

## CHAPTER 19

# “THERE IS A CAGE INSIDE MY HEAD AND I CANNOT LET THINGS OUT”: AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE JOURNAL WRITING

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This chapter presents the outcomes of a journal project initially set-up in conjunction with cross-disciplinary courses in Academic Literacies (Writing in Academic Contexts, Writing Science), taught at The Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT), from 2008 to 2011, as part of a Teaching Fellowship I held at that time. The project sets out to encourage journal writing and image making, consider issues of collaborative writing, social practice and identity and promote the transformative role collaborative journal writing can play within varying academic contexts.

In 2008, I encountered “The 1000 Journals Project,” based around the global circulation of 1,000 journals: contributed to by those who encounter a journal (in a café, for example) and left for another person to stumble across. I was intrigued with the idea of the journal as mobile, independent, and as a particular kind of space for writing with its own emergent identity. I adapted the concept and introduced a collaborative journal into the academic literacies courses I was teaching. This project (The Journal Project), aimed to engage with the practice of contributing to a journal as a collaborative, interactive, academic, and transformative way of thinking and writing. It is a multi-authored method of communication and expression that can be shared within the community of writers participating in a writing-based course. A journal was circulated on a weekly basis and participants were invited to actively engage with the process of writing and image making in whatever way they felt pertinent to their writing, studies and life at university. The journal was presented as a medium through which students could further explore themes covered in the courses, in a space independent of written assessment. Participants were encouraged to be as creative, experimental, formal, academic, and exploratory as they wished. The outcomes are a collection of seven journals rich in discourse, imagery and ideas that encompass a wide-range of topics and issues central to an Academic Literacies approach to teaching, learning and writing.

I focus on the following themes: the journal as collaborative endeavour, putting “self” into the journal, image making and emergent textual practices. Theoretically, I concentrate on the journal as a method of inquiry via discussion on issues of identity and construction of “self.” I argue that the journals have potential for transformation, both individually and collectively, within a group of course participants.

## **THE JOURNAL AS COLLABORATIVE ENDEAVOUR**

Journals are often considered to function as particular spaces for writing (e.g., Phyllis Creme, 2008). Here, writing can be seen as an activity that always occurs in a social context, at both a more local, immediate level and at a broader social and cultural level. As such, there are different ways in which writing can be understood as a “social practice” (e.g. Roz Ivanič, 1998; Theresa Lillis, 2001). This might include, writing within specific academic and disciplinary communities (e.g. Elizabeth Sommerville & Phyllis Creme, 2005; Fay Stevens, 2009), as well as expressing personal and social identities. Yet, during class discussions, students expressed a loss of identity during the course of their studies and targeted academic writing as responsible for it. This loss was expressed as a stripping away of creativity and being made to write in a way that felt abstracted and not representative of who they “really are,” or want to be.

All seven journals contrast in terms of coverage and content. It is interesting to see how the first journal entry shaped the focus and intention of following entries and how the journals took on an identity of their own. One journal, for example, set the scene with an opening that focused on gratitude. Following entries responded to this and as a consequence the journal has spiritual and therapeutic overtones. In contrast, another journal focused on the complex and composite identity of being a human scientist. Entries here, focused on the complex nature of the discipline and a writers’ struggling sense of identity within it.

Collaboratively, all journals, in some way, focused on an individual/collective and writerly identity and the processes of transformation taking place. More often than not, this is expressed visually and textually as a process of struggle and negotiation. In general, journals engaged with fluidity, creativity, playfulness, and collectivity, particularly as a series of responses to previous entries. In many respects, the journals evolved into collaborative safe spaces in which participants developed a spirit of inquiry, knowledge and wisdom that was directly representative of the individual but written in collaboration with others.

## **PUTTING “SELF” INTO THE JOURNAL**

Identity is a modern conceptual construct used in the social and behavioural sciences to refer to people’s sense of themselves as distinct individuals in the context of community. At a basic level, identity could be said to refer to people’s socially de-

terminated sense of who they are—a kind of social statement of *who one is*, referring to a sense of “self” (aspects of the individual) that draws upon trends (representative of the collective), so as to present oneself simultaneously as part of a whole and as unique (Antonio Damasio, 2000). From a corporeal perspective, writing can be seen as a technique of the body (Marcel Mauss, 1973), a kind of dexterous, woven movement (Tim Ingold, 2000, p.403) and a sort of fiction created by language and all that we think of as being language (Jacques Derrida, 1967).

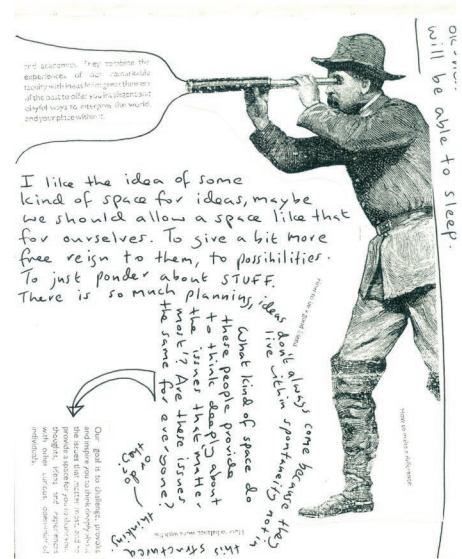
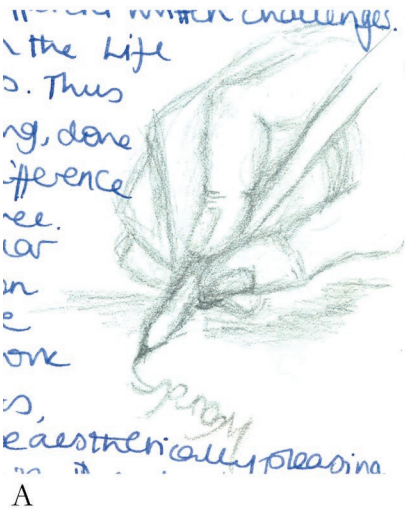


Figure 19.1: Visualising self in journal. .

Corporeal imagery features notably in the journals:

This includes an image of a hand in the process of writing “words” (Figure 19.1A), where the entry states that “writing can be exciting ... frustrating ... explorative ... reassuring,” while another image is of a figure writing in café (Figure 19.1B). The visual placing of the writer within the space of the journal includes an entry in which a collage figure bears a striking resemblance to the student who made the entry (Figure 19.1C) and an image of a person looking through a telescope (Figure 19.1D) and peering into the distance. Accompanying text states:

I like the idea of some kind of space for ideas, maybe we should allow a space like that for ourselves.

“Self,” in some instances, is visually present in other forms. In one example (Figure 19.2), the participant (human scientist) represents herself as a sequence of pie charts. Initially, her writing is expressed as two separate circles; what she refers to as “purely separate spheres of writing,” where one chart represents “essay criteria academic assessed uni work” and the other “for me subjective personal journal diary.” The following chart fuses the circles together. Here, she asks “do they overlap?”, placing her “self” in the middle: a combination of the two spheres of writing. Finally, she states that “my writing is all part of the same thing, with different aspects that blend together,” with an accompanying circle in which she places “myself as a writer” in the centre.



Figure 19.2: Visually working through putting “self” back into writing

Through the interplay of text and image, these particular journal entries explore the possibilities of connecting to and representing a “true” or “real” self, that has

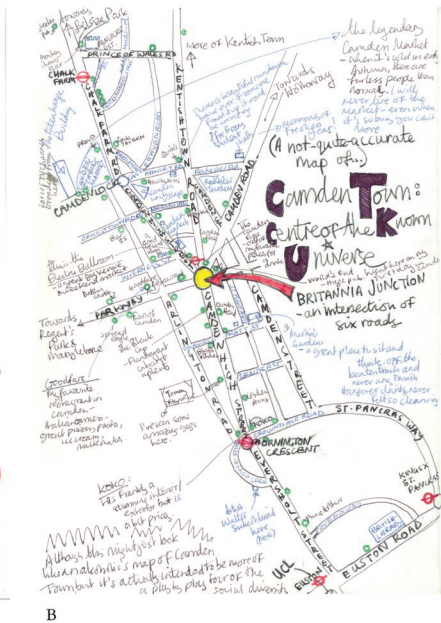
somehow become elusive to the writer. Participants demonstrate an awareness that their academic writing is not just about conveying an ideational content. It is also about the representation of “self” (e.g., Celia Hunt & Fiona Sampson, 2007; Ken Hyland, 2002) and expressing a sense of “self” (Peter Ashworth, 2004, p. 156; Phyllis Creme & Celia Hunt, 2008; Kristján Kristjánsson, 2008; Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1998). Moreover, that it is a social act that involves sharing work with peers (e.g. Maria Antoniou & Jessica Moriarty, 2008), as well as a set of processes which may contribute dynamically to knowledge making (cf. Graham Badley, 2009).

## IMAGE MAKING

The concept of text comprises an infusion of words and pictures (e.g., Mike Sharples, 1999, p. 130) and an interweaving of text and graphic elements (cf. Ingold, 2007, p. 70). Writing, image and colour are said to lend themselves to doing different kinds of semiotic work, where each has its own distinct potential for meaning (Gunther Kress, 2010). We could even ask, “where does drawing end and writing begin?” (Ingold, 2007, p. 120-151).



A



B

Figures 19.3A and 19.3B: “Mapping identity.”

The interface of image and text is executed in a variety of ways in the journals: text written around images (Figures 19.1C, 19.1D, 19.5A), as well as images around and integrated with text (Figures, 19.3A, 19.3B, 19.5C). Moreover, varieties of maps de-





Here, the participant is mapping out a concept, communicating directly to the reader as a visual and textual process that facilitates their own understanding of the topic, as well as an awareness of their thoughts and opinions on it; being both the writer and reader (writing to “self”) of the entry.

A “Dissertation Map” (Figure 19.3D), is reminiscent of a pirate map that alludes to the dissertation as some kind of treacherous journey to get to “hidden treasure.” References to London, include a tube-stop memoir (Figure 19.3A) that reveals an engagement with the collaborative free-spirit of the journal, stating the information might come in handy if the journal were ever lost and the finder “felt like roaming around London.” Moreover, a map of “Camden Town: Centre of the Universe” (Figure 19.3B) presents a bricolage of information that includes social history and memories of previous visits, with a statement that identifies the map as “a play by play tour of social diversity.”

These cartographical visuals act as evocative mediums for communicating a variety of information—corporeal, individual, composite, spatial and social—where the reader is required to engage concurrently with text and image and engage with the process of taking a journey as they “read” the map. Here, images can be seen to be much more than an adjunct to writing: they do not restate the data or reduce the need for prose, but offer a kind of separate or parallel “text” for reading and interpretation (see also Gimenez and Thomas Chapter 1, Good Chapter 3, Adams Chapter 4 this volume).

## EMERGENT TEXTUAL PRACTICES

The journals demonstrate that when the opportunity arises, the process of experimentation is fully engaged with. Moreover, that emergent textual practices lead to a variety of methods and outcomes that engage with issues central to an academic literacies approach to writing.

Michel de Certeau (1984) imagined the modern writer as the isolated Cartesian subject, removed from the world and confronting the blank surface of a sheet of paper in much the same way as an urban planner confronts a wasteland or a conqueror confronts the surface of the earth (pp. 134-136). Being faced with the blank surface of a page is often expressed as one of the most worrying encounters a writer faces. Interestingly, a majority of entries in the journals subverted the linearity of the A4 page and presented an interplay of text and image. Figure 19.4, for example, is an entry of words and images that rotate around the page. Based around the theme of “A Night of Wanderings,” the entry explores the “ping” of ideas as they pop into your head in the early hours of the morning and is playful in its approach to space, imagery, colour and text. Here, the reader not only engages with the content and visual impact of the entry, but also the gesture of reading, that involves moving the journal around in varying positions and shapes in order to read it and

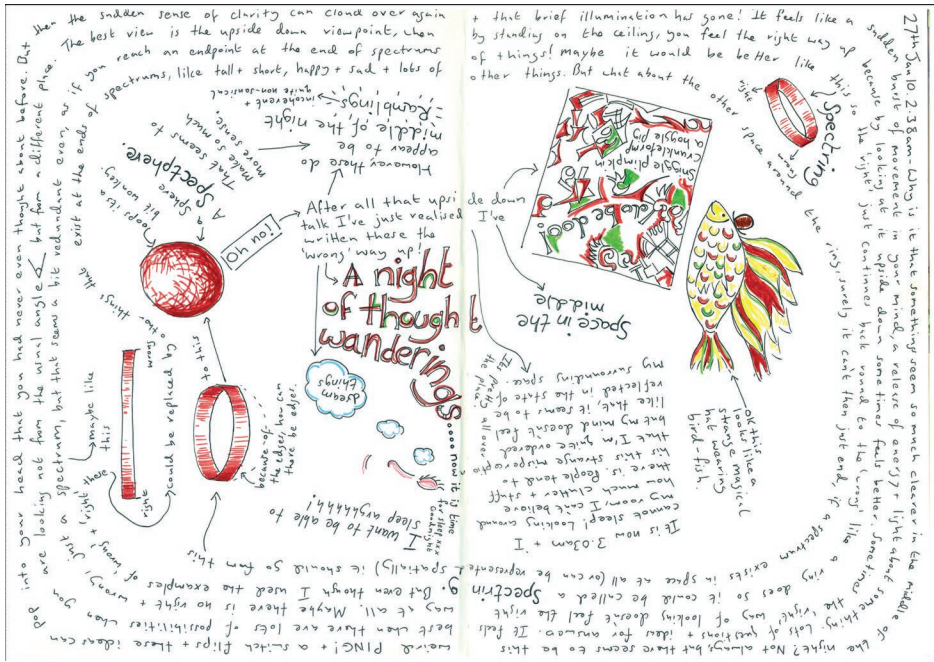


Figure 19.4: Non linear writing.

engage with the materiality of the journal in a three-dimensional way. As such, the journal moves from being looked at/read to an object that has tactile multi-sensory qualities.

Thematic references to flying (Figures 19.5A, 19.5D) and containment (Figures 19.5B, 19.5C) are also present. The flying images are associated with text that tends to have a positive and spiritual quality and associated with a sense of realization and free-spiritedness. In direct contrast, images of containment seem to reflect constraint and frustration. In Figure 19.5C, containment is portrayed as a cage that sits within the mind of a human figure. The cage contains comments such as, “I don’t want to be put into a category.” “I am going to learn German.” “Do I want to find a uniform way of expressing myself?” These are expressions of intention somehow constrained by the cage, but more specifically by the mind of the writer.

## CONCLUSION

A fascinating aspect of this project is the resulting richness of the journal entries, with regard to the diversity of style of both text and images and the readiness of the participants to experiment with the process. I am touched by their willingness to engage with the journals and their candour when expressing their sense of self, identity and relationship with the written word and the visual image. Framed in this way (as





means of viewing self through the concept of being a writer in a particular discipline.

Writers gain opportunities to refine their judgment and decision making as to when and how they present information visually (cf. Robert Goldbort, 2006, p. 174-194) and these journals are associated with a “spirit of relaxation” associated with growth (cf. Elise Hancock, 2003, p. 28) and learning that may be fostered by providing participants with writing spaces that offer them freedom, but also an opportunity to re-make themselves (e.g., Phyllis Creme, 2008, p. 62, cf. Maggi Savin-Baden, 2008). Here, writing is a socially-situated set of meaning-making practices (cf. Lesley Gourlay, 2009, p. 182). As such, journaling can become a personal journey and tied in with a holistic vision of life (Clare Walker Leslie & Charles Roth, 2000, p. 93-100). There is a strong sense of desire and anticipation concerning a shift in a sense of “self” as a process of going to university and the journals appear to have become containers for an epistemological medium of expression, associated with a collective sense of “belonging” at university (cf. Mark Palmer, Paula O’Kane, & Martin Owens, 2009), an individual desire to not lose a sense of “self” during the process and an awareness that processes of transformation are taking place. As one participant articulates:

Academic writing feels like something I’ve produced that is separate to me and is passed on to the audience. In comparison journal entries feel more like an extension of me, and part of who I am.

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