

Seven Minutes to an Authentic Response: How a generative writing practice can bridge creative practice and academic writing, decolonise curriculum and resist the generic seductions of AI generated text

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Abstract

This short paper outlines an experimental generative writing practice offered to the graduating year in painting for one hour a week for the past four years, and speculates on its efficacy in addressing three areas of pedagogical challenge pertinent to current cohorts in the School of Art. The first of these is the necessity of decentring curriculum away from unconscious western centric biases, the second is reframing writing in relation to the proliferation of AI (artificial intelligence) platforms, and the third is the question of how to best prepare art students for post graduate study by forming a meaningful bridge between creative practice and academic writing. Relevance to the themes of regeneration, repair and care is evidenced in the focus on students who have experienced outsider or subaltern status in relation to academic writing due to: English being a second or subsequent language; a diagnosis of neurodivergence or dyslexia; or translating the world via material and spatial practices rather than linguistic expression. Care for, and inclusion of, students who are initially less fluent than their peers, leads to the generation of diverse artistic and research communities which in turn creates more diverse forms of cultural expression. These are characterised by a quality of authenticity, that is, inhabiting an authority of knowing.

Keywords: Decentring curriculum; inclusion and diversity; material practice; artificial intelligence

Introduction

As a lecturer in the School of Art, I'm interested in decolonising art practice and the question of how knowledge systems become visible. I have great faith in students to participate. I'm curious about why art students often hate writing. Four years ago, I started a generative writing practice with the graduating year consisting of an hour of writing divided into 7-minute sections each begun with a short prompt. I made it optional, non-assessable and early in the morning, which should have failed on all three counts. We got hooked, me and the students, on this quiet hour of writing, that set up the conditions for going to the studio better than anything else. I came to each session prepared with 2-3 prompts with two more arising from the writing, introducing two new theorists each time, and wrote with them in an atmosphere of collective concentration. After a few weeks I noticed the students' relationship to the compulsory task of academic reading and writing beginning to shift. New content was entering into their research proposal documents. These were becoming more specific, idiosyncratic and interesting. A new reciprocity emerged between their writing and developments in the studio. The following year I began the practice with a new cohort and found that students who had moved on to Honours would return voluntarily to join the sessions. This paper aims to evaluate how this practice succeeds in addressing three key areas of challenge facing art students seeking to develop a research direction vitally connected to their primary motivation in becoming an artist.

The Context

"How can we voice the unsayable, unsettle the categorical, reach for that which lies beyond conceptualization?...By heeding the wisdom of those whom the majority call 'autistic.'"
(Ingold, n.d.)

I have found that four common reasons art students cite for resisting writing are 1) dyslexia, 2) an experience of neurodivergence such as ADHD or autism, 3) English is not the first language spoken and most common of all, 4) art practice is experienced as a separate sensory process that does not necessarily arise from the language center of the brain. The privacy of the generative writing practice is an important tool—the form or correctness of the writing doesn't matter. The brevity of seven minutes is low stakes, invites risk and proves very effective for evading the inner censor. Most importantly multilingual students are invited to write in any language they choose, particularly in an oral language or dialect that they may have grown up with that is later displaced by more formal written language in many parts of the world. Rather than emphasising the primacy of English, and their lack of native speaker fluency, we discuss the ways that being multilingual can be a philosophical advantage. These students have an embodied understanding of how language and sensory experience co-form and how one can know oneself differently in different tongues. Rather than lacking authority and fluency in English, they can claim the ability to translate concepts from one language structure and way of being to another. This is the primary way that this generative writing practice can produce emergent content away from the center in an English-speaking institution both consciously and unconsciously informed by the language and history of the West. Likewise, students who understand themselves as 'other' whether that be neurodiverse or queer or transgender begin to trust the ways in which these ways of being and thinking manifest linguistically. Poetic forms emerge in which neurodiverse

inclinations towards reversal, repetition and divergent leaps, become interesting linguistic devices to be considered. In this way the generative writing practice points directly towards the revealing of what Ken Lum terms “subjugated knowledges ... a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as non-conceptual knowledges, or insufficiently elaborated knowledges, naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (Lum in Madoff 2010 p.335). Lum here is referring to both ideas and material forms that emerge in artwork and are immediately deemed to be inferior due to illegibility that arises from their difference from an Anglophone cultural norm.

Eighty percent of art school cohorts in Melbourne in recent years are made up of students that are female or genders other than male. Around ten to fifteen percent of students are termed “international” generally from Asia and it is hoped that First Nations numbers will grow. Many local students have a parent or grandparents who have migrated from parts of the world other than the United Kingdom, United States and Western Europe from where the artistic traditions that inform English speaking art curriculum are most heavily drawn. Pedagogical methods that challenge the unconscious biases embedded in a system where, as Hamid Dabashi writes “Western philosophy is ‘philosophy’, and African philosophy is ethno-philosophy the way Indian music is ethno-music and Western thinking is “Thinking” and everything else, as Immanuel Levinas was wont of saying, is “dancing”, are an urgent part of the world building that must take place if art schools are to remain vital and relevant in the twenty first century. Amongst Lum’s subjugated knowledges we might recognise the question posed by American academic Gayatri Spivak “Can the subaltern speak?” in her book *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (2008), in which she interrogates the epistemic violence that leads to the silencing of certain voices.

Natalie Loveless writes “As feminist, antiracist and decolonial theorists have long taught us, pedagogical ideologies—regimes of truth—configure the parameters of legitimate research questions as well as what counts for rigour for both student and teacher.” (Loveless 2019, p.13). Consciously making space to hear the true diversity of voices that make up student cohorts and empowering their emergence leads to new and unexpected forms of cultural expression.

The Method

The seven-minute method itself is drawn from creative writing, in particular writing workshops run by American writer Sarah Sentilles, and Australian writer Charlotte Wood that I undertook during my doctoral research. I adapted the method to material practice by thinking about how a prompt might be primarily an interesting exploration and secondarily may generate the raw material for academic enquiry. Prompts are often directed towards activating the tools, materials and actions in the practice in ways that reveal their specific agencies in the making process, providing a key to individual methodologies. Adopting a literary device such as The Chiasm in which a statement is made and then reversed such as I tend the garden, the garden tends me can yield new understandings, analogies and metaphors. An example of a starting prompt might be to list the specific gestures within a practice using the chiasmic form, for example I stitch the fabric, the fabric stitches me. This

can include various ways of gathering source material; I hear the narrative, the narrative hears me. This might ostensibly produce some nonsense, but it can also lead to a comprehension of the reciprocal dimension of practice, in particular material agencies and the ways that objects and forms of matter can act upon the maker. From here the idea of “vibrant matter” (p. viii) and “thing-power” (p. xvi) as defined by a theorist such as Jane Bennett (2009), becomes accessible through the specifics of personal meaning.

The playful use of time in the prompts echoes the way imagery can hover over ancestral memories and other personal material experienced as somewhat liminal. A series of prompts may invite students to sequentially situate themselves in three different timeframes moving back through the generations of their family and exploring what they know of times and places. This can be generated through imagery as prompt, such as imagining a landscape or shelter and describing what emerges in that visualization, paying equal attention to absences and elisions. Many of these are strategies used in creative writing with throughlines to the sensory and feeling states that drive art practice. Once these are experienced as ‘arising’ within the free and private space of the seven-minute prompt, writing becomes a tool akin to material practice, one that reveals a new landscape that wasn’t as fully known before.

In the context of the art school the seven-minute method becomes an active mode of ‘research creation’, as defined by Natalie Loveless in her book *How to make art at the end of the world: A manifesto for research-creation* (2019), a key strategy in bridging the gap between an art practice experienced in sensory, material and kinetic terms that does not readily translate into an academic argument. The seven-minute method has a unique capacity to connect practice and writing through activating a reciprocal process between text and interior imagery. Engaging Charlotte Wood’s idea of “heat seeking” it goes to the heart of personal motivation and builds through a dialogue with the matter of making.

Loveless (2019) writes “An artist is an agent of operative realism, an art worker working with the material of the social, in ways that infiltrate our reigning alienated social orders and that carve out micro pockets of non-alienated encounter precisely by taking inter subjectivity and interdependence as a formal given”(p. 35). The collective experience of reflection and exploration without pressure or critique created by the seven-minute method becomes just such a ‘non-alienated encounter’ in a space previously experienced as alienating in multiple ways.

Large Language Models

Two years after I began practicing the seven-minute method with students ChatGPT launched to moral panic in schools and universities. Large language models spit out plausible sounding text in the space it takes to boil the kettle by giving us the next most predictable word. Suddenly the wild leaps and connections that characterise generative writing practice, the sheer unpredictability of the content, took on a new relevance.

For the student who dislikes writing or believes they are no good at it, the ease of using artificial intelligence models to generate text is naturally seductive and sometimes the

results are easily identifiable as AI and sometimes not. The strength of the generative writing practice is that it hovers a liminal territory in which the writer feels themselves articulating what is perhaps sensed but not fully known and this encounter with one's own thoughts in a new form is experienced as uniquely one's own, the opposite of undertaking the act of writing to produce something in response to a preformulated demand. The desire to use a large language model to quickly dispatch the task tends to disappear. Assistance to structure or extend a piece of writing can be very useful at a later date, but the sense of ownership over the primary content and the form it takes becomes inviolable in a useful way.

Architectural historian Jane Rendell's (2020) concept of site writing, in which different subject positions can be used to activate "the interaction between material and psychic states" (p. 145), explores the ways in which personal narratives activate space. These accounts become highly specific ways to explore affective states in relation to time and place, especially those spaces we may design and construct. Different subject positions are a key tool in creating prompts for the seven-minute method and something similar emerges through the invitation of the personal and situated, a more nuanced relationship between maker, matter and space that is more likely to break the bounds of what is derivative.

Conclusion

Through the collaborative practice of the seven-minute method, I and student cohorts have found that if a link can be made between the emergent personal material and an area of theoretical enquiry, an unprecedented quality of engagement ensues. This then drives new forms of research-creation that are more vitally situated and connected. English is the common language of communication but no longer the language that determines what can and can't be experienced or expressed and which cultural lineages have a place in the room. Languages other than English lead to different imagery and form which leads to more diverse and authentic artistic and research communities. Characteristics of dyslexia, neuro-divergence, gender, sexual identities and anything else experienced as outside the norm, can more readily emerge and take form if first explored through private writing. The generating of research questions and lines of enquiry is revitalised through what Loveless calls "a mode of eros that is committed, cathected and sustaining." (2019 p. 3) and successfully resists the generic logic of large language models through activating specificity and unpredictability.

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Author Biography:

Dr Sarah Tomasetti is an artist and lecturer interested in developing pedagogical methods that decenter curriculum, foster inclusion and make space for diverse ways of knowing. She is a specialist in pre-industrial material techniques and her doctoral research examines how putting the matter-energy of slaked lime in conversation with landscape imaginaries can constitute a correspondence and entanglement with the living world through making. She has had over 20 solo exhibitions and been shortlisted for 17 awards, winning the John Leslie Prize for Landscape in 2020.