

Book Review

Lucia Thesen (2024). *Knowledge-making From a Postgraduate Writers' Circle: A Southern Reflectory. Multilingual Matters.*

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Post-graduate writing is often difficult—even painful. Readers of this review might relate to some of the reasons: conflicting and competing demands on time, the associated trade-off between academic expectations and external priorities, and general feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and occasional isolation. In *Knowledge-making From a Postgraduate Writers' Circle* Lucia Thesen reflects on how these issues impact and challenge the students she engages with in a weekly writer's circle at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. Although these challenges are to some degree universal and familiar, the novelty of this book lies in Thesen's unorthodox and refreshing portrayal of such writing interventions as knowledge-making practices.

Throughout the book, Thesen skillfully weaves together narratives from her eight years of facilitating a weekly "Thursday writer's circle" at UCT. In so doing, she invites readers to experience the circle for themselves (p. 12). Writers in the circle Thesen describes take turns sharing short excerpts of their draft work with fellow members (p. 25). Notably, students and even former students across disciplinary backgrounds and degrees of expertise (sometimes across institutions) participate in these activities (p. 24). Although much of the story is told from her perspective, Thesen also allows these students and other facilitators from the writing circle to speak for themselves—in fact, the book begins and ends with contributions from a former and current facilitator of the writing group. This combination of diverse perspectives throughout the book allows Thesen to examine how the group functions and intersects with the multiple needs and aspirations of its participants.

In the first pages of the book, Thesen understands the writing group as a physical place or "water point" that shapes the writing processes of its many participants (p. 33). In chapters three and five, Thesen then considers the ways in which the writing group anticipates and responds to dominant constructions of knowledge and time within the academy. In undertaking this examination, Thesen

voices the unwritten and therefore unnoticed research or “knowledge-making” that so frequently takes place within the writer’s circle. For Thesen, knowledge in the writer’s circle is more than “learning to speak and write like a book” (p. 61)—unlike the “text work” (p. 132) often exhibited in Anglocentric research articles, the process of co-creating knowledge in the writer’s circle is active, alive, and joyous. It is, as Thesen puts it, a “story with verbs” (p. 63). The conversations Thesen recreates from the circle blend and bend the disciplinary and linguistic traditions, experiences, and expectations that students share with each other when they experiment with ideas or step away from the narrow, parochial concerns of their own research projects. Time and again, students in the circle are able to meaningfully take part in this social process of knowledge-making even when their own words have dried up (p. 107). In these prolonged periods of drought, students who are otherwise isolated, overwhelmed, or emotionally incapacitated find a home in a group that values and thrives upon their collective verbal explorations with other postgraduates (p. 114).

In this sense, the image of a “water point” is an apt metaphor for a writer’s circle: it is a rare space which welcomes and sustains life (p. 33). In this space, writing occurs organically and abundantly, but the conditions that give rise to these intense displays of intellectual vitality are unpredictable and almost impossible to control. Thus, instead of demanding or valuing writing for writing’s sake (notably, Thesen rejects the overused slogan “Shut up and write!” (p. 84)), students take control of how they use their time together (p. 136). In valuing the unwritten and therefore intangible aspects of academic life itself, the circle departs from the traditional metrics that define academic writing success to instead invite listening (p. 110), initiate reflection, and energize students with a renewed sense of purpose and an alternative conception of achievement (p. 111). The circle thus resists the many forces that so often disrupt and alienate developing scholarly writers from their work and empowers them to experiment with their evolving academic identity.

Another metaphor is perhaps even more poignant. In the third chapter of the book, members of the circle characterize literary practices within the academy as a “knowledge” supermarket (p. 53). By way of explanation, Thesen quotes a colleague who compares published writing to “your mince, your chicken wings, neatly packed and priced, but what we don’t see is the abattoir. The blood, the pain, the messiness of the making” (p. 53). This comment will resonate with readers for several reasons. First, as Thesen points out, academic writing comes with casualties. More accurately, the academic environment in which we write causes these casualties. Too often, ruthless competition exterminates promising ideas and eliminates aspiring writers from the scholarly arena. Countless

articles do not live to see the light of day, and the ones that do are bled dry of their animating complexity, deceptively packaged for easy consumption. On this view, scholarship is death.

But the metaphor has a second meaning. The process of writing is alive, but only when we provide it with the requisite sustenance and care. Conversely, without this process, we starve. And although this process is often hidden or ignored, although it can be unnecessarily painful and wasteful, practices of knowledge-making are scholarship too. These practices include the writer's circle with its inclusive emphasis on how writing grows and develops and its tacit rejection of what writing in the "knowledge supermarket" looks like. The writer's circle also includes moments of confusion, shame, or uncertainty when writers might admit to feeling trapped and suffocated (p.70). Sometimes, these moments are not resolved until writers admit that they cannot move. But once they vocalize their difficulties, they are better able to understand and overcome the conditions that prevent them from becoming knowing subjects within the academy (p. 2). In fact, it is precisely because the writing circle privileges the messy and necessary creative acts that birth the products of the so-called supermarket that knowledge becomes possible for these postgraduate scholars. This is why Thesen contrasts more traditional forms of scholarly inquiry in her fourth chapter with a more effective animating process in the circle: laughter (p. 72). In simply giving aspiring scholars room to breathe and permission to not write (or at least, to not write for the supermarket), the writer's circle collapses the stubborn dichotomy between publish or perish, or product and process (p. 56).

Perhaps this metaphor is somewhat dramatic or difficult to accept, but so is the reality students often face. Thesen's book allows us to conceive alternatives to the "publish or perish" model and provides us with tools to reimagine scholarship (p. 138). Although Thesen stops short of proposing specific solutions (p. 134), there are significant lessons to learn from her work. First, Thesen illustrates the dangers of tying writing interventions too closely to traditional metrics such as the number of participants, the amount of time spent in workshops, and the visibility of academic outcomes these workshops enable (p. 39). This is not to say that writing interventions cannot or should not be measured, but to recognize that our attempts to measure academic success are themselves causing the anxiety and frustration that has made writing circles necessary interventions in the first place (pp. 28 – 29).

The most encouraging stories in the book are not just the stories where students finish or publish their work, but the stories in which students continue conversations and relationships beyond the circle, change the trajectory of each other's academic careers, and even depart from degree programs to put their skills to work on successful entrepreneurship or nonacademic projects and to directly

influence the lives of others outside of the academy (p. 45). The conclusion to draw from these stories is this: rather than reinforcing negative patterns and the rhetoric around academic writing, effective writing groups allow participants the freedom to break patterns and resist scholarly norms of knowledge production.

A related point concerns knowledge production itself. Although writing can be a form of knowledge and knowledge-making, it is far from the only way we make knowledge. The writing circle Thesen describes consists of participants periodically exchanging ideas as they take their turn in a weekly ritual centered on sharing just two written pages of their work (p. 25). Rather than serving to increase the amount of writing that takes place, the exercise momentarily suspends the importance of the words students *write* (there is a maximum page count after all, and it is two, not 200!) and to increase their capacity to create knowledge with each other beyond the two pages. As counterintuitive as it may seem for writing centres or instructors to stop students from writing too much, the lesson here is that balance matters. We cannot expect students to write all the time. Perhaps instead of characterizing writing groups as a method for writing more, a better objective is to create knowledge experiments: spaces where students are allowed and encouraged to engage more fully in the unwritten conversations and processes that enrich and enable the written products that already demand much of their attention (p. 134).

It is at this point that I should again warn potential readers looking for easy morals and ready-made solutions to the patterns Thesen so ably critiques in this book. After all, Thesen does not want to do business in the knowledge supermarket as traditionally conceived (p. 132). She is critical of the tendency within social sciences to create abstract representations of deeply emotional and relational stories, and she resists taking an empirical or distanced analysis of her personal involvement in this circle. Like the philosopher Donna Haraway, Thesen describes her work as an imperfect effort to replace the illusion of objectivity in the sciences with the embodied perspectives we find ourselves reliving when we write academic stories (p. 58). Rather than standing outside the circle as an objective observer, Thesen writes to include the reader as a subjective participant. At times, readers may feel frustrated by these frequent departures from scientific conventions and may even resist Thesen's more personal, reflective recollections that deliberately call the so-called objectivity of her analysis into question. Skeptics who cling to the ideals of a singularly transparent or unambiguous past will be disappointed. For at least those readers, the book is decidedly *not* a scientific retelling of events.

To illustrate this point, it is worth reflecting on how the emotions involved in remembering influence our perception of the past. For example, upon concluding the book, I try to relive my own history as a student and novice scholar. Would I have written more, or at least more effectively, had I tried to spend less time wrestling with words on my own, and more time actively participating in other ways of creating and sharing knowledges with others (or at least, would this have enabled me to come to terms with the limitations of my “own” knowledge)? Suddenly, I remember the countless hours where I stopped writing in a different light. I remember what I was doing when I managed to actually forget about writing. The best memories are the ones where I am lost in conversation with others in reading groups, in seminars, in workshops, and even in the writing centre. I remember hours spent reading, listening, and wondering. But most importantly, I remember laughter. Scholarship in these moments came alive, and knowledge became fun. Perhaps Thesen is right: I cannot be sure where my writing ends and where knowledge begins. Memory plays tricks on us (p. 128). But I have become more convinced of at least one thing I had forgotten: these hours are never wasted.

References

Thesen, L. (2024). *Knowledge-making from a postgraduate writers' circle: A southern reflectory*.
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