Inextricable: Doctoral writing, engagement, and creativity

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Abstract
Engagement is an important issue for students, since many feel isolated or cut-off from others. For doctoral students in particular, research has suggested that writing can produce or evoke these feelings. One reason for this is because writing occupies a vital and complex role in a doctoral student's career. It is one of the main ways in which doctoral students are assessed, contribute to knowledge creation, and engage in the conversations of their disciplines. In this paper we argue that doctoral writing is inextricably linked to doctoral engagement and, as such, ought to be recognised as such. We also suggest that creativity not only plays a crucial role in the process of writing and research, but also has potential for fostering doctoral engagement. Using autoethnography and arts-based methods (collage and narratives), we (a doctoral student and doctoral supervisor) share examples of experiences with creativity, writing and engagement. We also share examples of pedagogical interventions we have used in our workshops and classes with doctoral writers. While engaging in creative practice is not without its challenges, we conclude by suggesting that it is valuable and has potential for fostering doctoral engagement.

Keywords: Doctoral writing; doctoral education; engagement; creativity.

Introduction

Student engagement is an important issue that has merited scholarly attention (Leijen, Lepp & Remmik, 2016; Jazvac-Martel, Chen, & McAlpine, 2011). Scholars have argued that alienation and isolation are indicators of disengagement (Harper & Quaye, 2009), further exploring the relationship between alienation and disengagement, as well as the impacts of other contextual factors, such as institutional and disciplinary power, culture, and identity (Kahu, 2013). Though much of the literature on student engagement focuses on undergraduate students, similar issues have been a focus of research on doctoral students' experiences. In Leijen, Lepp, and Remmik's (2016) study of doctoral "noncompleters", participants (*N*= 14) pointed to a lack of connection or relationship to a wider learning community as important factors contributing to persistence and success in their programs. The study also found that a sense of alienation and perceived lack of belonging, paired with the onerous task of conducting and writing up research, influenced participants' decisions to leave. Elsewhere, research has suggested that writing itself can produce or evoke alienation. Often, a sense of invisibility accompanies alienation, especially for doctoral students who keenly feel a lack of supervisorial, committee, or departmental support for their ideas (Jazvac-Martel, Chen, & McAlpine, 2011). While the literature on student engagement seems focused on undergraduate students, these issues—of alienation, disciplinary power, academic culture, and excessive focus on performance—are also relevant to doctoral students' experiences.

Contributing to research and thinking on doctoral student engagement, this paper argues that writing is inextricably linked to doctoral engagement and, as such, ought to be included in conversations about engagement. We also suggest that creativity not only plays a crucial role in the process of writing and research, but also has potential for fostering doctoral engagement. We reframe the practices of writing and engaging in original research as creative practices—processes of excitement, discovery and passion. We also recognise that although universities are increasingly promoting creative thinking skills (Coate & Boulos, 2012, p. 129), these institutions are often not spaces where creativity thrives. The formal and informal organisational cultures of universities often implicitly undermine creativity along with risk-taking, ambiguity and uncertainty (Arnold, 2012; Tierney, 2012). Additionally, a sense of isolation and alienation accompanies writing and research—leading to disengagement, burnout or dropout for some doctoral students (Leijen, Lepp, & Remmik, 2016). We join other scholars in arguing that creative activities can support writing and research development by engaging doctoral students in conceptual thinking, as well as overall research design. Bringing together theories of writing, creativity and doctoral education, we extend the conversation by considering the implications that creative activities can have for engaging doctoral students.

In this paper, we adopt an autoethnographic design to compare our experiences from different positionalities as doctoral student (Brittany) and doctoral supervisor (Cecile). Brittany is currently a doctoral student, whereas Cecile completed her doctoral studies over 25 years ago. We connected and formed a working relationship over a shared interest in "creativity" and "creative practices" as a way of engaging doctoral student writers. We both teach courses and workshops on graduate student writing using

creative methods, albeit at different Canadian Universities. Here, we share our process using arts-based methodologies to access doctoral engagement and disengagement in writing. Using visuals and narratives, we evoke a form of autoethnography that allows us to access and share the multiple layers connecting the personal to the social/cultural (Chang, 2008; Jones, 2011; Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). In this way, we explore the relationship between ourselves, creative practice, doctoral writing and engagement.

Doctoral education, writing and creativity
Doctoral students are often under enormous pressure. Systemic circumstances have created conditions of work intensification, time compression, and career insecurity that have inevitably led to high levels of anxiety and stress among students (Burford, 2017). Research indicates that there are high attrition rates for doctoral students in the USA and Canada (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014; Hunter & Devine, 2016). Students leave for many reasons (lack of finances, mentorship problems, family relationships under pressure, etc.) but studies show that there is often no difference in academic performance between completers and non-completers (Di Pierro, 2012). The students who leave are as academically capable as those who stay.

What causes students to leave? Loneliness, disconnection, isolation, and emotional exhaustion are all cited as major problems for doctoral students (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hunter & Devine, 2016; Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014). However, Emmioğlu, McAlpine, and Amundsen (2017) suggest there are two crucial types of experiences in the day-to-day activities of doctoral students that make them want to leave a program: not feeling like an academic and feeling excluded from an academic community. Doctoral students are not different from undergraduate students in this regard. Harper and Quaye (2009), for instance, note that while many students feel disconnected from time to time throughout their experiences in higher education, the students who leave institutions are more likely to report feeling a sense of not belonging—of not holding membership. Disengagement, in other words, can refer to a sense of feeling separate or cut-off from something one was attempting to connect with. But an important difference between undergraduate and doctoral students is the role that writing plays in their education. We are not suggesting that writing is unimportant at the undergraduate level. Instead, we posit—as Starke-Meyerring (2011) does—that whereas undergraduate writing rarely has the opportunity or expectation to authentically participate in a research community's conversations, doctoral students are *required* to participate. Participation ("to take part") requires, at the very least, an ability to access, connect, contribute, and engage. Writing is a crucial way scholarly conversations are accessed and contributed to. However, doctoral students are *required* to access and contribute to scholarly conversations for their degrees[i]. As such, we think that discussion of dis/engagement at the level of doctoral education ought to factor in doctoral writing. For instance, considerations of disengagement at the doctoral level ought to include the experiences doctoral students have with accessing and navigating membership to disciplinary communities, as well as the experiences that might arise from challenges with negotiating the demands that writing for these communities entails (Aitchison & Paré, 2012).

How can we understand the relationship of doctoral student engagement to the negotiation of membership and belonging? The concept of "belonging" prevalent in the literature on doctoral education and writing is worth exploring. Here, the negotiation of membership and belonging to disciplinary communities arcs alongside independence and identity formation. In the literature, the latter has been referred to as socialization, enculturation, cognitive apprenticeship, and situated learning (see Lee & Danby, 2012). The degree to which doctoral socialization is successful—and we note the ambiguity that a word like "successful" involves—has implications for doctoral student engagement. First, doctoral students must develop *ontologically* by understanding their role in their development and their place in their discipline. Then, they need to develop *axiologically* by understanding the values and ethics of their discipline. Doctoral students must also develop *epistemologically,* by understanding their discipline's body of knowledge and its boundaries, and *methodologically* by understanding the frameworks for research that are favoured by their discipline (Frick, 2012). When doctoral students are successfully able to negotiate these, they are better positioned to make a contribution to their disciplinary community and participate in the authentic tasks of their community (Cotterall, 2011; Hyland, 2011; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Lovitts, 2008). As such, we think that discussions of engagement at the level of doctoral education ought to consider the extent to which doctoral socialization is successful (Castelló, Pardo, Sala-Bubaré, & Suñe-Soler, 2017). Equally, and further to this point, because *writing* plays a crucial role in the socialisation of doctoral students, its significance and complexity should not be overlooked in discussions of doctoral student engagement.

How does creativity factor into doctoral writing and engagement? As it is well known, a key criterion in the assessment of the thesis or dissertation is the extent to which an *original* contribution is made to the literature. Originality has many possible definitions, but what often seems to be overlooked is the extent to which *creativity* is intertwined (and often conflated) with *originality*, especially as it relates to doctoral research and writing (Thurlow, Morton, & Choi, 2017). While creativity is often not highlighted in doctoral programs (Brodin, 2017), creativity is involved in the process of writing and research—from selecting a research focus and methodology, to the choices made about the research design and methods of knowledge dissemination (Baptista et al., 2015; Frick, 2012; Thurlow et al., 2017). Successful writers and researchers must constantly adapt, revise, adjust, and make judgements about their approach and content based on new meanings and understandings that arise during the research and writing process (Puryear, 2014).

However, we cannot assume that students will be creatively active in the course of their doctoral studies. Few students may see the work they do for the doctorate as creative. This may be related in part to differences in perceptions of creativity (Thurlow, et al. 2017). And while there are calls for universities to produce graduates who are creative, flexible and adaptable (Coate & Boulos, 2012), universities are often not places that cultivate creativity. We posit that not only is creativity an intrinsic element of writing and research, it is intertwined with doctoral engagement and doctoral completion (Lovitts, 2008; Frick, 2012; Paré, 2017). The challenge, however, is that the role creativity plays

in the practice and process of doctoral writing is not well understood and what we know about the potential creativity has for fostering doctoral engagement is equally limited. Nonetheless, drawing on the use of autoethnography and collage, we illustrate experiences of engagement and disengagement, as well as some examples of pedagogical interventions specifically to assist doctoral writers. Since we see writing as inextricably linked to doctoral engagement, we centre our experiences with writing throughout the rest of this paper.

Our project

To investigate our experiences with doctoral writing and engagement, we used two autoethnographic methods: collage-making and narrative reflection on the collages, as well as on our pedagogical experiences with using creativity in our classes and workshops with doctoral students. As Denzin (2006) so aptly comments: "our research practices are performative, pedagogical and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study" (p.422). We perform our way of seeing the world, which is always political, and we instruct others on our particular view of that world. Autoethnography provides a way for us to not only critically reflect on our own perceptions but to be up front and explicit about how we perform our work. Autoethnography has flourished as a research methodology in recent years and it has effectively been used to explore academic life and aspects of pedagogy (Pelais, 2003; Quicke, 2012; Jones, 2011). Autoethnography invites the researcher to reflect inward and outward, while imaginatively and creatively examining their life experiences (Camargo-Borges, 2018; Mizzi, 2010).

Collage-making constituted a large part of the methodology in this paper. We opted to use collage for three reasons. First, collage evokes embodied[ii] responses. The "juxtaposition of fragments and ambiguity" offer an opportunity to engage viewers "in multiple avenues of interpretation" (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 102). Second, collage—particularly the images or objects in the collage—can also help to surface the ways we perceive the world, offering an opportunity to foreground the meanings we ascribe to objects, meanings that are derived not from something inherent to the objects themselves, but "through the way we perceive how they stand in relationship to one another" (Robertson, as quoted in Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 103). Finally, collages can be fruitful methods for engaging in reflection and conceptualisation. The use of images, such as the ones found in magazines, can be used to as a way to find words to express experiences that might not easily articulated otherwise (Butler-Kisber, 2010)—making the strange more familiar or the familiar strange (Mannay, 2010). Put another way, collages offer us an alternative language to capture our experiences. Collages can also offer insight into nuances—of being, feeling, and doing—that might otherwise be overlooked because they tend to be less tangible. In addition, collage evocatively shifts emphasis from knowing as a rational, cool, and logical process, to alternative, overlapping ways of knowing that might not be as easily categorizable (Butler-Kisber, 2010). With collage, we can use an artful and aesthetic methodological approach to create texts from life which is easily accessible to most people (Adams & Holman Jones, 2018, p. 142).

For our collaging process, we focused on the topic of "engagement" and doctoral education. Drawing insight from Butler-Kisber (2010), we used two small sheets of paper (8 ½ by 5 inches) and responded to two prompts using the traditional "cut and paste" method. The first prompt asked us to reflect back on our experiences with writing as doctoral students and locate a moment or time when we felt excluded, estranged disengaged, or isolated, and to juxtapose this with a time when we felt engaged, alive, included, or like we belonged. The second prompt asked us to recall a specific experience in which we used creativity (in any form) to overcome a challenge with our writing as doctoral students. After completing the collages, we wrote reflective narratives to capture meaning. Once the individual work was completed, we shared our collages and collage-elicited narratives, and explored commonalities and disjunctures that arose.

Feeling engaged/disengaged

In the sections that follow, we present our collages and narratives as illustrations of a process doctoral students can follow to explore feelings of disengagement and how they could negotiate themselves into a different, more satisfying space.

Collage Prompt 1: Feeling stuck/Feeling engaged

The first prompt triggered thoughts on our experiences with writing as doctoral students and asked us to locate a moment or time when we felt stuck, estranged, or disengaged. Figure 1 shows our responses to this prompt, with Brittany's two collages on the left and Cecile's on the right. We wrote from a shared sense of direction but inevitably our collages illustrated different perspectives. Although these collages were completed independently and from different positionalities, they carry many similarities.

Figure 1. Response to Prompt 1: Feelings of being stuck versus engaged (Left: Brittany; Right: Cecile)

In Brittany's "feeling stuck" collage, decadent food makes up the background although it is obscured from view. Overlaid is a woman, totally constricted and hanging on the wall. A quote "Conscious of his own situation, it's as if he was slapping himself on the fingers", is boldly laid across the collage. Brittany feels this reflects her writing experiences of often being stuck and describes "stuckness" in relation to her own agency as well as to factors external to her actions. She expresses that academic writing has the potential to be tempting but often tries to "pin me down" in terms of ideas and meaning. The woman in the collage is pinned down, unable to move, and in a position that is both vulnerable and a violation. The image draws our attention provokes

our imagination, poking us to take another look. At the same time, the image carries with it a sense of "being in the dark". The woman is encased, bound and held down. Her feet are dirty, which signifies that she has been on her own travels and has been—not ungently—placed back in a box by outside, invisible forces. Brittany reflects:

> No matter how hard I try, I can't break outside of the boxes I both place myself in and am placed in. And these boxes are reflective of our broader socio-historical patterns. How do I contribute? How am I bound, but how do I bind others?

In this image and in her reflections, Brittany, notes the tensions of disconnection and questions her own role in this disengagement amid existing "invisible forces". She suggests: "It's easy to feel suffocated and stifled and stymied" when writing for an academic audience—finding meaning is always slippery.

Similarly, Cecile describes feeling stuck as a sense of feeling suffocated and of "not being able to breathe freely" but also in terms of a "continual fog" she felt like she "existed in, never knowing what [she] was doing, just fumbling around". Reflecting on the images on the left-hand side of her collage, Cecile observes grappling with

> The struggle to pull together disparate and complex ideas into a coherent linear form, working in a space of not-knowing and feeling that I would never-know, and the ever-present gaze of assessment and evaluation.

Describing the collage further, Cecile notes that how disembodied doll heads link to how she felt as a student "where the only parts of me that were acceptable in academia were contained in my head". The pointed weights refer to the intense pressure and the feeling that the Sword of Damocles[iii] was always about to fall and expose her as not being worthy of being a doctoral student. The "feeling stuck" collages were easy to complete and, surprisingly, satisfying. Perhaps it was the recognition—the witnessing—of profound and often disabling emotions that created the satisfaction. We suspect that doctoral students who engage in a creative process like this will also feel heard and acknowledged.

Standing in juxtaposition to the first half, the second half of the collages represent a time when we felt engaged, alive, included, or like we belonged. Figure 2 shows a close up of this section of both collages.

Figure 2. Feeling engaged (Left: Brittany; Right: Cecile)

In Brittany's collage, the blue background has the essence of water that culminates in a focal point. Overlaid is a fountain with water, two gold discs and some tiles that make up the border of the image. These images present a sense of freedom, movement and spontaneity. To Brittany, water is important for nurturing and sustaining life. She notes "water holds us, represents the mind but also spirit and life. It can take on a variety of shapes, depending on the vessel. So, there is a sense of flexibility" as well as strength. The gold discs signal inspiration but also light and light-bulb moments. They signal a "sense of feeling guided and of direction, perhaps even of purpose". The tiles at the very edge of Brittany's collage represent "collaboration, interweaving, and building on what others have to say". Brittany reflects:

> This part of the collage represents the best of what academia can be. Have I ever felt like this? Yes, often it comes with a decision to let go some of the conventions binding me in place, in favour of following my gut or where the paper/data/ideas are taking me. It's a sense of letting go of worry of the "form" and getting on with the content—giving myself permission to adapt the final product for/to the purpose of the writing. It's poetry in the middle of a thesis, a collage in the middle of an article, a surprising thought, something that was absent that reveals itself suddenly to me—a new insight into an old idea, a revisiting of work long-since abandoned only to find it useful again. It's a sense of not always being in control, and of embracing this and writing with it rather than obscuring it.

Like Brittany, Cecile similarly incorporated images that touch on collaboration, connection, direction, hope, and relationships. Describing her collage, she says

> The middle of the collage represents a transition. The arrow indicates the need for direction and the photos represent the many people both faculty and fellow students who helped me to engage. The photos are historical because although I completed my doctorate in Canada, there were many people from my university in South Africa who continued to help me. The candle is a symbol of hope, and the quilt suggests

connection, to me. Engagement to me means connection (not competition).

What was most interesting for both of us was to see how, despite Cecile's temporal distance from her doctoral degree, her experiences with being stuck align with Brittany's. Further, Cecile described her experience with creating this collage as "difficult" and "uncomfortable", whereas Brittany found the process cathartic as well as restorative and inspiring—particularly the process of collaging a time when she felt most engaged. Reflecting on the process later, Brittany describes how she keeps this collage on her desk as a touchstone and reminder of the experiences she aspires to co-create. Seeing the two collages (felt stuck/felt engaged) beside each other prompted Brittany to reflect more on strategies for overcoming her feelings of stuckness, and to select strategies that supported her aspirations for engagement. For example, during a particularly troublesome writing experience, Brittany reached out to another scholar in her field to discuss a finding the scholar had shared in an article, which led to a conversation that supported Brittany with making connections in her thinking about her writing, likely because it established a sense of connection and collaboration within a scholarly community. In her own words, "it was like I had a sense of who I was speaking with in my writing". In both collages, being stuck was represented by being tied down, smothered, and exposed. These are all representations of vulnerability, heaviness and helplessness. Feeling engaged, however, led to images of connection, flexibility, poetics, aesthetics, movement, attachment. In the "feeling engaged" collages, both of us felt a sense of control and wonder. We remembered what it felt like, viscerally, to be engaged and we wanted to re-create those conditions.

Collage Prompt 2: Creativity to overcome a writing challenge
In the second prompt we focused on using creative techniques to overcome a writing challenge. This required us to recall a specific experience in which we used creativity (in any form) to overcome a challenge with our writing as doctoral students. Figure 3 shows both of our responses to this prompt. Cecile's response in on the left, and Brittany's responses are on the right.

Figure 3. Response to prompt 2: Using creativity to overcome a challenge (Left: Cecile; Right: Brittany)

Reflecting on her collage, Cecile notes

> To be honest, I can't remember if I wrote word-poems[iv] when I was a doctoral student, but I have used poetry as a springboard into writing for a long time. Whenever I get stuck, I write poems – usually about how I'm struggling with language (hence word-poems). I only need to write one or two before I'm off writing again. That's what I was thinking about when I collaged this image.

One of the notable differences between the two responses is Cecile's use of texture, colour, and imagery, and Brittany's use of words. Reflecting on this, Brittany shares

> I created these collages at a time when I was encountering an obstacle in writing for a project (similar to a comprehensive exam). I felt extremely stuck, isolated, and dislocated. I had no idea what I wanted to write. Perhaps that's why I was so drawn to the words of others. I cut out random words from magazines that appealed to me for one reason or another. Originally, I intended to create one collage, but by the end of the process, I needed more space for the words. Maybe that's it—I needed space, more space, words, and more words. But that's not it completely—I needed to make sense of them. I needed to make sense of my ideas, what it was I wanted to say, what it was I wanted my work (my research and writing) to do in terms of alignment with a broader social purpose, and I needed to figure out who I was trying to talk to. Having finished the collages, I can't say I suddenly have a clear idea, but I do have a sense of counteracting a crippling feeling of inertia that likely stems from different writing obstacles.

Similarly, Cecile observes that "creativity gives me mobility and moves me from a place of being stuck to one where I'm engaged in the writing." The background of Cecile's collage features an image of thread wrapped around nails, which to her, represents being stuck. The images are a sensual feast of texture, colour and twirling lines. Reflecting on this further, Cecile shares:

> With this collage, I didn't really think about the images for meaning but chose images for colour, shape, texture. What I see now, is movement which I think is very apt because writing word-poems gives me mobility and moves me from a place of being stuck to one where I'm engaged in the writing. There are plenty of swirls in this collage suggesting light-heartedness, perhaps laughter. The word-poems are often quite funny so perhaps humour is a necessary ingredient. There is also an image of a dancer in the collage, because words begin to dance, I guess. There's an eye in the wood and it looks as if the wood has come alive. Do I come alive when I cross that stuck place and begin writing from a place of creativity? I think I do. I thought I would add a word but in flipping through the magazines, nothing stood out. Then as I was

packing the magazines away, I saw "Beyond" and that seemed to fit. Opening the door to beyond? Beyond my understanding? Moving beyond being stuck? I'm not sure.

Reflecting on her collage, Brittany shares

When I think back to these collages, I wonder, what was it about them that supported me with becoming unstuck? It isn't as if they were some magic pill to swallow, but they were a part of the solution. There was something about them that allowed me to overcome a sense of being distanced from myself, my research, and my writing. I think the fifth and perhaps the sixth mini-collage really did that for me. The fifth collage is the only one that is very image saturated. Although I had cut out many words, I had a massive number of pictures of people and so forth. I wondered what they represented, and almost put them aside. But it occurred to me, as I collaged, that these pictures represented at least two things. They represented the people I wanted to speak with, lift up, issues I wanted to amplify, and, as a result, a sense of the work I wanted to do. Or maybe the reason behind the work I want to do. The words in this collage are quite few, in comparison with the previous collages. This was a tongue in cheek remark about the fact that I was getting fewer and fewer hours of sleep, and I was finding myself confronting many of the beliefs I previously subscribed to.

Figure 4. Brittany's fifth collage

These collages show several similarities as well. First are the feelings of lightness, fun and joy when one is connected and engaged. Second, once one is able to let go of rules and conventions, thought-connections begin to happen spontaneously. Third, is

the surfacing of intangible, unspoken beliefs, thoughts and perspectives. This exercise illustrates a simple technique that can be used by any writer but particularly doctoral writers to work their way through being stuck. Remembering how we overcame a challenge in the past builds future writing self-efficacy (Pajares, 2003).

Why is creativity important for engagement?
In this section, we explore why we include creative aspects in our workshops and provide some examples of the activities we use. For Brittany, writing, creativity and engagement are inextricably linked. Writing *is* creative, even if it is dull academic writing. Writing requires creativity, even though creativity does not require writing. In her narrative, Brittany reflects:

> I didn't choose to go to art school or pursue creative writing, even though I continually and often spontaneously relied on creative mediums for my expression. I painted, wrote short stories and poetry, collaged, even built tables in woodworking classes, and AutoCAD diagrams of engines in Auto classes. I felt most at home when I was creating, but like many Canadians, art seemed peripheral to the "important work" that happened in "real education". This was an attitude I unfortunately carried with me until very recently, when in a sudden turn that felt quite rebellious, I threw off this tendency to marginalise my own artistic and creative expression in order to embrace more mindfully a life where both worlds merge. In my master's thesis, I relied on the use of found poetry and on sketches participants made of their experiences with writing to help convey the data in a way that stayed holistic. The sketches still, to this day, are the most persuasive piece of "evidence" I have, because although they are only a partial, temporary picture, they are reflections of the participants' experiences that feel more direct than my own writing about these experiences.

Brittany often uses multiple modalities, such as collages or sketching, in her workshops with doctoral students. For example, in a recent workshop, Brittany asked participants to collage a response to the one of the following three prompts: (1) *Imagine your research as a space. Who or what is in that space?* (2) *What don't you want your research to be (about)?* (3) *Choose your own adventure* (the second prompt is inspired by Amell & Blouin-Hudon, 2018). Emig (1977) argues that writing activates and integrates at least three major learning categories: learning by doing (enactive), learning by seeing (iconic), and learning by restating in words (representational or symbolic). Brittany's goal is to show participants how, after Emig, writing is inseparable from learning by doing, seeing, and saying—which consequently relate to the multiple modalities the activities draw on. She typically will ask participants to write for a few minutes after each activity, usually via a freewriting exercise ("just keep the pen moving"). At times, she gives prompts to respond to ("what was that activity like for you?" or "what did you notice?" or "what are some preliminary questions you could ask?"). Here, she connects to Paré (2009) who argues that that writing is a tool that helps us to learn; a tool that "does more than express meaning or knowledge; [but rather] makes meaning and

knowledge" (p. 2). Alongside the visual activities, she also shares contemporary approaches to academic writing (that is, product, process, and socio-rhetorical views), ultimately with a view to reminding participants that "writing is a social action" which means that it not only gets things done (has social consequences), it is a "specialised and collective practice that develops locally, in communities, organizations, and disciplines" (Paré, 2009, p. 5).

For Cecile, the research process is creative, and writing is a key part of that process:

> Creativity became important to me when I realised that so many doctoral students did not enjoy the writing part of their thesis/publication work. Many of the students I came into contact with wanted the quick "how-to", the template and "best practices" so that they could get over this chore as quickly as possible. For me, what makes writing enjoyable, despite the hypercritical environment of academic contexts, is the process of discovery. What I find, when I balance structure and freedom, is a delicious sense of surprise as writing emerges. Thoughts come together, ideas latch on to one another and suddenly there's more than I could have consciously imagined. At times, when I've been stuck on a project, I've created a visual journal where I jotted down any ideas on the project but also stuck in images from magazines for purely aesthetic value. I focus on colour and form that make me feel good. In this way, I find I want to spend time working in the journal and thinking about my research writing. It's like wooing a partner with dinner and a fine wine. I woo my writing with aesthetically pleasing sensations.

In her courses and workshops, Cecile uses sketching prompts (see Badenhorst, et al. 2016). She gives students coloured markers and papers. As a scaffolding exercise, she asks students to draw "democracy" and a good and a bad marriage". These are warm-up activities designed to break through any resistance students might have to drawing. They begin by thinking that they cannot draw "democracy" but find, to their surprise, that even with stick-figures and basic shapes, they are able to represent complex concepts. These warm-up activities are followed by sketches of increasing complexity. "Draw your research as if it were a tree" is a prompt that allows students to think about their research holistically but still in a comfortable linear way. Students represent the what they think are the roots of their research, what represents the trunk, branches, leaves and fruit. Some enterprising students will also capture creatures that live in the tree. A follow-up sketching activity could be "Draw your research as if it were a stage". Here students are shaken out of the linear representations of their research. Students will ask questions: "What kind of stage? Must I include the audience? Cecile, however, only replies with unhelpful answers ("I don't know") and they are forced to rely on their own instincts. Some students draw a circular stage enclosed by an engaged audience, others focus on what's directly on stage, while others shift the focus to something happening off-stage in the wings. There's a sense of awe in this play, an expectation of the unknown and a willingness to be surprised. Once the sketch is complete, students free-write to capture the thoughts generated by the exercise. For many students, these

activities provide the mechanism for breaking through conceptual blocks. As Cecile remarks:

> I don't want to give the impression that all we do is sketch, free-write, respond to expressive prompts and play. Alongside this playful approach, we examine research conceptualisation, genre, discourse/disciplinary requirements, rhetorical repertoires, and the other necessary knowledge required for quality writing. What the element of play does is that it piques students' interest, they find the process enjoyable, new ideas emerge, they begin to make connections, and discover relationships that they had not seen before in their research. Suddenly, research and writing are interesting and full of possibilities.

Reflections on creative practice, engagement and writing

One of the key arguments we have attempted to make throughout this paper is that writing is inextricably linked to doctoral engagement and, as such, ought to be included in conversations about doctoral student engagement. To this end, we illustrated some experiences with feeling engaged and disengaged, particularly as they related to our experiences with writing. We also suggested that creativity not only plays a crucial role in the process of writing and research (Baptista et al., 2015; Brodin, 2017; Frick, 2012; Thurlow et al., 2017; Paré, 2017), but also has potential for fostering doctoral engagement. To this end, we explored the supportive role creative practices played in our experiences with overcoming feelings of alienation and disconnection as they related to our writing.

However, we think it is important to acknowledge that "creativity" is a difficult concept to unpack. It is somewhat of a hollow concept, filled only by the discourses that flow through it (Phipps, 2010). It's a term where we often seem to have a common-sense notion of what it means yet find it hard to articulate those meanings. Many different incompatible ideologies lay claim to the concept and ultimately it is steeped in multiple competing assumptions. In one conversation, creativity could mean neo-liberal aspirations of innovation for income generation, the ordinary process of producing a factory object, or the genius of artistic brilliance. For some it involves individual originality while for others mimicry or improvisation are valued aspects. Many believe that imagination is at the core of creativity while others feel that problem-solving or critical thinking are foundational in creative beings. Creativity, then, is an uncertain term, at times intangible and ethereal, at times seemingly commonplace and solid (Tierney, 2012). For us, creativity shows up in two ways. First, as the individual insight and inspiration needed to generate novel and original research ideas and conclusions. Second, in the social-cultural interactions that result in community participation and building ideas off one another. In other words, we see creativity as the personal "capacity to see more sharply and with greater insight that which one already knows, or that which is buried at the margins of one's awareness" (John-Steiner, 1997, pp. 51-52), and also, we acknowledge the potential for creativity in interactions with fellow researchers and writers (McWilliam & Dawson, 2008). Frick (2012) argues that while

understanding creativity as a process and product is important, this latter understanding of creativity in social interaction is more significant. It is through community that creativity gets fostered as connections, associations and relational flows bounce off group members. It is here that we see the value for engagement.

It has been our experience that creative practice has enormous potential for engaging doctoral students, particularly when working with their writing. We have suggested that doctoral writing and research is creative—not just as "creative writing" as McVey (2008) argues, though we second this in some ways—but that it requires creativity throughout the whole process (Frick, 2012). Doctoral students must learn to negotiate the complexities of academic writing, which often includes addressing questions of identity, disciplinary textual practice(s), knowledge, as well as the writing/research process itself (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Rather than simply producing texts, doctoral students use language "to acknowledge, construct and negotiate social relations" (Hyland, 2011, p. 196). They participate in academic discourses and disciplines through writing, "render[ing] ideas in the appropriate language" (Pare, 2011, p. 65). Because of this deeply intertwined nature, problems with data analysis, research focus, knowledge and text production, as well as the creation and justification of an argument are "all questions of writing" (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 268) and, arguably, of creativity.

We agree with Thurlow et al. (2017) who argue that it is important for doctoral writing teachers to raise "alternative and broader ideas about the place of creativity in written academic work", as well as show "participants specific creative techniques to enable them to develop as 'creative' academic writers, both personally and at the level of their writing practice" (p. 9). In this paper, we shared some examples of pedagogical interventions we have used in our workshops and classes with the hope that they can be adopted and adapted specifically to assist doctoral writers.

Although we are convinced of the benefits of creative practice in engaging doctoral students in their writing and in their communities (see Amell & Badenhorst, 2018), we find that engaging in creative activities is not without its challenges. Not everyone is convinced that visual and playful activities are valuable (Thurlow et al., 2017). Many students feel they do not have the time to "play". Others have been schooled into believing that research is serious work and can only be seen in this way. Still others believe that the fault of being stuck lies so deeply within them that no amount of play will overcome this deficit. Yet, we have both experienced the surprising benefits of play, particularly visual play, in our own writing practice, in our workshops and classes, and in the experiences of students who do embrace these activities. We offer these reflections for those who might be tempted to engage in these practices. First, these activities need to be mediated to encourage, as Maxine Greene suggested, a critical consciousness through critical engagement with creative practices: "It is through critical encounters with a range of art forms that we are provoked to think and act differently" (Kohli, 2016, p. 19). Creative practices allow us and our students to begin again, but differently. What we mean here, is that a facilitator can play a vital role building an awareness of the value of creative practices for students. For these creative activities to work, facilitators need to provide a place of safety, with little criticism, a safe zone, where students can

let go of their boundaries, question the taken-for-granted, and take risks. It will be difficult to engage students in visual play if they feel at risk or under evaluation and the benefits will be severely muted. Students will inevitably want to know what is expected of them, as well as what they need to do to meet expectations. They will also want to know what they will learn, know, or do as a result of participating in the activities (Nilson, 2016). Since engaging in creative practices in many ways engenders experiential learning, ensuring there is a debriefing and reflection component after creative activities will support students with making impactful connections between their learning and the experience (Nilson, 2016). One way this can be accomplished is through a written response—even a quick email exchange—on questions like "what were your goals, and how did they shift during the experience?" or "what strategies did you use to accomplish the task? How effective were they? Have you relied on these strategies before? How effective were they then?" or "What emotions did you experience during the activity? Were there any that presented a barrier for you? What strategies did you use to overcome or relate to them?" (adapted from Nilson, 2016, p. 177).

Second, for doctoral students, the lines between writing, research, substantive areas and engagement in their programs are often blurred. Meyer and Land (2006) describe ontological obstacles as being partly rooted in a theory of self and of being in the world. An epistemological obstacle can present as a writing block and engender feelings of isolation and disengagement. This block relates in part to the implicit theories that students hold about a given problem that might block them from seeing a solution (Schneider, 2014). This is the uncertainty that arises from gaps between experiences as received and the experiences as interpreted, and often related to a "sense of relationship between the self and whatever counts as shared reality" (Wisker & Savin-Baden, 2009, p. 241). It is here that creative practices have a role to play, to access the unspoken, the feelings that cannot be articulated and to see wholes where only disconnected parts have been visible. Working in these liminal spaces, creative practices can teach the value of staying with "stuckness" until the obstacles have been removed or overcome. Instead of feeling isolated and alone, students feel connected and engaged.

Third, as much as we imagine research processes to be controlled, they are, more often than not, chaotic. Even while setting up boundaries and following the rules, "doctoral education is often the space when research (all of it, all the time) falls apart again and again" (Van Cleave, Bridges-Rhoads & Hughes, 2018, p. 1). Within this space of falling apart and beginning again, creative practices offer a flexibility that is dialogic, interconnected and mobile enough to cross boundaries and traverse chasms. Creative practices allow students to work in these chaotic practices in flexible ways. In this paper, we modelled our creative practices through collage and narratives to provide an autoethnographic account that illustrates the deep richness that these activities can provide, not only with writing specifically but also with doctoral student engagement more generally. While we acknowledge that these practices are not without their challenges and limitations, we believe that creative experiences have much to offer doctoral students and invite readers to reconsider the ways in which students can be meaningfully engaged through play and creativity (Amell & Blouin-Hudon, 2018).

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[i] Often via the dissertation or thesis.

[ii] We use "embodied" here to mean two interrelated things: 1) a tangible or visible expression to something that is often abstract, like emotions or thoughts, and 2) as something done with and through the body (Leavy, 2015, p. 127).

[iii] Any situation threatening imminent harm or disaster.

[iv] This is a phrase Cecile uses to describe the poems she writes that are generated by specific words she is reflecting on.