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Editorial

Writers and their Education

Liam Gearon and Emma Williams

1. Introduction

This Special Issue provides the occasion for examinations of the conceptions, perceptions and representations of education in the lives and works of writers. In addressing this theme we interact with, and draw precedents from, a number of existing fields and areas of educational research. In making mention of the ‘lives of writers’, for example, our topic suggests some overlap with well-established fields of education research that draw on biography, life-trajectory and related work on narrative (see for example Goodson, Antikainen, Sikes and Andrews, 2017). In seeking to examine representations of education in the works of writers, furthermore, our theme also connects to historically prominent and presently lively discussions of literary writing and its role in education (see for example the collection by Gearon and Williams, 2018; Choo, 2018). Moreover, our focus on writing and writers also relates this Special Issue to the growing body of research around writing practices in education – as borne out, for example, by the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) and their Special Interest Group on Writing (which over 130 members worldwide).

Yet there precedents for the themes of this Special Issue have also been set by those researching outside departments of Education. Indeed, writing and writers’ education has in many ways become a matter of acute concern for those researching in fields of Literature, at least over the past three decades. ‘Life-writing’ is itself a presently a burgeoning field of research in Literature and the humanities (Leader 2018; 2018a). In broader terms, there is much interest in ‘literary lives’ amongst literary scholars, in

ways that connect to debates around colonialism and imperialism (Bhabha, 2004; Said, 1994) and to the need to foster what Casanova (2007) has (controversially) called a ‘world republic of letters’. In more specific terms, it is also notable that those in literature departments have of late been formulating new waves of advocacy for disciplines of writing, and these have often include explicit links to the role of writing in lifelong learning and non-institutional forms of education, as well as in public and political life (see for example Collini 2017; Levenson, 2018; Nussbaum, 2012; Small, 2013).

It seems, then that the inter-relation between writing and education is a topic that is already being explored, perhaps implicitly, on a number of levels in both the fields of education and literature. Yet, prior to this Special Issue at least, there does not seem to be many attempts to link up these overlapping and complementary areas of research.

2. The ‘Writers and their Education’ Colloquium

This Special Issue of the *British Journal of Educational Studies* grew out of the Society for Educational Studies’ Annual (2018) Colloquium on Writers and their Education, convened by Liam Gearon and Emma Williams, and hosted at Oriel College, University of Oxford. Bringing together over 100 delegates for a two-day programme, a key aim for the Colloquium was to start a new conversation between those in education whose research (theoretically or empirically) engages with writers and writing, with those in literary studies and literature departments whose work intersects with educational themes.

With targeted invitations to formative voices in the arts and humanities, as well as in education, keynote lectures were delivered at the Colloquium by Homi Bhabha (Head of Humanities at Harvard University); Anthony Cascardi (Head of Humanities at University of California Berkeley); Noel Carroll (Philosophy, Central University of

New York); Ivor Goodson (Education, University of Brighton); Eileen John (Philosophy, University of Warwick); and Zachery Leader (English, University of Roehampton). A major role was also played by members outside the Academy, including representatives from local and national literary agents, publishers and booksellers and the British Council. The wider Colloquium programme included presentations around a number of central themes which the organisers identified as: ‘Researching the Process of Reading and Writing’; ‘The Literary Political’; ‘Literary Classrooms’; ‘Reading, Writing and Race’; ‘The Intertextuality of Influence’; ‘The Autobiographical Aesthetic’; ‘The Writing School’; and ‘Aesthetics, Authorship, Alterity’. Presentations and workshops allowed for in-depth discussion of issues that ranged from auto/biographic accounts of authorial relations to education, historical accounts of writers’ own formal and informal educations and related formative experiences, perspectives which explored the importance and influence of different literary genres (autobiography, biography, criticism, the novel, poetry, drama and theatre) in and for education at all levels, to creative writing courses in universities which teach the processes and practice of writing and authorship. The guest editors of this Special Issue wish to record their thanks to all who participated in the Colloquium.

3. The Focus of this Special Issue

The papers in this Special Issue represent a cross section of the Colloquium themes. Collectively, they attest to the dual significance and meaning we intend to be heard in the phrase ‘writers and their education’ – for this is meant to refer both to the way education is represented in the work of writers, and to the education and educational experiences of writers. All the papers collected here show what educational thinking can learn from a consideration of ‘writers and their education’, thus understood. It is

fair to say that the papers collected here exhibit something of a ‘family resemblance’ connection. Thus, as we elaborate below, a number of papers will include direct discussions of writing and writing practices in education. There are also papers that will introduce discussion of what thinking about education can learn from considering the education of writers (in these papers, uses of autobiographical writing and sources is a particularly prominent approach). Furthermore, a number of papers will seek to offer direct discussion of the significance for educational thinking of a particular writer or set of writings (in these papers, literary and philosophical analyses are particularly employed). It is worth noting here that the contributing authors are from departments of Philosophy (John), Literature (Cascardi, Gupta), as well as Education (K Williams, Nutbrown, Gearon, E Williams). To some extent, their home disciplines influence the approaches the authors have taken in their discussion. Our Special Issue in this sense represents a multi-disciplinary collection. In so being, it seeks to manifest the necessary richness of any inquiry into the connection between writers and (their) education. Let us now offer some reflections on the more specific focus of the papers that comprise this Special Issue, and what they stand to contribute to the field of educational research.

The education of writers is examined via an analysis of writers’ own memoirs in Eileen John’s paper ‘Learning to be a Writer from Early Reading.’ John analyses writers’ own words about their formative experiences with childhood reading, and interweaves her reading of these autobiographical accounts with discussions of psychoanalytical (Freudian) and aesthetic (Kantian) theory. Her discussion reveals four interrelated insights regarding the experience of childhood reading and its formative and transformative potential. This includes an argument for the unplanned and challenging path of children’s exposure to texts – the claim that we can never be

sure which materials will trigger interest and expansions of horizons. John's paper in this way holds valuable implications for, and will be of particular interest to, those engaged in educational discussions around the value of teaching particular books and texts in schools, as well as for practices in literary pedagogy more generally.

In 'On Reading as Figure and Writing as Practice', Anthony Cascardi examines issues around the teaching and learning of writing in the context of the claim that the logic of what actually takes place in literature and humanities departments in Higher Education contexts urgently stands in need of clarification. Cascardi's paper itself proceeds to offer an original and rich theorisation of writing that goes some way towards providing such clarity. His discussion draws both on an analysis of prominent theorisations of reading as they are found within the field of literary criticism, and on the philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes' notion of writing as *écriture*. A key claim of Cascardi's paper is that greater clarity over the logic of writing can make practices of writing and reading in Higher Education better aligned, and more beneficial and meaningful. Cascardi's paper thus raises important questions both about how writing in humanities subjects should be understood and taught, and about how to best articulate the value of humanities education today.

Suman Gupta's paper on 'Creative Writing Programmes and Patronage' examines how higher education programmes of creative writing have given literary writers a role and a position within institutionalised systems of education. More particularly, Gupta's paper discusses how concept of 'patronage' has become infused into the understanding of both teachers and students of creative writing. Calling for 'a more considered pause' on patronage – particularly given what a literary historical approach reveals about the ideology that stands behind such a concept – Gupta also reveals the advantages of 'formalised supportive patronage', and warns that creative

writing programmes may well be ‘nurturing its own downside.’ His discussion opens important critical questions around the elitism and unequal access to writing in education, and links this to wider issues around the characteristics of the contemporary university and the ‘higher education market.’ Gupta also ends by reflecting on how this topic might bear on growing rationales for teaching creative writing in schools. Patronage has been an absent concept from such debates and yet, given schooling forms the basis for much of the attitudes to learning undergraduates bring with them, Gupta observes that there are connections here worthy of exploration in further work.

Kevin Williams’ paper ‘Sounding in the Sources of His Power: The Education of Seamus Heaney’ bring a rich conception of one writers’ education into view. In drawing particularly on autobiographical writing, Williams’ approach is similar in some senses to that utilised by John in her paper. Yet Williams’ discussion also seeks to undertake a more explicit treatment of the importance and value of using autobiographical and narrative sources for building an holistic conception of education. As Williams suggests, such approaches allow for greater attentiveness to the inextricable inter-relations between an individual’s experiences in formal educational settings such as schools and universities and their ‘informal’ educational experiences at home and in the local community. Such attentiveness may be particularly pertinent for the cultural and national context within which Seamus Heaney received his education. Yet Williams also shows how, a broader level, attention to autobiographical and narrative sources turns us towards concrete and piecemeal practices of teaching and learning that take place in and across human lives.

Graham Nutbrown presents a close consideration of the representations of education found afforded by one poem in his paper ‘The Long Schoolroom: Philosophical Readings in W.B. Yeats’s poem “Among School Children.”’ More particularly, Nutbrown demonstrates how our understanding of Yeats’ poem – which is centrally concerned with processes of education – can be enhanced and complemented by an examination of biographical and personal correspondence sources. As Nutbrown shows, a consideration of these sources reveals there are under-attended-to connections between Yeats’ poem and the philosophies of education that were being developed by A. N. Whitehead and Giovanni Gentile around the same time. In particular Nutbrown identifies these relations as clustering around the notion that reading, thinking and learning should be ‘restless.’ Nutbrown ends his paper with a consideration of how a notion of ‘restless readings’ might be encouraged by, and hindered within, in the context of contemporary literature classrooms.

Emma Williams’ discussion of ‘Morals to Maths: Coetzee, Plato and the Fiction of Education’ also explores the connections between literary and philosophical writers’ treatment of certain educational themes. More particularly, Williams’ discussion centres on the apparently bizarre processes of maths education represented in Nobel Prize winning novelist J.M. Coetzee’s *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Through a reading of certain passages in the text, and a consideration of their relations to key tropes within Plato’s philosophy, Williams suggests that Coetzee’s model should not be dismissed as a mere fancy of fiction. On the contrary, she contends, taking it seriously can reveal how literary representations in fact serve to make more robust our conceptions and understandings of education and educational issues. Williams applies this claim in her paper particularly to contemporary debates about moral education and the role of literature within this. She shows how her discussion of Coetzee and Plato reveals

moral education as something broader and more pervasive in the curriculum than predominant arguments often to recognise.

Liam Gearon's paper 'Engineers of the Human Soul: Readers, Writers and their Political Education' also extends the focus of this Special Issue to considerations of literary and moral pedagogy. In the light of recent attempts to construct 'literature pedagogy' for cosmopolitan, 'globalizing', political ends, Gearon's paper provides some stark reminders about the educational, not to say political, risks of confining the aims and purposes of literature to the aims and purposes of politics, or using a literary-political aesthetic as pedagogy. Such confinement, he argues, occurs when literature pedagogy is put in the service of political doctrine. Even when this is undertaken through the guise of seemingly laudable moral intentions – to serve, for example, Enlightenment-derived goals of equality, fraternity, justice, or their modern guise of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism – the well-intentioned ethical premises of such literature pedagogy, it is argued, limits political horizons, narrows educational outlooks and reduces aesthetics to ideology. Deriving its title from Stalin's diktat that artists should be 'engineers of the human soul', and drawing on a variety of historical exemplars, he analyses a range of attempts politically to educate and influence readers and writers through literature.

4. Conclusion

In concluding this editorial it is worth gesturing to a larger matter that this Special Issue also serves to bring into view. This is the question of the role and value of the humanities in education – and in educational research – today. Certainly none of the papers included in this Special Issue demonstrate what might be easily recognisable as empirical approaches to resolve their central problems or topics. Most of the papers, on the contrary, intertwine interpretations of autobiographical and

biographical sources, with literary and hermeneutic readings, and philosophical argument and analysis. In recent years, some educational researchers have felt the need to explicitly defend the uses of the approaches of history, philosophy and literature to the study of educational problems (see for example Lagemann, 2005). Our Special Issue serves as perhaps a more implicit contribution to such debates about the nature and scope of educational research. In addition to making a contribution to knowledge at the interface of literature and education, this collection thus presents accommodating balance between differing approaches within humanities disciplines themselves. Our contributions to knowledge are thus to some extent as fundamentally methodological as they are epistemological.

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