LAUGHTER, SURFACE TENSION AND LEARNING FROM POSTGRADUATE WRITERS' CIRCLES

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In recent years there has been a surge of interest in the 'how to' of scholarly writing. While writing has been central to academic practice since the birth of the early modern university, it carries more weight under present conditions in higher education. Research articles are increasingly used as the institutional measure for gauging performance, and pressures for 'throughput' are mounting on postgraduates to complete their research degrees in less time. But the actual processes involved in becoming an authoritative writer of research remain largely hidden and approaches to postgraduate writing are often *ad hoc* and poorly resourced, both materially and intellectually (Lee & Aitchison 2009). Most of the materials and approaches available fail to live up to their promise, as they offer a watered-down version of the rhetorical challenges and power relations of postgraduate thesis completion (Kamler & Thomson 2008).

There is a promising field of practice and research focused on the phenomenon of writing groups to address the challenges of thesis completion and journal article production. Examples here are Murray (2015) and Grant (2006) who have described their experiences of facilitating writing retreats and their potential for a more socially engaged pedagogy that challenges the prevailing gendered discourse around academic writing. Aitchison and Guerin (2014) have edited an important book that draws together writers across national boundaries on the possibilities of writing groups for the development of scholarly writing. The pedagogies described in these texts are much more than useful responses to a writing crisis; they are also potentially transformative as they open up the processes involved in the completion of scholarly works and also welcome new forms and identities as they engage with the power relations of knowledge-making in the academy.

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In this chapter, I make a different point about writing groups based on my experience of facilitating a writers' circle at a South African university. I draw on this experience to explore how the circle has led to a change in my thinking about research practice. I reflect on how 10 years of involvement with this multidisciplinary circle every Thursday afternoon has both supported and unsettled me. This piece is not primarily about sharing the evolving practice in these writers' circles (though I believe that to be both interesting and useful), or making an argument for their important place in the fast-paced, measured university and how they have become a sheltering space for many students over the years. It is instead a reflection on how they have become an incubator for new thinking about doing research on the role of writing within the making of new knowledge.

I focus on one circle – the Thursday multidisciplinary circle – which is the most free-wheeling of various circle formats that have evolved where I work. More detailed descriptions of the evolving practices in this circle can be found in Chihota and Thesen (2013) and Thesen (2014). The chapter begins with a brief account of how this circle has emerged and what takes place within it. This section is followed by a discussion of ideas about writing in relation to thinking about data differently: not as representation, as capturing and moulding to a pre-ordained order determined by theory and methodology, but as living, in process, generative rather than reductive. I attempt to work with concepts in “an open-ended journey of thinking-feeling” from a position of being “right where you are” (Massumi 2015:xi). This is done through exploring lines of inquiry on the life of a postgraduate writers' circle first by looking at laughter and then through the idea of ‘surface tension’. This is a phenomenon in the natural sciences borrowed and applied as a generative idea to help understand and bring to life the complexity and fragility of the writers' circle, and the centrality of writing within the circle.

PICTURING THE WRITERS' CIRCLE

A brief history of the writers' circle is introduced through two images. The first (Figure 17.1) is imagined, a sketch that came from a desire to liberate writing from the constraints of what Cadman calls “divine discourse” (2003:1) – prevailing ideas about what constitutes knowledge and its expression in the English language. The second (Figure 17.2) is a photograph of the Thursday circle taken 10 years later.

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FIGURE 17.1 Sketch of a writers' circle used to advertise the first circle in 2005

This is a sketch I did for the first poster that we nervously stuck up on not-so-prominent walls when my colleague Clement Chihota and I began running writers' circles. I had never attended a writers' circle myself, but felt a need to come up with some image of an ideal writing space: intensely social and engaged, inviting a range of emotions, and acknowledging that our bodies also need attention, here shown as eat, drink and time to step back and rest. Looking back now, I can see more clearly that I was reacting to the dominant view of the postgraduate experience as characterised by isolation and loneliness. We started offering writers' circles while I was half-way through my PhD, and I attended the Thursday circle facilitated by Clement, both to understand how they could work, and for the social contact and shared experience that I longed for, and that they promised. I loved the interesting discussions and sense of flow but also recognised some of the risks in the pedagogy. We had no idea whether people would come; some came once and never returned. Most of the time there were far more women than men. We struggled with how much of a curriculum was required. Writing groups are not necessarily benign safe spaces.

This image above is far removed from the dominant image of the lone scholar at a desk or in a library, surrounded by books. The image of the lone scholar reflects what Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) describe as the 'always-already' autonomous scholar who is expected to emerge from the postgraduate supervision experience – especially in the humanities and social sciences – as an independent maker of knowledge. This figure is pure head, as she/he struggles to subdue the emotional, everyday ways of knowing in an attempt to become the 'Man of Reason' envisaged by the Enlightenment and embellished by the Humboldtian university in 19th century Germany. This image still persists, in spite of profound changes to the university.

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The lone scholar image is markedly gendered and also colonial. Trying to imagine a different pedagogy which sees a different sort of knowledge-making subject at the end of the process is not easy. In Johnson, Lee and Green's paper, which is particularly interested in the gendered character of the 'always-already' scholar, they warn about the challenges of trying to bring about a different narrative that gets outside of the binaries of rationality-irrationality, subject and object, autonomy and dependence. They acknowledge the "conditions of impossibility of a feminist pedagogy" (Johnson, Lee & Green 2000:144) with all the entanglements in power relations that produced the resilient idea of the autonomous scholar.

Since this article was written, there have been many challenges from feminist theory, inter- and transdisciplinary work, intersectionality, post-colonial theory, mode 2 knowledge, and knowledge co-production to name a few, all of which bring a different image of the scholar into play. They offer an image of knowledge as distributed, peopled, making place for new tools and skills and the sharing of dilemmas. This more democratic image of what writing spaces could be seems to be thriving although contemporary higher education with its performativity and measured academic subject has led to some nostalgia for the lone scholar of the past.

The hand-drawn sketch above with its imagined pedagogy seems to have had some staying power. Here is a photo I took 10 years later: it is not much different (Figure 17.2):

FIGURE 17.2 Photograph taken at a writers' circle in 2015, rendered to look less realistic

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I took the photo focusing on the activities of the participants as it felt too invasive to focus on faces. I did not want to break the fragile spell of the circle, bringing a different regulatory gaze into the room. The photo here is rendered as a drawing to change its modality from 'realistic' to 'dynamic impression'. Some of the elements in the picture are visible. There are two sheets of paper on the table. One is a sketch done during a warm-up activity where I asked the six people in the circle to sketch a key concept they are currently grappling with, and the second is two pages from Noma's findings section. Aalia is pausing before adding more comments; Karen is writing away behind her. There are coffee cups, sweets, sunglasses. Later on we will give feedback to Noma and she will leave with her two pages commented on by six people. We value these comments highly.

What is common to both images is the loose pages on the table. These two pages have become central to circle practice, working as a portal, or gateway, between the formal requirements of academic writing, and the informal processes that sustain writers over the long period of trial and error, writer's block and loss of confidence that typically accompany the writing of a thesis.

I've realised over time that the circle has become a deep well to feed my own thinking and I continue to learn from it and the remarkable people who move in and out of it. I regularly go through a real doubt about whether the circle will continue, but it is still here after 10 years. The current group is in flux. Four of the regular circlers are for different reasons moving on. Two have graduated with PhDs, one has stopped coming (I am not sure why) and a fourth is moving to Johannesburg. Five people who attended a workshop that I ran recently are keen to attend next year. But how to make sense of the circle? How can I reflect on it and share it without destroying it?

I don't like to research this circle so there's no empirical data to show that they make a difference. There is only a rich, living archive that has so far survived – and possibly even thrived on – the so-called knowledge economy with its competitive, outcome-oriented, time-is-money, ends and means discourse. In the face of this pressure cooker, the circles are organic, slow, absorbing, nurturing, generative, personal, embodied, emotional. I don't think of them as safe spaces – the critique in them is intense – so much as rehearsal spaces for students to weigh up their attachments to ideas, audiences, styles. They are also fragile in that they wax and wane.

I am feeling my way towards researching them, but in doing so, have had to unpick some of my own thinking about theory and method, the relationship between theory and data, and what makes a study rigorous. My fear is that in researching them I will kill the circle. As researcher, my attention will shift from immersion in the group to the adoption of an objective stance. There are moments in the circle where I want

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to stop and take notes, to capture dialogue, or write down something that has struck me, but I don't. How can I be laughing at a shared joke in the group, and making notes at the same time? Sometimes I reconstruct events afterwards in an attempt to make sense of what has happened. The only things I write down while in the circle are the names of books and articles that are shared, or things I need to follow up on such as giving details of a writing seminar happening elsewhere in the university. This follow-up would happen in the weekly e-mail I post on the university's learning management system. I don't want to interview participants as I think this will make them self-conscious. There is enough scrutiny and surveillance hovering over them. I want this to be a space where laughter can bind us together.

In the next section I reflect briefly on laughter as an index of a healthy circle and how this raises some challenges about research.

LAUGHTER AS A SIGN OF LIFE

One of the things that define the circle is laughter. Colleagues comment on the noise that belches out from the room where we meet. When we interviewed Clement Chihota about the ingredients that go into a good circle, he said, "If they're not laughing, watch out." I explored the significance of laughter in Thesen (2014), reconstructing incidents after the event that provoked laughter, and using Bakhtin's (1968) account of the history of laughter to explore laughter as renewal – a strand of social meaning that shows that the power of laughter to stitch together sacred and profane remains alive and relevant. For Bakhtin (1968:34) laughter functions:

... to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés [...] offers a chance to have a new outlook on the world.

This function to "liberate from the prevailing point of view" applied well to the often arid, isolated, rational notion of the solitary, independent scholar sketched earlier in this chapter. Conventions and established truths about writing are that it should be 'academic', that is, objective, distanced, filtering out affect. The laughter that is the backdrop to the more serious endeavour of carefully reading the two pages of text enables a "variety of elements" to be present in the same occasion. For Bakhtin, circles would be ideal spaces for everyday language to interact with official language, which comes with its authority fused to it. All text is made out of a combination of different, seemingly antagonistic pressures.

Reflecting on laughter through the Bakhtinian lens, it is possible to see laughter as a crucial part of a whole, restoring elements that have gone underground. Bakhtin

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sees this as one of the weaker points of the Enlightenment – a “lack of a sense of history, an abstract and rationalist utopianism, a mechanistic conception of matter, a tendency to abstract generalization on the one hand, and to documentation on the other” (1968:116). Laughter both critiques and completes. The circles seem to permit this seriousness and carnival to exist in the same space. Laughter is seldom directed at other people such as supervisors but at ourselves and at the pompous image of knowledge as sacred and rarefied. Typically the emotional tone in the circles is in flux between laughter and a very serious engagement with one another’s work and with ‘the postgraduate condition’ more generally. Through laughter, participants can live on the cusp between sacred and profane and explore the emergence of new forms of evidence and expression.

One can theorise laughter, but how does one research it? It is unpredictable; impossible to separate objective from subjective in the moment. Next I explore affect as a generative way of approaching laughter and embodied feeling.

AFFECT: RE-SEARCHING THE CIRCLE

A strand of thinking that I have found generative is work around affect. As Shouse (2005) points out, affect is not the same as feeling (a personal attribute), or emotion (which is social): it is a form of “prepersonal intensity” that can be productive as an indicator of our commitments:

An affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. [...] it cannot be fully realised in language [...]. Affect is the body’s way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience. The body has a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language because it “doesn’t just absorb pulses or discrete stimulations; it infolds contexts ...” (Masumi, *Parables* 30).

We can try to name and capture and explain laughter, or shame (which also often attends the writing experience), but more important than this capturing is staying with it in its complexity, recognising that it can’t all be put into words. Arguing for affect as “process oriented exploration” (2015:xi), Masumi asks:

What would an objective or general approach bring to the singular qualities of life that compose its affective dimension? Stilling. Dullening. Dead disciplinary reckoning. The aim is not to convince with claims of validity, but rather to convey something of the vivacity of the topic (2015:viii).

Masumi’s point speaks to my reluctance to submit the writers’ circle to over-analysis, but rather to engage with the ‘vivacity’ of the circle, to try, however hard, to bring

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it to life. This is risky business as I mainly have written words at my disposal. So it is necessary to engage differently with writing, to understand and celebrate it as an “active ambiguous and slippery phenomenon that will inevitably launch the writing subject into unexpected situations – both positive and negative” (Lykke 2014:3). Here she is arguing for the importance of the act of writing as a mode of inquiry in developing feminist and intersectional methodologies which strive for ethical ways of unfolding the relationship between the researcher ‘I’ and the ‘object’ of research across different signifiers of class, race, gender, nationality and sexuality.

The way I try to bring the circle to life in this chapter and in subsequent work is to introduce a concept from the natural sciences – surface tension – and to try to run thinking, descriptions, reconstructions, discussions, through this lens. In elaborating on process-oriented exploration that is generative rather than reductive, Massumi argues for a mode of inquiry that does not seek solutions, or summations, but intends instead “to arrive at a transformational matrix of concepts apt to continue the open-ended journey of thinking-feeling life’s processual qualities” (2015:xi). I would like to use surface tension in this way, as an idea that is always in play.

I have come to the notion of surface tension through coincidence. These are some of the strands that have come together. In pushing thoughts on how much laughter there is in the circle, it is possible to think of laughter as a release of tension, a sort of breaking through. I began to think about surface tension in relation to writers’ circles. This tied in with a faint memory of the concept of surface tension as studied in physical science at school level (explored in more detail below). The term ‘surface tension’ also resonated because it chimed with my theoretical interest in all things hybrid. A long-term interest in the co-working of forces that pull language together, creating cohesion, and forces that tug away from the centre, towards new forms, has recently been augmented by post-colonial studies and an interest in post-colonial dilemmas and the multiple often contradictory forces that shape the micro-politics of the everyday (Mbembe 2002a).

For a while I worked with Pratt’s idea of the contact zone which has helped to locate pedagogy – and circles in particular – in wider contexts. For her, the contact zone refers to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths” (1999:2). This feels apt in local higher education currently, with profound challenges to ‘business as usual’ through student-led protests against the colonial value system (the #RhodesMustFall campaign) followed by the #FeesMustFall campaign against economic injustice. These movements have reverberated through South African higher education as they ask questions about

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the foundations of the university and how it ended up looking and working as it does. Language plays a key role here at several levels. There's a clash of discourses: the 'divine discourse' of the university, with its reasoned insistence on evidence, is being countered with anger, pain, the language of protest and a deep desire to know things differently. Writing is, as Bourdieu reminds us, nobody's mother tongue, particularly for those who are historically excluded. And the English tongue only makes this worse.

These pedagogic and theoretical interests have found correspondence in observing the way water behaves, in particular in a small pond that I look at every day. Next is a discussion of the phenomenon of surface tension and its relationship to the writers' circle.

SURFACE TENSION MEETS THE WRITERS' CIRCLE

Working with concepts as living things rather than blunt instruments to represent an ordered world, the concept of surface tension is explored here.

Surface tension is a significant concept in the natural sciences. It is a subtle, yet extremely powerful phenomenon of contact which comes into play when elements of different density are touching, for example water in contact with air. When dew drops form in a nasturtium leaf, different substances have come together, making something new take place. What makes the drop 'stick' and hold its form is the interplay of different forces leading to the tightening of molecules on the surface of the water, enabling it to hold its form, at least for a while. Molecules attract one another through cohesive forces enabling the water to retain its character. But there is a different force operating at the surface: here molecules have fewer of their own kind to bond with, so they join together to resist the air they're in contact with. This creates an elasticity which reduces the surface area and enables new possibilities. This elasticity enables a bubble to hold its form, or a dewdrop to form a perfect sphere. It also enables a paper clip, made from metal or plastic with greater density than water – to be held on the surface, appearing to float.

This image of paper clips floating in a pond in Figure 17.3 shows this phenomenon. Interesting things are happening at the edge, where the clip is in touch with the water, and where the water is in contact with the stone bowl. There is also a force of attraction that draws the paper clips together. The leaves from the jacaranda have been drawn to the outer edge of the circle.

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FIGURE 17.3 Surface tension holds the paper clips on the surface.

Importantly, the surface tension force is temporary: it holds the clips and the leaves for now. Returning to this scene a day later, wind and sun have caused the water to evaporate, leaving the leaves stranded on the cement edge, now dry. A rain squall has broken the elasticity on the surface, and the paper clips are now on the bottom, resting on the stones.

How might surface tension help to explore the life of the writers' circle? I see it as a holding idea to express the flux of the life of the writers' circle. On the one hand it refers to the tension held in the body: those of us in the circle are here, for now, but this is not a comfortable place to be for too long. All writers are on their way somewhere else. We all belong to multiple places – disciplines, countries, professions – but we are briefly together here. We are here with full affect: laughter is welcome, constantly releasing and renewing the tension on the surface, enabling us to critique as well as to restore.

So surface tension applies to the life of the circle, but also to the core activity within it – writing. The 'two pages' that we bring are a portal between two worlds – between air and water, between the often daunting, emotionally austere practice of making new knowledge, in writing, in English, and the messy, exploratory world of living as a postgraduate, in which uncertainty and self-doubt are strongly felt. Forces that work in different directions (both regulating and unifying, and dispersing and multiplying) are temporarily held in balance.

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Surface tension has immediate appeal as an idea that speaks to aspects of writing and writtenness. Writing is most powerful as product, as recognisable, finished, packaged, doing some kind of anticipated work that will enable it to travel. A student hits the 'send' key and expects the recipient to read the text in good faith, with a sufficient commitment to the recognition work required to make sense of what is going on in the text. The process by which the socially situated writer sits, at some distance from the world that gives impetus to the writing of research, slowly turns into the written product that will travel and as Blommaert (2005) reminds us, hold its form but not its meaning, is a deeply political process. Inequality plays on the different resources that writers bring to the writing, how life history shapes text construction. If English is not your primary language of education, the scales are tilted against you when it comes to writing with authority in an academic world where authority stabilises around genres of power. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) put this well as they make a case for a mode of inquiry that values the networks and flows of the rhizome over the hierarchies and classifications of 'the tree': tree-like thinking does not acknowledge the "political multiplicity" in which hierarchies, diagrams, and definitions that seek to stabilise a world in flux potentially oversimplify and damage the very life they are seeking to know better:

There is no mother tongue. Only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital. It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil (1987:7).

The two pages and the intense engagement that happens around them in postgraduate writers' circles can work and "spread like a patch of oil". It is surface tension that enables this patch of oil to do its work, to hold its form temporarily, while entering the crevices, cracks and uneven surfaces along which it moves.

So there is nothing superficial about surface tension. Surfaces are always 'skins' between different substances. Surface + tension creates a concept that is unstable, at first glance superficial, but always uneasy, in the spaces between. The tension on the surface of the written word is powerful as it carries a tight form with it, but different people will make meaning of it in different ways. The writers' circles are temporarily held together by surface tension, giving the postgraduate writers (like the paper clips in the photograph) who come to them some buoyancy to make their way between the formality of writing that presents itself with rules and genres to which we feel we must conform, and the messy processes by which we move across classification systems.

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It is also possible to make a link between the informal archive that has gathered over the years of the circle and the notion of surface tension. Bowker (2010) calls this informal collection a “trace archive” which is a necessary but often invisible counterpoint to the formal archive, which in this case would include the repository of completed theses in the library. This haphazard informal, longitudinal archive is a collection of yellow folders stuffed with the two pages of text that participants have brought to the circle as well as the participant details forms that we fill in each week. It includes the weekly e-mail that I send out to everyone, mentioning very briefly what happened in the circle, and what is coming up for the following week. These draft texts are the “debris” – signs of what life has left behind (Mbembe 2002b:25). Postgraduates take their two pages away with them once they’ve been written on by individuals in the circle, so these are also part of the archive that I would explore with writers, using methodologies that are not extractive. Over the years I have written brief reflections on intense, affect-rich moments in the circle. Perhaps participants could do the same. We will not be concerned with validity, but with the vivacity of the topic.

An end and a beginning

This chapter has taken a theoretical journey to see how sustained engagement in the heart of a postgraduate writers’ circle has led to a change in thinking about how to research institutional rehearsal spaces such as these. The chapter began by locating the writers’ circle in their institutional setting, and in the broader landscape of research on the role of informal writing groups in postgraduate writing support. This was done by means of two images, one an imagined hand-drawn sketch of the ideal writing space – social and exploratory – and the other a photograph taken 10 years later, showing how the key elements in the circle have stayed more or less constant while many postgraduates have moved through them, some hovering only briefly, others coming every week in their need to stay in contact with a living, affirming space that will take their efforts seriously.

I reflected on the role of laughter in the circle, first as emotion, with the help of Bakhtin’s writing on the history of carnival. The laughter in the circle seemed to play with and deflate the disembodied, cerebral, male image of the researcher and of theory itself, bending it to a different image – intense, personal, consequential. Laughter pricks the power of the raced, gendered ‘autonomous self’, which now sometimes seems to be on steroids with the fast-paced ‘knowledge economy’ and the demands it makes on performance.

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There is potential to bring theoretical work on the centrality of affect to the writing of research and to follow the trace archive from the pre-personal intensity of affect outwards as it becomes political in the mind and body of the writers who must sooner or later make marks on paper. I hope to gather concepts to do this work, starting with surface tension: surface tension expresses the affect around writing, as well as the ambiguity of forces that tug in different directions. It also helps to enter, from whatever point, the trace archive that remains from the 10 years of the existence of the circle. This gives insight to the research projects and dilemmas of the students who have moved like nomads through the circle over the years. But that work lies ahead. This chapter prepares the ground for that journey.

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