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Fictional spaces, learning places: Exploring creative learning sites connected to fiction writing

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ABSTRACT

Connections between lifelong learning and fiction writing are explored by drawing upon the findings from two research studies that included interviews with fiction authors and with key informants at creative learning sites such as book festivals, writing conferences and creative writing programs. Focusing on two main themes; adult learning and the power of story, and lifelong learning and creative learning sites, we use a Foucauldian analysis to consider how learning sites are an essential aspect of the circular materiality of power in learning. We conclude by considering how creative learning sites related to fiction may be seen as a way to foster critical public pedagogy.

Introduction

Creative learning sites are places designed to foster creativity through both programs and physical spaces. In our research we explore creative learning sites that support the work of fiction writing as spaces and places that may enhance lifelong learning opportunities. Through interviews with fiction authors we investigate their learning processes in becoming successfully published writers and learn about the supports that foster their capabilities as 'creatives' – a term used to describe individuals whose careers involve working in creative industries such as film, literature, or the fine arts (Haukka, 2011). As a part of our research we are also interviewing "key informants" and visiting creative learning sites connected to fiction

writing, such as book festivals, mentorship programs, writing conferences, and creative writing programs.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of literature related to lifelong learning, creativity, and fiction writing. We then overview the two research studies that we draw upon to use as data for this paper and explore two thematic areas: adult learning and the power of story and learning within creative learning sites. In our analysis we draw upon Foucault's (2004) discussion of circulation and materiality, which he names as core to all systemic power relations, to explore writing communities and their related institutions. We conclude with a consideration of how creative learning sites may be connected with the idea of public pedagogy, as spaces and places where adult learners may learn to think more critically and creatively by engaging with fiction writing.

Lifelong Learning, Creativity, and Fiction Writing

Discourses in adult education that explore learning about creativity often explore learning connected to popular culture, including the media (Giroux, 2011; Tisdell, 2007). Educators have also explored how pedagogical strategies that incorporate artistic practices, such as popular theatre, can lead to creative and critical opportunities for adult learning (Butterwick, 2003).

Creative writing can be an important component of "life-learning" (Prescott, 2012) and may enhance adult learning opportunities (Tobin & Tisdell, 2015; Cranton

& Hugin, 2015). Jarvis (2012) argues fiction may develop empathy amongst learners when paired with critical pedagogical intent. In our earlier research, we also note the power of fiction to disrupt existing assumptions and to foster the development of radical social critique (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013).

Research Study

This paper draws upon research from two Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded studies. Our first joint grant looked at lifelong learning, fiction writing and citizenship, and our current grant builds on this research to look at lifelong learning, fiction, and the idea of 'creative literacies'. Each of these studies involves interviews with over forty fiction writers and twenty 'key informants' involved in programs or projects that support fiction writing. A life history/biographical approach has been used for the interviews with the authors. Shorter interviews with the 'key informants' at 'creative learning sites', such as writing centres or festivals that have been developed to engage people with fiction writing as authors or readers have also been conducted as part of both research studies.

Interviews are transcribed and participants have the opportunity to review these. As a means of drawing attention to and sharing the exciting work that our participants do, we share the identities of the authors and key informants, but provide them with the option to select either partial or full anonymity if they prefer.

Adult Learning and the Power of Story

In doing qualitative research, Marshall & Rossman (2011) describe the analytical process as one in which the researcher will be constantly "comparing her emerging themes and explanations with those in her literature review and looking for new variations or surprises" (p. 220). One theme that consistently arises in the literature that relates to the topic of fiction is that of the power of story. Humans learn from one another by sharing and telling stories and as Clark & Rossiter (2008) argue "using stories to teach has always been part of the practice of adult educators" (p. 61). Many adult educators who use narrative in teaching/research encourage learners to reflect upon their own personal experiences and biographies to gain insights into their learning. In our research,

however, we are most interested in looking at the power of story in terms of exploring the use of fiction, in which learners are asked to engage with stories created by imagination. Fictional stories may help learners to explore important issues and to question different interpretations of 'truth', but they are not reliant upon sharing personal accounts of lived experience. Difficult topics such as gender or racial inequality, emergent global concerns, and current social debates, are all taken up within the context of fiction.

Various authors that we interviewed in our study spoke to the importance of story in learning in connection with fiction. Young adult (YA) author Christine Walde explains: "as a fiction writer that's what really interests me - stories, narrative ... the power of the narrative thrust in our lives. This drive that we have to assimilate our experiences into beginnings, middles and ends - I'm endlessly fascinated". Stories are an essential part of meaning-making. By examining fiction, learners can also consider this process of how, as human beings, we make sense of the world, and how others depending upon their location, may view things differently. This kind of learning may also help us to make sense of our own biographies and individual learning experiences.

There are various reasons that fiction writers are drawn to capturing human experiences and sharing their ideas through the power of story. Canadian literary author Andrew Borkowski says:

Margaret Atwood once said – I attribute this to her, I think she said this to Peter Gzowski – people say they wanted to be a writer but they realized they had nothing to say, and she said really the reason to be an author is not that you have something to say, but that you desperately need to find something to say. And that's what the desire is. I've got to make sense of this, I've got to give this shape. I can't let this thing called life just wash over me, and let myself be carried whichever direction the tides are going. I need to stand against it and sculpt it. That's what the desire is.

Many adult educators have explored the urge that propels humans to engage in learning, beyond practical or mechanistic ways of comprehending the world around them. Groen (2008), Tisdell (2008) & English (2000) take up the spiritual components of adult learning, to investigate how people have this need to understand the world around them. In previous work Gouthro (2010) has looked at the idea of human happiness and the power of adult learning, connected to research by Field (2000) in exploring the notion of well-being and adult learning. Learning through story is part of this rich legacy of adult learning experiences, in which adult education is understood to be essential not just for skills training or formal educational assessments, but also for personal meaning-making, community engagement and learning in relation to social purpose.

Story is a powerful vehicle for engaging learners in a variety of contexts. One of our key informants, Donald Smith of the Scottish Storytelling Centre, argues, “a storytelling approach can draw together different curricular activities [and] be a stimulus for learning.” Critical and innovative programming in creative learning sites may offer opportunities for adults to engage in important learning across their lifespan, and some of these ideas for learning may also be transferred to other educational contexts.

Learning Creativity

Lifelong learning and creativity may be fostered in creative learning contexts where the arts are promoted. Clover (2015), for example, examines the frequently overlooked value of places such as art galleries and museums (which can be considered creative learning sites) “as spaces for ideology critique, and critical public pedagogy” (p. 300). Both the types of programs and the aesthetic aspects of physical spaces in creative learning sites may foster innovative and creative learning processes.

One of our key informants, Director of Literary Arts at the Banff Centre, Devyani Salzman, believes that creativity cannot be explicitly taught. As she explains, however, the unique opportunities afforded by a creative learning site such as the Banff centre can stimulate and enrich learning opportunities in a variety of ways. Salzman explains “I think the goal of the Banff

Centre is to provide the space to motivate and foster it [creativity].” The Banff Centre offers a range of artistic programming, opportunities for learning, mentorship and networking, as well as a quiet retreat space in a stunning locale setting amidst the picturesque Rocky Mountains.

The program design within different creative learning sites is also intrinsically important in fostering creative learning opportunities for participants. For example, another key informant, Barbara Hunt, discussed one aspect of the program at the Ontario Writers Conference:

One of the other things we’ve done in the last two years is run a little online monthly writing contest on our blog. We work with local artists, we have a visual piece of art that gets posted every month, and they write one hundred words to it. There’s no fee, there’s nothing attached to it, and this past year we did January, February, March, and we had two hundred entries. Some of those are in the States and out West, so some people are starting to connect, just in some small, non-committal way. The newbies can do it in a very stress-free environment where they post something on our blog and they have the satisfaction of being long-listed or short-listed, or winning for that month.

Using a digital design for this competition combined with integrating other art forms as a way to stimulate creativity helps to open up the creative writing community fostered by this conference.

Practical skills and social networking are also integral aspects of the kinds of learning that may happen within creative learning sites, as can be seen in the experiences shared by authors about their engagement with other writers either in creative writing programs or at conferences. Many of the authors we interviewed discussed how being part of a writing community and connecting with established authors is often very important in developing a career as a ‘creative’ – in this case, fiction writer.

Daphne Marlatt, a poet and literary writer, shares the importance of engaging with other writers and poets while she was studying at university:

They [other students] were all talking about careers as poets and I suddenly realized, this is possible; this is actually possible. Talking to Denise Levertov about that was really wonderful. And then Phyllis Webb and Jane Rule were on the faculty at UBC [University of British Columbia]; both strong women writers.

Dawn Bryan, a Canadian literary author, said that one of her former creative writing professors acted as a mentor by making 'specific suggestions about places to send it [her novel] when it was done, knowing a lot more about the layout of the publishing land.' Literary author, poet, and professor, Fred Wah, talks about how as a graduate student he was involved in a community of writers who started their own influential literary magazine, and he comments that 'small presses have been at the centre of my writing all along.' Children's literature writer, Gina McMurchy-Barber discussed signing up for the Surrey Writers' conference where 'part of the deal is you get to meet an editor and a published writer who can look at your stuff and give you some advice.' Many writers in this study learned about publishing through connections that they made in creative learning sites, whether these were formal educational programs or nonformal learning events such as writing conferences.

Power and Circularity

Although learning to become an author may often feel like a very individualized or insular experience, what has become clear through our research is that writing fiction does not happen in a vacuum. Arts councils, writers' unions, creative writing course, online writers' blogs, publishing houses, and fiction festivals are some examples of the social webs that facilitate the discourses of fiction writing. A Foucauldian analysis is helpful here to examine the power relations amongst these entities which all contribute to the creative enterprise of fiction writing. Foucault sees power as "intrinsic to all relations" (2004, p. 2), which means that these sites of production of fiction writing are not extraneous to what constitutes the mechanisms of power of fiction writing. Instead, the opportunities afforded within creative learning sites are an important in shaping how opportunities for creativity are enhanced, supported, or suppressed within a broader society.

Foucault argues that understanding such power relations, in this case of 'fictional spaces, learning places,' entails understanding the purpose for "the economy of power within which this project and structuring of space and territory is situated" (2004, p. 30). To understand how power relations develop and are sustained, therefore, involves looking at the geographic or spatial relations, as well as cultural, economic and social relations.

In our first SSHRC grant one of the key questions we were interested in exploring was how a Canadian 'voice' evolves in relation to literature, particularly fiction writing. This research was designed to draw attention to how we learn about citizenship in relation to fiction writing. When looking at the strategies implemented by various creative learning sites, we can see that these may sometimes be linked with a sense of national identity. One rationale for supporting fiction writing in Canada is to continually explore, reinforce and consolidate representations of "Canadianess" to Canadians and the broader world. These are our stories, as Canadians, as complicated and contradictory as that identity may be for many individuals and many writers.

For adult learners in a variety of different contexts, reading and writing fiction provides myriad opportunities to explore challenging and multi-faceted concepts such as nationalism, post-colonialism, and citizenship. Educators may draw upon fiction in their classrooms in higher education or community-located programs. Adults may choose to enter into informal learning spaces at creative learning sites such as writing conferences or book festivals. Non-formal or formal educational contexts such as creative writing programs or higher education programs may take up topics/issues related to texts, writing, and digital communication and learning that incorporate fiction as part of the curriculum. Professional programs such as Medicine, Business & Education sometime incorporate creative learning opportunities by weaving in opportunities for learning in connection to fiction (Jarvis & Gouthro, 2015).

Creative learning sites that foster fiction writing are therefore an important aspect of sustaining, sharing, and disseminating these stories of, for instance, what

it means to be a Canadian. To borrow on Foucault's analysis, the spaces and places needed to foster creative writing are not so much about "the regulator of a milieu" (2004, p. 29) or "fixing locations" (2004, p. 29) inasmuch as "guaranteeing and ensuring circulations: the circulation of people, merchandise, and air, etcetera" (2004, p. 29). There is the circulation of ideas through in-person and online writing communities; peer or editorial critique; the media's role in promoting fiction, for example, through the Canadian Broadcast Corporation's Canada Reads program or the literary Governor General's Awards, and book launches through publishing houses to name a few. These are examples of how the discourse of creative writing has been given structure and venues to foster individuals' talents and give them a structured place in the broader public discourse.

At the heart of identifying the production of power relations, Foucault contends that circulation is intrinsically linked to material realities and their limitations. Giving writers a physical place to have the mental space to develop their craft also has important ramifications. It may be that this material need is met in part by Arts Councils, which although at arms-length, is funded by the government, because "commerce is thought of as the main instrument of the state's power" (Foucault, 2004, p. 339), meaning that ultimately the government's interest in furthering the arts has more to do with ensuring public cohesiveness through a sense of shared identity, rather than more altruistic reasons. Nevertheless, the funding to create physical locales for writing – be it in a retreat, a community centre, a college course – has important implications for writers' needs.

But this desire of social cohesion is not easily wielded through fiction. One key informant from our first SSHRC study commented on how the arts councils can use funds to exert power on the publication and circulation of books, in this case, by influencing the literary canon, which is a well-established body of literature that has historically lacked diversity:

The [arts] council industries for example, a few years back, started giving huge advances for first novels by so-called minority writers or ethnic writers. So that was one way to diversify the canon, but they did that

because they expected them to present work reflecting the larger societies notion of what it means to be an Italian or a First Nations writer. So I think they tend to value a certain kind of story, and I'm not talking about a particular publisher, I'm talking about the bigger cultural industries that are interested in publishing fiction that will get foreign rights right away.

The support given to a book that is anticipated to reach high international circulation in turn complicates what gets produced for publication. Similarly, within creative learning sites, such as the Banff Centre, deciding which authors will obtain support to be given retreat space for writing or opportunities to participate in workshops to develop their craft, is a way in which power gets enacted in determining which writing is more likely to end up being published, supported, or promoted. Festivals and writing programs also exercise a certain amount of power in selectively facilitating the development of certain writer's careers. The types of fiction that is made available will ultimately also affect the opportunities for people to learn from fiction in various other contexts.

Creative Learning Sites and Public Pedagogy

Adult educator, Jennifer Sandlin (2011a) argues that the term 'public pedagogy' has been used to 'extend the possibility of the public intellectual into other decentered and communal configurations' (p. 358). Public pedagogy directs our attention learning that occurs outside of the parameters of formal educational programs and institutions.

Engagement with a diverse range of fiction ensures that adult educators and learners have access to what Sandlin (2011b) refers to as artworks that 'interrupt dominant cultural scripts and *resist* explanation via their commitment to aesthetic and embodied forms of knowing and learning' (p. 349). Going back to the focus in our earlier grant on citizenship and concerns such as national identity, this points to the need to have books that speak to the localized experiences of Canadians, to support learning for citizenship in both formal contexts such as schools and informal contexts such as individual reading or book clubs. It also raises questions about how we define which books (and

authors) are worthy of receiving support as Canadian novels – do we support genre fiction, do we support visible minority authors, do we support emerging or more established novelists? All of these questions play out within our creative learning sites, because fiction in a public pedagogy framework, in a sense becomes a part of the core curriculum for adult learning. What books will be promoted? What stories will be shared? And who will be given access and the opportunity to learn? All of these questions raise important concerns for adult educators to reflect upon as they examine the role of creative learning sites in connection to fiction writing.

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