Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 2

Journal of the Association for Management Education and Development

amed
developing people
developing organisations

Edition Editors: Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie

Thanks to our friends at Triarchy Press for their continuing support.

TRIARCHY PRESS

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Ink and pixel; pen and stylus:
paper-based and digitally-based reflections on practice

Paul Levy

My reasons for writing this article

Recently I signed a form with a real pen. Notice the use of the word 'real'. I realised I hadn't used a real pen to write my signature for months. My signature was a bit wobbly. I think, as I wrote it, I was worried it wouldn't look like my real signature, so long had it been since I had written it with my hand clasped around a pen.

The personalising influence of my manuscript writing

Pressing the pen point down onto the article felt satisfying, certainly more satisfying than a typed name in an email. It felt somehow more committed to what I was signing.

Last year, I was seriously ill and it took several months in a hospital bed, and then at home, to recover. During that time, my medical specialist suggested I keep a journal. I reached for the laptop but she meant using a real, paper notebook. So, over six months, I kept a hand-written journal. It wasn't autoethnography, because the reflections were simply about myself.

> *'Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) '*

> (Ellis et al, 2011).

I began to wonder if the way we reflect in writing on our experience could have cultural implications. My specific question was: *What if the way we record our experiences – digitally or on article - is different, and how might acting on those reflections in an organisational context also be different?*

I still have that notebook. You can notice the improvement of my handwriting as I got better, week by week. I also noticed how my physical hand writing tired me - not mentally, but how weak my fingers felt from years of hardly writing on paper at all. As it turns out, there can even be longer term injuries that result from this selective use of my fingers, hands and arm.

My finger muscles got stronger the more I wrote, and I noticed something else: compared to my texted writing on a computer, tablet or smartphone, I noticed I was writing 'I' and 'Me' more, especially when I was personally reflecting on my recovery, and on my life more generally. You may notice I am using those two words quite a lot in the introduction to this article. That has been happening more in my digital writing, the more I have also been writing on paper. The hand-based writing has been 'rubbing off' on my digital writing in terms of a more personal style.

As soon as I reduce my paper-based writing, replacing it with digital writing, the occurrence of 'I' and 'Me' reduces in my digital writing, and that discovery represents the reason for this article.

A simple experiment

If you also tend to reflect digitally rather than on paper, try this: Type your name. Do it a few times. Then take a piece of paper and a pen. Then write your name using a pen onto that paper. Do you notice a difference in your feelings towards that writing? I did. And that is the start of what became a brief inquiry into my autoethnographic writing that has left me wanting to research more my reflection on my practice via writing.

The Aim of this Article

This article is an act of auto-ethnography. I, the author, am self-describing and self-analysing my own process of self-observation - observing my own practice, in retrospect, and comparing two methods of recording that practice of reflecting on my own practice.

One method involves recording my practice by pressing pen or pencil onto paper (a physical notebook). The other method involves recording my practice digitally, using fingertips, or a keyboard combined with a smartphone or tablet computer (speech recognition isn't currently widely used nor reliable). In this way, I (the author) am making a comparison, and I'm wondering if these two methods yield different styles or qualities of reflection., which may impact differently on decision making in an organisational or professional context.

In recent years I have written increasingly using digital devices. Primarily my reflections on my practice have been recorded on my smart phone or tablet using my fingertips or a wireless keyboard (I have rarely used a stylus pen). I have also used a laptop computer with a built-in keyboard. I used to use physical notebooks with pens a lot more. In my earliest days as a facilitator, pen and ink was the only available method. (I didn't use a dictaphone). I had a growing feeling that the sentences in my digital writing were becoming shorter and also contained less variety, more repetition, with less use of the word 'I'. My reflection on myself was become depersonalised.

This bothered me (though I wasn't clear why at the time). I looked at a sample of my digital and my physical writing and found some support for my instincts. As a reflective practitioner I was concerned that the quality and helpfulness of my reflection was dropping via the seemingly more convenient use of digital tools. I had also become lazy - why write by hand if you only have to type it all up later? Why not write directly using the digital tools available? But I felt less emotionally connected to my digital writing, even less committed to engaging with it on a slower, deeper level of reflection.

How could I understand the impact respectively of digital and physical autoethnography? Here, I have tried comparing both methods, offering two case examples. I conclude that digital reflection can be helpful for certain types of reflection on practice, and physical writing is better (for me) for other types.

Digital or paper?

Since coming to these realisations, though I am still an active user of digital tools in my reflection on practice as an organisational development practitioner, I have increasingly reverted more to physical pens and paper as well. I invite you as a reader to carry out your own experiments in relation to how you record self-observation, analysis and reflection. In my own experience of autoethnography, subjectivity can play a major part, and a weak point is succeeding in the attempt to remain objective and draw objective conclusions. I have tried, where possible, to ground my argument in samples of my autoethnographic writing – in the words and sentences themselves.

The samples in this reported experiment are low, limiting generalisability. In fact the two samples I present are characteristic of a much larger sample (my writing over the last three years representing tens of thousands of words) of both my written and typed reflection on my practice as a facilitator. These are reflections, of varying lengths, recorded directly after O.D interventions in the form of workshops and away-day sessions with organisational clients from both the private and public sector.

Here, I have confined myself to sessions I facilitated in the last three years in the UK and overseas. Organisations of varying sizes are also included. I've selected the two writing samples here to demonstrate the typical writing behaviours that, respectively, clearly contrast digital and paper-based reflection. This points to the need for more systematic research. My reflections here are indicative of my own behaviour in general when reflecting on my practice via writing. If my behaviour were to have generalised relevance, it could point to significant implications for decision making and behaviour change that arises from either digital and paper-based writing.

An open question

An obvious question arising from this is: Is there a measurably qualitative difference between hand-written and digitally written reflection on practice? I have to leave that open to more systematic research, but have certainly found clues in relation to my own autoethnography.

Burden and Warwick (2015) point to the value in 'non-judgemental noticing' when reflecting on practice. They observe that we notice things first and then our reflection can later lead to further inquiry. Often, they can also lead to the advocacy of behaviour changes and decisions, via the conclusions drawn from reflection on experience. Noticing precedes judgement. Here are some of those observations that I've noticed.

Five self-observations

Self-observation 1 - Intellect and Emotion contrasted

I've noticed that my digital writing is more impersonal than my paper-based writing. I feel less emotionally engaged with my digital writing and treat it with an intellectual style of reflection. I tend to reflect more emotionally and deeply with paper-based writing. My digital writing is more 'hands-off' and detached, enabling an emotionally more detached view, but limiting reflection that is based more on emotional exploration and engagement. This, of course, is not an absolute statement of my behaviour; it is simply something I am increasingly noticing as a tendency in my reflective writing.

Self-observation 2 - The Sacredness of the new notebook

A brand new note book doesn't cost nearly as much as a brand new laptop or smartphone. I turn to the first page and hesitate (I always do this). The commitment of those first words to the fresh, white page leads me to pause. My first few words are based on a firm decision to commit those words to paper, I am mindful of them in advance of writing them.

I noticed that I am scared to cross out that first sentence. I physically feel the pressure of pen onto paper, as ink flows. With my laptop (and, even more with my smartphone) I type almost without thinking, the sentence is longer, often a paragraph or, in contrast, a list of bullet points. And I'm much less inhibited in erasing.

The hand-written sentences are slower, I pause more.

With the digital tool, I write faster, and notice that my thoughts struggle to catch up with a stream of writing that appears to come from a cognitive activity that is much faster, resident in my fingertips. With hand writing, I write less in the same amount of time. I compare two pages - one digital and one physical. Both appear reflective, both intelligent. The digital page contains more clichés. I notice the word 'actually' appears more. And also I notice the word 'also'. I notice I feel prouder of my hand-writing on paper, yet also enjoy the sheer volume of words my fingertips produce. This could relate to the visceral, physical effort involved as well as the uniqueness (to myself) of my style of handwriting. I also notice that the quantity (in terms of word count) of my digital writing is greater than my physical writing.

Self-observation 3 - The embodied nature of the chunky pen

Not only do I produce words faster on my digital device, but I also notice the speed, often impossibly fast as if fingertips and brain are in a superfast link-up. The writing feels more technical and I reach for the easiest word. With the pen, I feel more emotional. I have even cried as I have written with a pen onto paper. Never by digital means. I notice my feelings are less involved at the time of typing words. The pen feels more embodied as my entire finger and thumb wrap around it.

My fingers and hand tire faster with a pen than when I use a fingertip press or a stylus. Hand writing feels like harder work and it seems to be more feeling-based in the real time act of writing. I notice that I pause, I frown, I cross out and the evidence of my crossing out is always present, evidence of confusion or decision-change on the page. This seems to feed into my writing flow. I film myself writing by hand and my face is a kind of emotional theatre.

Self-observation 4 - Embodied Pen-Holding and the stimulation of feeling and the will

Because holding a pen is a more embodied experience (Mangan and Balsvik 2014), there is evidence that we engage more fully with hand-written content than with fingertip-generated content. The 'Maybe' to be found in social media platforms can result in less commitment, e.g. to attend an event, than in writing with pen and ink. Certainly I have noticed that I engage my will and keep promises more consistently when I sign a letter by hand than by email. That isn't to say I am unreliable! I simply notice that my digital signature calls for more effort to commit than when I press ink onto paper. I notice something similar with a commitment by voice compared to email. This is explored further in my book, Digital Inferno.

Self-observation 5 - Measuring the I and Me

My digital writing is less first-person in style. The Ego index is a simple way to measure this. (I've used it in teaching writing). Here is how it works: Take a sample of your writing and divide the total number of words in that sample by the number of occasions that personal words, such as 'I', 'me', 'myself' etc. are used. This produces a ratio. A higher ratio represents a more impersonal style of writing, and vice versa.

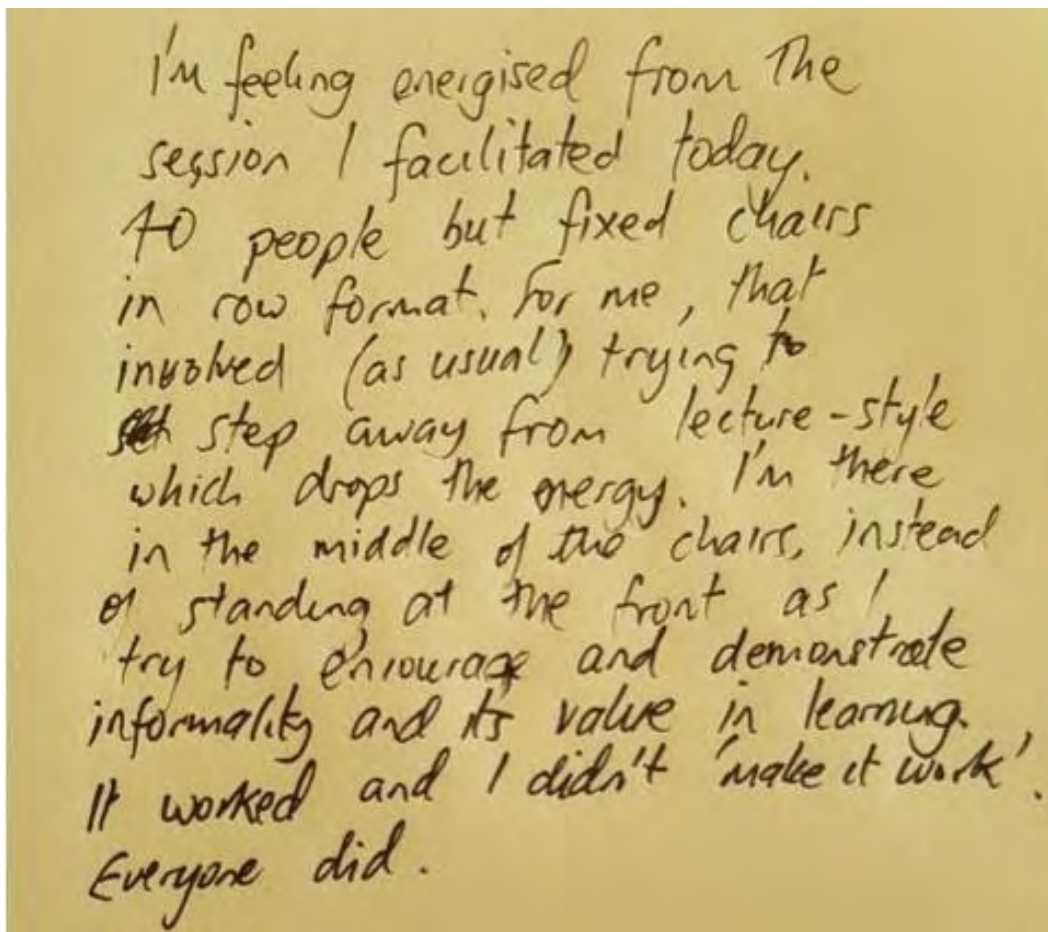My ego ratios (in a much larger sample of my autoethnographic writing) are closer to 30:1 in my digital writing. In my physical writing they are closer to 15:1. I also notice the much lower ego index in this paper! This is probably a result of the topic covered, and the focus of self as object of my research. It could be that autoethnography generates a lower Ego index regardless of the tool chosen.

This could suggest that the more embodied, physically committed nature of holding a pen and pressing onto article adds a sense of physical value and commitment to the process. Also because more of 'me' is physically involved, then I feel more myself and I locate my writing more in the first person, due to that higher degree of embodiment in the writing process.

Case 1: Two comparative illustrations

I've chosen the following two characteristic examples to illustrate this comparison. They are drawn from a much larger sample of my own reflective writing on my O.D. facilitation practice. Sample 1 is an extract from my pen-based writing; sample two is a fragment of my digital writing. Comparing these two fragments, it's obvious that the digital writing (Sample 2) is less personal than the paper-based writing.

Sample 1: An extract from my paper-based reflective writing (Image Credit: Paul Levy 2018)

I'm feeling energised from the session I facilitated today. 40 people but fixed chairs in row format. For me, that involved (as usual) trying to step away from lecture-style which drops the energy. I'm there in the middle of two chairs, instead of standing at the front as I try to encourage and demonstrate informality and its value in learning. It worked and I didn't 'make it work'. Everyone did.

Sample 2: Some of my digitally-based reflective writing (Paul Levy 2018)

> *A good session. Plenty of engagement- got the host to welcome everyone before they all sat down, in the coffee area - a risk and he was nervous, but paid off. Felt informal and relaxed from the start and carried onto the discussion group. Enabled me to facilitate more minimally. But there were PowerPoint talks and that relaxation makes people more intolerant of the formality. (and often more boring!). Need more on the go Q and A."*

Case 2 - Comparing digital and paper-and-pen reflection and the resulting cultural conclusions

In this second case example, I compare and discuss two forms of my reflection after two strategy workshops with clients. The first example is based on writing with pen and paper, the second is based on digital-based reflection. I also include a rough measurement of Ego Index for each example.

Example 1: Reflections on a strategy 2-day away session - end of day 1 - reflections, hand-written

"I'm feeling tired. We ran over time for the prioritising activity and I tried to hurry things. Feeling frustrated with myself as I am usually patient. I'm sensing a resistance in the room to some of the actions identified. Classic zone of discomfort. Two people taking "urgent" calls and I'm not sure restating the ground rules at that point really helped. Having said that, the group have made a lot of progress and I'll pick up that momentum in the morning. I certainly want to remind them of the ground rules so that we all stay focused during the last half day. I need to include more time in future sessions for unplanned "confusion" and "discomfort". Organisations are becoming even more complex and facilitation needs to allow for confusion and discomfort to be named, explored and resolved."

Observations on Example 1

Ego Index: 10:1 (approx.)

My reflections here are twofold. I focus on the emotional state and behaviour of the session participants. And I notice my own state, very much in a writing style of "I". My planned interventions are also people-focused and about improving "team" health. I also make a generalised assumption at the end that arises from my autoethnography - I generalise wider cultural conclusions based on my self-experience in an organisational client setting. I focus less on taking a more "detached" view of the group and notice that conclusions are drawn from a high degree of trust in my immersed, ego state (probably based on a high degree of trust in my own abilities and past experience).

Example 2: Reflection on a financial strategy 2-day away workshop - end of day 1 - reflections recorded digitally on a smart phone

"Tired. A good, productive day overall, though a lot of confusion over the Finance Director's strategy model. Not really enough time for questions and I'll have to add fifteen minutes to the start of tomorrow as the next stage won't be achievable if people aren't on the same level. Room was too hot, and need to get that sorted. Need more copies of the priorities exercise. Plenty of creative energy in the team, but danger of "work back at base" claiming people's attention. Strategy sessions need to be in comfortable spaces and time planning needs to be 100% realistic."

Ego Index: 80:1 (approx.)

I note my physical stage of tiredness at the outset but do not use "I"; I objectify the state. My reflections are more about emergent process rather than people. Where process is influenced by human behaviour, I note it but, again. the style is third rather than first person. There is less use of the word "the" as in "room was too hot, and I note the style as "short hand". The observations contain little emotional content. The style is more impersonal. It is "functional", seeking our problems with logical solutions

Sense-making about my facilitation practice, from these two examples

My reflections so far suggest that both paper- and digitally-based reflections are potentially complementary, offering different qualities and nuances to support reflective writing. My hand-written reflection (Example 1) appears to address itself (more as a bias than a conscious choice) to the human-centred and cultural aspects of organisation development. My digitally-written reflection (Example 2) is more detached, addressing itself to processes and a systems view. In terms of the digital-physical construct, it appears to be a case of both-and, rather than either-or. Yet a bias towards digitally-based reflection could limit the self-knowledge that can arise from attempting to write down our thoughts and feelings.

Digitally-based reflection on myself, due to its more impersonal nature, could help me to observe and report on my practice from a more detached point of view. It can allow a reduced sentimental attachment to what I am reflecting on. Paper-based reflection could offer a complementary perspective that is consciously more immersed, emotional and subjective.

So, some conjectures

My digital writing is more rushed and coldly intellectual (in my personal case). Writing with a pen is more tactile and 'embodied'. Both ways of writing can assist autoethnography and reflection on practice. To use of only one method could distort and limit my reflection, and then lead to unbalanced decisions and actions in a client context.

More specifically, this relates to my own practice as a facilitator of Organisational Development. At the end of a day's work, I keep my journal. I reflect on my practice through writing, tending in recent years to make more use of digital tools than pens and paper. I make tentative decisions about my behaviour for the next day. This will take the form of 'interventions' - possible changes to programme activities, statements I may make, questions or challenges I may pose. What if my digitally-based reflection leads to less emotionally intelligent or sensitive interventions? What if my pen and paper writing leads to more human-centred interventions?

On the other hand, what if an over-reliance of pen and paper perpetuates a bias towards human elements in organisations increasingly thinking in terms of technology, systems and business processes? There may be advantages to a more conscious, blended approach.

My reflective writing also helps to shape my wider attitudes about organisational culture and society at large. My interventions contain influence, as does my other more academic writing. If it can be established that the impact of different kinds of reflection on practice that relates to influence on organisations as cultural systems is significant, then the trend towards using digital tools for reflection may be creating a depersonalised bias in decision making. Culture more broadly may be becoming de-humanised, if it proves true that digitally-based reflection leads to less emotionally intelligent decisions. Autoethnography based only on digitally-based reflection could then be an un-balanced process, less human-centred.

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Reflection and projection

My article has a soft hypothesis via a comparison, and explores an autoethnographic process of writing about facilitation, with examples of both manuscript and digital writing, which are analysed with consideration of the methodological choices and challenges involved.

I intend to carry out further, more systematic research into my own autoethnographic writing for this reason: If the choice to use digital tools for my reflection leads to colder, but less emotionally informed decisions, this could significantly impact on the quality of my work as an O.D facilitator. Whether this is for better or for worse remains to be seen.

If this hypothesis can be confirmed, then the impact on organisational culture and society could be significant. Having written this article, I now feel the need to re-balance my writing about my own practice, and not to become primarily a digitally-based reflector on my work. Balance seems to be key, and an ability to choose between writing modes and media may be a necessary and fairly new, emerging skill for facilitators and change agents who use reflection through writing to guide and inform their work. The idea that paper is better than digital may no longer hold true.

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Contents

A note about AMED

AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

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Contents