

The thinking blanket

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TEXT prose

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The Thinking Blanket

She's stuck.

She's in the thick of her creative writing PhD, reimagining stories from her teaching career and revelling in the ability to lampoon former foes. Sometimes the story writing is easy and fluid, at others it is painful and bleak. She's determined to do justice to the voices and experiences of herself and her colleagues. But staring at the screen does not make the words write themselves so she walks away to sulk with some knitting.

Back in England she knitted cardigans and jumpers for her children, squinting at the intricate patterns that allowed her to recreate images of *Postman Pat* and *Thunderbirds*. When the children rejected 'babyish' jumpers, she turned to knitting blankets. She brought the habit to Australia but living in the Tropics means there isn't much call for heavy coverlets. So, she donates to family and friends who live in more inclement climes. Or to Cairns folk who relish the novelty of a knee blanket for the winter evenings when the mercury dares to dip below 18 degrees.

She finds blankets useful for using up oddments of yarn, those incongruous leftovers only acceptable for patchwork projects. She regularly trawls through the free patterns

online, looking for a different take on the traditional stash-buster blanket. She loves the knitting of multiple multicoloured squares but loathes the endless joining up. Today, she searches on her phone and finds a new pattern promising a revolutionary method with no tedious joining of patchwork pieces or aching arms from a hundred stitches of worked knitting bending the needles. No, this pattern promises a way of joining as you go with only ten stitches on the needle at any one time.

Her writing problems forgotten, she inspects her yarn collection determined to try the new pattern immediately. The contrasting bundles are so aesthetically opposed to one another, she decides to knit with two strands instead of one – merging the jarring hues to forge a blended colourway. She snatches up the needles, fuming at her inability to continue writing, and casts on. She studies the pattern at each step, undoing mistakes and reworking stitches. As one strand of yarn ends, she adds another to create a new coupling. She knits.

She yanks the yarn and it resists for a moment before submitting. She has limited time to get the writing done and must maximise the school holidays when her marking is complete and the next school year is a new and shiny thing glinting in the distance. She thinks about her writing and berates herself for not concentrating hard enough, for not being creative enough. She knits.

The project is growing quickly and she no longer consults the pattern for guidance when turning the corners of her rapidly spreading square blanket. The colours are bright and cheery, a kaleidoscope of loops jostling for attention. She knits.

Her breathing settles and her grip relaxes. The garrote of doubled yarn slackens and ribbons through her fingers. She knits.

Her brain drifts from her writing, thinking ahead to the colours she will use next. Should she make a clean break and start with two new strands or continue merging? She knits...

... and her confusion unknits.

The writing knot loosens and unravels. She doesn't notice at first, but her brain creeps back to her writing. It's nudging her, reliving the problem but smiling slyly like someone with a secret. When she pays attention, she realizes the mystery has been exposed. She rests the knitting needles in her lap and stills her breathing, as if taking another breath will chase the big reveal away. But it remains, hands in pockets, gaining shape and becoming a fully formed solution.

She reaches for her writing journal, jotting down the fragments of clarity and feeling the words flow from her pen like yarn threading through her fingers. Setting the

knitting aside, she brings her journal to her work desk, opens the laptop and writes, fearful in case a freak phenomenon wipes the words from the page and her brain. She writes and writes, the earlier confusion erased.

It takes a few bouts of frustrated and angry knitting before she realizes that each time she picks up the needles to add to the blanket, each time her breathing settles and her grip relaxes, the writing knots slip back into orderly strands. When she makes the connection, she tests it. One afternoon, she leaves her desk as soon as the barriers block her way forward and takes up her knitting. She sits with her journal and pen, hoping the problems will evaporate with each loop of yarn peeping through the next one. She knits, anticipating failure. The end to the coincidences. She changes colours and waits for the answers to come.

They arrive within minutes, like long-lost loved ones, their unorthodox greetings voiced as solutions she needs for the latest writing hurdle. She makes notes in her journal then continues knitting. Her guests stay and talk awhile, prompting her to take more notes. She writes and knits. One kind of making sparking another. She knits to untangle her creativity. She knits to write.

Now she knows. The hesitation of sitting down to write disappears as she no longer dreads the moments when the words blur on the screen, or she forgets what to type next. That malevolent malingerer, *self-doubt*, has its free pass revoked. The knitting project grows along with her thesis. She uses up her stash of oddments and buys more yarn to sustain the blanket. It requires regular feeding and frequent attention, especially as she approaches the gnarlier end of her thesis and the writing load intensifies.

Who will want this blanket behemoth when it's finished?

When her thesis is submitted and outside of her control, she sets the blanket aside. When the revisions come, she knits her way through them to re-submission and success. Like many before her, the anti-climax of finishing such a feat of writing is a bereavement. As consolation, she checks the size of the blanket – curious. It spreads across and over the edges of a double bed. She traces the blending and changing of moods with each colour switch. Two creative artefacts for the price of one. Two creative artefacts married together like the mismatched colours striping through the blanket. Two creative practices nourishing each other. A double bed's worth of thinking.

She keeps the blanket.



Dr Nadia Mead is a lecturer with the School of Education and the Arts at the Cairns Campus of Central Queensland University. Her research interests include autoethnography, creative writing and teacher wellbeing. Nadia has worked as an educator in the UK and in Australia, and across primary, secondary and tertiary contexts.