



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

# TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 59 October 2020

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

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To cite this article: Philp, A, E Jeffery & L McGowan 2020 ‘Collaboration and its discontents: considerations for creative writing HDR students collaborating on traditional research outputs’, in A Philp, E Jeffery & L McGowan (eds) *Creating communities: Collaboration in creative writing and research*, TEXT Special Issue Number 59, *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* 24, 2 (October):

<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue59/Philp&Jeffrey&McGowan.pdf>

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### Collaboration and its discontents: considerations for creative writing HDR students collaborating on traditional research outputs

#### Abstract:

Collaboration between creative writing researchers in the academy, and particularly the benefits and potential of HDR writing groups, are topics that have drawn increasing scholarly attention. Batty notes that while ‘creative writing is often seen as an isolated practice, it is also one in which practitioners crave connection and people with whom to share their ideas, for moral support and critical feedback’ (2016: 69). While collaboration is vital to developing new networks and communities, the development and maintenance of collaborative practice is often as complicated as it is productive. This article examines some of the deeper complexities of collaborating on traditional research outputs and considers the ways in which creative writing HDR students in particular can develop a range of strategies to navigate collaborative practice. Through reflecting upon several exemplars of collaborations experienced by the authors – including a HDR writing group – this article contends that collaboration is often more complex than the literature suggests. Rather than being conceptualised as an always generative, ideal model for producing research outputs, collaboration should instead be conceptualised, discussed in scholarship, and approached in ways that are as diverse, paradoxical, and fluid as collaborative endeavours are in practice.

#### Biographical notes:

Alex Philp is a PhD candidate at Queensland University of Technology. Her research examines sister relationships in fiction and the Gothic. Her short fiction has appeared in *Overland*, *The Review of Australian Fiction*, *Westerly* and on the *Meanjin* blog, and in 2017 she won the Rachel Funari Prize for Fiction.

Dr Ella Jeffery is a researcher in Queensland University of Technology’s Creative Industries Faculty, where she lectures in creative writing in the School of Creative Practice. Her research focuses on postcolonial Australian anxieties about dwelling, housing insecurity and belonging, and her debut collection of poetry, *Dead Bolt*, won the 2019 Puncher & Wattmann Prize for a First Book of Poems.

Dr Lee McGowan is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He recently published *Football Fiction: A History* (2020) and co-authored *Never Say Die: The Hundred-Year Overnight Success of Australian Women’s Football* (2019). His other research interests include digital narratives, practice as research and community engagement. Lee follows Glasgow Celtic and the Matildas.

Keywords:

Collaboration – HDR writing groups – HDR development – traditional research outputs

**Introduction**

Collaboration between creative writing academics – and particularly the ways in which we foster vibrant collective practice and harness the benefits of doing so – is a topic that has drawn increasing scholarly attention (Aitchison & Guerin 2014; Nelson & Cole 2012; Ritchie & Rigano 2007). While recent literature has begun to voice the complications of collaboration (see Thomson et al 2010; Nairn et al 2015), collaboration has still largely been discussed (and perhaps conceptualised by our institutions) as a generative model for academic practice and for producing traditional research outputs. The literature is especially positive when examining collaboration and the peer-to-peer learning it facilitates (see Batty & Sinclair 2014; Maher et al 2013; Topping 2005) within Higher Degree Research (HDR) student communities – a popular and enduring model of which is, of course, the writing group. Deep interest in such groups is justified. Scholars recognise the significant learning, emotional and social value of collaborative groups for both creative writing HDR students and facilitators: as Craig Batty notes, while ‘creative writing is often seen as an isolated practice, it is also one in which practitioners crave connection and people with whom to share their ideas, for moral support and critical feedback’ (2016: 69). However, while collaboration is vital to developing strong networks and research communities, as writers and academics in different stages of our careers we have each experienced collaboration to be as complex and challenging as it is productive and fruitful.

The principles underpinning current governmental performance-based funding schemes around undergraduate outcomes are paralleled in sector-wide recognition of the need for better support of HDR students in enhancing their employability (as discussed later). Given that an emerging or established publication track record is considered a key element in any competitive academic resume, and that as our institutions wrestle each other for research funding academics are working harder than ever to produce greater research outputs with greater impact, it is pertinent to interrogate the nuanced ways in which creative writing HDR students might work within collaborative relationships to produce such outputs. We acknowledge that these metrics of productivity and impact are by no means the only ways in which an academic might conceive of the value of their research, and that, as Archer (2008: 268) has established, this is a particularly fraught area for HDR students, whose entry into the university sector may require them to conform to the neoliberal discourses that now structure contemporary academic life. Nonetheless, this focus on productivity and viable research outputs remains a reality for HDR students in any field, and our own experiences have shown us that collaboration on traditional research outputs is frequently adopted as a way to introduce a cohesive social dimension to the push for enhanced productivity. We are particularly interested in HDR experiences of

collaboration because we have all been recently engaged in the HDR community: one author, Philp, is a current PhD candidate; Jeffery was awarded her doctorate in 2018; and for a number of years McGowan was the HDR coordinator for, among other disciplines, creative writing HDR students at Queensland University of Technology.

This article unpacks some of the deeper (and often paradoxical) complexities of collaboration and considers the ways in which creative writing HDR students can develop, and augment, a range of strategies to navigate collaborative practice. We firstly review the relevant scholarship in the field before outlining our approach and reflecting upon several exemplars of collaboration experienced by the authors. We begin by analysing exemplars of co-authorship and of co-editing, before examining how our experiences of both inform the practice of our final exemplar – a writing group. Within our discussion, we explore the specific mechanics and functionality of collaboration where a traditional research output – a co-authored article, book chapter, conference paper, or edited journal issue, for example – is the primary purpose. Most creative writing HDR students are producing through practice-led research a single-authored extended creative work. However, the capacity to produce traditional research continues to be seen as central to securing a permanent academic position in the humanities, and very frequently collaboration with other HDR students is upheld as an accessible option for new academics to develop their critical acumen and engage in social relationships with others in their field. This article explores how creative writers in the academy might support each other's academic practice and specifically the development of HDR students through collaboration. Our exemplars are drawn from a range of collaborative experiences. Their varied nature, as well as how our explorations of them shift into each other, reflects both the diverse ways that we have experienced collaboration in the academy and the fluid ways that we advocate for it to be conceptualised, discussed within scholarship and implemented within practice.

### **Connection, discussion, reflection: collaborating on traditional research in the field of creative writing**

Creative writers often view themselves – misguidedly – as solitary individuals. While changes to the creative economy and the writing and publishing sector in the last decade have vastly disrupted this model, in the academy the focus on collaborative practice is longstanding. In this section, we outline some of the key research into collaborative practice, with a particular focus on creative writing HDR writing groups as (arguably) the key locus for academic collaboration on traditional research outputs. Rather than a broad historical review of the literature on collaboration, we are interested in recent scholarship that examines the changing nature of collaboration and HDR writing groups, and which underpins contemporary notions of collaboration in the academy.

Collaboration always involves a social dimension, in which academics in any field work together in an intellectual and social sense to produce research or creative work. Lave and Wenger, in a study of situated learning, identified ‘a system of relationships between people, activities and the world’ and coined the term ‘communities of practice’ (1991: 98), which is

now the field's key touchstone for the dynamic interactions that take place in collaborative contexts. The conception of collaborative endeavours as communities of practice signals that the collaborative space becomes an arena in which an individual is able to define their own academic competencies and interests alongside a group of others with whom these competencies and interests overlap or intersect. In this sense, the group functions as a 'container' of competencies which allow the individual writer-academic to learn and connect with others (Wenger 1998: 55-59; for further reading see Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002; Brown & Duguid 2000). Communities of practice have become a key influence in learning environments, where they can drive strategy, solve problems, promote and spread best practice approaches, and enable individual and team skill development (Wenger & Snyder 2000).

In the context of academic research, a community of practice 'temporarily transforms writing from a solitary practice into a social one' (Mewburn et al 2014: 219), which for us is a key element for creative writing practitioners producing critical and practice-led research in the academy, and speaks to the development of the writing group as a model for enhancing, supporting and engaging HDR students in developing their skills. The stereotype of the isolated writer is misleading in the context of the academy and is particularly complicated when applied to traditional scholarly research: as Aitchison has established, 'the process of writing is inherently interactive and mutually constitutive: writers and their writing are influenced by, and in turn influence, specific social networks' (2014: 51). Writing in the academy, then, might instead be considered a shared practice in which key social as well as intellectual exchanges evolve regardless of the type of project being undertaken.

Highlighting these social dimensions of writing in the academy enables us, as writer-academics, to acknowledge the key roles that collaboration and community-building play in our scholarly work. Many scholars also agree that HDR students in particular benefit enormously from being part of communities of practice, where they are encouraged to form professional networks, can access feedback and also gain the social benefits of feeling part of a community (for example, see Batty et al 2019). Communities of practice are important places of negotiation, learning, meaning-making, and the development of identity (Wenger 1998: 72) and offer a 'mode of belonging' (Wenger 2000: 227) which is vital to HDR students as they begin to develop their scholarly profile and establish professional relationships. The connections made in such a community can be loose and serendipitous. They are characterised by reciprocity and unidirectionality (Milligan, Littlejohn & Margaryan 2014) – particularly where academic staff and students share expertise, contacts and resources in an informal setting.

One of our key interests is how the academy engages creative writing HDR students in collaborative practice. There is a wide range of formats for collaboration in higher degree research more broadly, from symposia, to informal meetups, to reading groups (Stracke 2010). These sites for collaboration have become a key pedagogical context in higher degree education where, as Mewburn et al note (2014: 220), the 'apprenticeship model of supervision is under pressure at the same time that the regulatory frameworks surrounding doctoral education are becoming more rigid'. One of the solutions widely adopted by HDR students, or organised by

HDR coordinators or supervisors, has been peer-to-peer learning formats like the writing group, a format that we will explore in one of our exemplars below. The writing group is seen to engage HDR creative writers in developing peer review circles and in generating discussion that may lead to traditional research outputs. Collaboration in this format is particularly significant in addressing and sometimes resolving common issues that HDR students experience – procrastination, disorganisation, isolation and perfectionism (Maher et al 2013: 199).

The writing group, in line with the social dimensions of all communities of practice, also enables students to form connections with their cohort, to engage with research from outside their own areas of interest, and offers a forum for students to discuss their perception of their progress. In this sense, writing groups and other collaborative formats can also offer HDR students a space in which to develop their skills outside the traditional supervisor-student hierarchy. Key emergent themes of our research into collaborative practice include a focus on productivity, social connection, and disrupting the top-down power structure of traditional supervision models, as well as the importance of combining ‘productivity *and* pleasure, and the renegotiation of academic hierarchies so that more enabling power relations can be generated’ (Nairn et al 2015: 597, italics in original).

A great many scholarly accounts of collaborative experiences in the academy are overwhelmingly positive: findings and key themes are dominated by accounts of the transformative possibilities of networked communities of practice. However, as Nairn et al note, a significant gap in the literature exists in terms of scholarly accounts that examine the problems associated with writing groups:

Research about writing groups generally describes how groups are organised and the benefits reported by participants...However, there is a noticeable silence in the literature, on the challenges that writing groups encounter in practice. (2015: 596)

This is also the case for other collaborative pursuits in the academy: while it is standard practice in scholarship to discuss and reflect on the failure of a particular technique, experiment, theory or style in our field, it is difficult for a creative writer in the academy – or academics in any field – to discuss the shortcomings of a collaborative experience. There are a great many perceived risks involved, particularly for HDR students at the beginning of their careers whose relationships with their peers, supervisors and colleagues in the university are still developing. Only more recently have researchers begun to tackle the complexities of collaborative practice, and in particular writing groups, where a range of social, intellectual, strategic and cultural perspectives are at play.

There are inherent limitations in communities of practice more broadly, which have been widely acknowledged since the term was first introduced, but which are not always discussed in scholarship and not always considered in practice. The community of practice model can produce abstractions, tools, terms and concepts which risk reifying issues and ‘bad’ practice

(Wenger 1998: 59). Communities of practice are rarely stable and can ‘take on a life of their own outside their original context where their meaning can evolve or even disappear’ (Roberts 2006: 625). Roberts explicates common issues, such as power dynamics, trust and the pre-dispositions group members knowingly or unwittingly bring with them to the collective endeavour, and reflects on the limits of communities of practice in other industries in relation to organisational management (2006: 626-634).

Collaboration is frequently conceived of as a desirable form of research and writing for established academics, ECRs and HDRs to undertake because it offers ‘the potential for enhanced productivity’ (Ritchie & Rigano 2007: 12). Recent scholarship, and our personal experiences, show this is not always true. This raises questions for us about how contemporary scholarship might address situations where collaboration becomes untenable in spaces like the higher education sector, where collaborative practice is increasingly the dominant form through which outputs are produced. Although creative writing researchers still, of course, produce single-authored papers, the addition of a focus on collaborative research is not one that dissolves the requirement for single-authored research. Indeed, academics – particularly HDRs and ECRs looking to build their research profiles – are encouraged to simply produce more of both in order to simultaneously demonstrate their independence as researchers and their capacity for teamwork.

This can be read as one way in which HDR creative writing academics are often embedded in a space that is ‘inculcated within neoliberal discourses’ (Archer 2008: 28) that govern the contemporary higher education sector. Black et al, discussing their experiences as a group of women writers in the academy, note the need in their creative writing practice and research to ‘locate spaces beyond measurement, impact, evidence and all the violent organisational enterprises the hegemonic spaces of the academy produce’ (2017: 533). We recognise that the university sector’s reliance on metrics of research output, impact and volume are not singular and definitive: we might also measure the success of our collaborations outside these neoliberal frameworks, and consider the success of a collaboration based on the social and intellectual relationships developed, or the innovative ideas that arise from conversation with other academics. These are, in fact, often offered up by the academy as helpful and valuable elements of collaboration in creative writing research, and may be highlighted to teach HDR creative writing students to shrug off the persistent conception that creative writing is a field of individual creative practice and research.

However, the literature is rife with accounts of collaborative endeavours that begin with the double aim of social cohesion and heightened research outputs, and often end with social bonds placed under pressure or broken down entirely as a result of the collaboration. In short, while the neoliberal institution’s prioritisation of research outputs is certainly something for any potential collaborators to rigorously consider, the promise of social cohesion and innovation through building personal connections should be approached with similar suspicion. Black et al’s is just one account of a creative writing group ‘increasingly possessed by a communal desire to build deeper connections personally, and in professional, educational and academic terms’ (2017: 534). However, accounts like Nairn et al’s are characterised by a desire for that

communality which is disrupted by a breakdown of social relations: ‘A critical incident, which we affectionately call “the mutiny”’ (2015: 596) that largely disrupts the progress for emerging creative writing academics in the group. Thomson et al (2010) discuss a similar rift in their collaborative approach to editing a journal’s special issue, which resulted in one member of the editorial team leaving the group. Tensions and divergences encourage collaborators to consider complications embedded in their collaborative endeavours:

[T]hese kinds of incidents are part and parcel of academic life, in which collegiality occurs against/within a competitive environment and scholarly identities can be both made and undone through teamwork. (Thomson et al 2010: 146)

As a small group of academics who have been involved in co-authorship, co-editing, writing groups and a range of other collaborative roles, we see opportunity in the rifts that occur. Recent scholarship in this area is increasingly engaged in reflecting on the complexities of such collaborative endeavours, where the social dimensions of writing together are as, if not more, central to the process as the academic dimensions. In the following section, we unpack our approach to discussing our own collaborative experiences before we reflect upon our exemplars.

## **Approach**

We have selected a small number of exemplars through which to analyse the nuances and strategies of collaboration where producing traditional research outputs is the central focus. The selection of exemplars is based on the key role undertaken by one or more of the authors within each collaboration and the exemplars are organised by the nature of collaborative practice undertaken. First, we examine co-authorship as collaborative practice through exemplars of several ‘Beach Soccer’ research outputs co-authored by McGowan and colleagues at various institutions; an unfinished research output by McGowan and several colleagues; and an article co-authored in 2019 by Jeffery and Philp (along with academic and author Emily O’Grady). Second, we discuss co-editing as collaborative practice and discuss the production of a Special Issue of *Social Alternatives* (McGowan & Hancox 2019), as well as the production of this *TEXT* Special Issue (Philp, Jeffery & McGowan 2020). Finally, we explore writing groups as collaborative practice and explore the specific exemplar of the Queensland University of Technology HDR Creative Writing Group (2018–present), which evolved out of the leadership of Philp. Our reflection upon these exemplars demonstrates the multiplicity of approaches to collaboration and the varied outcomes, as well as the ways in which creative writing HDR students might collectively produce traditional research outputs and the strategies that they might employ to navigate collaboration.

## **Collaborative practice: exemplars**

*Co-authorship as collaborative practice*

Finding co-authors has its challenges: those a researcher would want to work with are often busy; identifying complementary skillsets can be time-consuming; and negotiating approaches can create organisational obstacles. However, McGowan's recent experience of co-authoring several articles on beach soccer aligns with 'the potential for enhanced productivity' that Ritchie and Rigano (2007: 12) argue is a feature of collaborative endeavours.

This collaborative relationship was instigated by researcher Elizabeth Ellison, whose interest in the Australian beach led her to ask about related sports research, in this case football (or soccer), and saw her combine her expertise with that of critical football studies researcher, McGowan. Having learned of the collaboration, colleague Michele Lastella informed Ellison of his experience playing for the Australian National Beach Soccer Team and soon joined the collaborative team. Due to availability of the team, time constraints, and the identification of a relevant publication platform – in the first instance, a top tier football studies journal that had never published on the subject of beach soccer – McGowan led the collaborative practice with the initial drafts. Ellison's depth of expertise brought a strong theoretical framework within the context of the Australian beach to the drafting process and Lastella contributed first-hand expertise and insight. The collaboration has since resulted in a conference paper turned into a journal article (McGowan et al 2019), and a related book chapter (McGowan et al 2020). A forthcoming scientific paper (Lastella et al 2020) is based on Lastella's scientific insight with contributions from Ellison and McGowan. The series of publications combine three distinct yet complementary sets of research knowledge: its success is dependent on clear-cut areas of contribution; willing, cooperative and flexible working practices; and open communication between its authors. It must be noted that writing teams do not always come together this organically. This particular team overcame geographical challenges in that Lastella is based in Adelaide, South Australia, Ellison in Noosa, Queensland and McGowan was based in Brisbane, Queensland. This collaboration is noted here as an exemplar of what can be gained in investigating the possibilities in fusing what appeared to be disparate fields of research, but it also highlights an example of untroubled success.

Prior to this success, McGowan worked with a leading author and several co-authors on an as-yet-unpublished paper. The factors that impacted and diminished momentum were related to the capacity of co-authors who had shown willing, but were unable to carry out their initial commitment. The reasons for this include poor timing of the data gathering process, a faculty project prioritisation (another project deadline was made more pressing), and a key contributor moving to a different institution. As a result, impetus to complete the research dwindled and the project, despite getting close, remains incomplete. This experience – like the exemplar above – provides evidence to the idea that collaboration is constantly evolving, flexible, and can shift throughout the process. While the Beach Soccer outputs reveal the value of flexibility and fluidity in collaborative practice and in a later exemplar (the QUT HDR creative writing group) we will even argue for the necessity of such fluidity, McGowan's experience of this unfinished output is an example of the potential challenges of letting go of structured schedules and enforced deadlines. We acknowledge, in line with Archer (2008: 266), that the increasingly

neoliberal functions of the university sector places overwhelming focus on quantifiable metrics and outputs, and in many ways encourages academics to approach the social and intellectual connections of such collaborative practice as unintended or unexamined by-products of the imperative to produce high-quality research. An important strategy, then, for HDR students to navigate collaborative practice might be to understand the value of collaboration being ‘neither a tidy nor a static form’ (Brien & Brady 2003) of practice, and also recognise the potential challenges of this fluidity and flexibility.

This is something that Jeffery and Philp, as an ECR and a HDR student, considered deeply when beginning to collaborate on a co-authored article for *New Writing*, based on a conference paper of the same name that they presented at the AAWP conference in November 2018: ‘Blueprints: Constructing the Creative Writing PhD’ (2019). Jeffery and Philp were keen to emulate the success of McGowan’s Beach Soccer collaboration, in that several research outputs were developed from one initial output, as these authors were (and still are) acutely aware of how important traditional research outputs are for advancing their careers as academics. They assumed that ‘Blueprints’ would be easy to co-author: the ideas in the article had already been fleshed out in a conference paper, as individuals they had fewer words to write (as the authors were collaborating through what Donna Lee Brien and Tess Brady [2003] describe as ‘contribution collaboration’) and they are not only peers but friends. They had also all completed (including third co-author Emily O’Grady) their undergraduate courses, Honours degrees, and had or were completing their PhDs at Queensland University of Technology, and in fact had even shared a supervisor as HDR students. As such, their research training was similar, they had similar expectations of writing style and rigour, and were compatible for an efficient collaboration.

However, they found that co-authoring ‘Blueprints’ was more difficult than anticipated. The organisational work that the collaboration demanded – such as emailing, setting up meetings, discussing ideas – took a third of the time it took to actually write the article. In this way, their experience of the ‘enhanced productivity’ that Ritchie and Rigano (2007: 12) argue of collaborative practice had nuances. They did produce two significant research outputs – a conference paper and a Q1 journal article – but it is possible that they might have been more productive if their individual energy, time and efforts had not been eaten up by the organisational process. Of course, this is a somewhat narrow view on the value of collaboration. In many ways, the organisational tasks meant that the co-authors were able to hone skills such as negotiation, communication, and time management, and the co-authors did experience many other benefits of collaboration as described in the scholarship: a feeling of community, peer-to-peer learning, social connection. However, in terms of increasing traditional research outputs, the question remains: was co-authoring really more productive than producing research papers individually?

It is also important to reflect upon another aspect of the ‘Blueprints’ collaboration. Two of the three co-authors had never experienced co-authoring before, not even with their HDR supervisors. While they found this liberating in some ways – in that they could navigate co-authorship for the first time without the hierarchies, power structures and often mercantile

motivation that writing with supervisors or more established academics entails – they also found the fact that they were peers, even friends, meant that there was a different complexity to navigate within their co-authorship. The co-authors were at times unsure of how to approach a collaboration with friends: do we meet in person, or online? If we meet in person, how much of our time should be used for work and how much for inevitable socialising? If one person guided the direction of the article, did that make them the first author? While being friends had many benefits, such as empathy, trust and an awareness of habits that could be potentially disruptive to the collaboration or signs of frustration or fatigue, the co-authors were also afraid of stepping on each other's toes or 'ruining the friendship'. As noted by Brien and Brady (2003), friendship within collaborative endeavours has its own set of 'assets and liabilities'. 'Blueprints' demonstrates the paradoxical nature of collaboration, where often the benefits are also potentially unproductive or at least more nuanced in practice than first perceived, requiring each collaborator to contend with the relatively new experience of collaborating with other researchers on a scholarly publication, but also with the heightened pressure of balancing two dimensions in their interactions with their co-collaborators: the professional engagement of three researchers who each bring their individual expertise to the process, and the empathetic engagement of three close friends.

This exemplar also illustrates a particular complexity of collaboration for HDR students. The reality is that within HDR collaboration, if students are not collaborating with their supervisors or more established academics then they are often collaborating with their peers and therefore most likely people they know well socially. As Jeffery and Philp experienced in co-authoring 'Blueprints', this has both valuable benefits and some potential challenges. Clearly, co-authoring as a collaborative way to produce increased traditional research outputs is not always as straightforward for HDR students as it is largely described in scholarship. To navigate co-authored research outputs, it is important for HDR students to ensure that their understanding of collaboration is as paradoxical as it actually is in practice. To achieve this, it is equally important for the scholarship surrounding collaboration in the academy to be more vocal about unproductive or unsustainable experiences. To be clear, the authors are not suggesting that these experiences are 'bad' or examples of 'failed' collaborations. Rather, these experiences are necessary to make clear that collaboration can be complex and to create a balanced discussion of collaboration within contemporary scholarship; a balance which is needed for HDR students to navigate complexities such as these when they most likely experience them. While co-editing can entail similar complexities to co-authorship, the following exemplars illuminate unique considerations for co-editing as collaborative practice.

### ***Co-editing as collaborative practice***

As co-editors of a community engagement themed issue of *Social Alternatives* (2019), McGowan and researcher Donna Hancox, with the support of Philp as their research assistant, sought to engage supervisor and student teams and wherever possible community partners. All of the articles within this Special Issue are focused on working with community partners or as a community. Four of the eight articles feature supervisor-student pairs within the writing teams. Buoyed by this collaborative experience, we suggested the idea for this Special Issue of

*TEXT*. In developing the Special Issue, Philp has carried out the project management, communication with contributors and curation of the articles; Jeffery has provided direction, a substantive literature review and was the main point of contact for a co-authored paper based on this special issue given by co-editors at the 2019 AAWP conference; and McGowan has provided guidance, support and contributed to the drafting process. Both of these collaborations involved a great deal of learning and guidance, and they were valuable and mutually beneficial. Philp built on skills from the first in running the second, and the co-editors shifting between roles – who was the point of contact, who picked up work in which document – allowed them all to learn. In this way, it becomes clear that while ‘research teams come in all forms’ (Siltanen et al 2008: 55) and every collaborative experience is different – and must be treated as such to allow the collaboration to grow into a model that works best for those involved – significant learnings can be brought from one collaboration to the next. In this way, individual collaborations can be considered to be ‘in collaboration’ themselves, and the value of conceptualising collaboration as ‘fluid’ or constantly evolving is reinforced.

Thomson et. al (2010) discuss the value that collaboratively co-editing a Special Issue can have for HDR student and ECR development. The Special Issue can be how they ‘come to learn and understand the game of academic journal publication’ (2010: 137) and it can also allow them to ‘stake a claim in a field of inquiry’ (2010: 138) and build strong networks – benefits experienced by Philp (in both Special Issues) and Jeffery (in this *TEXT* Special Issue). In discussing their own experience of co-editing a Special Issue(s), Thomson et al (2010: 139) explain that the opportunity for HDR students and ECRs arose ‘through the networks of more experienced scholars’ and that networks further determined who ‘were to have those opportunities’, making it ‘indeed a case of “who you know” as it so often is in academia’. Similarly, when discussing the logistics of forming collaborative teams, Mark David Ryan (2012: 149) argues that collaborating with experienced researchers allows HDR students and ECRs to ‘learn the tricks of the trade in academic publishing’. These experiences echo the exemplars discussed here. The initiative, guidance and networks of McGowan (and in regard to the *Social Alternatives* special issue, Hancox) were essential in Philp and Jeffery gaining the value that Thomson et al (2010) and Ryan (2012) argue for HDR students and ECRs. For example, it is only through collaborating with McGowan (and Hancox) that Philp and Jeffery have gained larger and more diverse networks. These exemplars clearly illustrate that the collaboration of HDR students and ECRs with more established academics is vital to HDR student and ECR development – and, in terms of producing a traditional research output and strengthening networks, their future employment opportunities.

Despite this, aside from discussions of candidate-supervisor collaboration (see, for example, Clowes & Shefer 2013; Kamler 2008), collaborative strategies for HDR students and more established academics are rarely examined together. The groups are often explored as separate, with ECRs lodged – often precariously – between the two. While both groups have clearly differing roles, demands and needs, the mechanism for the former group to become the latter is often collaboration between the two. For example, a HDR student might be employed as a research assistant on the project of an established academic, or invited to co-author an article, thus giving the student the skills, experience, and network to be competitive in the academic

job market. We are keenly aware of the many potential pitfalls, including exploitation of students' willing, work, words and ideas, along with those concerns around informal and formal communities of practice noted earlier (see Roberts 2006; Wenger 2000, 1998). However, the above exemplars demonstrate the strong potential collaboration between creative writing HDR students and established academics has for HDR student development; the learning experiences and professional opportunities gained through such collective practice is clear. It was partially with this potential in mind that Philp began what is now the current iteration of the QUT HDR creative writing group – the final exemplar.

### *Writing groups as collaborative practice*

The current iteration of the HDR creative writing group (July 2018–present) first met monthly and now meets biweekly for one hour. Unlike many other HDR writing groups described in scholarship, the group is not facilitated by a supervisor shared by the students, established academics are rarely present at meetings, and all meetings are run by a student facilitator (Philp). While there are many aspects of the group that could be discussed, this discussion focuses on the group as a space where members can co-author traditional, creative writing-based research outputs and considers the role that collaboration between students and staff can play in supporting this function.

Further unlike the HDR writing groups often described in scholarship (including Knowles 2017; Fegan 2016), the group is not a space where writing is peer critiqued or where writing skills and strategies are developed. HDR writing groups are often focused on peer critique as a method to develop writing and research skills and to inspire motivation (such as in groups discussed by Batty & Sinclair [2014]; Aitchison [2014]; Ferguson [2009]; and by Maher et al who in particular argue that peer critique was 'a powerful way for [them] to learn about writing and to learn how to write' [2008: 264]). Instead, the group was developed to build a sense of community (or as Wenger terms it, a 'mode of belonging' [2000: 227]) among creative writing HDR students at QUT and to encourage peer support. The benefits of both are commonly expressed in scholarship exploring HDR writing groups, and illuminate a value of collaboration beyond neoliberal metrics of success.

In establishing a space of peer support, the group made a common anxiety among the creative writing HDR cohort visible: these students were deeply concerned about producing increased traditional research outputs to ensure that they could be competitive in the academic job market following the award of their degrees. Kent et al (2017) note that prioritising writing above other tasks (such as teaching) is a key factor in creating a robust suite of research outputs. Further, the continual pressure on academics to publish outputs may be particularly stressful for ECRs, 'since there are so many other aspects of their roles that are new and challenging' (Kent et al 2017: 1194). This stress is similar yet also distinct for HDR students. HDR students are constantly learning new skills and expanding their understanding of the role of an academic, but rather than feeling a pressure to produce outputs to meet targets and establish a reputable scholarly profile, HDR students feel a pressure to produce outputs in order to be employable within the academy in the first place. As such, a key focus of the HDR creative writing group

from early on was using the group as a collaborative space to co-author scholarly journal articles, book chapters and conference papers.

While the group is run by a student facilitator and established academics only attend the meetings where invited, when the group began Philp drew on the learnings noted in the exemplars above and McGowan (as the HDR coordinator at the time) was involved in the planning of the group to support Philp. McGowan's experience of and strategies for collaborative co-authoring influenced the way the group decided to co-author: we agreed to have several simultaneous outputs with a first author on each who would act as the 'project manager'. All members were then invited to contribute to outputs and those that had the time and interest in the article would sign on as co-authors. This approach allowed those students involved to build on varied skills in their different roles on each research output and to learn from their peers. Each student experienced the demands of being first author and of having to work around individual workloads and candidate deadlines. As a result group members increased research outputs. The design of this collaborative practice draws from peer support and cooperative learning models (see Petocz et al 2012; Topping 2005) and models of peer-teaching, which facilitate and promote the improvement of communication skills and encourage independent learning (see Lim 2014).

McGowan's guidance of this design was instrumental, and he has also been a key figure of support in other regards: for example, McGowan has shared advice to members on practical elements, such as the submission of book proposals and the complexities of balancing teaching, research, and engagement within an academic role. This support, alongside the peer-centred approach of a HDR student leading and facilitating the group, made for a successful combination in terms of HDR student development. The peer-centred approach enabled students to discuss their feelings and thoughts without having to 'perform' as many HDR students and ECRs feel that they have to in the presence of an established academic (for example, see Boud & Lee 2007). However, McGowan's guidance offered insight only an established academic could provide. While we acknowledge that the impetus behind the decisions of HDRs and ECRs to seek out established academic collaborations can often be to get by gatekeepers and assumptions about networks, experience and rigour in traditional research publication, this exemplar asserts the deep potential value of collaboration between the groups when working toward HDR student development.

Since 2018, across a range of co-authorship combinations, the group members have produced five co-authored research outputs (two conference papers and three journal articles). Miri Shacham and Yehudit Od-Cohen (2009) argue that traditional models used in research education often fail to appropriately prepare students for the demanding academic workplace where collaboration is expected. A great many HDR students 'aspire to undertake academic or research roles and will thus be working in professional communities that are influenced and shaped by collaborations with peers, notably the peer review process aligned to publication in scholarly outlets' (Batty & Sinclair 2014: 336). The QUT HDR creative writing group demonstrates that HDR writing groups can be an effective space for HDR development; these groups not only have the potential to facilitate co-authorship endeavours and to increase

research outputs among HDR student cohorts, but they can also increase HDR student knowledge of some of the realities and expectations of academic careers as a result of such collaborative endeavours. Here, Stracke and Kumar's (2014) research rings true to the exemplar of the QUT HDR creative writing group. For Stracke and Kumar, HDR writing groups – or as they describe them, peer support groups – not only provide 'much needed emotional support, but also a route to an academic community in which all members are equipped with the required graduate attributes and skills of a scholarly community' (2014: 627).

However, while the group has produced several collaborative research outputs, it is important to note that the group has not completed all of the outputs that they set out to. There have been several article ideas that remain half-typed on their laptops, or conference abstracts scribbled, shared enthusiastically, then abandoned. This echoes the earlier exemplar of McGowan's unfinished co-authored article, and while several factors similar to those in that exemplar could have derailed the attempts of the group, another factor is clear. The group is not *only* a space for collaborating on research outputs; as already established, the group began with the aim of establishing a sense of community and peer support among creative writing HDR students. Peer support is a large (and important) function of the group, and this is reflected in the focus of the group's meetings. Strategy and research outputs are often discussed, but a great deal of unstructured meeting time is turned over to members to seek advice and share successes, unpack research milestones and challenges, and many other aspects of their academic and professional writing lives. However, this variable shift in focus does not signal an end to their collaborative practice or to producing traditional research outputs. Rather, the collaborations remain ongoing, with members dipping in and out depending on their needs. This reinforces the importance of understanding and implementing collaboration within fluid terms and signals that the generation of new ideas and the discussion of new research papers, even if they are later abandoned, is an important part of the developmental process for creative writing HDR students learning to approach collaborative practice in the academy. It also suggests that HDR writing groups, while a potential space for increasing research outputs and therefore for addressing a key anxiety in many HDR students and aiding their development, also have myriad intrinsically valuable functions; the ability of a group to be organic and shift to accommodate and address the needs of members is crucial.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the perspectives of three writer-academics on the multifaceted ways in which creative writers in the academy might collaborate with the goal of producing a traditional research output. Collaboration *is* vital for developing new networks and communities, but the complexities of collaboration in practice often reflect the actual nature of collaboration in perhaps a more balanced way than it is often 'sold' to us by our institutions or discussed in the literature. Through reflecting upon several exemplars of co-authorship, co-editing, and an HDR writing group, this article has examined collaborative projects and spaces as they contribute to HDR development. As practitioners, academics, and members of such

collaborative projects and spaces, we have offered insight and discussed tensions that arise for writers as they move into a collaborative practice and have put forward several strategies for HDR creative writing students. When navigating collaborations, it is valuable to ensure that our understanding of collaboration is as paradoxical and complex as it actually is in practice and to further recognise the potential limitations and possibilities of collaborative practice between HDR students, ECRs, and established academics for HDR student development. While this article only discusses traditional research outputs, a clear direction for future research is the particular nuances of collaborative creative practice – which would be so deep as to deserve the space of an entirely new article.

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