposed, performative, straitening, even as they become adept at (re)producing the desired texts, and even as they undoubtedly take pleasure in doing so. They are joining a club, learning to speak the language; they are becoming authors, acquiring authority.

Perhaps inevitably, then, people often assume that it is only in 'personal' or 'creative' writing that one's own voice can be truly, authentically expressed – the still small voice above the thunder of the crowd, the chatter of the club. Myself, I've come – over many years of

writing for academic and policy audiences, as well writing poetry, sometimes both at the same time – to doubt that, or at least not to take it for granted. First, there is no guarantee that 'personal' or 'creative' writing *per se* will be fresh and new, uncontaminated by received ideas or ingrained habits of thought. The spontaneous, untutored self can find it all too easy to reproduce clichés of emotion as well as of linguistic expression. The cultivation of a true, truthful 'voice' takes hard work, practice, trial and error, deliberate immersion in the best of what has been written in a diversity of traditions, the ability to take and use criticism. Richard Sennett reckons that it takes 10,000 hours of disciplined practice to become proficient in a skill, however brilliant one's initial talent (Sennett 2008).

Secondly, a good place to learn some of the craft of writing is in wrestling with that funding proposal or briefing paper. Having to convince other people that you have a sound rationale and a sense of logical progression, that you can put complex facts or ideas into comprehensible, persuasive language within restrictions of word-length or time-frame, that you have a story to tell in your own words, is a really useful discipline. So I think we should beware of polarising 'personal' and 'professional' writing, and allow ourselves the little wriggle of satisfaction that comes from finishing a well-structured, cogently-expressed school policy or student handbook – it's qualitatively no different from the gift of realising, as we read it aloud, that our poem has, at last, on the *n*th draft, come out 'right'… This means, of course, that we must also learn to *listen*.

But what does all this have to do with the business of teaching and teaching teachers? Well, on the most superficial level, teachers have to get on with the production of routine 'educational' texts like the above-mentioned lesson plans, student reports, academic assignments, and so forth; exerting ownership over even these fairly routine pieces of writing contributes to professional satisfaction. On another level, it's obvious that if young people in schools are being expected or invited to spend time and effort on 'creative writing' then their teachers should have some direct experience of what this entails – at the very least, so as to avoid putting students in the emotional or intellectual impasse of feeling that they 'have nothing to say' or that the words they've managed to type are 'pathetic' because the preparation, context, environment, support and/or feedback have been inadequate. This much we should take as read.

But the book raises some deeper and very challenging questions about the role of imaginative writing in teaching and teacher education, including:

- if (as I'm inclined to think) the *aesthetic criteria* for assessing a poem (or short story) within the discourse of literary criticism are different from – even contrary to – the *developmental criteria* for assessing the self-same poem (or story) within the discourse of professional learning, can we make those differences explicit and meaningful? what are the implications for how tutors and students approach imaginative writing?
- similarly, what are the assessment criteria for deploying 'creative' writing as *a mode of investigation* and/or *data representation* within the discourse of research? and what are the implications for how people can and should approach imaginative writing in this context?
- what are teachers trying to achieve when they invite children to write poems (or stories)? Are they, for example, teaching elements of literature through direct experience of the genre; introducing and supporting the disciplined practice of imaginative work; encouraging 'self-expression' – and *for what educational purpose*? the current 'creativity agenda' is not sufficient justification, as I've argued elsewhere (Saunders 2011).

There aren't easy answers to these questions, naturally, but I'd like to spend just a few moments thinking about other possible kinds of connection between teaching and writing. The writer and radical educator Peter Abbs has laid out what he sees as the four tasks of the poet (Abbs 2006) – the existential, linguistic, cultural and metaphysical tasks, respectively. Applying poetic licence to his notion of 'poet', let's use it here to mean 'writer'. In summary, the first task of the writer is to be *existentially grounded* – the writer's work is to understand and make manifest his/her own vision, give cognitive shape and expressive form to a particular human state of being.

The second task is to be hyper-aware of *language*. A poem is something made in language, for the love of language. But because our language is polluted and impotent, says Abbs, a poet's task is also to cleanse the language – which may be achieved as much through silences and stutterings as through articulation and articulacy. Silence has a power, a presence, from which every poem arises and into which it passes; a poem is cleansed by the silence on either side of it, it does not seek to occupy or colonise the silence.

The third task of the poet/writer is to engage with the *cultural dimension*, the collective tradition, 'the ancestors', whoever they may be. Poets are archaeologists of the imagination, where all poems co-exist in a

simultaneous present. A writer therefore lives in a vast echo-chamber of multiple cadences, an entire symbolic world, which gives her/him freedom from the politics of oppression or the hegemonies of fashion.

The fourth and final writerly task is to be unashamedly *metaphysical*: poetry is the evocation of forms of life and ways of living offered for our shared contemplation. Writers are ecologists, they keep alive species of creative consciousness in a confused, sad, diminished, trammelled world. If 'philosophy begins in shipwreck', poetry can help us find rescue and meaning; poetry helps us bear witness to ourselves and each other.

Having taken enormous liberties in summarising Abbs' four tasks so baldly, I now want to go even further and add a fifth task to the list, based on what the poet Seamus Heaney says in his essays about the function of poetry (Heaney 1988, 1995). Heaney too believes in the 'poet as witness', emphasising '*poetry's solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimised, the under-privileged*'. So we could call this the *ethical* task of the writer.   Taking the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam as exemplar, Heaney reads his work as liberating the spirit:

The essential thing about lyric poetry, Mandelstam maintained, was its unlooked-for joy in being itself... Mandelstam implied that it was the poet's responsibility to allow poems to form in language inside him, the way crystals formed in a chemical solution... Mandelstam's witness [was] ... to the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-dictated, inspired act (Heaney 1988, page xix.)

And all those negatives – the 'uns' and 'nons' – are themselves, perhaps, an echo of what the poet John Keats called 'negative capability': the pulsating, receptive, resolving silence that always surrounds the thing that is made of, in, words.

So my proposition about the relationship between teaching and writing is this: in a world full of the noise of militancy – aims, targets, impact, wars on low standards, and all the rest of the battle-talk and derring-do – the ability to be open and stilled, to practise the interior disciplines of the imagination and to convey these things to young people by example as well as by precept, might be what the moral purpose of education looks and sounds like. If that is the case, then imaginative writing is not only not a luxury, but is integral to the enactment of human existential, aesthetic and ethical values. This book shows us how such an educational environment might come into being.

Lesley Saunders

Lesley Saunders is Visiting Professor at the Institute of Education, London, and Research Fellow at the Oxford University Department of Education. She is also an award-winning and published poet. www.lesleysaunders.org.uk

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PREFACE

A preface is usually written by the author. In this case, however, the editor Dr Janice K. Jones, who is also a contributor to four of the book chapters has asked me to write this brief introduction, which I am hugely delighted to do. I have celebrated with Janice over the years her own personal and professional transformation brought about through her powerful, reflexive and charming creative writing. She is a passionate advocate for the importance of creating a space for writing as transformative practice in education, a theme which features extensively in her teaching and scholarship. Janice is an engaging and gifted writer who has gathered together in this book a diverse and exciting mix of very experienced and neophyte writers. In so doing, she admirably embodies the book's intent to talk to and invite academic researchers and practitioners as well as undergraduate and postgraduate students to consider and question the privilege and value usually attributed to different forms of writing in a host of multifarious ways – as a tool for inquiry, as a product of research, as a reflexive device in professional development and as a creative endeavour. As educators, we must never lose sight of the importance of writing for personal expression, storytelling and creativity. There is room in the curriculum for both the development of an understanding of the 'mechanics' of writing as well as the practice of writing as a personal transformative learning process.

 Weaving Words is an attention-grabbing book that will definitely stimulate and maybe reshape your thinking as it traverses contemporary philosophies, practices and products of writing for teaching, professional development and research in education. It compliments and furthers the evolving discussion about the position of creative and reflective writing within 21st century epistemologies and practices of research, in education, and most especially within teacher education. At the same time it brings fresh viewpoints to this discussion. Each chapter addresses aspects to do with personal and professional beliefs and understandings about the construct, purposes and forms of writing including as a creative process, as a means for self-knowledge and as a means for research. The writers' conversations are framed within contemporary critical perspectives about creativity, language, culture, identity, power and authority. While most exemplars are Australia based, the arguments put and challenges raised

transcend geographical boundaries. This is a book equally relevant to university academics and postgraduate students in Australia, the UK, the USA and beyond.

I encourage all educators who read this well-crafted book to embrace the questions and issues raised within *Weaving Words* and to maybe rethink the role that writing in all its forms has in your classroom, and how it is represented in teacher education and in research.

Nita Temmerman

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INTRODUCTION:
THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Weaving Words: Personal and Professional Transformation through Writing as Research brings together the writings of researchers in education and pre-service teachers to engage with emerging debates around what forms of writing are valued and supported within 21st century teaching and research. It focuses upon the importance of writing for personal expression, for finding a voice, for storytelling and for personal and professional transformation.

The book's chapters elaborate one or more of the following organising questions:

- What are researchers' and educators' beliefs and understandings of the purposes and forms of writing as a creative process, for self-knowledge and for research?
- How are pre-service teachers' and researchers' personal and professional understandings and beliefs about writing constructed, shared and challenged?
- What connections, gaps and contradictions occur at the intersections between the written words of researchers in this text and those of pre-service teachers?
- What are the implications of those intersections, and the gaps and silences between the voices of the authors, for practices of education more broadly, and for research in education in particular?

In addressing these questions, the book interweaves contributions by researchers in education with chapters where poems, plays and short stories created by undergraduate pre-service teachers are presented with the writers' reflections on their experience. Further, accounts by pre-service teachers of the challenges they experienced in transferring their learning to working with younger students as writers, and their reflections on those experiences raise challenging questions about the impact of professional habitus: effecting change is increasingly difficult within systemic processes of curriculum and pedagogy.

Weaving: the metaphor for this book

Kathryn Kruger (2001) portrays the fine threads of history and practice that connect spinning, weaving, storytelling and writing as means by which personal and cultural narratives have been, and continue to be preserved and shared by ancient and modern cultures worldwide. Weaving, according to Kruger (20001) is "akin to speaking" (p.28), for the Dogon people of Africa, and for the Dine people of the Southwest United States the great mother, Spider Woman weaves the world into being. Weaving and spinning have ancient connections with oral storytelling and, much later, with writing for cultural and spiritual exchange, although the earliest written texts had a commercial rather than a narrative or reflective purpose. Twist-method weaving has been found in clay fragments, pre-dating the neolithic era (Adovasio, Soffer, & Page, 2007; Carr & Adovasio, 2012). Against these historical contexts, the authors have sought to create a layered textual fabric where writing weaves ideas and the world into being.

Cultural context

This book includes contributions from pre-service teachers studying in Australia and from educational researchers and writers based in Australia, the USA and the UK. While the writers acknowledge that their voices emerge from a personal history, place and culture, their values and ideas, networked affiliations, personal connections and life-experiences represent the "fluid world" of intercultural and mobile learners discussed by Kovbasyuk and Blessinger (2013, pp. 4-5). For Yvonne Findlay in Chapter 2, concepts of identity are relational, liquid and contextual as discussed by Dervin (2011) who cites Jack (2009) in his rejection of "fixed categories of analysis that essentialize culture" (p.38) in relation to heritage. Yet, for Findlay, as for author Donna Moodie in Chapter 5, and for several of the pre-service teachers in this work, speaking from a place of belonging in the land is fundamental to making meaning. Their writings interweave across real and imagined borders of belonging, acculturation, delegitimisation and assimilation (Dervin, 2013, p. 368).

Writing in education – contested territory

Weaving Words contributes to emerging debates concerning the nature of graduate attributes and professional skills for educators in transnational contexts (Australian Insitute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011),

and in relation to how current practices of teacher education impact upon future educators' understandings, experiences of, and ability to support writing as a creative process. This is of particular importance in the light of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports of a seeming decline in performance on tests of literacies in Australia (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2009, p. 21) and a similar turn in the United Kingdom (Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2012).

   Weaving Words raises important questions about the impact of 21st century practices of education upon human creativity and joy in learning (MCEETYA, 2008) in and through writing. It questions how writing is experienced and valued as a process and product of research; as a means for personal and professional learning; and how it is taught and experienced in the classroom. In doing so, it brings together a range of critical perspectives upon writing within global agendas for international competitiveness in education and research, and the capacity for writing and reflection to disrupt and transform personal and professional understandings (Ellis, Bochner, Denzin et al., 2008). Finally, this work considers the power of writing for greater personal and professional understanding of self and the world, and for making meaning

Writing for teachers and researchers

Weaving Words' contribution to knowledge and practice is in the neglected but important area of teachers as creators of writing, and more specifically of forms of writing where the intent is literary rather than academic. In this text, the works of pre-service teachers are shared in Chapters 3, 6, 8 and 11, with their reflections upon learning and teaching interwoven into research Chapters 1 and 10. Writing for teachers is important. There has long been a focus upon developing future educators' skills and knowledge for supporting others' writing skills (Cremin & Myhill, 2012). However, a wealth of evidence from research and from established practices such as those of Montessori and Reggio Emilia (Gutek, 2004; New, 1993) suggests that for educators to create spaces for others' imaginative and creative works, this requires a "pedagogy of risk" (Wilson, 2009, p. 398) by which they engage in the lived experience of creative writing. Increasingly, government curricula and internet sources for educators include model lesson plans for the teaching of writing through step-by-step approaches. Research suggests that where teachers are not themselves confident as writers, this encourages conservative approaches (Myhill & Wilson, 2013). There is a scarcity of research into

teachers and pre-service teachers' learning of the craftand art of writing. The works created and shared by pre-service teachers as authors in this book initiate a conversation that seeks to redress that gap. Pre-service teachers and the younger authors with whom they have worked are named as authors, and their writings are presented without any commentary in four chapters of this book. In Chapters 1 and 10 pre-service teachers are named as supporting writers or co-authors.

The research chapters in this text (Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13 and 14) examine epistemologies that appear to shape pre-service teachers', university educators' and researchers' beliefs about the forms of writing that are privileged and valued, in teacher education and in educational research, in theory and in practice. They consider questions around an ethics of voice, agency, authenticity and authority in reflexive writing for teaching, personal and professional development and research. In doing so, they engage with issues of disclosure, representation and knowledge of the self and others in and through writing. In addressing those questions, the authors contend with the contradictory and troubling values and judgements writers and readers bring to works whose original purpose may have been to disrupt rather than to meet accepted standards of form and aesthetics. Beyond this, the writers in all chapters consider whether and how reflection may be attendant upon the processes of shaping, editing and presenting the written word, and how far writing as reflection may be transformative of the writer's understandings and practice, creating rather than representing the known. Within that exploration they engage with issues relating to voice, culture and identity. The reader is a third strand in this interweaving of ideas, making meaning within and between the works of authors in the book.

Pre-service teacher writings – the context

The writings and reflections of pre-service teachers were created during an elective study (a course chosen by undergraduates seeking to enhance their skills and knowledges in that subject area). The course synopsis describes its intent:

> Pre-service teachers will focus upon poetry, prose and drama from a range of traditional and contemporary contexts, so as to enhance their personal repertoires of practice and knowledge of literature and language. Through reading, creating and sharing literary texts participants will have opportunities to enhance their personal understanding, skills and knowledge of grammar and literacy for teaching in Australian contexts,

bringing the potential for learning to be transferred to global contexts (University of Southern Queensland, 2013).

Where other courses in the Bachelor of Education program brought a literacies and multiliteracies focus to the teaching of English this course emphasised the reading of works of literature from diverse cultural and historical contexts, and the creation of written works for adult readers. The first part of the assessment task was to create a portfolio of works including a poem, a short story or scene from a play in any style or genre. The teaching team encouraged writers to consider performative approaches and the use of digital technologies, but few authors chose this option. The assessment task also required participants to transfer their knowledge and experience to working with a younger writer, (discussed in Chapter 10), and to reflect upon how their personal learning in writing may have informed their practice of teaching.

Students in the fourth year of a Primary Years specialism were the largest cohort in the course. Those taking the course in their third year did so as part of the Early Childhood specialism. A small number undertook the course during their first year of study within the Secondary Years specialism (Table 1). Writings are drawn from three offers of the elective where participants who passed the course (n=145/147) were invited to consider publishing their work after the release of final grades. Many did not respond (n=97). Students were seeking employment and may have stopped accessing university emails. Others responded $(n$=22) indicating that although they had enjoyed the course they did not wish to share their work.

Online students were encouraged to share draft works and to provide feedback to one another in discussion forums. On-campus students were encouraged to share their works online, but most preferred to work in pairs and not to share their works with the group. As course examiner I shared my own draft works, and adjusted these in line with undergraduate feedback. Although the power difference between examiner/student could not be reduced, my intent was to model the generative processes of writing, listening to feedback and building trust. Virtual classroom sessions allowed small groups of online students to discuss issues and challenges. To encourage the giving of feedback, I adjusted the assessment for the second offer of the course to require authors to include examples of feedback they had given and received from a colleague or trusted peer, and to discuss how and whether this feedback had been used.

Year	Mode	Enrol	Year	Domestic/ Int'nl	Nil response/ Rejected	Agreed to publish
2011	On campus	25	4 (17) 3 (7) 2 (1)	25 Dom	Nil: 8 Reject: 3	14
	Web	25	5 (2) 4 (16) 3 (7)	25 Dom	Nil: 21 Reject: 3	1
2012	On campus	13	4 (9) 3 (3) 1 (1)	13 Dom	Nil: 8 Reject: 4	1
	Web	39	4 (25) 3 (11) 2 (1) 1 (2)	39 Dom	Nil: 26 Reject: 8	5
2013	Web	43	4 (24) 3 (15) 2 (2) 1 (2)	41 Dom 2 Intn'l	Nil: 34 Reject: 4	5

Table 1: Student numbers and mode of study over three offers of the course

The structure of this book

The book is structured in three parts, each including writings by researchers and pre-service teachers upon a theme.

- Four chapters constitute Part 1, under the theme *Identity and voice*. Pre-service teachers' creative writings focus upon on beginnings, endings and the journey between, and researcher writings explore the writing as a means of discovering and developing personal and professional identity.
- Part 2, *Writing the wor(l)d* includes five chapters, three of which have been written by researchers bringing a close focus upon writing as generative process, and as a way of negotiating complex issues of identity and culture, power and agency. Two

chapters are composed of pre-service teachers' literary works: poems, short stories and plays through which they engage with issues of relationships and power.

- Part 3, *Writing for personal and professional transformation* engages with the troubling and transformative power of writing as research and as reflection, transferring personal learning into practice, and the challenge of writing as a way of becoming.

Each of the three parts is preceded by an introduction.

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PART I:

IDENTITY AND VOICE

Introduction

The chapters that constitute Part 1 of this text share a focus upon processes and practices of writing as a means of forming, making meaning and speaking from a unique personal and professional voice.

Chapter 1 *The Challenge to Write: The warp, the weft and the space between* is co-authored by Janice Jones and undergraduate pre-service teachers. It considers the experience of teachers as writers, attending to issues of power, agency, disclosure and safety in the experience of writing. This chapter is counterbalanced by Chapter 10 in the last section of this book, where pre-service teachers consider their personal and professional practices as teachers of writing

In Chapter 2 *Uisge Beatha: The ebb and flow of four* tides researchers Yvonne Findlay and Janice Jones employ narrative autoethnographic methods, and a phenomenological theoretical framework to deconstruct Yvonne's life story and its potential meanings. Using the metaphor of the cycle of water from its starting point in the highlands of Scotland the authors interweave Yvonne's texts and transcripts of their critical conversations to explore the power of labelling.

Chapter 3 brings together poems, short stories and reflections created by pre-service teachers, under the title *Beginnings, endings and the journey between*, and with unifying themes of love, loss and forgiveness.

Chapter 4 *Finding my voice* concludes the first part of this book. Reprising the metaphor of a river of life, Anne Jasman draws upon writings created across her academic career to critically evaluate writing as a means of generating a unique and authentic voice. The chapter engages with the physical, emotional, social and cultural contexts of writing as research.