

## Flinders University

Jeri Kroll

### **The supervisor as practice-led coach and trainer: getting creative writing doctoral candidates across the finish line**

#### Abstract:

Multitasking supervisor-trainers who oversee the hybrid creative writing thesis have to be as informed and proactive as those guiding the careers of elite athletes. They function as manager, coach and trainer all in one. These roles are complicated by the multiplicity of theoretical and structural pathways available to shape the hybrid thesis. Since each new project poses new challenges, how candidates and supervisors respond has moved the discipline of creative writing forward, helping to define what kind of knowledge it can produce as well as what skills it can foster. There cannot be, therefore, one supervisory model. The dialectical process of supervisors interrogating their performance replicates, to some extent, how candidates undertake practice-led research, which involves posing questions and modifying strategies as a thesis progresses. Nevertheless, the successful collaborative hard science supervisory model can be adapted to creative writing doctoral supervision to improve performance on micro and macro levels. These ‘hands on’ supervisors not only work effectively with students individually. They also set up external structures such as creative mentorships and, most importantly, exploit the power of the group. Scheduling practice-led research seminars that unpack the methods of creative writing research can be particularly useful. They demonstrate this type of research in action and allow refinement of research questions. Supervisors can also manage regular creative writing postgraduate support groups. Members do more than simply workshop; supervisors and students provide collegial modelling, professional development opportunities and publishing guidance. In sum, they foster a team mentality that does not stifle creativity but encourages the completion of creative and critical work. By functioning on micro and macro levels, therefore, supervisors guide candidates through the research maze so that each thesis can embody an individual vision.

#### Biographical note:

Professor Jeri Kroll is Program Coordinator of Creative Writing at Flinders University. Past President of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, she is on the Editorial Boards of *New Writing* (UK), *TEXT* and *Australian Book Review*. She has published extensively on creative writing research and pedagogy and has been supervising and examining creative theses since 1997. She has published over

twenty books for adults and young people, including poetry, picture books (two CBC Notable Awards) and novels. *Death as Mr Right* won second prize in the Anne Elder Poetry Award. Her most recent creative works are *Mickey's Little Book of Letters* (novel) and *The Mother Workshops* (poetry). *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research and Pedagogy* (2008) was co-edited with Graeme Harper. Their next project is a book on creative writing research methods contracted with Palgrave Macmillan. The recipient of numerous grants and residencies, she received a Varuna Writer's Retreat Fellowship for 2009 to work on a verse novel.

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## Introduction

Imagine this. A postgraduate arrives at the office of his supervisor for the first face-to-face encounter. He knocks on the half-open door and enters. A chair swivels in front of a desk and he sees – not a demure middle-aged man with a neatly-trimmed beard; a chic woman in a grey business suit; or a thirty-something in jeans and scruffy Tee who resembles one of his peers. What he beholds is a new breed of supervisor.

Like Argus, she has many eyes, to keep track of foreground, middle and background. She excels in perspective. Like Shiva, she possesses many arms, so she can juggle drafts, field calls and answer emails late into the night. She has mastered multitasking. Like an earth mother, she nurtures her children, managing to give each one enough attention. She specialises in pastoral care. Like Dr Who, she troubleshoots, negotiating with all forms of academic life. In fact, she can transform at will into whatever she needs to be: academic, artist, mentor, disciplinarian, cheerleader. And of course, as a creative scholar who embodies all of these bodies from diverse traditions, she obviously understands cross-disciplinarity. The new postgraduate hesitates, at once dazzled and confused. Then suddenly, what he beholds dissolves into a real person who points out that what he has been seeing is a vision of his supervisor over the course of his candidature. What he has beheld is a metaphor.

I have constructed this scenario to highlight the challenges of twenty-first century supervision of creative writing doctorates. Funding constraints, heavy workloads and shifting definitions of creative writing research as well as attendant governmental pressures have combined to complicate the supervisory role, especially for academics who are also writers. In fact, the challenges of supervising demonstrate how doctoral study has helped to forge creative writing's disciplinary identity and to work out its definitions of research. The significance of supervision in achieving these goals is apparent in academic disciplines in general; supervisors represent a field and, 'consistent with Hockey's (1995) findings, different kinds of PhDs are undertaken according to tacit, discipline-specific expectations about the appropriate scope and range of PhD research' (Sinclair 2004: 13). Since recent national reports deal only with doctoral higher degrees, I will restrict myself to creative writing PhDs here for ease of comparison. In order to facilitate completions in creative writing, supervisors (as well as examiners) have been at the forefront of defining what the discipline considers an 'appropriate scope and range of PhD research'. They are, at once, guardians of literary and critical quality and trainers in practice-led research.

This conception of the discipline does not reduce it to an elaborate pedagogy, but suggests how creative writing doctoral programs help to define what kind of knowledge creative writing can produce as well as what skills it can foster.[1] The debates in key journals *TEXT* (since 1997) and, to a lesser extent, *New Writing* (since 2004), indicate that the nature of research, the discipline's epistemology and the composition of the creative writing higher degree have preoccupied the Australian and British academy. Essay collections such as *Creative writing: theory beyond practice* (Krauth & Brady 2006) also reveal the increasing sophistication of debate. In fact, in late 2008 NAWA (National Association of Writers in Education) in the United Kingdom issued two benchmark statements: one on creative writing as a subject and

the other on creative writing research, with a section dedicated to research higher degrees. I will return to the latter statement later.

How one evaluates creative practice and product as well as what genres are worth being evaluated (literary versus popular, for example) has also informed the discussion about how to justify creative writing as a research subject (Kroll 2002; Dawson 2006; Melrose 2007; Carey, Webb & Brien 2008; Nelson 2009 and many others). *TEXT*'s special issue, *Illuminating the exegesis* (Fletcher & Mann eds 2004), was based on a symposium organised by the Arts Academy at the University of Ballarat, and was the first to my knowledge to focus solely on the hybrid thesis. Various symposia and conferences since 2001[2] demonstrate how creative arts programs in general have affected conceptions of research. What unites all these factors at the doctoral level is the bipartite thesis, a 'polyphonic discourse' (Kroll 2004a) aimed at a variety of audiences.

Supervisors who perform myriad functions (as my introduction suggests) in order to aid candidates to complete that thesis have helped to move the discipline forward. Among many others, Arnold (2005), Perry (2000), Brady (2000), Brien (2004), Crew (2000), Dibble and van Loon (2004) and Woods (2007) chart the writers' journeys as candidates, writers and/or supervisors, providing case studies, as do chapters by Baranay, Krauth and O'Mahony in *Creative writing studies: practice, research and pedagogy* (Harper & Kroll 2008). Most recently, Williamson, Brien and Webb (2008) provide an overview of supervision literature in general and survey scholarship that describes personal experiences of the exegesis. Their research grew out of the development of the website-based Australian Postgraduate Writers Network (<http://www.writingnetwork.edu.au>); this initiative allowed them to conduct a 2007 survey of 'HDR candidates, recent graduates and supervisors in writing across all Australian universities' (Williamson et al 2008: 9). In particular, they describe candidates' expectations and disappointments with the supervisory relationship (10).

What this body of critical work underlines is the multiplicity of approaches to writing research and the strategies developed to guide it. To aim towards best practice, therefore, the self-conscious supervisor today must interrogate performance continually. Since each project poses new challenges in creative writing, there cannot be one supervisory model. This dialectical process is replicated in the way in which students undertake practice-led research, which involves posing questions, responding and rephrasing as they rewrite creative and critical material. I return to this aspect of supervising the thesis in due course and primarily use the creative writing supervisory practices at Flinders University as a case study.

Let me propose another metaphor to understand the creative writing doctoral environment. Sport, for better or worse, permeates Australian culture, and leaders in business and education are often called coaches. They help to select who joins the team. Pursuing a creative writing higher degree is, in many respects, like running a marathon, only students have to traverse more territory than the traditional postgraduate. They jog through literary and cultural history, perhaps taking alternate routes through other disciplines, as well as traversing their own creative landscapes. Those entering this arduous race can be compared to promising athletes who aspire,

by the end of their training, to reach an elite level. All research higher degree study requires commitment, energy, hard work and time, but creative writing postgraduates (and their supervisors) have additional hurdles to jump. The choice of a myriad of theoretical and structural pathways complicates this new breed of thesis. Clarifying conceptions of creative writing research in workshops, offering external mentorships and establishing postgraduate support groups, where the hybrid thesis can be examined in theory and in practice, can be the key to fostering a team ethos that does not stifle creativity but encourages completion of creative and critical work. In this way, creative writing higher degree programs can adapt some of the benefits of the collaborative hard science model.

### **What is good PhD supervision?**

General supervisory responsibilities are spelled out in university higher degree publications and websites.[3] A random survey of sixteen universities which offer creative writing higher degrees reveals that they require similar duties couched in general terms (with, in fact, some borrowing or referencing each other's material). Supervisors must communicate relevant university policies; guide research projects through all stages, providing appropriate feedback; and manage the candidature by setting up appropriate meetings, monitoring milestones and organising examiners. They are also responsible for 'advising on research ethics, research design and methods' (*Australian code*: 12). Supervisors have their own styles, of course, as is evidenced by their creative implementation of generic guidelines.

Mark Sinclair's concept of 'hands off' and 'hands on' supervisors (2004), in *The pedagogy of 'good' PhD supervision* (the most recent national report on Australian doctoral supervision), is useful in teasing out the implications of generic responsibilities for creative writing supervisors. 'Hands off' supervisors, who do not rigidly direct or intervene, are the least successful, relying on candidates being equipped from the start to pursue research; they expect them to function independently without a great deal of guidance (Sinclair 2004: vi-vii). This treatment works for some – those highly competent already, for example. This cohort might include mature-age and/or career professionals and academics seeking additional qualifications. Hard science supervisors are likely to be 'hands on' and 'relatively interventionist' (Sinclair 2004: vii). According to Sinclair as well as Neumann (2003) and Latona and Browne (2001), the hard science model is the most successful because students, who are screened for entry according to very specific criteria, have higher levels of supervisor access, funding, collaborative support and publication opportunities.

'Hands on' supervisors structure the candidate's journey, establish an "open door" consultation policy' (Sinclair 2004: vii) and encourage trust (vii). These supervisors do not hide the differences in status and power, but 'use their superior position to mentor candidates' professional development with a view to the candidate establishing him or herself as a peer' (vii). The interventionist thrust of science supervision on the micro level is demonstrated by the type of thesis topics selected and the relative ease with which candidates settle on them: 'the PhD topic is often

more continuous and predetermined than in the Social Sciences and Humanities' (Sinclair 2004: 13). I will return to this issue in the next section.

Such supervision might well derive from knowing how research teams function effectively. In other words, these supervisors have not had to reinvent the wheel in terms of practice and find it convenient to incorporate doctoral candidates into research projects, publishing ventures and professional associations. Being part of an established research culture is the key to why hard science students have the highest success rate for completions on time (Sinclair 2004: vii), a fact that reinforces findings as early as 1983 from the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee that 'the most successful PhD students were "traditional students – young, male and in the natural sciences – who undertook more structured research degrees"' (Latona & Browne 2001: 4).

It is worth discussing publication opportunities since, ideally, doctoral writing candidates want to see their creative work in print and many also desire to see their critical work published, especially if they plan careers in the academy. Students of 'hands on' supervisors (Sinclair 2004: vi-vii)[4] tend to publish; moreover, 'collaborating with supervisors on publications contributes to the likelihood of the candidate completing' (Sinclair 2004: 4). On the other hand, according to Sinclair, 'Humanities and Arts research culture is individualistic in its orientation to the publication of research' (Sinclair 2004: iv) and the creative writing thesis experience replicates (if not exaggerates) that individualism. Co-authorship (just as collaborative research) has not been the Humanities and Arts' norm, although there have always been exceptions and that bias is slowly changing.[5] In addition, the isolation that is, to some extent, necessary for creative production in the field of writing can increase student and supervisor frustration. For example, candidates might be reluctant to show supervisors chapters of a novel before they have written a substantial part of the work, whereas traditional postgraduates routinely submit single draft chapters. For creative projects, extracting sections to publish and/or present might not be feasible. Essay publication of exegetical sections, however, might be. I return to this issue later as having work published during a candidature builds confidence in critical and creative abilities.

In creative writing doctoral programs, the challenges of a long-term project are complicated by new understandings of research, necessitating a multifarious response by supervisors, who have to teach themselves as well as students what they need to know: "Research postgraduate training is unique among academic responsibilities in providing a direct linkage between teaching and learning activities and research" (Zuber-Skerrit & Ryan, 1994 as qtd. in Latona & Browne 2001: 2). Given the hybrid thesis's variable nature, each project requires an ad hoc supervisory response to some extent. Jack Mezirow's development of transformative learning theory offers insight into the unsettling experience that candidates (especially those at the apprentice level) undergo and that supervisors oversee. Together they are engaged in a type of 'emancipatory education' (Mezirow 1991: 197): 'Its goal is to help learners move from a simple awareness of their experiencing to an awareness of the *conditions* of their experiencing (... a reflection on process) and beyond this to an awareness of the

*reasons why* they experience as they do and to action based upon these insights' (Mezirow 1991: 197). Doctoral candidates have to learn how to complete a major creative and critical project (or, in the case of seasoned writers, learn how to expand their practice in new directions) as well as understand their processes and articulate how their work fits into a cultural and/or historical context. In so doing, they will become 'more critically reflective of [their] own assumptions and those of others [including supervisors and critics]' (Mezirow 2006: 27); they will also, no doubt, be reassessing past aesthetic habits of mind. Supervisors facilitate: 'Educators assist learners to bring this process into awareness' (Mezirow 2006: 28).

Mentorship of this type consumes time and emotional energy. The term is sometimes paired with supervision, without clear distinction, as in the *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research 2006*: 'Institutions should promote effective mentoring and supervision of students and research trainees ...' (12). In Homer's *Odyssey*, Mentor is the trusted elder comrade whom Odysseus, when departing for Troy, leaves in charge with 'authority/over his house and slaves' (Book 2, lines 225ff: 25). He represents a wise person with management skills. Mentorship, therefore, implies a personal relationship bonded by trust, so the qualities needed to mentor and to supervise successfully can overlap. A supervisor of particular types of students might take them on, knowing that pastoral care and professional development are part of the brief (see Lederman 2008), but this is not necessarily the case. According to the *Macquarie dictionary*, a supervisor is simply 'a teacher who supervises the work of a student, esp. a research student or one studying for a higher degree' (1996). Such a definition reads like a job description (the role often appears in academic appointment criteria). The activity can be performed without a close personal attachment between the parties. Being a mentor can have a purely professional dimension, too. I will return to this subject when I discuss external mentorship of creative projects.

To summarise, many of the beliefs about what constitutes good supervision are heavily influenced by practices in science disciplines, but that successful model can be adapted to creative writing doctoral supervision to improve student performance on both micro and macro levels. Being a more involved, 'hands on' supervisor is obviously labour-intensive, but some of the strategies I will suggest can alleviate pressure. As coach and trainer in practice-led research, creative writing RHD supervisors deal with students on a case-by-case basis, set up support structures and foster a group ethos among a postgraduate cohort that encourages team success. By fulfilling these roles, the supervisor helps the individual and the group wrestle with the hybrid creative writing thesis.

### **Of research cultures and research topics**

The wider perspective of the environment in which supervisor and candidate function – the research culture – gives a clearer sense of what needs to be done to facilitate the hybrid thesis.

PhD candidatures represent an induction into prevailing disciplinary norms governing the conduct, reportage and supervision of research. In effect, then, the PhD candidature

appears to be a *rite of passage* into distinctive research cultures that manifests in different completions and times to submission between disciplines. (Sinclair 2004: 12)

The rite of passage for hard science students is eased by collaborative research and co-authorship. Another key factor, as Latona and Browne (2001) observe from their survey of the literature, is ‘discipline differences in conceptualising higher degrees’ (2); these variations account for variations in completion rates (Latona & Browne: 7). Alternative views of ‘the value of the PhD’ (Latona & Browne: 2) affect how degree programs are structured. One needs to ask [whether it] ‘lies in its outcome (new knowledge) or its process (training in research)’ (Latona & Browne: 2). What do creative writing doctoral candidates expect from their degrees? At the extremes some want an apprenticeship (that is, to train and experiment) and others want to produce benchmark work (produce new knowledge).[6] Indeed, practice-led research as a methodology encourages more than one outcome.

This ambiguity about the purpose of a higher degree affects questions of scope and originality and, hence, the thesis topic: ‘The higher education literature maintains that there is a fundamental distinction between the way students in science and science related disciplines identify a doctoral topic and the way it is defined within the humanities and social sciences’ (Neumann 2003: 57). Being integrated into a research team means that students ‘fit in’ to a broader project. They might have a directive supervisor who hands them a question to answer because it speaks to an area that his team is investigating, or they might find ‘wide latitude ... to pursue their own determinations of “promising” lines of research’ (Neumann 2003: 57). But they are shown those “promising” lines’ and understand the range of methodologies available, with expert advice nearby if needed.

Alternatively, in so-called softer disciplines such as creative arts, humanities and social sciences, students are ‘more ambitious’ in what they attempt than their natural science peers, who are ‘required to meet more uniform professional criteria’ (Sinclair 2004: 24) rather than a vaguer standard of ‘originality and uniqueness’ (Sinclair 2004: 24). In other words, these candidates aim to make an original contribution to knowledge by themselves and, in my experience as both supervisor and examiner, sometimes wind up completing enough work for two theses. This tendency is exacerbated in a creative writing candidature, where students face two journeys – creative and critical. Candidates might lack models at their university if the doctoral program is new or find access barred to models from other institutions (see Boyd 2009, who describes restrictions on thesis access). Anxiety about defining a topic and achieving originality can affect morale and, thus, completion rates (Sinclair 2004: 13).

In the creative writing PhD, the ways in which thesis topics are generated and phrased vary, reflecting the myriad of templates available. Boyd (2009) and Carey, Webb and Brien (2008) have attempted the most recent surveys of creative writing higher degrees in Australia and confirm this diversity, which is both exciting and confusing for the discipline. Boyd reports that ‘there is substantial variance in length, structure and content in the PhDs and DCAs awarded in the scoped period from the earliest submitted Australian thesis, in 1993, up to June 2008’ (Boyd 2009: 2). In addition, Carey, Webb and Brien report that, among the twenty-eight universities they



investigated, they found a range of approaches to the concept of a creative thesis itself, the centrality of research questions and attitudes towards examination. Not only did instructions provided to examiners differ but procedures for finalising results (4). In fact, the challenge they identify of finding suitably qualified examiners parallels the challenge of providing candidates with enough expert supervision to cover both aspects of the bipartite thesis. Carey, Webb and Brien's expansion of Milech and Schilo's 2004 analysis of three exegetical models highlights the critical state of debate about what research in the discipline means in practical terms for HDR students (7-8).

If, as they affirm, universities do not have the same understanding of 'the meaning and relative importance of key terms such as "creative", "original knowledge" and "research"' (10), candidates, supervisors and examiners will have to clarify in each case for themselves what they mean. In fact, during the course of the doctoral experience candidates might alter their original conceptions. Variations in conceptualising thesis structure can cause problems in work rhythm. As a supervisor, I have noticed that focusing on creative work with little or no attention to critical or cultural issues or, indeed, research questions, for an extended period, especially at the beginning of the PhD, can stall the thesis as a whole and lead to what I call 'the exegesis as afterthought'. As an examiner, I have read exegeses that seemed to have been produced by this process.

If the institutional research culture does not offer students enough guidance, supervisors must take up the burden. Let me turn to what a creative writing research degree means and then to how supervisors can modify an individualistic culture into something more collaborative without compromising artistic autonomy. Specifically, I address how to adapt the 'hands on' or engaged supervisory model to creative writing with the aid of workshops and postgraduate support groups to foster a successful work ethic and speed completion.

### **What is a research degree in creative writing?**

The *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research* (2006) defines research as 'original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and understanding' (10) and then qualifies this by quoting from the United Kingdom's *Research assessment exercise* (RAE) 1998, which includes the 'generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights ...' (*Australian code*: 10). The research-worthy arts are, then, capable of 'technical, conceptual or epistemological innovation' (Wisker 2005: 6); 'publication in some form' (Wisker 2005: 6) is a desired outcome. As mentioned, the United Kingdom's NAWA published two key statements on creative writing that elaborate on this conception.

The *Creative writing benchmark research statement* (2008) defines principles, nature and scope as well as discusses research methodologies, degrees and measurement (11-15).[7] The section below indicates why students often feel overwhelmed with choice:

Creative Writing is an investigative and exploratory process. Of the various approaches adopted, some may be called 'situated' or action research; some reflexive; some

responsive; some may result from an engagement with ‘poetics’; some may adapt or adopt the investigative procedures of other disciplines, where useful. (2.5: 12)

Candidates must find a suitable design for creative/critical work as well as select and justify process and theory. Their solutions are embedded in a hybrid thesis that requires self-reflexivity, creativity and experimentation as well as scholarship. A polyphonic discourse, it addresses multiple audiences: the candidate, supervisors, examiners and a potential reading or viewing public (see Kroll 2004a). Further, candidates have to make a case for how their work fits into a field. This necessity for context is supported by both adult learning and creativity theory.

Mezirow emphasises that adults ‘make meaning’ through ‘reflection’ (1991: 99) and reflexivity is pivotal in connecting the threads of the creative writing thesis. Candidates need to be conscious not only of process, however, but context, looking backward in order to look forward – to perceive, in effect, what needs to be done creatively at this point in their culture. Expert supervisors provide that cultural perspective. Recent creativity theory supports this conception of the background needed for breakthroughs: ‘Creativity is the ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are *new*, *surprising* and *valuable*’ (Boden 2004: 1). Candidates learn to recognise what is new and valuable aided by supervisors who possess literary ‘domain-relevant skills’ (Boden 2004: 81). This is another way of conceptualising the master-apprentice dynamic.

Donald Schön’s key, much-quoted *Educating the reflective practitioner* (1987) offers a useful way of understanding the challenge in undertaking a creative writing degree:

Through complementary acts of naming and framing, the practitioner selects things for attention and organizes them, guided by an appreciation of the situation that gives it coherence and sets a direction for action. So problem setting is an ontological process – in Nelson Goodman’s (1978) memorable word, a form of worldmaking. (4)

That phrase, ‘worldmaking’, points to the twenty-first century incarnation of the God-Author as doctoral student – ‘In the beginning was the Word’ – who must find a language adequate to construct a world. Each project is a ‘unique case’ (Schön 1987: 5) and, ‘if [they are] to deal with it competently, [they] must do so by a kind of improvisation, inventing and testing in the situation strategies of [their] own devising’ (Schön 1987: 5).

This late twentieth-century articulation of reflective practice (which might not develop into a research project) leads into a discussion of twenty-first century practice-led research, which supervisors need to help students to grasp. As I have recently discussed, practice-led research can have three principal goals, any or all of which can underpin the hybrid creative thesis:

The research proceeds by and for the practice ... The research proceeds through practice in order to produce a creative product ... The research proceeds before/during/after practice, aided by ideas generated by practice, in order to produce new knowledge ... (Kroll 2008: 9)

The first research goal focuses on developing (or creating new) methodologies and techniques for the practice of the artform/genre itself. The knowledge here is ‘acquired through the act of creating’ (Harper & Kroll 2008: 4). The second goal focuses on the quality and integrity of the creative work itself that contributes to the field. The third goal can proceed before, during and after practice and can draw on methodologies and theories from other disciplines (as other goals can). It can also produce the kind of knowledge based in conventional scholarship. Finally, one or all of these research goals can be embodied in the hybrid thesis as one entity, in either of the two parts or in the way in which the parts are related.

Extrapolating from patterns in action research (Tripp 2008: 12; Kroll 2008), ‘we see a cycle of asking questions, generating methodology, collecting data, creating, revising, reflecting and modifying practice, which then moves to another level to clarify significance through systematic (or theoretical) evaluation’ (Kroll 2008). This volatile, dialectical process, ‘research cycle’ (Dick 1999: 4) or research loop occurs throughout the candidature and can be aided by both individual and group interactions. It also suits the type of doctoral experience where at times students might focus solely on creative work or exegesis, and then draw back to consider the whole.

### **The expertise of the individual**

Supervisors must devise strategies to facilitate achieving any or all of these research goals, so I now consider what specific methods an engaged creative writing supervisor might exploit. Three critical areas are under the supervisor’s control: the individual academic relationship; the mentor/mentee or master/apprentice relationship, played out on individual and professional levels; and postgraduate workshops and/or support groups designed to encourage creative and critical writing.

Let me begin with issues about individual supervision from my own personal experience. The diverse expertise of the principal and associate supervisors (as well as adjuncts or panels) reflects the hybridity of the creative thesis and the contemporary trend to interdisciplinarity. One supervisor might be a novelist, and the other purely an academic. An associate supervisor might hail from another discipline. The influence of the principal on the thesis is therefore considerable (as opposed to a principal who leads a hard science team where other senior researchers might stand in), for he or she has to juggle the varying perspectives. Keeping everyone in the loop (by copying correspondence, setting periodic group meetings, for instance) is a standard way of ensuring understanding. Email has become a primary mode of interaction and, in fact, its influence on the complexity of doctoral supervision has been recently studied (Bradbury-Jones, et al 2007). In the case of creative theses, however, that complexity is intensified. Academics who are not writers and/or inexperienced in this thesis type need guidance. They can be supplied with reading about the degree and creative research in general to orient them. Later in the candidature, associate supervisors should read some (if not all) of both parts of the thesis (if not to comment on them) to encourage a broad perspective and coherence.

Settling on a thesis topic and research questions is the first challenge for a creative writing candidate and a precondition of the confirmation of candidature (which occurs usually after a successful research proposal presentation). In some respects the supervisor acts like the bridge warden in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, who guards the passage over the chasm. Wardens ask questions and know – perhaps not *the* answer, but a range of successful answers that have helped previous students across. Supervisors realise that the thesis in ‘soft fields’ (Neumann 2003: 57) is more like a puzzle, and the doctoral work comprises helping ‘the parts of the jigsaw accrete into a discernable image’ (57).

Brainstorming questions is one way to begin. Students can then write a paragraph or two on the most promising that might lead into a discussion of the topic as if it were an essay. Considering the type of creative work and research needed to support it is often the key – what does the student need to know and why? How broad is the field? Where will they fit in it? These questions lead naturally into developing primary and secondary works’ bibliographies that will further help students to refine topics. Since scope is the greatest challenge in creative writing theses, refocusing needs to be a constant activity. Allowing a creative work to proceed without much research or sense of direction is unfruitful and leads to ‘the exegesis as afterthought’ as well as fuzzy argument. Having a department file of successful research proposals is invaluable, since students gain a sense of the parameters of a hybrid thesis. If possible, they should browse through completed doctorates in a library. Conversation to refine questions takes up initial months of candidature.

The mentor/mentee or master/apprentice dimension is another aspect of individual supervisory relationships. A close personal association between candidate and supervisor is not necessary to allow fruitful mentoring. We can break down mentoring into two primary activities: professional career guidance (teaching and research) and creative development. Students report that they are ‘attracted to working with fellow artists who were also academics’ (Neumann 2003: 45), someone knowledgeable in the craft as well as in the requisite ‘academic framework for the development of their ideas’ (45). A variation on the traditional practice of learning at the master’s side, this interaction reinforces contemporary theories of creativity that explain the necessity of ‘expert knowledge of one type or another’ (Boden 2004: 23) as a precondition for creative progress.

In addition, induction into the artistic community means absorbing what Vickers terms ‘an “appreciative system” – the set of values, preferences, and norms in terms of which they [practitioners] make sense of practice situations, formulate goals ... and determine what constitutes acceptable professional conduct’ (Schön 1987: 33). Facilitating this kind of informal instruction is especially relevant now when ethical issues arise; for example, in interviewing human subjects or dealing with sensitive and/or minority material. Encouraging candidates to present at conferences, take up publishing opportunities and become involved in professional associations are all ways of including them in a wider academic and cultural environment.

Much of the aforementioned guidance can occur efficiently within a group context, but some cannot, particularly a certain type of creative mentorship. It is worth reiterating

that both supervisors might not be writers as well as academics. An academic who might be an excellent editor will still not possess the perspective of a published writer. Even a dedicated supervisor, however, if they have many students, can provide only so much feedback. In addition, familiarity can be the enemy of objectivity, especially when a supervisor has read many drafts of a work. This is where the external, professional mentor can be an invaluable addition to the supervisory team. A mentorship program requires clear guidelines, some organisation, and department or school funding.

I am aware of two universities at this time that offer formal mentorship programs: Adelaide and Flinders universities.[8] The stated purpose of these programs is to give students the opportunity of attaining a higher professional standard by engaging the services of a well-regarded writer. Adelaide University instituted their program first and detail ‘Responsibilities of the candidate’ and ‘Responsibilities of the mentor’ (Adelaide University Guidelines 2009).[9] Their program focuses on keeping the creative project moving along. In fact, during the mentorship period the guidelines state that ‘the mentor will replace the candidate’s supervisor for the Major Creative Work (not the Critical Essay) for the duration of the mentorship’ (Adelaide University Guidelines), which can extend over several months. There is no mention of what stage the candidate’s critical essay will have reached when the mentorship occurs.

At Flinders, the mentorship occurs usually in the candidate’s third year or reasonably close to submission in order to ensure that the thesis as a whole has achieved coherence and quality. To be specific, ‘Flinders has a firm requirement that students must have completed a draft of the entire thesis (creative and critical components) and this stage in the supervision of a candidate’s research work can only occur when, in the opinion of the principal and co-supervisor, the candidate has completed a full and near-final draft version of both the creative component of the degree and the exegesis’ (Flinders University 2008). Students are, thus, encouraged to work seriously on critical as well as creative parts.

The mentorship experience has proved invaluable at Flinders, allowing candidates to view their work from the perspective of someone highly regarded in the literary community.[10] Frequently, the mentor restates what supervisors have already advised, but sometimes candidates are more willing to listen to external feedback. A key to the program’s success is that candidates have to reach an acceptable standard with the whole thesis – the exegesis cannot be an afterthought. Further, while the mentor reads, the candidate can focus on the draft exegesis again. This type of enforced refocusing (or distancing) supports the dialectical pattern of practice-led research and allows for increased objectivity in the case of the creative product. In addition, the way in which the mentorship program splits the supervisory role into creative and critical bodies takes the pressure off the principal supervisor at this time, who can deal with other students or help the candidate with the critical component.

Mentorships as well as targeted workshops and groups have proved effective at Flinders (which has high postgraduate numbers) in helping supervisors to fulfill a range of supervisory duties. Let me focus now on groups, which provide ways of

alleviating pressure, diversifying feedback, developing requisite skills, testing out research problems and disseminating information.

### **The power of the group**

In my own experience, the postgraduate group can be the cornerstone of a creative writing higher degree candidature, allowing formal and informal instruction. If each student is a mini-version of the God-Author, one of the first things they realise is that gods can be lonely. A postgraduate group, meeting every three to four weeks, comprising the creative writing students of one or two supervisors, or a department, can be a powerful force in helping them to complete. These are more discipline-specific than workshops offered by university professional development divisions.

Group effectiveness is demonstrated by the American experience, where using groups to improve completion rates has recently been tested. Some graduate schools have established “Dissertation boot camps,” either as retreats or regular on-campus meetings ... designed to allow Ph.D. students to coach one another while receiving expert advice as well’ (Jaschik 2008: 3). The term ‘coach’ emphasises the personal as well as professional aspects of the interaction. Here we see an academic version of Schön’s creative practicum, where ‘students mainly learn by doing, with the help of coaching’ (xii). ‘Reflection-in-action’ and dialogue are also prime components of the process. In addition, the group fosters what begins on the micro level between supervisor and student by encouraging collegiality. Donald Hall maintains that supervisors ‘should be “open texts” for them [students] to read and learn from in their own processes of professional interpretation and skill-building’ (Hall 2006: 2). Candidates can provide sounding-boards for one another, continuing what Hall sees as the ‘conversational skill’ (2) desirable in every discipline. The most efficacious types of creative writing postgraduate groups go beyond conversation and craft, however. I will return to the periodic group after looking first at targeted workshops scheduled at critical points of the doctoral journey.

A foundation event is the introductory hybrid thesis workshop that unpacks the assumptions and methods of creative research. This is an ideal place for students to formulate research questions that they have brainstormed with supervisors. After discussion of creative research (and if possible presentations by those further advanced or completed), breaking up into cohorts of three to five to work through research questions for individual projects is productive. This activity exposes students to the diversity of subject, methodology and structure of the hybrid thesis. Subsequent research workshops allow students to test initial research questions, follow-up issues raised at confirmation of candidature presentations and fine-tune arguments. The graduate experience becomes, then, a progressive focusing in on what the thesis problem is and what can and cannot be solved within the creative and critical work – this is another way of understanding the research loop. Supervisors function as expert guides, critiquing strategies and suggesting alternate pathways. The group encourages idea testing, gives feedback (including perspectives embodied in their own work) and comfort in the wilderness.

Encouraging students to publish critically as well as creatively is beneficial since it increases skill and confidence and provides opportunities to draft material that will be incorporated into chapters. Group activities prove beneficial here, too, since they allow supervisors to offer guidance to many and some co-publication might result. Workshops can be organised around abstracts for a particular conference and then follow-up paper workshops can be scheduled to deal with drafts. Sometimes students need to write papers to help them to work through problems. They can refine their argument, integrate it into the thesis and/or ‘dispose’ of material through publication. The resulting essay might or might not find its way into the exegesis, but it might achieve publication and so enhance the candidate’s CV. Refocusing on the critical is also a good strategy if creative work stalls because it keeps students writing.

In a regular postgraduate creative writing group, which provides structure and collegiality, I have found a variety of activities useful. First of all, beginning and end-of-year planning sessions encourage a wide perspective and foster organisational skills so that candidates can meet required progress milestones. Second of all, trial-run presentations before the formal seminar that confirms candidature allow students to fine-tune argument, practise with technology and learn to manage anxiety. These presentations also demonstrate to the group how practice-led research functions in particular cases. Sometimes this can be the key to another student’s breakthrough.

Guest speakers (including experts on specific topics, such as use of Indigenous material and interviewing techniques) enrich the educational experience. Student field trip presentations aid candidates who must prepare a formal report to funding bodies and provide information to peers about how and why field trips are undertaken.

Subgroups can also be effective. For example, candidates can sort themselves into genre or subject-based reading cohorts in order to swap lengthy manuscripts. In addition, a ‘Finishers’ Group’ can be valuable. I instituted one of these in 2008 when I was going on long service leave but knew that, when I returned, three of my students were on schedule to submit within six weeks of each other. I met with them individually to discuss what they should complete during my absence,[11] and then asked them to form a group to share information about completion and to determine my schedule – whose work would I read first and when would it appear? When I returned I had the first project in my pigeonhole and knew the dates when subsequent work would arrive. All three submitted on schedule. I intend to continue this practice with those near completion.

To summarise, a creative writing higher degree group allows sustained contact in a supportive atmosphere and the benefit of extended perspectives. Members can confirm the highs and lows of the doctoral experience for each other. As well, they can foster the independence of mind and the skills necessary for practice-led research, which relies on a dialectical process where writers research, question and refocus in order to advance.

## Conclusion

Creative writing practice-led research is more challenging than traditional research, since it must be adapted for each candidate as they train to become independent learners. In the process, however, they and their supervisors enrich the discipline with fresh perspectives about the type of knowledge creative writing can engender. Supervisors have to be, therefore, as canny, informed and proactive as those guiding the careers of elite athletes. They function as key personnel – manager, coach and trainer all in one – and, if they want to be the best in their field, they need to critique their own performance, too. From the first months of candidature, they devise strategies to maximise the chances that students will reach the finish line in shape and on time. Of course, independent scholar/writers must understand that they are ultimately responsible for their projects. They own them, while supervisors facilitate, administer, nurture, protect, troubleshoot – all terms which hark back to the metaphor with which I began this paper of the multitasking, interdisciplinary trainer who oversees the doctoral experience.

But we are not dealing with ideal scenarios. Supervisors cannot perform miracles, but they help to establish the route, track progress and assess fitness. Postgraduate workshops and groups are powerful aids to enable supervisors to clarify practice-led research in creative writing, provide models, keep students producing and foster a team mentality that encourages the completion of creative and critical work. A successful RHD candidature involves, therefore, a layering of experiences on micro and macro levels. Supervisors function as guides through the research maze but, ultimately, candidates must find their own way out so that each thesis can embody an individual vision. At graduation, a supervisor's greatest reward is to be left behind as candidates move into the professional league.

## Endnotes

- [1] Comparative national studies focus on PhDs, so I do not consider DCAs here. See Boyd 2009 for her discussion. My paper focuses on supervisors who are both academics and writers, therefore often in the position of principal supervisors, responsible for the entire project. Later I deal briefly with the challenges of having a non-writer-supervisor on the team.
- [2] ANCCA (Australian National Coalition for the Creative Arts) was 'launched in June 2000 to provide a policy forum for the academic peak bodies representing creative arts disciplines in Australia's universities' (Wissler et al 2004: xv). A study funded through the ARC's Learned Academies Special Projects scheme, sponsored by ANCCA, was mediated through three symposia (Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth) held over a two-year period (2001-02). Edited material arising from those symposia appeared on <http://www.innovation.qut.edu.au/>. A final print version including additional contributions appeared in 2004 as *Innovation in Australian arts, media and design: fresh challenges for the tertiary sector*. Creative writing was covered in chapter 4, 'Creative writing: the house of words in the new millennium' (Kroll: 41-54).
- [3] Universities surveyed include: Adelaide, Canberra, Charles Sturt, Curtin, Edith Cowan, Flinders, Griffith, James Cook, La Trobe, Melbourne, RMIT, Queensland, Swinburne, South



Australia, New South Wales, UTS. A number have supervisory registers with different requirements, purposes and rules governing access.

- [4] One of the other hallmarks of successful supervision (which students in interviews say that they appreciate) is ‘rapid turnaround of edited script (ideally within 24-48 hours)’ (Sinclair 2004: 34). This factor should be set alongside this other frightening statistic: ‘... supervisors in the Natural Sciences have three times more of these publications [co-authored, international peer-reviewed articles] than supervisors in the Social Sciences and over 10 times as many as supervisors in the Humanities & Arts’ (Sinclair 2004: 4). Here is where valuing of creative work and differences in research cultures count the most – and clearly the arts are disadvantaged.
- [5] Brien has written extensively on collaborative practice and publication and how to integrate co-participatory learning into higher degree programs (for example, see Brien and Brady 2003). Dibble and van Loon (2004), as others already cited, have turned the supervisory relationship itself into an object of study, creating a publication opportunity. Co-authorship on general professional or academic subjects is a more complex challenge.
- [6] Boyd (2009) has gathered statistics about doctoral candidates who had published before entering programs and who have a high rate of publication of the creative product after completion. In addition, she accounts for an influx of creative writing doctorates by pointing to the need for ‘academics to obtain a high level qualification in the discipline in order to continue teaching or be promoted; many theses completed were written by university lecturers and tutors’ (9).
- [7] In 2008, Graeme Harper notes the change in mood in creative writing higher education in the UK as opposed to the US. Comparing the AWP Hallmark document (which still insists that the MFA can be the exit degree [http://www.awpwriter.org/membership9/dh\\_2.thm](http://www.awpwriter.org/membership9/dh_2.thm)) with the NAWA statement, Harper underlines that ‘the Doctorate (the PhD, in particular)’ is now ‘Britain’s “exit degree” in this subject’ (Harper 2008: 166).
- [8] I have limited this to what can be gleaned from university websites.
- [9] I am indebted to Professor Brian Castro and Dr Sue Hosking for information about creative mentorships at Adelaide University.
- [10] Between 2007-09, every candidate at Flinders who has taken part in this program has completed (five) or is under examination (one). I would like to acknowledge Associate Professor Rick Hosking for proposing the mentorship scheme initially and for helping to develop it fully.
- [11] Each had a second supervisor, of course, who offered some guidance, and the postgraduate group continued under an associate supervisor’s leadership.

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