

Surface tension: Theorising postgraduate writing practices from an informal archive (0294)

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This paper develops the metaphor of surface tension as a way of doing theory to understand postgraduate writing practices in a 'southern' context. It is widely acknowledged that challenges with thesis completion are often linked to difficulties that manifest in writing which is gatekeeper for many students, particularly for those on the margins. In response to these difficulties, a range of forms of writing support have been developed at many universities. These vary from compulsory access courses, to discipline specific or generic workshops, and open-ended, informal peer writing spaces. These writing offerings are structuring curriculum for postgraduates in interesting ways, and there is much to be learnt from these initiatives about how writing is both affordance and constraint in creating access pathways for historically excluded students. The informal spaces in particular present a generative space in which to explore the interplay between practice and theory.

The site I have chosen to reflect on for this enquiry is a multidisciplinary, open-ended writers' circle that has been in existence for the past decade at the University of Cape Town. Postgraduates who attend are typically in transition between countries, disciplines, languages, or between the workplace and the academy. These circles have evolved in response to what we have learnt about the writing lives of postgraduates who are 'unhomed' and in search of community. From the beginning, the circles complemented on the one hand, the supervisory relationship, an often lonely process with cyclical lows and more infrequent highs, and on the other, the generic writing workshop with its pop-up pedagogy, where we hope that the elusive forms of research genres will be made manifest.

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate the contribution of these informal peer writing spaces, or to describe emerging practices. It is to explore how close engagement with a dynamic, evolving circle over a ten year period can offer a site for doing theory. I draw on the informal, at times haphazard, record of these circles that creates what Bowker (2010) calls a 'trace archive' of an emerging practice. The archive includes weekly emails sent to students (the email list is always bigger than those who attend regularly) and folders with a variety of draft texts that students bring for commentary. There are also notes that I made after a particularly interesting or challenging circle, reflecting on how the circle waxes and wanes, recalling dilemmas, contestations and laughter.

The core of this paper is an account of doing theory that comes from bringing the metaphor of 'surface tension' to the circle. The concept of surface tension is significant in the natural sciences. It is a phenomenon of contact, when elements of different density are contiguous, for example water in contact with air. When dew forms a perfect drop on a nasturtium leaf, different substances have come together, making something new take place. What makes the drop of water 'stick' is the presence of different forces resulting in the tightening of molecules on the surface of the water enabling it to hold, at least for a while. The notion of surface tension can apply to writing, with its material 'stuff' that can travel across contexts, holding its form, but not its meaning, thus opening writing to competing interpretations and hence, inequality (Blommaert). The concept of style in sociolinguistics and the rhizome in philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari) are also relevant for this

enquiry. Surface tension encompasses the lines of tension in the draft writing, as well as in the life of the circle. Forces that work in different directions (both regulating and unifying, and dispersing and multiplying) are temporarily held in balance.

I show, drawing on texts and memory in the trace archive, how working with the notion of surface tension, concepts such as flow, time, buoyancy and (cross)current emerge to help make visible the rich underlife of a writers' circle. This interplay between practice and theory illuminates, comments on and disrupts 'divine discourse' - 'the taken for granted, almost sacred understandings of what constitutes 'knowledge' and its expression in the English language'(Cadman 2003).