Chapter Nine

In the Forests of the Library: Five Paths Through Letter Writing and Writing Groups Towards Sustainable Writing

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Introduction: The library as refuge, resource and place of reconnection

Pamela Nichols, WWP Head

Disciplinary background: Ph.D. in Comparative Literature (New York University), 40 years' experience of teaching writing in universities in Beirut, New York, and Johannesburg

All writing begins with reading, with internal engagement with the voice on paper or screen. Early experiences of reading are hopefully often associated with pleasure. In my own case, two memories come to mind. The first, a very early memory of sitting on Grandad's lap in front of the coal fire, listening to his telling of the stories from the delicately illustrated golden book, looking into the embers of the fire as he spoke and playing with the maps of blue green veins on his hardworking hands. The second, as a teenager, being told to turn off the light and instead burrowing down under the eiderdown, torch at the ready, because I had to find out what happened next. I cannot think of either memory without a wave of remembered pleasure. The books were alive with lights, voices, feelings, colours, alternative realities: they were my escape and resource, extending the limits of my world.

But what if reading is not associated with pleasure? What if the earliest memories of reading are connected to punishment at school? What if there were no, or very few, books at home and

no welcoming local libraries?[1] How do we then provide students with entrances into a culture of reading and writing, where they can realise Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's dictum that there is no single story and apply that possibility to all learning (Adichie 2009)? The Covid-19 years deprived many students of just such a possibility, because of the exclusion from the potentially levelling spaces of school and university and because of poor quality online learning associated with the 'passive consumption of pre-packaged meaning'.[2] What can we do now to rekindle engagement and to generate pleasure as we re-open the gates of learning?

One answer is to activate libraries and renew these local, resilient resources described by the great philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, as 'Palaces for the People' [3] and which might, as suggested by several recent novels, provide a way to avoid an unpleasant future.[4] Activate libraries not through prescribed and directed reading, but rather by opening the doors, literally (through physical and online curation) and figuratively, so that students can find and choose their paths through forests of meaning.[5] I make no apology for mixing metaphors. We need the idea of the library and the forest,

1 It is striking that love of reading and libraries often begins with defiance and an assertion of will and agency. See, for example, Richard Wright's strategy of borrowing someone else's library card, pretending to be stupid so as to gain access to the library, and then staying up all night as he read, hearing the voices of what he was reading all round him, being amazed not by what they said but that they had the courage to say it and then knowing by daybreak that he could no longer live in the oppressive South, see *Black Boy,* chapter 13.

2 Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, in answer to my question during an OECD webinar 18/01/2022. Also see Adam Garfinkle (2020) 'The erosion of deep literacy' for a devastating account of the implications of superficial reading and writing promoted by social media and online browsing, and Maryanne Wolf (2007) and (2018) on the current urgent need to reintroduce a love of deep reading.

3 Andrew Carnegie was a child worker in a cotton mill and taught himself through access to a rich man's private library. He never forgot this gift and during his life founded over 2000 public libraries. Carnegie's description of public libraries, 'Palaces for the People,' is the title of Eric Klinenberg's excellent 2018 book, which is subtitled, *How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life.*

4 See for example Anthony Doerr, *Cloud cuckoo land,* 2021.

5 See also Nichols 2020 'To remember, to reason, and to imagine together: Activating the 21st century university library through reading and writing programmes,' a concept document written for the Wits Senate Teaching and Learning committee and available on request.

to assert the value of the library as a public, responsive, anchor institution and the value of the pleasurable and primal freedom to explore at will its myriad and sometimes hidden holdings and so encourage creative adaption.

This paper considers two current strategies to reactivate such self-motivated learning: letter writing and writing groups. Both strategies seek to 'nudge' students towards increasing ownership of and engagement in, their own intellectual and imaginative journey through libraries of knowledge and increasingly scholarly and creative conversations.

First some background to our context from which these strategies have grown. It is not a coincidence that the Wits writing centres are found in or next to university libraries. This paper draws from experiences in the main Wits Writing Centre (WWC), founded in the mid-1990s, rather than from the discipline-specific writing centres in Education and Law.[6] The WWC is a resource, mainly, though not exclusively, for undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as for staff within the humanities faculty. It also houses a writing reference library. The WWC does not attempt to teach the literacies of different disciplines[7] but rather provides writing consultants as attentive listeners, to help students to develop an ear for their writing and to learn how to effectively situate that writing in terms of style and argument within disciplinary conversations.

The paper also draws from experiences in the Wits Writing Programme (WWP), formalised in 2018, involving currently more than 40 Writing Intensive (WI) courses across the university (run by discipline specialists and supported by around 400 Writing Fellow (WF) tutors). The WWP, like the WWC, employs writing cognitively and rhetorically to enhance learning and the ability to craft disciplinary texts.

While different – the WWC is a voluntary resource and the WWP is a mainstream pedagogy – both share the principle of writing as thinking, rather than the packaging of thinking and both institutionally fall under the WWP. The WWC and the WWP constitute a single developing ecosystem, with a complex set of interrelations. For example, both depend on postgraduate students to promote and further student engagement: consultants in the WWC or WFs in the WWP. These postgraduate respondents are a dynamic group, usually successful students, or scholars themselves, who move between the following roles:

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6 The Education and Law writing centres operate separately and within their disciplines, though there is collaboration among all three writing centres in the WWP not least through the frequent sharing of writing consultants.

7 See McKenna and Boughey (2021) for the inadequacies of decontextualised academic writing support, pp. 67–69.

1. writing centre consultant,
2. WF in different disciplines,
3. Senior Writing Fellows (SWFs) with extra mentoring or administrative responsibilities,
4. in some cases, as WI lecturers.

As these roles change, learning about writing facilitation is transferred, compared and built upon and the work of the WWC and the WWP is knitted together by their movement between them.[8] All of the co-authors of this paper have moved between some of these roles.

Within the developing ecosystem of the WWC and the WWP, the letter writing strategy was employed as a low data method to encourage students during the Covid-19 years to write about their processes of writing and thinking. Letters prompt students to use informal writing to hone formal writing and create the opportunity to pause and to think about thinking through the encouragement of an attentive interlocutor. The letter writing method was guided by templates, designed by the WWP Head in 2020, for both cover letter requests and the consultant responses. First, the student completes a consultation-requesting cover letter, which includes explanation of task and writing concerns and then submits both cover letter and draft to the WWC. The student is then assigned a consultant, who responds through strategic annotations on the student draft and sends a response letter back to the student. The guiding templates for the cover letter and the response letter ensure consistency of response and a prioritisation of concerns following the writing process.[9] We were fortunate to have among us an author who enjoyed the literary challenges of this method and mentored others in its practice.[10] This letter writing method built on earlier WWC work with school children which encouraged regular informal channels of communication and opportunities for metacognition,[11] became the basis of a national research project called Epistolary Pedagogies (Erasmus 2021), and the main mode of response to writing in the WWC during the

8 See *Writing within simultaneity* (Is Ckool et al. 2019) which is written as letters between and among WF and WI lecturers.

9 See 'Letter from the Wits Writing Programme', April 2020. Available on request.

10 Barbara Adair, see next section.

11 See descriptions of the resonant classroom in Nichols, 2016.

Covid-19 years, as well as being a common strategy across the WWP between WFs and students and sometimes also between WI lecturers, students and WFs (Erasmus 2021).

Writing groups are a group version of the one-to-one conference, drawing from Donald Graves and Lucy Calkins' early ideas of the writing workshop, as well as from Peter Elbow's even earlier teacher-less groups of peers (Graves 1994; Calkins 1994; Elbow 1973, 1981). At Wits, writing groups were initiated by the WWC Director in the early 2000s for postgraduates and for women lecturers who participated in the Wonder Women project, Buttons and Breakfasts (see Orr, Rorich and Dowling 2006) As with the letter writing, the primary aim of a writing group is to establish sustainable, independent and effective writing habits, this time not in dialogue with one other person but among a group of peers. In 2022, the WWC employed Senior Writing Fellows (SWFs) to promote writing groups for both postgraduate student writing and WF and writing consultant writing, including an SWF who has previously worked and published on writing groups at Rhodes University.[12] During the Covid-19 years, the writing group strategy became particularly important to promote writing and community for consultants and WFs and also served to promote their professional development through the practice and sharing of teaching strategies.

The two strategies, letter-writing and the regular meeting of writing groups, create an opportunity for learning which is not tied to the centre, so replacing the hub and spokes metaphor (used previously by the main academic development unit at Wits) with a concept of symbiotic growth, such as that of a forest. The strategies have also been influenced by the arguments of the Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (the OECD) that collective thinking is vital for post-Covid-19 educational recovery (OECD 2021).[13] This chapter presents the reflections of five colleagues in the WWP, selected for their noticeable engagement in one or both strategies. In the sympathetic words of anonymous early reviewer, we aim to offer 'a kaleidoscopic perspective on one institution's writing programme response to both recent and enduring challenges in higher education.' Following Barbara Walvoord's[14] approach to writing programme evaluation and development, we also aim to record and build upon the perceptions of value identified by our

12 Fouad Asfour, see following section on writing groups as seed beds.

13 OECD principle 9 (2021).

14 Barbara Walvoord's method of surfacing and then building on the reflections of lecturers is remarkably close to writing centre methods and has obvious professional development advantages. It has been endorsed by Bean, Carrithers and Earenfight (2005) as an efficient and rich method of programme evaluation, though obviously it can and should be supplemented by student data.

colleagues, so affirming and investing in their engagement and developing the WWP through the engine of collective reflection.

The first path describes how letter writing can encourage engaged reflection, as the well-known South African author, Barbara Adair, considers how to draw out the writer's voice.

A letter to another

Barbara Adair, Senior Writing Fellow

Disciplinary background: Human Rights Attorney and law lecturer, novelist, travel and short story writer, Ph.D. in Creative Writing

Speaking is not my strength; it is the written word that speaks to and for me. Writing excites me, as reading creates an environment that is conducive to listening and intimacy; I can hear myself speak in my writing and another is listening as they read my words and learns with me.

How can a letter do this? A letter is writing that goes back and forth between two people, an on-going process whereby one person writes to another and in this writing they speak. Writing becomes speech, as writing is the vocalisation in words of thoughts, musings and questions. An intimate conversation develops.

There are no rigid rules in letter writing. Questions are asked and replies are read, thoughts are mirrored, responses challenged by posing questions, requests for clarification made. Writing is informal, stories are told to illustrate academic concepts. In letter form this engagement exists in the to-and-fro of the letters as both parties come to understandings that they may not have had before. Both participants begin to hear their thoughts in their writing and so adapt and judge their thoughts in relation to their correspondent.

The relationship in writing can be more intimate than a physical meeting as there is less danger in the sharing. Neither party is placed on the spot to respond in speech then and there, they can mull over what they have written, think about how to phrase something, find a book in which the same subject and thoughts are discussed, speak and share the ideas with a friend or member of the community. There is so an intimacy and a widening of knowledge in letters, time is spent in their construction, the words are thought out carefully and so, therefore, is the thinking. Both writers

can reveal expansively as professional trust is established. The letters go back and forth: What do you think? How does it sound to you as the reader? Does what I am saying make sense? Does what I am saying answer the question for you? Can you hear what I am saying or am I leaving things out as I know about them even though you do not? Why are you repeating this as it has already been answered in the previous paragraph?

In my practice, the following questions, phrases and challenges have prompted this conversational process.

To show that the student is aware of my experiences and knowledge that I have, or don't have, but also to show that I am here to listen to them and to learn:

1. I have read little/nothing about X. It is a fascinating subject so I am really looking forward to learning more about it from your essay.

To develop a two-way conversation and the sharing of ideas:

- I, as the reader, understand you to be saying X in your essay. Is this what you want me to hear and understand?
- I hear what you are saying but I am slightly confused, what do you think when you read it?
- Often I imagine when I write something that I am the first reader so I try to listen to how the essay sounds to me. I do this by reading it aloud; it helps me when I write things.
- I show my work to others, other academics, friends, family, I think of them as the second reader, and then imagine the following.

    - What they know and what experiences they may have in this field.
    - That they are not devoid of knowledge and experience, but at the same time are not conversant with the ideas in this discipline; or they have a diametrically opposed view to my view.
    - Now I try to convince this reader by my argument. I try to share my knowledge with them, and travel with them towards a new understanding.

To develop shared thoughts and auto-critique:

1. What is the purpose of this paragraph/sentence/word? Is it linked to the body/the concepts raised/the title or question?

2. I notice many words in the essay so for me as a reader the communication between us has been broken. I can't seem to get past what I perceive is an abundance of words and so I can't understand what you are trying to say, I feel lost. Can you help me understand?

3. I am not an engineer/biologist/architect/artist so for me the words used in your discipline are not simple or familiar and I want to know what they mean. What do these terms mean?

4. For me when I write an essay it is important to engage with the references and quotations. When I read my writing I try to link and connect them to what I am trying to say; if I can't do this I take them out. What do you think? Maybe look at all your references and quotations and decide if they connect with what you want to say, so you can decide what to do with them.

5. It is my view that brevity is a skill, so I always try to keep the essay brief and to the point. What is your main point?

Letter writing responses to drafts as suggested above, can promote a constructive written conversation which helps the students to reflect and build on their thinking through epistolary connection to a listening other. During the Covid-19 years, this was particularly important as such letters offered the possibility of human companionship while learning.

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Our second path into the forests of academia is taken by Babalwa Bekebu, who has won a leadership award for her work as Chair of the Wits Postgraduate Association and has more recently than most of us writing here, travelled the difficult gap between school and the university and knows how easy it is to become lost or discouraged. The university is a constructed culture for everyone, can we through writing make ourselves more at home?

Letters home

Babalwa Bekebu, WWC consultant and WF

Disciplinary background: Bioethics and Health Law

My journey with the Writing Centre began when I was reading in the library for my master's research project at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2019. A student job advertisement got my attention and I remember rushing home to complete the application so that I could submit it that same day. We were required to write a 300-word piece on our earliest memory of reading. My mind was suddenly filled with candid childhood memories of my mom and me reading to each other.

I think this was my first moment of writing from an intuitive place in the four years that I had been at university. We had always been hammered and drilled into thinking that the only writing that was allowed was academic writing. But here, the way the question was phrased evoked a sense of calm. Professor Nichols asked us to describe an early memory of reading. We had to include all the details that we could remember, including physical details. We were asked whether this early reading experience affected the way we write or understand writing.

The two stages of this question, to first mine our memories and then to reflect, made me start to see writing as a process of thinking. Reflective writing tends to do that, in the same way that letters allow us to pause and think about what we think. Also, when we write to a friend or a family member, we re-tell events, often from an intuitive place. I started thinking that writing could allow me to fully express myself, without being distracted and self-conscious by the need to sound academic.

I have always been attracted to reading and writing. Few things in life have excited me as much as when I, or a student I am working with, have a breakthrough, when we finally understand what we want to say and how best to write it. Throughout my writing journey with the WWC and the WWP, the premise that 'writing is thinking' has helped me to shift focus from being self-conscious and self-doubting, to owning my voice. The excitement that comes with getting it right, is the excitement of understanding how to be heard and how to graduate from being an outsider to participative insider.[15]

15 Professor Pamela Nichols, the Head of Department at the WWC, has stressed this approach to writing since we joined the WWC and so this premise and way of thinking, the way we approach writing and work with other students.

In 2022 I was one of the many WFs who facilitated a short, large-enrolment, online gateway course on climate change for over 7000 incoming first-year students. I am sure that these students were terrified of writing in university. They were not at home at all and had had their last years of school severely disrupted by the pandemic. We welcomed them to their new home by providing a letter writing space online to write their thoughts and 'find their feet'. We were not; evaluators: we offered a *listening eye* (Murray 1979) almost like a pen-pal and tried to guide them in their understanding and storytelling about their learning and so ease their adjustment into academic writing. This is the WWC: a writing home, with peer support or confidants to help you tell your own story in your way, of what you understand or are beginning to understand.

Letters can create this relaxed communication and can increase confidence. You start to trust your interlocutor. You start to get interested in your own reflections, to consider and reconsider, knowing that someone is waiting to hear your reformulation. Without realising it, you begin to think in a more complex way. Without pain, you cultivate critical thinking skills. As we reflect, we better understand the *why* and *how* and *what next* and practice how to convey our adjusted thinking. We are not speaking to someone who intimidates us but rather to an interested and eventually internalised, reader. So, the walls between student/teacher fall and are replaced by generative dialogue.

We need to maintain our connection with students as fellow learners to be effective writing coaches. This gentle, subtle, but powerful relationship was threatened by the panic and pressures of rushed online teaching. When we deviated from being peer listeners, the WF-student relationship was lost and students either resented our lack of disciplinary expertise or demanded that we edit. If WI lecturers assumed that WFs would fix students writing on the side, rather than being integrated into a WI course as peer coaches, students viewed us as extra and unnecessary work.

During Covid-19, writing helped all of us connect. We wrote to stay sane and survive, sending out 'letters in a bottle,' which was the subtitle of the WWP Online Handbook. We were forced to adapt to online learning, so we had to come up with creative and viable ways to ease both our own and student adaptation. As WFs, we had to work on remaining relatable to students, because we were after all in the same boat and needed to find ways to stay afloat during these up-ended years.

Letters can create a relationship which mirrors the physical space of the WWC: a space of peers, which encourages us to tap into the best parts of our minds and improve our articulation. Students want to be seen and heard, to develop their ideas, make them more theirs and place their thinking against others. Our current educational culture does little to encourage independent and creative thought and too often alienates students and limits their ambition. In letter writing, students can find themselves, choose their own words and employ their own languages, follow their own meaning,

grasp and develop their own agency.[16] Through such writing, students can make the university their home and contribute to its greater relevance.

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The third path is that of the Women's Health activist Lucy Khofi, named by the *Mail and Guardian* as one of the top young South Africans to watch in 2022 and who, in her spare time, has already set up an NGO for Menstrual Health Education and in 2020 a mentoring organisation for undergraduates. Lucy Khofi sees writing and scholarship as serving change and letters as teaching writing as action.

Letters as action

Lucy Khofi, WWC consultant and WF
Home discipline: Medical Anthropology,
Ph.D. candidate in Public Health

In my career it is crucial to communicate with the general population. I see myself as a 'pracademic' because I integrate academic interests with practical action on the ground. A pracademic, or academic practitioner, is both an academic and a practitioner/activist in their subject area (Macduff and Netting 2010; Powell et al. 2018).

My role as a pracademic frames my interaction with students who come to the WWC. As a person who serves communities in various ways, helping students with their writing means more than helping them to write a particular text. For the students and for myself, I want to constantly improve and see writing as a life-long craft which is crucial to our careers. For example, I have learned that activism is frequently ill-documented and ill-communicated and so I dedicated 2021 to documenting my work. In tandem with my studies, I have been blogging, raising awareness of sexual and reproductive health realities on radio stations, in primary schools, high schools, communities, streets and other places. I wish to translate academic insights into action through writing and so partner more effectively with communities and empower their abilities to solve problems.

16 For theory and further discussion of an epistolary pedagogy, see Erasmus, 2021; Nichols, 2020; Erasmus et al. 2019; Nichols, 2016.

Letters are a concrete form of communication, which are successful if the letter writer communicates their intended meaning to their letter reader. In their cover letter, students explain their concerns and consider their next steps. From the beginning of this communication, the reader is a key presence for the writer, as they will be unable to help without this contextual information. When students realise this need to work with the idea of someone else in the communicative act and embrace the dialogue, their writing improves almost without them realising it. For example, a student in Health Sciences submitted a first draft to me which was full of unnecessary jargon, over-complicated sentences and was generally reader unfriendly. This student revised through being asked to explain, to be cognisant of a reader who wanted to understand and in so doing, dramatically uncomplicated her work. She revised through inserting explanations, signposts, clarifications of argument, acknowledgment and response of anticipated objections, following her newfound sense of how her reader might read her argument and follow her style. In her final letter to me, she observed that the letter-writing process had taught her that her goal was to communicate rather than to prove her intelligence and that she could see how that improved her writing. Now she was more confident in her seminar presentations because her focus was on communication to colleagues, many of whom come from different disciplines, rather than on a self-doubting performance of academic prowess.

The skill of developing reader-centred writing when revising drafts is guided by the consultant and then internalised by the student. At the WWC, we encourage students to be independent and to have autonomy. We do not think for them or give them solutions to their writing. The approach is to ask guiding questions so that they can view their writing from the standpoint of readers and choose for themselves how they wish to revise. The writing centre serves as a GPS, but it is a student's responsibility to find the best way to arrive at their destination.

As an undergraduate I was aware of a stigma associated with going to the writing centre. We thought it was only for students with learning difficulties or who were struggling with their courses. However, with the WWP and the proliferation of WI courses, many students are writing regularly and consulting WFs as part of mainstream learning. This habit of frequent writing and the sharing drafts with several readers, has started to change the culture of writing at the university. Along with other WI methods, the letter writing method and the establishment of peer-led writing groups has initiated an idea of learning through multiple conversations. The goal now is to be clear about what you mean because someone is interested in what you think. This is a vital step towards promoting the citizen scholar.

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Writing Group read-along

Fouad Asfour: Senior Writing Fellow

Disciplinary background: M.A. in linguistics at Vienna University, M.A. in Creative Writing at Rhodes University, currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Wits School of Arts Fine Art Department and a Center for the Liberals Arts and Sciences Pedagogy Fellow at the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining us on these pages and welcome to our Writing Group. We're pleased that you found your way to our midst. You might wonder how, as you read these lines outside of our physical presence. Perhaps, think of this as an asynchronous meeting, where the readers' attention and commitment connect outside of time and space. Our writing group has been meeting for years: experimenting with how creative writing exercises can enrich academic writing, aiming to bring out writers' voices.[17]

In our peer-led meetings, we engage in writing exercises to facilitate processes of becoming and growth, informed by Peter Elbow's focus on 'intuitive processes in the first half of the writing cycle and conscious awareness or critical discrimination in the second half' (Elbow 1981: 11). Peer-sharing instills solidarity and complicity in learning through mistakes, for example, by encouraging colleagues to present 'shitty first drafts' (Lamott 1995: 21–27). The glue that keeps writing groups together is a shared curiosity and supportive response to experiment. As the group reflects, we think together and gain insights.

For postgraduate students, this can allow new beginnings. Writing groups can explore how we shape language in writing, while language shapes ourselves, based on the insight by learning theorist and psychologist, Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky:

> Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by emotion, i.e., by our desires

17 My writing group facilitation practice is informed by popular education in South Africa (see for example, Busch 2014; Boughey and McKenna 2021; Nichols 2017; or Oluwoleet al. 2018).

> and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the answer to the last 'why' in the analysis of thinking. (Vygotsky 1986: 252)

It may be objected that such experiences could confuse and defocus a postgraduate writer. However, while the facilitator endeavours to ensure that writing group meetings are a free and safe space, the shared sense of risk and trust also forms a bond between writing group members and fuels agency. We acknowledge that writing operates in a space of vulnerability and supplies the contact details for professional counsel if needed.

There is no formula to ensure a successful writing group; members usually decide in the first few meetings if they will continue to engage or not. The recent experiences of lockdown appeared to galvanise writing groups. As the social space of interacting with peers disappeared, online meetings became vital informal spaces to allow collective, explorative thinking, experienced as 'epistemological becoming' (Asfour et al. 2020) in postgraduate journeys.

To engage in deeper, playful ways of writing, is to explore the self as source of inspiration. While our meetings aim to support traditional academic writing, for example, by responding to argument, we want to invite you here to explore your thoughts through creative writing exercises, to consider how experimental, generative writing can create new inroads into research questions.

Our meetings usually start with exercises designed to shift focus from meaning to form. For example, drawing from a variation of the *Cadavre Exquis* (Exquisite Corpse) game, presented by Suzanne Césaire as the 'Voice of the Oracle' (*Tropiques* 5, April 1942), we wrote down questions and answers independently from each other, then read them aloud. The resulting combinations of question and answer generated unexpected connections and a heightened listening to processes of meaning. My text below was written after listening to this call-and-response experiment.

> The shadow outside is waiting. Not on the pavement, but between the stones. A dry sound finds a gap. An echo grinds sand between its toes. When this moment finds an exit, the walk will begin. A cloud forms around the path, leaving a spray of salty mist in my face. A hand presses against the window, next to it a leaf falls, shaking in the wind. Its five corners span the house the shadow lives in. The flap in the back door is jammed. The grey cat snuck in to get food, too grainy to be located. Paws leave prints in the cloud, where rainwater dissolves oil in a prism of light. Another step now. The walnut cracks and splits open. The grey cat jumps out, carrying a golden comb, running

> towards the shore. I hear the sound of blood rushing in my ears as I reach the waves. The hand presses against the glass it shatters. The leaf explodes falling through a crack into an abyss of five dimensions. (Asfour 2021).

Apart from enjoying the forms of language evoked and witnessing listeners'/readers' collective contribution to the growth of a text, these exercises make visible ways in which language shapes perception and imagination.

Another fruitful exercise was prompted by the need to create our presence in our writing, especially when under pressure or facing writer's block. The following prompt, called 'writing as breathing,' was inspired by the following excerpt from Natalie Sarraute's 1965 book *Tropisms*.

> Write in regular phases of breathing – each thought one breath. Your body is an instrument, your body makes beautiful sounds. Allow the sound to carry your words. Become aware how the enunciation of each word reverberates through your body.
>
> Write as you speak, speak as you read. Allow the words to activate the air, watch spit fly as you speak, watch air enter your lungs as you inhale what will be the next word.[18]

(You could try this, if you have a few minutes, to listen to the breath of your hand as you write.)

In discussing our experiences of writing in response to these prompts, we found confirmation and inspiration, or surprise about the way that they revealed silences and gave them voice. Visual artist Philiswa Lila responded, for example, to the moment of sharing by exploring facets of agency hidden within language. The text was later included in a series of artworks entitled 'Willing to Share'.

> *I am willing to share*
>
> *I already know what I would like to say. To share with you as honestly as I could. With all the details I can find. No more silence and silencing the fact that I can actually share the interior truth of me. The willing to share. The will to want to share. I am practicing this will. Practice is me thinking about what to say. Where to say it. How to say it. Practice in my imagination.*
>
> *Is it my body that has the will? My voice. Tone. Gestures. Senses. The willing to share in a space of comfort. The one that I am sitting on right now. In my room. On the floor. I sit in a*

18 Authored collectively by the writing group.

> *corner where I am next to my books, plants and candles. It's quiet when I sit here. I do not hear the outside. I am able to make nothing of sounds. I am not sure if it's a choice I make. But. My corner is very silent. Elevating my thought process. What am I thinking of sharing? Now this is when the thinking and overthinking the will to share becomes the thinking and overthinking the known and unknown. The knowing is what I can actually share. The unknowing is in another voice that says... ask do you really?* (Lila 2021: n.p)

These metacognitive moments and movements revealed by exploratory writings allowed us to consider presence and writing at the moment of utterance and to explore further how writers perceive themselves in and through the act of writing. Experiencing and sharing these moments of creation, inspired courage and endorsement of each other's developing work and has led to co-authoring publications. So far, I have been part of the co-publishing of three research papers as well as online texts connected to writing groups.[19]

Thank you for joining this short writing group introduction. I hope that it gave you a first impression of how these can become a fertile seedbed for postgraduate writing.

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Lastly, a perspective from Esther Marie Pauw, a postdoctoral artistic researcher at the Africa Open Institute (AOI), Stellenbosch University (SU), coordinator of the AOI's sonic residences, winner of SU's 2020 postdoctoral award for excellence in research, flutist, WI lecturer and SWF, of developing networks and how writing groups can cross university and even national boundaries to help writers and readers to connect and so activate new channels of learning, meaning and intellectual creativity.

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19 Among others, a research paper about writing groups furthering student's agency (Oluwole et al. 2018); translingual writing as epistemological becoming (Asfour et al. 2020); as well as a reflection on reading groups (Khan, Asfour and Skeyi-Tutani 2022). A creative writing paper was published online as; The love of writing, or writing as love/r: Collaborative writing as shared visual art studio practice' by the UCT based project *Creative Knowledge Resources*: https://www.creativeknow.org/bopawritersforum/the-love-of-writing.

Writing as spinning this world into being

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In 2021 and 2022 an Oppenheimer Memorial Trust funded grant[20] enabled researchers and practitioners at Wits, and specifically at the WWP, to explore and implement ideas about epistolary writing, peer group writing practices, citizenship writing and writing beyond individual university nationalisms. WFs and SWFs from various disciplines and several universities in South Africa were appointed to liaise with students on their writing projects. I was appointed as one of the SWFs for the period March through August 2022 and I was based at Stellenbosch University. My appointment enacted the grant proposal aim of extending writing practices that emanated from the WWP to work beyond narrow university nationalisms.

During my time as a WF, I came across Ghanian Asante mythology about Spider Man and Native American mythologies about Spider Woman. These myths, from different parts of the world, inspired my practices as a WF and helped me to understand the power of a network of cooperation and sustenance.

The Asante stories about Ananse the Spider Man who receives stories from the sky gods, tell us that stories help shape human survival. Similarly, the many myths about Spider Woman from North American indigenous knowledges point to the powers of Spider Woman as trickster, helper, teacher and creator (Philip 2004: 15). Through her thoughts, Spider Woman spins this world into being. She also bestows her gifts on humans, so that humans become thinkers who spin understanding through language.

The notion that humans think thoughts, tell them as stories and write them as texts that help to spin this world into being is potentially a vivid reminder that acts of writing as thinking are

20 This Oppenheminer Memorial grant was awarded to Professor Zimitri Erasmus and Dr Nosipho Mngomezulu from the Wits Anthropology department and Professor Pamela Nichols, head of the Wits Writing Programme at the University of Witwatersrand.

important for contemporary living. Furthermore, the metaphor of a spider's web that is created to catch sustenance as food, amidst dew drops and sunshine shafts that sparkle off its fine strands, is potent when applied to writing networks. The metaphor of the spider's web suggests writing-doing-thinking as a practice of many threads, enduring, yet fragile, housed within communities of foresting libraries, nurturing collectives of people who are co-connected in sustainable pasts and futures, hereby relying on the forest metaphor that Pamela Nichols suggests early on in this chapter.

Along with the WWP's gesture to share its resources by appointing writing fellows at two other universities in South Africa (North-West University and Stellenbosch University), I extended my work as a SWF at Stellenbosch University to include emailed letter-writing with a doctoral student in artistic research who was based at a European university. As an outcome from this engagement, I sensed that the cross-pollination of ideas that emanated from differing geo-political contexts were important to broaden the scope of both of our contexts of artistic research writing. Our interchanges explored ways of writing about artistic research where the writing brought together the academic, the artistic and the practitioner's reflectivity. Our work was collegial. We were perhaps 'finding' our 'homes' without becoming assimilated into institutional binds.

The notion of 'finding home' without becoming assimilated is derived from a text by the scholar Willie Jennings who writes about academic institutions that search for new ways of operating 'after whiteness' (2020). For Jennings, 'whiteness' is not a narrow reference to people of European descent, but a reference to 'a way of being in the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning-making' (2020: 9). For Jennings, the harmful focus of the remains of whiteness-thinking in institutional culture is the advancement of programmes of assimilation (2020: 110) above programmes of acknowledging individual contribution. Similarly harmful is the tendency by lingering whiteness-thinking to continue to '[explain] the world' (2020: 138) in a controlling and all-knowing way. By contrast, Jennings suggests that the individual's desire should be to venture beyond whiteness and instead to find 'home' and 'belonging' without becoming assimilated in whiteness. Also, for Jennings, exchange networks should not be about 'items and money', or 'commodity' (2020: 144), but about 'something personal, communal, storied and obligatory that leans toward mutual recognition and relationship' (2020: 145). Networks and friendships are then about 'strength and desire of the one for the other' (2020: 145).

The WWP's strategies to work beyond narrow nationalisms, as illustrated by the broadening of the network of WFs nationally and the encouragement of subsequent support for networks internationally, probe to go beyond harmful traces of control and assimilation that may yet lurk in institutional cultures.

Borrowing from conversations with Pamela Nichols and from her ideas in the *Creative Academic Writing Journal* (2020), I am reminded that writers across networks and continuums of writing practice 'catch' messy thoughts and weave them into strands of connection. Writers spin webs of sense-making that acknowledge writing as thinking, recognising that writing can be developed in context-specific ways that energise and provide courage. The WWP's focus on letter-writing, peer group writing, citizenship writing and especially home/belonging beyond university nationalisms are the type of practices that help foster values of the sharing of resources, of creative and sustainable forward-thinking and of the freedom to roam in public, shared spaces. The spider's webs that are rebuilt every day and that hang between books and leafy vines are a reminder of the power of relationality, care and sustenance. The spider's web is also a reminder that the human and the non-human can intersect to find new futures for an ecological world in trouble and for a cultural world teetering between need and greed. Those spider's webs cojoining books and vines in Nichols' metaphor of the forests of the library remind us of Donna Haraway's Camille stories of butterflies and humans, symbiotically and biologically inter-connected and emerging from the compost to take flight on migration routes of the future (Haraway 2016).

Conclusion: the common library

Each of these paths describes the deep engagement of the practitioner: through letter writing correspondence and the development of voice; through students encouraged to make the university their home without feeling that they are being assimilated or distorted; through learning how to use writing as chosen action; or in a writing groups to find ways to foster and support a group recognition of the act of thinking and its individuality; and lastly, through laterally functioning national and international networks in which ideas are nurtured through widely spun webs of meaning. The life of these engagements is the relationship between writer and reader.

The novelist Ruth Ozeki writes of the intimacy of the relationship between writer and reader: '*I'm reaching forward through time to touch you... you're reaching back to touch me*' (Ozeki 2022: 39). This fusion of writer and reader could not be further from remedial instruction it is rather the touch that allows us to enter the library of learning.

To allow the proliferation of these practices of deep learning, we need to change our programmatic structures from being predominantly governed by a hierarchical model. The idea of the commons (Ostrom 1990), which has informed recent work on the Writing Enhanced

Curriculum (Anson 2021), posits that individuals and local groups can self-organise and work sustainably so long as there are clear mechanisms for interaction, monitoring and management. The development of the idea of the successful commons was the life work of Elinor Ostrom, the late Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences, who remarked in her Nobel acceptance speech that, 'What we have ignored is what citizens can do and the importance of real involvement of the people involved' (Arrow, Kechane and Levon 2012: 13135–13136). This chapter attempts to follow that lead through considering the motivations and trajectories of colleagues. Further research is necessary to investigate and assess both student responses to these methods and to consider how Ostrom's principles for the successful working of the commons can be applied to writing programmes and how these principles can be built into a continuous professional development plan for WFs and writing consultants. However, the practitioner reflections here demonstrate how teaching experiences can be mined for future programmatic development and most importantly reveal a common investment in the letter writing method and writing groups as supporting and strengthening self-chosen paths into sustainable and verdant forests of learning.

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