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Designing a literary workshop for the graphic novel: a critical tradition and a new literary form

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns a retreat for graphic storytellers held in Australia and Indonesia. The project, called Comic Art Workshop, was designed specifically to explore whetheror not graphic storytellers could benefit from the sort of literary workshopping that is familiar to novelists, poets, screenwriters and theatre-makers. This article describes the project in detail, explains its rationale and describes what we learned in facilitating over 28 literary workshop sessions during retreats in 2015 and 2017.

1. Introduction

This article reflects on the first formal workshopping sessions conducted among long-form graphic storytellers in Australia at a series of retreats called Comic Art Workshop (CAW). We began organising these retreats in 2014, motivated by a belief that an Australian comics tradition could be enriched by literary workshopping and that was possible to design a new kind of literary workshop specifically for graphic storytellers. This article should be read as a record of applied research in the humanities. Here we will describe our project, its rationale and its context, then – drawing from observations made during our retreats, informal feedback and from participant testimonials – we will describe what we have learned from 28 workshopping sessions over four years.

2. Context and rationale

There is a long history of caricature, cartooning and comics-making in Australia (Patrick 2012)[1] and the last two decades have seen the emergence of an Australian tradition of long form graphic storytelling. Around the Australian graphic novel one can observe the early signifiers of literary respectability: new comics criticism, comics scholarship and comics curricula in Australia's world-leading 'Go8' universities. However, one aspect of broader literary activity that has not yet crystallised among Australian comics-makers is the tradition of the writers' group or literary workshop: an organised event for long-form storytellers to gather together to share and discuss works in progress.

Workshopping has been an established part of what it means to be a writer of prose, poetry or script in Australia since the 1960s (see Clarke 1969; Dugan 1973; Dawson 2001). In the interest of bolstering this burgeoning local comics tradition, Comic Art Workshop was initiated by two academics, Patrick Grant and Elizabeth MacFarlane. Our trajectories both as artistic practitioners and academics straddle the sphere of Australian literature and Australian comics. Before starting this project, we met many people working in comics that were aspiring to work in the long-form and others that were struggling with first or second books. We noticed that something was missing from the working processes of these graphic storytellers: the intervention of early readers. We heard stories from authors of fraught or frustrated working processes and projects that were stalled or abandoned. We read published books that, to our eyes, felt like they could have been much better had their authors been given an opportunity to workshop them. The central question for our project, and this article, is: could workshopping be a valuable part of the process of creating a graphic novel?

3. Design of the retreat

Our graphic novel workshops were held as part of two authors' retreats over two weeks in both 2015 and 2017. A third retreat is being organised at the time of writing for late 2019. For the purposes of clarity, we should articulate that when we refer to the *retreat* or to *CAW* we mean the two week project, with all that it entails, but when were are referring to the *workshop* we mean one specific activity that happens as a significant part of the retreat

3.1. Participating authors

The undergraduate or postgraduate writing seminar is the tradition that most informs the design of CAW, but to be clear, our project is not aimed specifically at students. Our project is intended for comics practitioners in more advanced stages of their careers, in many cases, those who have already published books. Thus, from this point on, we will describe them simply as authors.[2]

Prior to our first retreat we put out a call for authors to apply for one of fourteen places. We were surprised to receive 57 applications for our 2015 retreat and 53 applications for our 2017 retreat. Participants in the 2015 retreat were offered the option to return in 2017 and 2019. At the beginning of each project cycle the 14 participants were chosen from the pool of applicants based on the strength of their project, the clarity of their literary voice, our sense of their capacity to follow through on a major project, and our confidence that their project would benefit from group feedback. This was a difficult responsibility. We were, and remain, uneasy about playing the role of institutional gatekeeper among the relatively small community of comics-makers in our region. The artists that were accepted, while already literary practitioners, had never participated in a literary workshop and only a few had received cursory feedback from editors.

3.2. Mentors and facilitators

Also attending the retreat were two project directors who had the responsibility of facilitating the formal workshop sessions as well as managing the administration and logistical concerns presented by the retreat.

We also invited distinguished guests to attend and work as mentors for the project. In 2015 this role was filled by Leela Corman and Tom Hart, both lauded graphic novelists and co-directors of Sequential Artist Workshop, a small school for graphic storytellers based in Gainesville Florida. In 2017 we invited Sonny Liew, the author of *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* and the winner of multiple Eisner Awards as well as the Singapore Literary Award. Officially the role of the mentors was to bring their expertise and experience to the workshop space, however – as will become clear in section five – this official role was diminished as the workshop transitioned from a plan into a lived experience.

3.3. Locations

Our first retreat was held on Maria Island, an unpopulated island of considerable natural heritage off the coast of the state of Tasmania, itself an island. We inhabited a building that was once a penal colony and later became a work camp for a nearby concrete mill. These were spartan facilities. There was limited electricity, limited internet and no stores or places to buy supplies.

The location of the second retreat was very different. Yogyakarta (Jogja) is a city in central Java which is well known in South-East Asia as a centre for visual arts, sculpture and creative manufacturing. The venue that hosted us was an artist-run screen printing studio called Krack.The contrast between these two locations allowed for significant insight into the design of a retreat itself and, as we will show in section five, how the location of a workshop is key contributor to its success.

4. Design of the workshop background: history and key tensions in the workshopping tradition

The activities that our participants were engaged in the retreat are varied and numerous formal and informal, but here we will focus on the activity at the core of the retreat: a literary workshop for each of the 14 graphic novel manuscripts that had arrived with their authors.

Prior to our first retreat, designing a literary workshop required us to juggle multiple unknown variables while also being sensitive to the entrenched problems and tensions that traditionally accompanied the literary workshop tradition. We were careful to contextualise this new project as part of a broader history of similar literary infrastructure. Key themes that emerged from this contextualisation were:

  – the legacy of creative writing pedagogy,
  – power and authority inside the workshop space,
  – and the capacity of the workshop to both homogenise literary voices and consolidate disparate voices into literary movements.

Each of these key themes are unpacked in this section.

Several scholars have differentiated American and European traditions by which the craft of storytelling is learned over the last 100 years (Leahy 2005; Swander, Leahy, and Cantrell 2007). A European tradition involved informal mentorships in pubs and libraries, while in the American tradition writers learned the craft in university seminars and literary societies (ibid). For many North American researchers, the modern literary workshop can be traced back to the freshman composition seminars at Harvard and the renowned Iowa Writer's Workshop (Dawson 2003; Neave 2006).

Paul Dawson (2001) traces the development of creative writing education in Australia, noting that it was first taught in primary and secondary schools, thus its first appearance as a discipline of study in the tertiary sector was as part of the curricula at Teachers Colleges and Technical (vocational) colleges in the 1960s. Concurrent to the radical developments of the 'new' Australian writing in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, creative writing workshops were 'proliferating in summer schools and evening classes' (Dawson 2001). The literary scene in Australia at this time was strikingly similar to the underground comics scene that was happening in the US and Europe: young writers in Australia, rejected by mainstream or establishment journals, were using typewriters and cheap off-set printers to establish a network of underground publications, independent presses, and live public readings. While the US workshop tradition, typified by the Iowa Writers Workshop, developed concurrently with the close reading techniques of New Criticism in the 1930s, the sometimes awkward folding of Creative Writing programmes into English literary studies in Australian universities happened during the groundbreaking rise of Theory in the 1970s and 1980s. As postcolonial scholar Marcelle Freiman observes, a profound and ongoing anxiety about the discipline of Creative Writing in Australian universities is tied directly to its position as '"other" to the "main" teaching of [English] Literature [...] Institutionalised education and the English discipline, into whose boundaries creative writing has been increasingly inserted, is framed by colonial assumptions' (Freiman 2001). This disciplinary anxiety and 'othering' runs alongside the broader enduring unease with which a creative practice sits within the institution: Can creative writing be taught? And to what end?[3]

Dawson observes that the development of Creative Writing studies in Australia with the rise of Theory, in particular with Terry Eagleton's work on Marxism and literature, meant that 'though students might draw on inspiration or write for therapeutic reasons, they were compelled to do this within an environment which saw the writer as possessing a social responsibility' (Dawson 2001). The interdisciplinary location of a creative writing tradition in Australia somewhere between a technical craft and a critical practice of representation informed, consciously or not, the design and philosophy behind our workshop sessions.

4.1. Classroom tensions

The site of much scholarly experience in workshopping tends to be the university classroom in undergraduate or masters-level creative writing workshops (Donelley 2010). As such there is a deep pedagogical focus in the scholarly literature on workshopping. A tendency to reflect on the teaching challenges rather than the literary challenges at play in the workshop space. We wondered how our experience as creative writing teachers would inform or obstruct productive discussion among a group of authors who were much more developed in their practices than

the average undergraduate. We were convinced that some kind of *learning* would take place in our workshop however we were uneasy about taking on responsibility for this learning. We weren't trying to recreate the experience of a university classroom.

Dawson (2003) describes three recurring principles that are taught in the university literary workshop. In taking on the craft of storytelling an aspirant should learn to read like a writer, they should learn to show not tell, and they should discover their voice. Dawson acknowledges the deep practicality of these principles yet recognises them as best serving a tradition of American Realism, often at the expense of divergent or experimental modes of storytelling. For literary theorists, the myopic attention to questions of craft that undergirds many workshops is problematic. Morton and Zavarzadeh (1988) and Neave (2006) both describe a long running rivalry between the craft thinkers of creative writing departments and the theoretical thinkers of English departments. For Bishop and Starkey a key criticism of creative writing workshop is the absence of any kind of sustained theoretical approach (2006).

In designing Comic Art Workshop, we wondered how we would negotiate this tension between theory and craft. Comic scholarship is new and while there are leading theorists such as Groensteen (2007), Cohn (2013), and Chute (2010), there are few theoretic tools that focused on the *making* of comics, nor is there a clearly defined pedagogical approach to visual storytelling. We were uneasy about imposing a theory of learning or a pedagogical method onto Comic Art Workshop and more interested in finding or discovering a theoretical approach through practice. We wondered whether the three practical lessons described by Dawson would underpin the development of the graphic novels we worked on, or whether we would we see entirely separate lessons emerge from unique problems presented by the graphic novel. A key question we asked was: how do we use what we know works in the classroom setting without stifling the potential for insights and outcomes that are specific to graphic storytelling?

Ultimately, we decided to impose very little literary and pedagogical theory upon our group of participants. Instead we chose to adopt a reflexive posture. We let the participants themselves set the tone and set the agenda for the discussions. We saw this as an opportunity to learn how people approach productive discussion about a graphic novel manuscript rather than an opportunity to show how we might do it as creative writing teachers.

4.2. Power and authority in the workshop

A key consideration in the literature about the writing workshop examines the structures of power at play in the workshop space. Embedded in the model is a power imbalance created between those seen to be authorities on 'good writing' and those who are there to learn how to make writing 'good' (Green 2001).

These considerations of power were central to our thinking in designing our workshop. Historically in comic communities there is mistrust of cultural establishments (Grant 2014), and as academics we were careful about our self-imposed roles as retreat organisers, gatekeepers and workshop facilitators.

Scholars describe a broad sweep of workshop models from an autocratic teacher-centred model more common in the early 20th century described by Green (2001) to a more intrinsically radical peer-based model in which the teacher figure recedes in authority and instead works as a facilitator intent on developing consensus described

by Neave (2006). Ristow (2014) presents an alternative that he calls the Neosophistic workshop by which the workshop leader draws awareness to the ambiguities, tensions and unchallenged assumptions that less experienced participants bring to the discussion. He challenges the workshop's implied mandate to pursue 'good' writing and instead argues for a workshop that exposes ruptures and raw patches in the text.

Prior to our first retreat, with the value of our organisation untested, we found ourselves to *creating* structures of power despite our knowledge of the above problems. We sought out authority figures such as mentors and master artists. We presented ourselves publicly as experts of 'good storytelling'. This served to bolster the legitimacy of a fledgling organisation. It was easier for us to attract funding and supporters if we could make a convincing case that there would be 'experts on the ground' at our retreat. This was, at best, an institutional facade. In reality, our approach was less self-assured. We, the facilitators, weren't really sure what makes a graphic novel good, nor how to make one better, but we were committed to creating a space where a group of experienced graphic storytellers could figure this out. Ristow presents a workshop in which the participants develop their practice not just through receiving feedback but through the challenge of giving precise and meaningful feedback to others (2014). This was appealing to us as we felt that our participants were as likely to be the bearers of important wisdom as our 'mentors' or our 'facilitators'. In the first few days of our first retreat one key goal for us as facilitators was to undermine the power structures that we had created to get our project off the ground.

4.3. The workshop as the site of movement building

In working closely with many authors on long-form comics over a decade and a half we had a sense that we were witnessing the first pushes of an Australian literary movement. We wondered whether a workshop could catalyse this process and how we might design for movement building. Bishop and Starkey (2006) describe one of the effects of the democratisation of creative writing in a modern corporate university is the tendency of workshop programs to homogenise the creative processes at play. For Bishop and Starkey there is a 'kind' of writing that comes out of an MFA programme. Workshops help authors develop a 'group think' and this can arise to the exclusion of other, perhaps more idiosyncratic, modes of writing. Whereas Bishop and Starkey's case studies are centred on established literary traditions, the Australian graphic novel does not have a recognised tradition. Today's authors barely have precedents, much less a canon, to draw from (Patrick 2012). There are so few graphic novels from our region that we felt it was worth the risk of falling into a kind of 'group think' because there was also great potential for the workshop to be an occasion for ambitious minds to develop an aesthetic and conceptual simpatico. We saw our workshop having the capacity to consolidate isolated literary acts into a clearly recognisable literary community, thus fermenting an Australian literary movement.

4.4. Facilitating the workshop

After deep discussion of the above concerns we arrived at a template structure for the two-hour workshop. Each author could adopt and amend the template as per their needs and desires and the particulars of their manuscript. The duration of each workshop is two hours. The template workshop operates as follows:

(1) The manuscript is made available for all the participants to read prior to the retreat or, at least, prior to the workshop.
(2) The workshop begins with a brief introduction from the author and an outline of their questions, worries and concerns. The author should let the group know what they would like to get out of the session.
(3) For the first 60 minutes the author of the manuscript does not contribute to the discussion. Instead the group discusses their comprehension and impressions of the work. This tactic has been described in Bishop and Starkey (2006) as well as Neave (2006). The author's silence has the effect of focusing the discussion and channelling feedback towards the manuscript itself, not the author, and discourages the author from defending their decisions, allowing them to simply see how the work has been received.
(4) For the second 60 minutes the discussion opens up and the author can participate, contribute new questions and talking points.

This format has been amended in different ways to suit the needs of a particular manuscript or a particular author. Early in the project, authors were still learning about what to expect during a workshop and what they might get out of it, however by the end of our 2017 retreat after more than 30 workshop sessions over two retreats, the group has settled into this format as 'the way we usually do it' (see Figure 1).

5. What we learned

5.1. Lesson one – our workshop was valuable, but it wasn't unique

At the initiation of this project we were working on a hunch. We suspected that graphic storytellers were capable of generating a unique kind of literary workshop. In the same way that discussions about works of prose have differing concerns than discussions about

Figure 1. The authors in the middle of a workshop in 2015. Photo Gabriel Clark.

a theatrical play, we were interested in finding out what was unique about a literary workshop when all present were visual thinkers (see Figure 2). Can a group of cartoonists change and enrich the centuries-old tradition of literary workshopping? In our project as it stands the answer is complicated.

Firstly, our workshop design served its participants in similar ways that a workshop might in a university setting. One participant wrote:

> The workshopping itself was a fascinating experience. I had never workshopped one of my comics before – comic creating is quite a lonely sport, and opening yourself up to a whole group of people picking apart your work is terrifying . . . what I got from the workshop was the best constructive criticism that I have ever received.

Another wrote:

> Reading and thinking analytically about such a huge range of diverse works developed my critical thinking skills and widened my creative scope so that I could successfully provide others with feedback that was beneficial to them and the work that they created. It forced me outside of the bubble of work that I am usually comfortable reading and taught me about the importance of giving feedback to others that isn't self-serving and is designed to help them make more successful work.

We received feedback like this from most participants. Any creative writing teacher would be happy with this kind of feedback from a seminar. One conclusion that we could make here that there is an unmet need for creative writing training among graphic storytellers, even established authors working at a high-level.

Secondly, we found that the graphic novel workshops were remarkably similar to the workshops we had participated in that covered a novella or a short story. For our participants, working alone for so many years, our workshop was a rare and precious opportunity to step back and look at the broader compositional concerns of their projects: the shape of a story, the broad themes, character arcs, the intent of the author.

Figure 2. Workshop participants Sam Wallman and Sarah Firth mid-way through one of the workshop sessions in Indonesia in 2017. Photo Gabriel Clark.

At Comic Art Workshop this was where most our workshop time was focused. Participants asked of the graphic novels in progress: What is this story really about? Who is this character and what makes them behave this way? Why does this part of the story feel unresolved? What do we need more of? What do we need less of? We were surprised that these are macro literary concerns not specific to the graphic novel. Could we then conclude that the modern literary workshop is a useful tool for addressing story itself, assuming one can conceptualise a platonic ideal of 'story', unmoored from the form and medium? We don't think so. Instead we lean towards the conclusion that the outcomes of the workshop are intensely influenced by the workshopping model, which is to say, that our graphic novel workshop was very much like a prose workshop because it was designed and facilitated like a prose workshop. The verbal discussions at play in a literary workshop are deeply informed by Dawson's craft principles described earlier, a set of ready-made rhetorical devices, process metaphors and conceptual tools. We talked about our stories in a specific and familiar way because, largely, that was the only way any of us knew how to talk about storytelling. But our workshops were not entirely focused on the macro aspects of narrative composition.

In the latter part of each two-hour session, with broad structural and thematic concerns already out in the open, participants turned their attention to a closer reading of visual language. This is the part of a session where a group of prose writers might raise a concern about a tendency towards run-on sentences or a group of poets might draw attention to a particular word choice or line break. Here the authors began to raise concerns unique to the visual language we are working with. In one instance a participant saw a problem with the tension between the elegant figurative subject of a drawing and the guttural quality of the lines by which it was drawn. In another the group described a feeling of being spatially unmoored from an important action-filled sequence in a book. This led to talk about the visual representation of space in the scene. The group discussed how different choices of framing in key panels might give the readers a clearer spatial understanding of a scene. In another instance the group raised concerns about a manuscript in which two key characters looked similar and created unnecessary cognitive labour for the reader.

We found that our graphic novel workshop did have moments where the discussion was unique to graphic storytelling, but these instances were relatively rare. Our workshop design only allowed for this kind of visual 'fussiness' when the larger structural and compositional issues had already been broached.

Gere has observed that writers' groups and literary workshops are effective at activating what we might call 'composition thinking' (1987), but graphic storytelling requires more than mere composition. It requires inscription, which is to say, drawing, lettering and design. During workshops we observed something we might call 'translation strain': the cognitive burden of talking *about* a set of drawings. Meaningful feedback demands precision, and the inherent clumsiness of talking about a drawing in the context of a large group seems to have daunted most of our participants. In future workshops we hope to learn how to circumnavigate this translation strain. Is talking *at* a drawing pinned to a wall more meaningful than talking *about* a drawing that is bound up into a manuscript? (see Figures 3 and 4 below) What if we were to eschew talking altogether? What happens when we *draw* about a drawing? How might we design a workshop to allow for the possibility of drawing on, with or around one of these manuscripts?

Figure 3. A complete manuscript by Sarah Catherine Firth pinned to a wall for the workshop. Is this a better way of presenting a graphic novel for critique than a bound manuscript? Photo Gabriel Clark.

Figure 4. A different kind of analysis? Authors speaking **at** a drawing in unstructured time outside formal workshop sessions. Photo Gabriel Clark.

In future retreats conducted under the banner of Comic Art Workshop we hope to develop the workshop into something that is more unique to visual literature. In 2019 we plan on introducing a second kind of workshop that we call the *close read*. Participants will break off into groups of 3 or four and examine the manuscript page by page. Interrogating the work at the level of line, image and sequence. It is our hope that this space might be more productive in the cultivation of a critical vocabulary and procedural

traditions that are unique to the graphic novel workshop. This will no doubt be the subject of future research.

5.2. Lesson two – workshops housed within retreats are ideal

Much of the writing about the literary workshop in the University setting makes mention of the possibility of conflict or competition in the workshop. One of the risks implicit in the workshop model is that hurt feelings and animosity might fester among the group. We had seen this play out in our own university classrooms and we were eager to avoid it at CAW. We thought that a retreat-based model might help. Francis (2012) writing about the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop – another retreat-based workshop – described an intense feeling of trust developing as a result of the workshop. We designed our project as a 14-day retreat in order to catalyse the development of trust among our participants. This was one aspect of our project design that we felt was successful.

One participant wrote '*Time between workshops spent chatting while drawing, walking, cooking, eating and generally making merry let us connect even more. We ended up trusting each other incredibly quickly. In a creative environment built on trust, it was easy to open up about one's own challenges and challenge others to take already impressive work to greater heights.*'

Another wrote: '*The Workshop creates an incredibly trusting and warm connection between all its participants. This connection creates a trust between those involved which allows them to give some of the most robust critiques that I have ever been involved in.*'

The trust that quickly developed underpinned a group-wide commitment to rigorous and thoughtful critique, but there were some other effects that we found surprising. Our participants became more honest and open in their discussion. We also noticed that participants began to openly cry while giving, receiving or listening to feedback. The trust we had established was such that the workshops probed beyond craft towards the well-spring of the literary impulse. This intense emotional work turned out to be a recursive process. The vulnerability of critical engagement did not incite divisions between participants, rather it reinforced camaraderie and compelled others to open up their practice for deep introspection. Each workshop created a sense of the group having been through an emotional ordeal together and the sense of trust was intensified. As the days passed and the layers of emotional armour peeled away from each of us, we became more committed and earnest about the work we had come to the retreat to do.

5.3. Lesson three – location can make or break a workshop

We held two retreats in two very different places. In 2015 on an uninhabited island in a national park, in 2017 in the middle of a South-East Asian city. Over these two occasions we learned a lot about the capacity for the setting to catalyse a successful workshop.

Reflecting on the 2015 workshop, one of our participants wrote

The rich environment assisted to help focus the mind on to the broader matter of story-telling. The light off the hills and the peak shrouded in mist, brought you to a place where you could think telescopically about your project with clarity and exactness. As a group of artists and writers we were able to look at each others' work in as unsentimental light as possible and discuss the works in their formative stages, with great results.

In this instance there were 18 authors on an uninhabited island with spartan resources and very few interruptions. After an intense discussion on the island in Tasmania, one only had to walk for 50 metres in any direction before they were alone in a place of quiet natural beauty. Our 2017 retreat in Indonesia was an entirely different experience. Instead of helping us focus on the work, the location drew our attention away from it. The break times between workshop sessions were so intense and stimulating that it made the time in the workshop considerably more exhausting and difficult. Whereas in Tasmania we had limited cellphone reception, in Indonesia our smartphones were chattering constantly.

In general, the feedback from our 2017 retreat in Indonesia was positive, particularly from participants that had not attended the 2015 retreat, however, feedback from those who attended both retreats was tempered. One participant described their experience of the 2017 retreat as a feeling of 'atomisation', a sense that they were in too many different places at one time. Most made it clear that the location of the 2015 retreat was ideal and the 2017 retreat was much less conducive to the work at hand. As facilitators we agreed.

The key lesson that we learned from a comparison of our 2015 and 2017 projects was that workshopping is intense and exhausting on its own, and workshopping retreats should be held at quiet, secluded locations that provide a counterbalance to this intensity.

5.4. Lesson four – mentors or experts were less essential than we thought they would be

The role of power and authority in the workshop space was one of the aspects of the workshop model that we felt most uneasy about. As part of our initial project design we had invited well-known authors to come and 'lead' the workshop and play the role of 'expert mentors' but this proved to be even less important in practice than we suspected.

Stegner notes that 'The best teaching that goes on in a college writing class is done by member of the class upon one another' (1988, 11). This was the case in our workshops. In the first few days of the 2015 retreat, we saw our roles as leaders diminish. By day three or four the facilitator's role was largely constrained to beginning the session, keeping time and warning the group that the 2 hours was nearly complete. Participants came to us with suggestions and feedback as to how the facilitation could be conducted and we amended the workshops accordingly. In the workshop space, while some stayed mostly silent, different voices in the group established themselves as bearers of wisdom, solvers of problems or authorities on specific aspects of our literary craft.

One of our first mentors, Leela Corman, described how her position of authority as 'Instructor' very quickly fell away over the course of our 2015 retreat. By the end she said she felt like one participant in a group of peers. '*I was awed and humbled by the strength of each participant's work*' she wrote, '*and as an artist I felt rejuvenated and more committed to making comics after spending two weeks with them*'.

It would be foolish to assert that power and authority was not at play in our group. However, in the case of our project, the structures of power and authority were much less imposed upon the group by a teacher or institution as is most often the case in a university classroom. Instead the group developed its own figures of authority and developed habits to police its own power imbalances.

One example of the group self-policing emerged in the interest of balancing out the agency participants felt in speaking up in front of the group. There were several participants who were reluctant to speak about complex literary problems in front of the group, and others – often older and more experienced – who were very confident. When two members started to speak at the same time, other group members began to alert the more confident speaker (often an older white male with a louder voice) that someone who had yet to contribute had something to say. In the university setting this sort of policing would fall upon a teacher or instructor, but this group of authors developed these habits and policed them as part of reflexive improvisation.

Day (2005) describes a similar phenomenon, of improvised and fluid structures of power and authority inside a workshop. She experienced an 'extended conversation among peers with each participant contributing equally to the debate.' and it seems to be no coincidence that her experience, like ours, happened in groups of established authors. She writes: 'It is a roundtable in its most ideal form but I must admit that I have never seen it working in academia, only in informal writers' groups attended by writers who were my peers.' (ibid pp159).

As the project has progressed and relationships between participants have deepened, we have found that the group was much less in need of a mentor or a teacher figure to bring the group together. In fact, a recurring piece of feedback from participants is that the best insights and support came from other participants.

5.5. Lesson five – workshopping continues outside the formal workshop space

Observing the success or failure of the formal and structured periods during a retreat is relatively straightforward, but to observe and reflect upon the way that graphic novels are workshopped and creative problems are solved *informally* is more difficult.

One of our participants wrote:

> The discussion of comics and comics making didn't end outside of each person's workshop ... (the retreat) gave us all a chance to thoroughly discuss and share knowledge about aspects of comics making that I have never had the chance to talk about with others. This includes publishing, grant applications, graphic recording, our varying creative processes including writing, drawing and tools etcetera

After each workshop we were relieved to be released from the structured discussion space but, we observed that whatever was discussed 'in the room' continued to be discussed as the authors broke off and clustered into small groups to walk, draw, smoke, cook, chop firewood, drink tea etcetera. We observed that insights, problems and themes, followed the authors back into the informal space of retreat. One benefit of the immersive retreat model is that these thoughts were not dispersed into the complexities of a daily life, instead there was space for these ideas to be processed, investigated and revisited in whatever time they needed. The work moved between the intense intellectual labour of 'workshop time' and the fluid and improvisational labour of unstructured conversation (see Figure 5).

We suspect that this unstructured – and ultimately intangible – kind of literary labour is more valuable to our participants than the formal workshop itself. While the workshop

Figure 5. Authors talking, drinking and drawing. Important processing and problem solving was done in the times between formal sessions.

session is important as a formal occasion to bring people together and table discussion point, we learned that there is significant value in that time spent before it and after it. This is an important insight that informs our project design in the future. We began with the question: 'how does the facilitator make the workshops more valuable to authors?' is beginning to be eclipsed by a different question: 'How does the designer of a retreat we make the time between workshops as meaningful as possible?'. We wondered whether we were framing the outcome of the project incorrectly. The central outcome of Comic Art Workshop may not have been a series of improved manuscripts but an enduring network of supportive relationships.

6. Conclusion

The Australian graphic novel is a literary artefact that is still in the early stages of finding itself. There are now many Australian graphic novels and a few of their authors such as Tommi Parrish (2017), Campbell Whyte (2017), Chris Gooch (2017) and Simon Hanselmann (2014) have published works through major international publishers and set a tone for the representation of Australian experiences in comics.

In this article we have described a project that has been initiated to support this movement, a piece of literary infrastructure which is – in the same way – also finding itself. We have described Comic Art Workshop, its context, its rationale and we have articulated five key lessons that we, as facilitators and project designers have learned from the project so far. Ultimately our impression is that in the right conditions the age-old critical tradition of literary workshopping can be of great value to authors who have taken on the monumental task of completing a graphic novel or a major work of comics.

Notes

1. See Kevin Patrick's 2012 article 'In search of the great Australian (graphic) novel' for a comprehensive round-up of the evolution of the graphic novel in Australia, dating back to the 1940s.
2. In fact our program is open to the participation of writers who do not draw or illustrators who don't write, but, at the time of writing we have only worked with auteur cartoonists, which is to say, those working on ambitious projects that are written and drawn by the same person. We see the complex and intertwined acts of writing, drawing and design in comics to fall under the auspices of 'authorship'.
3. See Susan Thomas's recent article 'Learning to write by writing to learn: How writing centres and creativity can transform academic writing instruction' (2019) for a 'white paper' model for the way forward for writing centres in Australia.

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