Writers in retreat: Conflicted knowledge workers, shifting identities and changing relations in the new enterprise university

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Commodification, surveillance and standardised measures of scholarly productivity are reshaping the relationship of writers to their writing. Not only are material and symbolic enticements shifting researchers’ priorities, they are also changing the meanings and value of publications, and producing new kinds of relationships and writing habits/practices and identities. Yet, most academics have a strong desire to write about and disseminate their research findings and feel conflicted about performance indicators that directly equate quality with achievement of performance indicators. Indeed, Shore (2008) contends that when professionals are incentivised and measured their sense of professional autonomy is eroded, and ambition demotivated (Lorenz, 2012).

This paper calls into question the effects of managerial techniques used for ‘cajoling’ writing. It provides a counter-narrative to prevailing neo-liberal policy discourses that focus on products and quantify knowledge production. While researchers now have specified rights and responsibilities and a language with which to ask for writing time and workload allocation, there has been little attention paid to the implications of this visibility through the privileging of the rational specification of process and product. The paper discusses the teaching and learning initiatives being devised to meet the demands of the current environment by assisting university staff with heightened performance expectations. I am interested to examine what new forms of identity construction are required to negotiate academic work-life in a highly competitive environment in which only a few can ever be deemed ‘successful’ or ‘productive’ in the narrow ways ‘ideal’ academic identities are being conceived.

I first describe a writing intervention that appeals to an individual’s need for encouragement and development and inspires participants to relish their writing projects, ignites the fire in their bellies, and forges confident academic identities. The paper also illuminates the competing agendas for the new breed of professional who has emerged in response to intensified competition, and who is charged with boosting publication rates and assisting researchers’ relentless pursuit of self-financing. Having recently acted in this role and facilitated over 20 writing retreats for one university (Knowles, forthcoming), I have heard

1 I am indebted to my colleague Dr Susanna Iuliano for this term. I like its suggestion of persistent flattery, wooing, and enticement. Other nuances are useful too for the idea of cajolement evokes gentle pleading and insincerity.

2 Reduced public funding has led to the appointment of staff known as Research Development Advisors in Australian universities:

http://theresearchwhisperer.wordpress.com/2014/01/28/what-research-developers-do/

“More often than not, it’s a diplomatic coaching exercise” ... or “ushering [researchers]” through grant applications.” Posted 28/1/2013.
the whispers within workplaces, not to mention “secrets and silences” (Gill, 2010) surrounding the operationalisation of the new performativity measures. Drawing on data which is collected as a normal part of work practice from ongoing writing retreats for Australian universities, and observations as a writing retreat facilitator/participant, I argue that retreats enhance the pleasures of academic life by being less entangled in intensive managerial control practices. Finally, I chart researchers’ resistance and creative responses to instrumentalist discourses and disciplinary technologies and elaborate the ways retreats can empower and enable researchers to believe in the value of their work outside of a ‘publish or perish’ mentality and provide safe havens for pressured knowledge workers. The retreat ethos (Grant, 2006; Knowles & Grant, in press) has distinctive features that actively seek to disrupt institutional messages that brand researchers as institutional ‘winners’ or ‘losers’. The provocative term ‘institutional loser’ signals the unintended and contradictory effects of the ‘audit culture’ in which loss and unworthiness are inevitable by-products in such high stakes contexts. When writers are in retreat from their institutions, perceptions of the ‘ideal’ or ‘perfect’ academic as a pervasive binary concept can be shifted.

Bibliography:


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1 In Australia the success rate for national competitive grants is 15%. (see for example The Australia Research Council - ARC, and Office for Learning & Teaching - OLT). Rachel Cockburn of the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London hosted the symposium on “The institutional loser” in November 2013.

3 Some colleagues from a new generation university aspiring to be a research-intensive university refer to institutional bullying around publishing.

4 It is interesting to ruminate upon the new kinds of strategies emerging for time-poor writers: the Research Whisper, Shut-up-and-write phenomenon etc.
The term refers to the contemporary academic who faces a barrage of benchmarks, frameworks, and standardisation. It also alludes to someone who is deemed to fail at an activity.