Volume 15, Number 1 • February 2008

Organisations & People

Writing in Leadership and Change

The Quarterly Journal of AMED
the developers' network

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This *Organisations and People* journal was originally published in hard copy bearing the **ISSN 1 350 6269**

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Editorial: Writing in Leadership and Change

This groundbreaking anthology challenges change agents, leaders, managers and other professionals to pay closer attention to how we use writing in our work, and raises some important questions. How can writing be used effectively to inspire and empower the development of organisations and individuals? What are the underlying theories and specific approaches that we and others are using with good effect? What can we learn from sharing our experiences, practices, enquiries, and reflections around writing and conversation to inform our work and to increase our awareness of the choices we make about how to use the written word? How do we need to adapt the way we write to a digital and global environment?

Where it all began

The writing that follows has emerged from a collaborative process involving multiple conversations and stages. On 15 June 2007, after months of debate and planning, a writing workshop was organised by a number of people who belong, in the main, to three overlapping networks. These networks are The Change Alliance of Surrey University's MSc in Change Agent Skills and Strategies (CASS) programme, The OD Innovation Network (ODiN), and The AMED Writers' Group (AWG). We called the workshop '*Striking moments—putting our practice into writing*'.

It was always part of our plan to find ways to distill, develop and share our explorations and conversations about writing more widely. Following the workshop, we circulated a call for proposals for this special themed issue of *Organisations & People (O&P)*, which were then anonymously peer-reviewed. We aimed to encourage a network of contributors to be more explicit about—to explicate—how we use or could use writing effectively in our practice, in the context of organisational development, leadership and change.

The role of critical friendship

As commissioning editors, we are confident that the resulting publication will excite interest in all those who aspire to realise the best possible outcomes for initiatives in leadership and change. The contributors are managers, consultants, facilitators, therapists and marketing specialists. The articles acknowledge the wide range of ways we use writing in our work: emails and PowerPoint, websites and flipcharts, journals and feedback reports, appraisals and agendas. Without being repetitive, the 11 strong and varied articles share many themes and motifs: references to the complexity paradigm; the iterative dynamic between writing and conversation; the role of reflective writing in our practice. So the articles seem almost to be engaged in their own conversation, to speak to and echo one another in all sorts of ways, offering a kind of kaleidoscope view on the role of writing in our work.

Some of us are 'established' authors; others are appearing in print for the first time; yet others are writers emerging from hibernation. In our various contributions and from different perspectives, we have all been keen consciously to experience and reflect upon how the journey of 'getting into print' feels at every stage, and upon what this means for our various practices and discourses.

All the contributions—and the process by which the final publication has been produced—reflect a commitment to the co-creation of meaning and understanding. Fundamental to this commitment has been our interpretation of the editorial role as, amongst other things, one of critical friendship. Some contributors have therefore participated in a variety of ways in the editorial process—helping to select and shape initial ideas as well as supporting, encouraging and giving honest feedback to other authors.

The process continues

For us, one important test of the impact of this special issue will be whether—as editors, authors, critical friends, or readers—we have in any way helped to co-create a greater consciousness of and expertise in the role of writing in organisational leadership and change. We hope to stimulate and continue the conversation and the learning with a further conference, provisionally planned for April 2008. We fully expect that the learning conversations that take place in anticipation of, and during, this seminar/workshop will generate further cycles of co-inquiry and co-creations of meaning and understanding about 'Writing in Leadership and Change'. So watch this space!

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to all the contributors, and also to **Melanie Greene**, **Lin Grist**, **Candy Mackay**, **Irene MacWilliam** and **Chris Rodgers**. They have been playing a crucial role as critical friends behind the scenes, by generating ideas and energy in support of this journal, and by providing essential challenge and editorial support to authors with whom they were respectively paired. We must also thank **Terry Gibson**, *O&P*'s Managing Editor, for his encouragement and advice throughout our own guest editorial journey, and also his regular editorial colleagues. Finally, we thank **AMED Council** for sponsoring this publication. We hope they feel that their faith in this venture has been justified.

Bob MacKenzie and Vicky Cosstick

Writing within the Circle of Authenticity

VICKY COSSTICK

The author explores the significance and interconnectedness of authenticity and presence in her work as a consultant. She notes resonances in gestalt and complexity theory. She takes the idea of 'presence' in the work of Patsy Rodenburg and applies it to some of the ways that she uses writing in her work, including emails, her website, and responses to Terms of Reference.

KEYWORDS: Authenticity, presence, writing, consultant, organisation.

Introduction

It is, I assume, worthwhile to seek 'authenticity' in my work, role and identity as an organisational consultant. In this article I intend to explore the source and nature of that compulsion, but not to question it, and to examine the role that writing plays in the quest to be authentic. Recently, I came across Patsy Rodenburg's book: Presence (2007). It helped me to think again about how we develop authenticity in our work, and I began to wonder what it might have to say about how we use writing to enhance our work.

Theory and practice

What do I mean here by authenticity? I work as a change facilitator almost entirely within the charity and overseas development sectors. Values I hold dear include the belief that my work is about enabling positive change to take place, ultimately for a better world, the pre-eminence of listening as an active intervention, and the virtue of collaborative working. Authenticity for me is about being 'true to myself', living and working according to my values and standards, 'walking the talk', and 'the process is the content'. The way I work needs to be congruent with what I have come to believe about people, organisations and change. Practice needs to be underpinned by theory. I guess every consultant would, consciously or unconsciously, hold to their own uniquely expressed framework of core values and beliefs and have an instinctive sense of whether a given assignment is congruent with them.

This congruence is what Gestalt theorist Edwin Nevis means by 'presence': an integration of assimilated theories of learning and change with a way of presenting oneself: "Those who have presence in the eyes of others appear to be doing and being what they are meant to be." (Nevis, 1998 p.78). Coherent with this are core ideas of the complexity theory paradigm, which underpins all my work. According to this, the consultant can never be seen to be wholly external to the field or system of the client group or organisation. The tiniest gesture or intervention by the consultant into the systemic reality of the client makes a difference—in ways that may or may not be intentional or measurable.

Authenticity as a value is also explicit or implicit in the holistic and confessional accounts of consultants' lives such as those by Page (1996), Jaworski (1996) and Harrison (1995). Authentic consultancy involves an integration of head, heart and spirit, work and personal relationship. Page agonises about whether his children would prefer a tree house or hamster (hamster wins hands down). Jaworski communes with the universe and encounters his beautiful future wife at an airport. Harrison marries *several* times, and makes it clear that the personal development of the consultant and the development of the organisation are one, and the process of reflective writing is inherent and essential to this journey.

Patsy Rodenburg is, however, not an OD consultant. Rather, she is a voice coach who works primarily with drama students and actors. In *Presence* she is offering her insights to a wider audience. Presence, for Rodenburg, is charisma or star quality, or "It", and also "present energy—clear, whole and attentive energy". We see it, yes, in famous actors, but we all had it quite naturally as children. Think of the way that our attention can't help but be drawn to a child. There was the little girl I watched while waiting at a bus terminal recently as she trailed behind her hurrying and distracted mother. In one hand she clutched a stuffed animal, and in the other the handle of her miniature pink suitcase on wheels, which seemed to have a mind of its own and kept overturning on each kerb or bump in the path. The little girl, with studied concentration and determination, continually righted the case and scampered to keep up with her mother entirely unbothered by the busyness all around.

Three Circles of Energy

Rodenburg believes that, with practice, all of us can rediscover this innate quality.

> I began to know that presence is a universal quality that we all have but is somehow flattened out of us—'It' is an 'It' that we all have locked away in our bodies and breath that can be awakened.

The essential idea of 'Presence' is that at any time—and perhaps even from moment to moment—we are in any one of three circles of energy: and the winners in life are those with 'second circle' energy, the ones with presence.

We communicate at any times from one of these three circles, and while each circle may be appropriate in different circumstances, only mutual second circle communication is coherent with authenticity as I have defined it. First circle energy is directed inward, reflective and self-absorbed. Third circle energy is directed outward to a depersonalised audience. Second circle energy is focussed and intimate. I have presented some of the characteristics of each circle in Table 1.

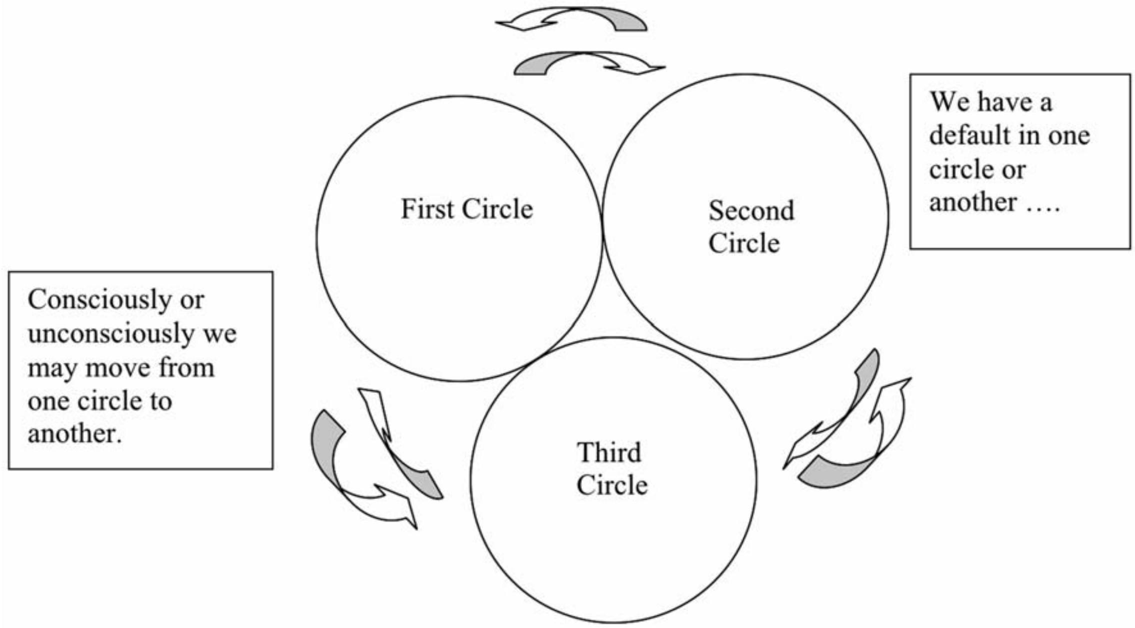

Figure 1: The focus of Rodenburg's Three Circles of Energy

It is important to note that these circles are not a matter of personality or character. Each of us can and does exist in all three circles, although we may default to one or other of them. Rodenburg, as a voice coach, believes that disciplined voice, body and breathing exercises, as well as other deliberate actions such as listening to music or walking in nature, can bring us from First or Third Circle into Second. For more details on that, read her book! It is well worthwhile.

Second Circle practice

As professionals, our work hinges on the quality of the relationships we build with our clients, client groups and organisations. So it will be obvious that Rodenburg's essentially very simple thesis is of direct relevance, whether we are managers, coaches or consultants. As I mentioned earlier, I take as axiomatic that I seek 'authenticity' in my work as a consultant. While self-employment is risky and hard work, I can

First circle	Second circle	Third circle
● Energy inward-moving ● Introspection and reflection ● May appear "self-centred, uncaring and withdrawn" ● Drains rather than enlivens others ● Vulnerable to being victimised ● Useful when you don't want to be noticed	● Energy focussed on specific object, person ● Energy moves both directions, takes and gives ● Focussed in present ● Connected to audience ● Begets intimacy ● Also exposed, vulnerable and open to risk	● Energy focussed outward toward world in general; non-specific target ● Poor listening; protected and defended ● May appear "insensitive, arrogant and over-bearing" ● Pleasant and enthusiastic without fully committing; "performing" ● Relentless charm and enthusiasm.

Table 1: The characteristics of each Circle of Energy

remain more 'true' to this inner star than I could in fulltime employment. And having undertaken the commitment, there is no point in compromising for any assignment. Experience has taught me many lessons, and I need to work in a way that is 'true to my experience'.

I also believe that I must engage with my work 'holistically'. In other words, there is a physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual element to everything I do. This, I hasten to add, is not about getting boundaries confused, and Nevis agrees. Presence, he stresses, is not "letting it all hang out" (Nevis, 1998 p. 77). But presence is about recognising the importance of an integrated approach to the work. The demand for authenticity requires that negotiation with a client over a potential piece of work is a two-way street. The client is choosing a consultant that is right for them; conversely, I am looking for clients and assignments that are right for me. I need to communicate and express myself in a way that will enable this two-way negotiation to take place. I trust that clients will notice the benefits of this commitment to an authentic and integrated approach, although they may rarely analyse its precise nature or source.

Writing in each Circle

My main concern here is to explore how we may and do write in each of the three circles. I also want to challenge us all to spend more time writing in second circle, the place of presence and authenticity.

First Circle Writing

First circle is the place of reflection and introspection. The audience for our writing is ourselves. Clearly, as consultants or OD specialists, the primary means of first circle writing is in our journals, where we process and resolve issues and identify key learnings. One of the many dangers of email, especially for introverts who may well default to first circle, is that we write emails in first circle. In first circle, according to Rodenburg, we may become invisible, and so a first circle email may be incomprehensible to its reader. The formality of letter-writing offers some protection from this because we need to think more carefully about what and to whom we are writing and whether to send it. We used to 'draft' letters, but we rarely draft emails. First circle letter or email-writing is for friends and intimates only!

Third Circle Writing

Third circle writing is that of marketing and publicity: the brochure, the flyer, the all-user email and the website. It may also be the language of the PowerPoint presentation and the consultant's report. It may aim to be 'impressive', glossy and present material in an objective or impersonal way. The language is likely to be formal and may use jargon. This writing is aiming deliberately to reach as wide an audience as possible. The author is unwilling to take a risk and in this type of writing reveals little about themselves.

Terms of Reference

As a consultant, I experience pressure from all directions to work and communicate in third circle as a consultant. Rodenburg's book gives me a language and a framework for expressing my already-existing doubts about using this type of writing. One obvious example of third circle writing is Terms of Reference for consultancy contracts. These often appear in my email inbox and I find that I am expected to respond to these in writing, without a conversation with the client. Clients, particularly in the charity sector, may justify the use of Terms of Reference on the grounds that this is a more efficient or fair way to choose a consultant. However, I have come to realise that I am not really able to recommend an intervention or do my best work without a 'second circle' conversation with the client.

Some clients may have self-diagnosed a problem or challenge in their work, while unconsciously retaining an investment in things remaining unchanged. They go through the motions of addressing the issue, even hiring a consultant, without conviction or commitment. Consultancy delivered or received in third circle is probably doomed to superficiality or failure. Clients may on the other hand want an issue addressed, but unthinkingly use third circle communication such as Terms of Reference. If the consultant replies in Third Circle, the work is probably, again, doomed.

It seems to me now that it is my responsibility as a consultant to take the risk to challenge this practice. Perhaps I am looking a workhorse in the mouth, but the consequences of taking on a piece of work without a second circle conversation actually present a greater risk.

Websites

Many websites are written in Third Circle. When I started my practice ChangeAware, I couldn't really afford a web designer. I knew a designer would want me to be fairly clear in advance about the structure of my site. I wanted something personal and flexible that I could change myself at a moment's notice, and I wanted the website to reflect my own approach, even at the risk of putting off clients. I came across moonfruit.com and was able to do just this. With effort, I was eventually able to produce something which I hope is professional without being glossy. It expresses something that is authentically myself, using, for example, many of my own photographs (on which clients often comment). I also needed to avoid the website being written in 'first circle', and hence appearing too personal.

When I designed and produced my website, I had not read Rodenburg. Now I see clearly that I had identified the problem of wanting to write my website in second circle rather than third, or first.

Second Circle Writing

What are the characteristics of second circle writing? First of all, it needs a specific imagined audience. In the days when I did radio broadcasting, I was taught to imagine that the microphone was a specific individual. I always used to recall the cliché images of a family during World War II bent close to the radio! Similarly, when we give a presentation, however large the audience, we are taught to make eye contact with people. Often there is one particularly responsive person on whom we can fix our attention.

Secondly, successful second circle writing is not over-personal. But it does explicitly start from and attend to our experience and the experience of our clients. It cannot be formulaic, purely academic or theoretical. Recently, I was asked by a client, a large overseas development agency, to carry out a review of a government-funded project in an African country. I responded, but they knew already that I was not a technical specialist in evaluation. Actually, the project had not gone well, and the client genuinely wanted to know what had really happened. They knew that the impersonal tables and statistical analysis of an evaluation would not tell them the whole story. Instead, I brought my skills and background as a journalist and sociologist to bear as well as those of the consultant. I saw the assignment more as the narrative account of the varied perceptions and experiences of everyone who had been involved in this project. It felt risky, I must admit. But the test of the final product was that, although coming up with some surprising conclusions, the final product 'rang true' or 'resonated' with the client. And they were more than pleased with the outcome.

Rodenburg says that one way to reconnect with second circle is to be in nature. That is one reason writers go to the country, which is where I am drafting this article. She also explains a dilemma I have experienced with painful consequences. For authentic communication to take place, the receiver must also be in second circle! Probably, the reader of this article, or of a non-fiction book or novel, needs to be 'in the mood' to read it. But I fear that even a carefully drafted second circle email can be misunderstood and the author's motivations misinterpreted. That is why if we find ourselves reacting crossly or defensively to an email we should always reread it later. Often a different mood in us evokes a different response.

This article began not with a certainty, but with a hunch. This hunch was that Rodenburg's circles could be applied to the way we write, and to the way we read the writing of others. Writing it has been an adventure, giving me the opportunity to think in a new way about some of the ways that I write, and the capacity of writing to enhance the authenticity of the work we do. I was slightly amused when the "critical friend" assigned to accompany the writing process suggested that I include an example of second circle writing in the article! May I suggest that a definition of second circle writing is that it is patently authentic, compelling and memorable? And if you have read this far, I may have at least partially succeeded in that ambition. But let me end with the story of the negative impact of third circle writing transformed by a second circle email.

Second Circle Writing wins out

The CEO of a charity releases a paper to the staff outlining a new strategic direction for the organisation. Written in an impersonal third circle, it offers a bold new vision for meeting the needs of clients, but fails to speak to the fears or needs of staff. The CEO is shocked by the feedback from team discussions of the paper. She writes in second circle to the angriest team:

"I am so very sorry that you feel undervalued, disappointed, downhearted and unimportant. That has never been on the agenda and never been the intention—why on earth would we want to do that to such a great team of people?" And the team leader replies, also in second circle: "I was very touched by your email, and I think the immediate and positive response you gave has lifted the team's spirits. They know now that they are valued and respected. I tell them often enough, but your email was 'the icing on the cake'. The team is now looking forward to the new strategic direction."

Acknowledgements

I would like to express appreciation for Bob MacKenzie's critical encouragement during the writing of this article—and in particular for his remarkable commitment and hard work in producing this special themed issue of *Organisations & People*. I was inspired by him to write for publication for the first time in some while, and it has been a privilege to work with him in the editorial process.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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ChangeAware

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Facilitating change in people,
teams and organisations
in the
overseas development and
charity sectors.

The Increasing Value of Keywords in Marketing

NEIL DAVIDSON

The emergence of the internet has already changed the face of marketing and business, but there will be greater change in the next five years. These changes will be driven by the rise of the importance of internet search engines and search engine data. This data is the key to a new form of insight on consumers and markets, insight based on real behaviour. Because this insight is based on the words consumers use, it will offer new and surprising opportunities to conventional advertising and marketing agencies, marketing and general business organisations, business leaders, consultants and leaders of change.

KEYWORDS: Internet, insight, creativity, consumers, search engine optimisation, marketing and advertising.

Introduction

We are all aware of the rise of the internet and its effect on buying behaviour over recent years. The big question is what the next internet-based trend will be. The most likely driver of change will be the internet search engine. However, it would be easy to assume that their emergence might exclude the conventional skills used by traditional marketing and advertising agencies or that the opportunities they create will be restricted to those who understand the complex technologies used by search engines. The truth is different: the word will become more important in this internet age. Smart marketing and advertising agencies will adapt their word based skills to use the rich insight available from search engines, while business leaders, consultants and leaders of change could use search engine data to increase the quality of their work.

Faster and smoother search engines

Words are the glue that holds the internet together. We use words to find the right website; words help us make sense of the content and the importance of word-driven internet search engines is often overlooked.

Search engine marketing experts like to surprise new clients by telling them that over 80% of internet sessions start with the use of a search engine. Most internet users still use a search engine to get to a particular website, even when they know the website address, because using words just feels so much easier and more intuitive.

Search engines are improving. The user experience is faster and smoother, and search engine organisations are getting smarter in how they use the data from words typed in by users. Consumers will rely on search engines even more and marketing experts will need to recognise their importance.

Keyword research data

Search engines don't do a live search after you type in your word or phrase. The work has already been done and stored, ready for your request. The words that you type in as part of your search are also stored.

The words saved from searches are known as "keyword phrases". The most common use for keyword data is in search engine optimisation (SEO). SEO providers originally aimed to help websites get to the top of search engine results. These results depend on a close match between search terms and website content.

Some internet marketing experts already use keyword data in other ways, for example to:

- Discover the right phrases to bid for in Pay-Per-Click (PPC) campaigns, the text boxes within a website that often pop-up on the right-hand side of your screen when you're searching.
- Spot other quirks in consumer search behaviour to generate website sales. Many businesses win sales by capitalising on misspellings when people search. They recognise these as misspellings but still include them in their website copy. For example, Park Seeds (www.parkseed.com) generates website visits and sales through the misspellings of Latin plant names.
- Use keyword data as guidance for developing copy for websites. Because keyword data tell them what users want to read about, they can direct content areas and what to say about a particular subject.

Consumer insight on tap

I have done consultancy and commercial writing for Wordtracker (www.wordtracker.com) since 2005. Wordtracker is one of the best-known providers of keyword data but I have been amazed how little was known about the subject outside the world of SEO. I also saw that the existing uses of keyword data were only the tip of the iceberg in terms of their potential for digital marketing, marketing in any media and business generally. They also have great potential as a tool for writers generally, for the generation of ideas and as a style guide.

Marketing experts obsess over what consumers think and feel about the world generally, their attitudes and beliefs, and what they think about a particular product, service or sector. These experts invest in qualitative and quantitative research to try and understand consumers, but this research has limitations. The research process itself affects responses and is based on reported, not actual behaviour. It is also expensive and slow. Keyword data is an alternative source of consumer insight. It doesn't suffer from any research effect, as it's purely a summary of the words that users type into search engines.

There are early adopters of these uses of keyword data, and here are some of the ways that smart marketing people are using it:

- **As a stimulus for brainstorming sessions.** Keyword data can summarise consumer views on a topic, both expected and unexpected. The results are the perfect springboard for brainstorming sessions around new product development, product positionings and new business ideas generally.

- **Estimating market size and revenue potential of a particular market.** By knowing the number of searches for a product, service or sector it's possible to work out the potential size of an existing or untried market. (For more detailed examples, see the keyword research guide at www.wordtracker.com.)
- **Spotting new market segments and developing marketing strategies.** Smart analysis of keyword data can reveal whether consumers are looking for what you think they might want or whether there is an unmet need in your sector. Imagine you were considering launching a vegetarian dog food and you came up with the following keyword data results:

  - "Vegetarian pet food" is a more popular search term than "vegetarian dog food."
  - Consumers searching for vegetarian pet food are more interested in the health reasons behind it than the ethical reasons, i.e. they are unlikely to be vegetarians themselves.
  - One of the top 1,000 popular search terms generally is around "puppy dog names."

These insights uncover opportunities to broaden the product offer, develop a positioning and targeting of the product and an opportunity to grow the market, i.e. talking to dog owners when they get their puppy. (There's a free report on these approaches, written by myself and other marketing experts, on the Wordtracker website.)

- **Developing customer personas.** Customer personas bring an audience archetype to life. They are richer than classic target audience descriptions and include descriptions of the internet usage patterns, the level of digital sophistication and the technology the customer is using. This means the relevance of the content can be increased, as well as the usability of digital interfaces, such as website design.
- **As a new business tool.** All of the uses listed above are relevant to new business pitches and the insight available can be accessed quickly and cheaply, making it ideal for pitches. It's especially useful for smaller advertising or marketing agencies that don't have large research budgets.

Wordtracker is already learning from and building on these new uses discovered within its customer base. They created the term "keyword creativity" to describe these and other uses for the data. The term challenges existing preconceptions that keyword data are not about creativity and thus in terms that will interest advertising and marketing agencies. If you want to see how Wordtracker's Chief Marketing Officer, Ken McGaffin, and myself have spread and owned "keyword creativity" on the internet just search for the term with Google.

The Super Bowl effect

Nothing compares to the razzmatazz and the massive advertising exposure of the Super Bowl, the premier football fixture in the USA. It's estimated that 2.5 million new televisions were bought in the USA in the weeks leading up to Super Bowl last year, just so that viewers could see the game on high definition television.

It's a time to get the fundamentals of marketing right, but in 2002 AT&T did just the opposite. As part of the launch of 'm-life', its mobile communications initiative, AT&T invested millions in the Super Bowl, but didn't think about what its potential customers would do after seeing the ad. They went online and typed in 'm-life', but nothing had been done to make sure that AT&T had ownership of the term. AT&T lost customers to unrelated websites. It meant lost sales, but they had also managed to annoy a lot of people.

U.S. agencies and clients now understand how extended internet coverage can mean the difference between the success and failure of an advertising campaign. Take what the domain name and web hosting provider Go Daddy did at the 2007 Super Bowl. Advertising purists have criticised Go Daddy's advertising for relying on the sex appeal of the models they use in the ads, but the results have been incredible. (You can see examples of Go Daddy's advertising at www.wikipedia.org/wiki/GoDaddy) Go Daddy harnessed the controversy to get people onto the internet and get sales, with their 2007 ad, which was pulled before its planned second showing.

Go Daddy took the plaudit as one of the most annoying ads of Super Bowl 2007, but it was also the most replayed on the internet. Go Daddy's CEO whipped up a storm of coverage (www.bobparsons.com) and if you searched for the Go Daddy ad you found www.godaddy.com at the top of the list. Once you watched the ad on their website Go Daddy offered a special 10% sales discount. Year-on-year sales for Go Daddy on Super Bowl Monday were up 70%.

The challenge for advertising agencies is to make sure that they are the people talking to their clients about how to have an effect on internet results, instead of internet agencies talking to the same clients about how they to change their advertising.

Improve customer experience

Marketing experts now have access to the words that their target audience use on the internet, in their own homes, at the office, on the move or in internet cafes. This keyword data can make the link real between what consumers want, how it's summarised in marketing briefs and how it's communicated. It doesn't have to be based on enlightened guesswork or skewed research any more. Brand positioning, target audience definitions and key campaign messages can be built on the words that a particular target audience actually uses.

One view could be that this brings us closer to a world of Big Brother; concerns have been raised about the data held by search engines. Another view is that marketing organisations will now truly understand what consumers want and that there will be no excuse for not meeting these needs. All of this will be possible because of the power of words, even in the age of the internet.

Keyword data, leadership and change

Obviously, keyword creativity and other uses for keyword data have potential for those involved in leadership and change outside the world of marketing. Keyword data can be used to spot trends, understand markets and see things from a user's perspective. Based on my own experience, these insights often challenge a client's preconceived notions about their own consumers. Keyword data can also reveal ideas for new business and revenue streams for organisations and their clients. (For more detail, see the 'Leading Las Vegas' case study, written by myself, at www.wordtracker.com.)

Keyword data are consumer insight on tap and that insight can spark creativity. Organisations depend on insight and creativity to survive. You can expect to hear more people talking about what words are worth in the future.

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Complementary Forms of Writing for Organisational Learning

ROWENA DAVIS

This article discusses learning about the limits (and benefits) of using slide presentations to present complex realities and to bring about organisational learning and change. It discusses the role of written reports and meetings to complement slide presentations and enhance learning.

KEYWORDS: Complexity, systems theory, organisational change, learning, SAVI® communications, sensemaking, emergence, writing

Introduction

In this article I discuss how I learned about the limits and benefits of using slide presentations to present complex realities and bring about organisational learning and change. I describe how my approach to this with one client evolved over two years working in the US, UK, Italy and Turkey—in other words how I learnt too. The context is sensemaking in relation to market, industry or organisational data, rather than the use of presentations and reports for learning about concepts, tools or techniques.

The way I have made sense of what emerged in the series of projects described here is influenced by several theories about how organisations work and change. Specifically, I draw on Systems-Centred theory (SCT) (Agazarian, 1997; Gantt and Agazarian, 2006) and its tools, including the SAVI® model, to understand communication patterns. SCT includes a focus on how change happens through the group or organisation's ability to discriminate and integrate differences, as well as the importance of roles, goals and context, and identification of behaviours that approach or avoid goals. I also draw on the strand of complexity theory which acknowledges the complex, emergent, often unexpected nature of what unfolds in organisations, the practice of noticing what is happening in the moment and the notion that change happens through local interaction (Stacey, 2000; Shaw, 2002).

The projects were carried out for a client I've worked with over many years. It operates in one part of a complex distribution chain in many countries. My team helps it to make sense of the chain: what's happening at different points; how organisations react to changes and what informs their behaviour; what roles different parts of the chain perform and how these evolve. We do this through talking to people from different points in the chain, such as wholesalers of the raw materials, manufacturers and retailers, and we report back on the emerging themes. We discuss what we've found and the sense we've made of it with different people in the client organisation in meetings. Over the last two years we've begun to reflect more actively on what is helping and what is getting in the way of how we facilitate the client's learning.

One way we do this is to help the client describe the system it is part of with maps and rich pictures (Checkland, P and Scholes, J, 1999). The goal is to be able to see the different forces that enable or constrain change, including the impact of our client's strategies and actions on the wider system. Ultimately, the goal is for the client to learn from our work, specifically to refine its models of how the chain works and plan how it will act in the future. In other words, we adopt a classic Action Learning model of plan, act, observe and reflect.

'Yes-buts' to PowerPoint

This client had always asked for—and got from us—PowerPoint slide presentations that summarised the key 'learnings' from our work. People in the organisation like the slide format as they are then able to modify it into an easily digestible summary to inform discussions on what needs to change or happen next.

A couple of years ago we presented a PowerPoint summary of what was happening in the US market. We emailed this to the client in advance and then presented it at a meeting. The three people from the client organisation at the meeting had not read it before we met and sat with crossed arms as we went through it slide by slide. After about 10 minutes I was aware I felt uncomfortable and thought that there was too much detail for them to take in. I asked if they wanted me to continue in the same vein or stop and have a discussion. They asked me to keep going.

After the meeting, my colleague and I discussed our dissatisfaction with the number of 'Yes-buts' each time we made a point that was different from their existing view. In the SAVI® (System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction) model, 'Yes-buts' are a Red Light Competing verbal behaviour and are unlikely to convey the information intended by the speaker to the person they are talking to. The 'Yes-but, Yes-but' is a common pattern in organisations, used to offer a token agreement to something the speaker actually disagrees with. It allows the speaker to have a conversation with themselves rather than with the other person (Byram, 2006 and http://savicommunications.com/savigrid.pdf).

I reflected that we had brought in too much difference; that is, what we were saying was significantly different from the attendees' existing view of the world and we hadn't taken them along with our thinking. (In hindsight, I realised it would have been useful to separate out the 'Yes-buts' and explore the 'yes' first, then the 'but'. Oh, for hindsight in the moment!) This all resonated with my experience of writing the presentation; there was so much detail and I felt dissatisfied both with the level at which we had summarised it and the amount of detail we expected the client to take in first time round.

Yes-but, Yes-but pattern

> "The way to deal with this is to offer them a new contract."
> "Yes-but don't you think we've given them enough already?"
> "Yes-but if we don't do this, we'll never resolve this issue."
> "Yes-but I don't think this is right."

Yes-buts are often accompanied by an opinion-opinion pattern.

In SAVI® any pattern that gets stuck like this one is called an "alert". These are dead-end conversations which tend to generate frustration and fail to solve problems or resolve issues.

Interestingly, the manager we were working with told us in subsequent conversations she was very happy with the work. One of the most contentious slides—on the unintended consequences of the client's actions—was adopted as part of the organisation's strategic thinking and became common parlance. Chris Rodgers (personal communication) has suggested, rightly I think, that:

> the issue might be partly explained in terms of the political dynamics of organisations. In other words, that joint sensemaking 'in the open' and on the back of a 'cold' presentation might be seen as a riskier undertaking than if the opportunity is afforded for people to make sense of contentious issues privately (or with close allies) before being exposed to the material in open forum. The former approach might inevitably generate more 'Yes-buts' as a sort of defence mechanism (because people can't judge how the political territory lies), even if the point being put across resonates with them as a fair reflection of what's going on.

'Yes-ands' to a report and presentation

In the next project on the UK market, I wrote a Word report as an experiment. I found it easier to convey the complex interactions between different parts of the system and the emergent, sometimes unexpected reactions to change. My client also wanted me to present a PowerPoint version as a higher level summary at a meeting. I tried to resist this—I was only seeing the limits of slide presentations at this stage—but knuckled down and discovered I had fun doing it and the end result produced some new insights. I found the presentation easier to do once the complexity had been conveyed and made sense of in the Word report. I also enjoyed enriching the slides with pictures and images that conveyed some of the feeling of what was happening in the market. I had a week between finishing the report and delivering the presentation—crucial to allow the creative juices to add more; to be able to see the 'learnings' at another level and bring in new ones.

The client team also had a week in which to read and absorb the written report. They were delighted with the granularity of the report and how it 'all made sense'. They saw it as a reference point—'my bible'—which they would use, and in practice have used to inform different aspects of their thinking and planning. We had also met their expectation of a higher level summary with the presentation. In the meeting there were no 'Yes-buts'; just 'Yes-ands' as they built on our conclusions and got excited about the implications for various parts of the organisation and how they were going to act next. In SAVI® 'Yes-ands' are an Integrating Green Light behaviour, important to building a problem-solving climate.

I have reflected that we gave them time to absorb the detail and react to the conclusions.

There was a narrative which made sense as a whole. This concurs with Weick's (1995: 17) notion of sensemaking.

> It is the job of the sensemaker to convert a world of experience into an intelligible world. That person's job is not to look for the one true picture that corresponds to a pre-existing, preformed reality. The picture of sensemaking that emerges is not one of the tidy world of Mastermind. Instead the picture that is suggested is 'that there is nobody here but us scratching around trying to make our experience and our world as comprehensible to ourselves in the best way we can, that the various kinds of order that we come up with are a product of our imagination and need, not something dictated to us by Reality Itself. There isn't any One True Map of the earth, of human existence, of the universe, or of Ultimate Reality, a Map supposedly embedded inside these things; there are only maps we construct to make sense of the welter of our experience, and only us to judge whether these maps are worthwhile for us or not' (Fay, 1990: 38).
>
> (Weick 2001: 9)

Back to 'Yes-buts' to PowerPoint

So far, so good. For the next project in Italy I went along with the Italian team's request to present the day after delivering the report. This meant there was no time to do both a written report *and* a slide presentation so I opted for a longer than normal slide presentation. Again, I found the writing dissatisfying; it was harder to build up a story that made sense and link the different, complex interactions between different players. The flow was wooden, not smooth. What we were saying was very different from what one part of the client organisation wanted. It challenged their position and potentially their existence. Again lots of 'Yes-buts'—this time with more aggression. Interestingly, I felt less able as the presenter to substantiate our view of what was happening, even though it was fully backed up by the data. We had built up less of a story, there were fewer quotes and somehow the whole seemed more fragile than in a written report. I and the client manager concluded that we should stick to the format of a written report, short gap and slide presentation. Figure 1 summarises our thinking.

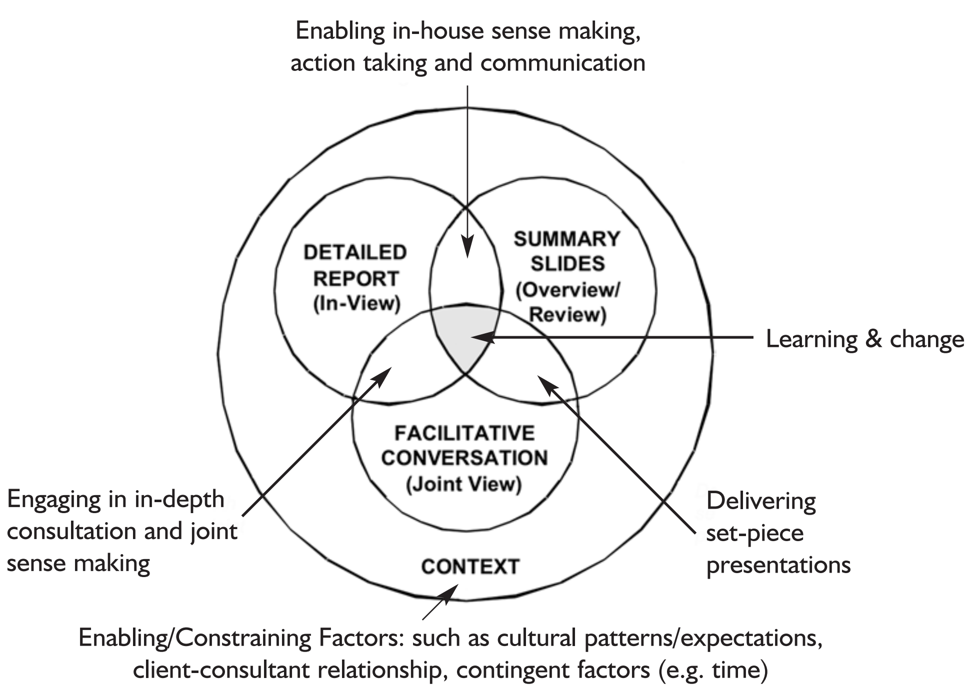

Figure 1: Two complementary forms of writing

Presenting a report emergently

In the latest project on Turkey, I sent the Turkey team the report a week ahead of our meeting to discuss it. All but one of the five participants had read the report before the meeting and the one who hadn't was already very familiar with the work we have done in other markets. During the meeting, I simply projected the charts and "maps" from the Word report. We had a lively conversation which followed the energy and curiosity in the room. This links with Stacey's notion that change happens when conversations are open and lively (as opposed to stuck in repetitive themes or incoherent and chaotic). Indeed, for Stacey, "Facilitation of change is facilitation of different forms of conversation." (Stacey, 2000: 365).

Conclusion

Only recently have I explicitly reflected with the client on the role of the writing as a tool for organisational learning. This doesn't mean that the writing wasn't being used for learning—just that it was an implicit, rather than an explicit, goal. My own view has also changed through writing this article. I have become much clearer that written reports, slide presentations and conversations all have their place in making sense of complex data, depending on the goal and the context. One definition of complexity from the Santa Fe Institute is:

> the condition of the universe which is integrated and yet too rich and varied for us to understand in simple common mechanistic or linear ways. We can understand many parts of the universe in these ways but the larger and more intricately related phenomena can only be understood by principles and patterns—not in detail. Complexity deals with the nature of emergence, innovation, learning and adaptation.
>
> (Battram, 1998: 12).

Through this process the client teams and I have come to see that a written report can help both the writer and the reader come to grips with complexity. It allows the individual time to digest and interact with the thinking and data at his or her own pace. It also offers the possibility of making sense of the findings in small groups or one-to-one before expressing opinions in a more public meeting. A written report is also a reference point. It's something individuals and teams go back to when they're thinking through different aspects of their planning. It's more easily accessible to people who weren't at the original meeting as the report has more detail and builds up the thinking in a more transparent way.

I've also come to see the role of the presentation format more clearly—it does help sift the wood from the trees and can be an opportunity to lift the thinking up a level, with the aid of visual tools that are more difficult in a written report. To be of real value it too needs to engage with the complexity—but more through diagrams, images and maps—and surface another level of perceived patterns.

The two forms of writing also address different (perceived) needs of different constituencies of people. The report format is more suited for those people at peer-group level who need to understand and engage with the subject in the same depth as those who were directly involved (who really need to "get their hands dirty" and be able to refer back to the detail). In contrast, the slides, whether presented or distributed, are viewed by clients as a more accessible way to communicate with those whom they judge only need to know the settled-upon outcome (i.e. the formal message). (Thanks to Chris Rodgers for pointing to this implicit conclusion in the first draft.)

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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Striking Moments and Reflective Writing

ALISON DONALDSON

During a two-day meeting, a group of colleagues working together for the first time were invited to write down some reflections on what 'struck' them during the first day's conversation. Next day, they shared their writing by reading it aloud. The experience helped to generate a sense of connection and prepare the group for its future work together. Such experiments in reflective writing and reading can, the author argues, be used to stimulate learning and change in organisations.

KEYWORDS: Writing, reading, reflection, learning, change, teams, inquiry methods, conversation, collaboration

Introduction: moments that change us

> Fundamental to the nature of such moments is the fact that they are what we might call 'arresting', 'striking' or 'moving' moments. They are moments that matter, that make a difference in our lives.
>
> *(Shotter, in press)*

Reflective writing is not new. Trainee teachers conduct 'critical incident analyses'. Medical students write reflective pieces about their experiences in order to explore their hopes, fears, mistakes and emotions. Nurses have been using reflective diaries for years. I hope, nevertheless, that the account below will cast new light on reflective writing and give a flavour of how it might be useful in organisational life. In the case explored here, my colleagues and I used writing, reading and conversation to develop our thinking and practice and prepare ourselves for a joint future working opportunity.

One distinctive aspect of this account is the emphasis on 'striking moments'. I was introduced to this concept through the writings of a member of the group (John Shotter), who in turn draws on the work of Wittgenstein and a psychotherapist called Tom Andersen.

We are all 'struck' by an experience from time to time—a comment, a look, a feeling, something beautiful or unexpected, a written phrase, a troubling incident. But we do not necessarily take time to notice and reflect on these arresting moments. We may not even recognise how significant they are.

How is it that we have apparently come to ignore or underestimate 'what strikes us'? Some argue that we are under the spell of science: "the belief that there is a form or pattern of reasoning, a methodology, that we must follow if we are to overcome the difficulties we face in our lives" (Shotter, 2006: 2). Within a purely rational approach, 'systematic' is good and 'random' is bad, so of course 'striking moments' cannot be taken seriously.

Many have further argued that scientific or technical solutions are not suited to every kind of inquiry. Each field of investigation should be allowed to "devise methods to match its problems" (Toulmin, 2001: 83). Science tends to direct our attention to the search for hidden mechanisms (Shotter, 2006). In conversation, however, some would argue that "nothing is concealed" (Wittgenstein, 1953: remark no.435). The trouble is "it all flows past so quickly" (ibid). We do not normally have time to reflect on what happens between us.

An emerging ensemble

In summer 2007 my colleagues and I met up for two days at a farmhouse in France. There were four of us—the fifth had missed his plane and could only join us remotely, using Skype internet calls. In recent months we had all felt a growing desire to work together and now a potential opportunity had come up for us to engage with a particular organisation. In France, we wanted to explore our different ways of working and how they might intertwine, and we hoped not just to *talk about* working together but to 'practise' together. We are all organisational practitioners with particular practical and academic interests. For example, I pay special attention to the relationship between writing and conversation, whereas my colleagues focus on things like working live with conversation, creativity at work, or working with recordings of people talking about their experience.

In anticipation of the meeting, I recall being keen to invite everybody to try some reflective writing at some point during the two days. Towards the end of the first day, I voiced this desire and the others seemed receptive. During our first Skype call with Donald, therefore, I invited each of us to think about a 'striking' moment during the first day's conversation and write down (possibly by hand) a few thoughts about this experience, which we would all share the following day. Half a page would be quite sufficient, I remember suggesting. Next morning when we gathered for breakfast, it became clear that some had not yet found time to write. But with some encouragement, each produced a piece.

The four of us in France started the second day's meeting by reading our reflective pieces out loud to each other. I remember my delight at hearing just how differently each of us had gone about the task. I had found myself describing not just one but a number of striking moments from the previous day (perhaps taking my own directions most literally!). Others had written more of the feeling of the meeting for them. And the voices varied—for example, one wrote partly in the more distanced third person but most wrote in the first person singular. None of the pieces felt like formal meeting notes. The excerpts below are included to provide a flavour of how we wrote, even if their content may seem a little obscure to those not present at the time.

John

A table of friends in a French country garden, no one from France, but each one feeling that France is for ease, freedom, and relaxation—even after a long day travelling. The task: to find a new way forward, a new way to set the scene for institutional change and development—for none of the old ways seem to work anymore, if, in fact, they ever worked ...

Theodore

I am struck by the lengths to which we have gone to hold off from instrumentalising the details of our proposed interventions ...

Patricia

I'm chastising myself that, having extolled the importance of noticing detail, what I have now are only strong impressions. Like the feeling of dancing in my body I sense the growing ease between us, the pleasure as we relax into being together, I remember the little jig I danced in the kitchen ...

Alison

... I remember Patricia inviting me to say something, after I had been listening quietly to the conversation for some time ... she was talking herself about 'working iteratively' and while still in the flow she simply looked towards me and asked how this all resonated with my work or experience. I was glad to be asked and said that, yes, iteration was at the heart of my work. What this incident brings out for me is the amazing complexity of the turn-taking process. In all these conversations I/we respond inwardly to almost everything that is said, but we must choose our moment to express ourselves. I often find myself keeping in my thoughts, while at the same time wanting to speak out loud, because speaking up ignites a more intense participation ...

The reading aloud itself added an extra dimension. Each of us heard our own voice, noticed how our written words sounded in speaking. We stumbled over certain phrases, we could choose where to slow down or pause, and our words naturally had tone and emphasis. After the readings a rich conversation developed. It was then that Patricia mentioned the sense of our becoming an 'ensemble'. I remember too asking John about his use of the third person—in his academic writings he places much emphasis on the distinction between talking 'from within' as opposed to 'about' our experience. He disarmingly admitted that he himself oscillates between 'aboutness' and 'withness'.

Insights

Now, some three months after the experience, a few notes I made at the time remind me of some 'insights' that emerged for me then, which have probably since taken root in my ways of thinking. For example:

- *Quality of inviting*. Someone commented that this had had a strong influence on our experience. What this means to me now, as I reflect on it again, is that perhaps the emphasis on striking moments gave people a licence to write in a more personal way, to focus on memorable aspects, rather than trying to summarise literally what we had discussed.
- *Noticing what one another had noticed*. Listening to one another's reflective writing made this possible.
- *Writing "turns passing events into something that can be reconsulted"*. To me this phrase, which John attributed to Geertz, was so much more appealing than the popular notions of 'tacit' and 'explicit' knowledge.
- *"But will it be the right or the wrong account?"* One thing that seems to hold some people back from writing narrative accounts of their experience is that they ask themselves "How do I choose among the many possible narratives? Can I bear to commit just one to paper?"

Later that afternoon, we had a second Skype call with Donald in Scotland, during which the four of us in France each read our piece out loud again, this time without any discussion between each reading. Donald then responded, with feeling, in his melodious Scottish accent:

> If there was ever a way to give me a flavour of what was going on, that was it, that was absolutely amazing. It's quite incredible that, you know, it's a billion squillion miles from an executive summary and yet it hits the mark straight away in a way that a report could never really do. I'm quite intrigued by that.

When John asked what this different kind of summary might allow him to go on to do, Donald replied thoughtfully and haltingly:

> What's occurring to me just now is… is that what that… what that did was it kind of cut through a veneer of protocol that might otherwise… have… kept us from one another in some way…

Then, for the first time, Donald read us his own piece, written the night before (see excerpt below).

Donald

It's midnight. I feel good. But I can't sleep...words are gathering like sheep for the morning feed. Demanding satisfaction.

Today was a good day. Things shifted. New shapes emerged through the mist. New paths beckon.

What struck me first and foremost about our conversation was the warmth. The welcome. I was particularly happy that it was Theodore who opened up this atmosphere as I had been hoping to sense that kind of connection with him in our first face-face meeting. Oddly my not being with you in the flesh no longer felt like an absence. Indeed, my absence somehow heightened my sense of your presence as, on Skype, only your voices and my imagination were at play ...

I think we all sensed that something meaningful had occurred between us, and that the writing and reading aloud had added something. It had slowed things down and made visible some creative differences amongst us. I remember glimpsing the promise of satisfying future collaboration. One might ask whether this 'result' was special to this particular group or occasion. I would reply, yes, in that every encounter occurs for the first time and is unrepeatable. But I am nevertheless confident that this kind of practice—combining conversation with writing and reading—has wider relevance.

I have been asked what intention lay behind inviting colleagues to write about a meeting—did I have an idea to test? I think I was testing a method or practice that I have come to value, without knowing how my colleagues would respond. In the event, it proved to be a memorable experience for all of us. After two days, we felt we were indeed becoming an 'ensemble', and we had also done valuable preparatory work. Most tangibly, we recorded our conversation and readings and then used excerpts to make a sound file for the organisation we were hoping to work with, instead of a more conventional written proposal.

The value of writing in organisational life

> Human communication is never one-way. Always, it not only calls for response but is shaped in its very form and content by anticipated response.
>
> *(Ong, 2002: 173-4)*

I have come to understand organisational change as emerging predominantly from human interaction, much of which is *conversational* (i.e. oral rather than literate or written): meetings, informal encounters, phone calls, etc. Of course writing also plays a part, although sadly what is left of written communication in organisations today is often dry and unappetising, overly prescriptive (rules, targets, processes), or plain overwhelming (100s of emails a day).

My own research and practical experience have opened up for me the full potential of writing and reading. By studying a range of authors on communication and literacy, I began to see the shortcomings of the ubiquitous 'sender-receiver' metaphor, which implies, for example, that documents 'contain meaning'. This taken-for-granted way of talking about communication renders invisible the normal ambiguity and responsive nature of human interaction.

Indeed, I would argue that writing, though different from talking (and for many people less natural), is itself conversational. While writing, we conduct a silent conversation with some combination of our imagined readers and the 'generalised other' (Mead 1934). As words and sentences are formed, the imagined responses may influence us, and we sometimes change what we were intending to write. Eventually, we may send or read out our text to someone, at which point the response becomes real. This actual response then continues to change the meaning of our words.

Given that so much apparently goes on in our minds while we write (and also while we read), it is clear that the process of writing itself always creates something new. Writing is learning. It can lead us to sharpen and elaborate otherwise vague thoughts. In addition, writing can be thought of as a 'visible form of thinking'. The text makes our thinking available for further reflection and interaction. It can 'capture' experiences that might otherwise be transient.

So, what use is writing in pursuit of organisational development? I suggest the type of joint reflective exercise I have described can be easily woven into meetings, workshops or other encounters to stimulate learning and develop team spirit. Based on my experience so far, a number of reflections now emerge for me:

- *Focusing on 'striking moments'.* The act of taking just a little time to reflect and write encourages people to notice what has struck them from a meeting, conversation or a day at work. Writing about 'what strikes us' can be liberating: we don't have to stop for long to work out whether we are producing something systematic, comprehensive or knowledgeable. We simply take our experience seriously and try expressing it. Our words don't 'capture' the experience, they explore it further, so we don't need to worry too much whether we are writing down the 'right' story.
- *Using writing to develop our thinking.* As we search for words to express what we recall, and elaborate on it, we cast light on impressions and experiences that might otherwise remain dim, or which we might quickly put behind us.
- *The reading aloud* of what we have written—and the listening—can enrich a conversation, allowing us to glimpse new ways of thinking, and new ways of relating to our colleagues.
- *Deepening relationships.* There is no guarantee that such an exercise will improve working relationships but in my experience the sharing of reflective writing can help people understand one another better.
- *Enabling us to 'go on together'.* The 'outcome' of a conversation or meeting does not have to be an action plan or a specific decision. Even without such tangible 'outputs', we have probably all experienced conversations that are satisfying and productive. The practice described here, of weaving informal writing and reading into a meeting, can potentially allow us to develop new ways of seeing and acting.

All these thoughts have implications for how change emerges in organisations. Reflective writing is not a way to 'get things done' in the everyday sense. But it does have the potential to open up new understanding and strengthen working relationships. These are surely vital prerequisites for positive change and effective leadership.

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Agenda: *Managing Micro-strategy, Conflict and Consensus Artfully*

PETER FRANKLIN

Co-operative writing helps to develop consensus in the management of change. The principal investigative method of this proposition is a piece of ethnographic fiction-science which provides a short story for a subsequent brief discourse analysis. In the story, a group of managers discover that the process of sharing documents for review and comment helps to surface and resolve their conflicting implicit agendas. Finally, the paper raises the possibility of a theory of agenda which enables managers and facilitators to surface and work with the multiplicity of personal meanings and agendas when managing change.

KEYWORDS: Agenda, management of change, ethnographic fiction science, discourse, co-operative writing.

> Thus, there is no given plot. We do not ask: "What will happen next"? Rather, "What is happening"?
>
> (Per Wästberg, 2005. *Presentation Speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature*)

Introduction

Methodologically, this article draws upon insights derived from current thinking and practice in three research fields; namely, strategy as practice, ethnography and creative writing. Resulting insights are woven together by a piece of ethnographic fiction science (Watson, 2000, p. 500). Ethnographic fiction science requires written and told stories to be sufficiently fiction-like and science-like that readers value the perspectives, knowledge and insights which the author headlines, and which readers go on to discover independently.

Whilst this article has been drafted to meet this implied standard, the story which it contains remains an artifice. It is crafted deliberately to describe a context and a process which suits my intent as author (cf. Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Accordingly, it has four characteristics. It:

a. is inherently strategic;
b. shows fictional characters involved in co-operative writing, in joint authorship and behaving as critical friends (MacKenzie, 2006);
c. refers to different media, such as slides,

spreadsheets, emails and simple notes and comments (written *and* spoken) which are swapped. Written words are also spoken aloud, when using a flipchart;

d. highlights the claim that sharing documents for review and comment helps readers and writers to explicate one another's implicit agendas, encourages people to see one another's points of view, and hence facilitates consensus and commitment to prospective change.

Epistemological consequences

Two epistemological consequences arise from my methodology.

First, the claims about the importance of co-operative writing in facilitating change derive from a form of casual empiricism which is different from the stringent scientific methods of the true ethnographer. Casual empiricism is certainly not a perfect substitute for science; but it still yields the possibility of surfacing interesting insights, arguments and hypotheses for researchers to investigate later.

Second, it is important to signal an implicit double standard, which derives from an embedded irony. I am writing about the value of co-operative writing *seemingly* as a sole writer. It is for you as reader to decide whether this double-standard disqualifies the insights and outcomes recorded in this paper.

Agenda as discourse

CONTEXT

'Strategy as Practice' has become an important new research field, where scholars, researchers and consultants are focussing on the making and doing of strategy in organisations (see hyperlink 1 below).

The emphasis on 'practice' differs significantly from other perspectives in the study of strategic management, because 'strategy as practice' is concerned with observing, understanding and explaining the *micro*-processes and routines that leaders and managers adopt when doing strategy (cf. Franklin, 2001).

One consequence of this perspective is a rich methodological pluralism. In 'strategy as practice' scholars are experimenting with different methods, such as discourse analysis and script theory, and researchers are taking advantage of anthropological approaches, like ethnography. In this way, they study the formation, implementation and consequences of the strategies of organisations in which they are directly and intimately involved.

Writing Agenda in the management of change

The essential hypothesis of this paper is that drafting, writing and publishing formal agenda documents often involves complex strategic processes. These are typified by simulation, discussion and negotiation, when the initial written, spoken, half-said or tacit agenda is often 'co-operatively' re-written or re-spoken several times before final publication. This co-operative process is iterative and essentially political. It is a process which aims deliberately to shape:

- People's expectations of the future.
- The perspectives, structure, content and media of the contributions which people make in organisations.
- The arguments, issues and challenges which will be heard, and those which will be dismissed or stonewalled.
- The implied opportunities and threats which will influence individuals' future behaviours.

Discourse analysis

Here, the discourse analysis centres on the piece of ethnographic fiction science—a story called "Shaping the Future" that I have written for this article. It is concerned with the co-operative drafting, writing and publication of a new vision statement, and serves as a rhetorical device which pictures the fictional organisation's intended future. This is consistent with the focus of the 'Strategy as Practice' research field.

Implicit throughout the story are multiple agendas, interpretations and meanings of the idea and application of *Agenda*. As readers of the story, we never see (or read) the formal written Board Agenda, which we might reasonably expect to contain the item 'Proposed New Vision Statement'. However, the story notices different agendas amongst members of the top team, and recognises the rhetorical impact of agenda in the micro-strategic management process.

Like many oral histories and written recollections of the past, the narrative is bitty, with meanings often implied rather than being explicit. The dialogue between characters is sometimes cut short as people burst into others' conversations, and in the heat of the debate, their personal stories are misrepresented or mislaid by others.

The play-like script, complete with Acts and Scenes, plus an occasional touch of description and direction, enables our ethnographic fiction science to provide the reader with a matrix of possible meanings and interpretations relevant to our theme of writing in leadership and change. For instance, you might read the story as if you were a Board member who will eventually read the new Vision Statement, but never know its precise provenance. Alternatively, you might read it from the standpoint of one of the writers who co-operated in the drafting and publication of the presentation to the Board. Whatever standpoint(s) you take, this discussion marks the beginning of discourse analysis. As an approach, discourse analysis is concerned with discovering the rhetorical impact of text and talk (see hyperlink 2) on our lives as voyeurs or activists in the management of change (cf. Hamel, 1998).

The story: "Shaping the Future"

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Drew Goodman, Managing Director of the Strategic Business Unit
Finlay Donne, Finance Director
Heather Rowe, Head of Human Resources
Chuck Spender, Head of Sales and Marketing

ACT ONE: Late summer

Scene 1: Sunday. The night watch

In the silence of the night Drew began to write, slowly at first and then slowly faster. Silent words, and ugly disorganised phrases that had been causing him distress all evening were now, almost like magic, beginning to rearrange themselves into paragraphs and sentences which he felt would satisfy his colleagues and convince his critics.

Imagining the audiences who would eventually read the published version of the Vision Statement, and colleagues who he planned to involve in providing feedback, written comments and annotations prior to final publication, this stream of consciousness felt good, and pleased him.

Scene 2: Monday. Breakfast. Proofing Drew's first draft

Drew awoke early to proof read his overnight writing and to email copies to his team. By seven a.m. he was done: "Vision Statement. Draft

Version 01" was added to the front cover, and the Send button pressed. It was now in a public domain.

Scene 3: Monday noon. Drew's office. First informal ad hoc meeting

"What agenda are you talking about?" Heather asked, irritably. "Are you talking about the agenda for the main Board meeting, or are you talking about the change management agenda which is implicit in this draft you're asking us to comment on?"

"Both," Drew replied swiftly. "But it's crucial that we get our vision statement right, so that as Executive Board members we jointly 'own' the Vision Statement and assume accountability for the bits that we're individually responsible for."

"So you've really not drafted the change management agenda, then?" asked Heather, in obvious disbelief.

"No one person can or should do that, Heather," counselled Drew. "Based on our last executive meeting, you'll see I have drafted some thoughts. So let's work together to flesh these out, and ensure that our proposals hang together as a whole."

Heather looked across the table to see how her colleagues Finlay and Chuck were feeling about the discussion. "And what about the agenda for the Board meeting?" she insisted. "Are *you* going to present the Vision Statement, or do you want us to contribute somehow?"

"A couple of slides, perhaps?" asked Chuck.

"Good idea, Chuck," commented Finlay, eager to be heard. "I am happy to work up a spreadsheet showing the KPIs that we need to achieve if we are going to sustain double-digit growth over the next five years."

"But you cannot do that alone," Chuck contested, looking to challenge Finlay's devotion to spreadsheets. "For example, you and I, Finlay, need to work up and agree my sales and marketing budget before you finalise the prospective KPIs, and …"

"… and that's going to be true for all of us," intervened Drew. "We need to work together on this, and we need to be *seen* to be working together on this one." His team nodded. "If we are going to convince others about the need to make the changes we think are important for our future success, then we really must be seen to be writing and speaking and communicating as one."

"And what are you going to be doing, Drew?" grinned Heather.

Drew replied: "Will it be helpful if I circulate my notes of this discussion, and include some prompts about the structure and style of the presentation we should make to the Board?" The others gestured consent. "And in the meantime, can you let me have your comments on the draft Vision Statement that I sent today … plus any copy you'd like me to consider? Say, by Thursday morning?"

Scene 4: Friday noon. Drew's office. Second informal meeting

"First, I want to thank you for the emails and attachments you've sent me this week. I've read all of them, and over the weekend I'll draw up a second draft which reflects some of the suggestions you've made." Drew coughed.

"But before I draft the second version, I thought it might be helpful if we used this meeting to consider the implied impacts of the Vision Statement on our respective teams and portfolios. For instance, Chuck, I get the sense that you see the Vision Statement as a way of justifying a significant increase in marketing spend. And you, Heather, are trying to anticipate the training and development issues which will ensue, while poor Finlay feels excluded and unable to understand how either of you calculated the implied budgets you've asked for."

"That's not fair," Chuck interjected.

"Fair or not, Chuck," replied Drew. "That's how it appears when I read the special pleading *you* sent me."

Drew looked across the table at Heather and Chuck, and pointedly held his breath for a couple of moments to underline his disappointment.

"Now I want to make this clear: while I welcome many of the proposals you make about your own department, you cannot make these as *if* your department was the only one. There's no point claiming an increase in the training budget till we understand the full impact of the new strategy on our business plan. Similarly, there's no point looking for an increased marketing spend till we know what we want to prioritise. As part of our practice, we really need to involve Finlay in drawing up an overall budget that reflects the bottom up aspirations and challenges that arise from our Vision Statement."

The room fell silent. This was the first time that Drew had been openly critical about the way that individual members of his team were behaving. Perhaps he'd misunderstood the intention of some of their submissions. Perhaps he'd not been sufficiently clear about the format and content of the suggestions and advice he wanted from his executive team. Perhaps the faint hint of new jobs, and the prospect of new opportunities that were outlined in his draft Vision Statement had gone to their heads. Whatever the explanation, he remained disappointed that the hidden agendas of two of his team had seemed inappropriately ambitious and self-serving. But as the meeting closed, he consoled himself; he had the summer months to coach Heather and Chuck to behave in a more corporate way.

ACT TWO: Three months later

Scene 1: Monday 09:00 hrs. Drew's office. Formal executive meeting.

Drew stood alongside the flip chart, holding a couple of felt tip pens in his hand.

"So we've really moved on since the summer," he said. "Tomorrow afternoon, as executive members of the Board, together we will be asking the full Board to approve the Vision Statement we've been working on. As you know, the formal Board Agenda and associated papers went out ten days ago, and I am pleased to say that so far all the feedback I have heard has been positive."

"That's what I hear", Heather confirmed.

"The purpose of this meeting then is to draw up the batting order, and, to mix a metaphor or two, to agree the choreography of the day. Can I confirm you've read my suggestions?" Drew's team nodded. "So let's use the flip chart to discuss and record the prospective timings of our contributions tomorrow, and agree how we are going to pass the baton between us …"

Scene 2: Same day, towards the end of the same meeting. 10:50 hrs.

"So we are agreed?" Drew asked rhetorically, as the meeting came to a close.

"It's been a really useful exercise for me," Heather volunteered. "Working together has given me a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing HR, and I can also see those which face other teams across the business.

"I agree," Chuck reflected. "By contributing to the Vision Statement, and preparing jointly for tomorrow's presentation to the Board, I know what we need to do together."

"It's been a great learning experience for me," added Finlay. "As a newcomer, it's helped me to understand the business as a whole, and it's been a great induction process …"

"Something we might build on in the future," quipped Heather, trying to catch Drew's eye.

"… and most importantly of all," said Finlay, keen to close the meeting with the final word. "I've also learned how to insert a spreadsheet into a PowerPoint slide ..!"

Drew left the meeting smiling. He knew it had worked: the co-authorship and sharing of drafts of documents had helped to knit his team and design a potentially better future for the organisation as a whole—for shareholders, team, and staff.

Towards a theory of Agenda

This paper takes a fresh look at the role of agenda in managing change in organisations. It argues that in its intent and application, an agenda is part of the internal political process. Further, it deduces that those who draft and publish agendas shape the future of others and, tautologically, wield considerable power through the creation and application of those agendas.

When power is shared, however, the intent and application of agenda has other purposes. In particular, as we've seen from our story, the co-operative drafting, amending and publication of agenda encourages others to reveal their own agendas about what they want from other people and about what they're prepared to commit.

In the real world, personal agendas are seldom explicitly stated or recorded, except perhaps during appraisals, when jobs and career aspirations are re-written, re-storied and vigorously defended. But while these agenda mainly lie hidden, skin deep, they help to determine an individual's attitudes and behaviours in the presence of friends, colleagues and others beyond.

In our story, we catch glimpses of personal agendas. For instance, Heather is chastised about her claim for an increased training budget, and Chuck is admonished for his apparent rudeness to Finlay.

Whether Chuck meant to be rude, or failed to notice he was being rude, we'll never know. The point is that there is always a possibility that misunderstandings will erupt between colleagues. When there are resources (and power) to be won or lost, as triggered by a new plan, initiative, or agenda, competitive tensions between colleagues are likely to rise.

On one reading of our story, we might be generous about Drew's leadership style. In particular we might conclude that Drew had anticipated the gung ho claims that Heather and Chuck would make on Drew's future budget. This would also explain why one of Drew's concerns—one of his implicit agenda items—was to improve the way his team worked together. In the context of the prospective publication of a new vision statement, he also promoted co-operative writing as one way of developing a clear, coherent and consistent message among his team and beyond.

Almost inevitably much of this brief discourse analysis of our story ends up as a sort of messy, uncertain speculation about characters' motives, prior knowledge and management competencies (cf. Franklin, 2004). In the real world we might seek to investigate and to evaluate these. But some of the outcomes of these investigations will be valid for a limited time only, as people's preferences and behaviours change, and so do their agendas.

A theory of agenda would need to recognise the multiplicity of personal meanings and personal agendas in organisations. It would need to take account of the contexts and contingencies that affect the creation, relevance and continuity of agenda. And it would also need to provide valuable insights for those who are engaged in the management of change, in much the same way that research and *a priori* thinking on organisational learning have benefited those managing the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations (cf. Orange, et al, 2004).

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HYPERLINKS

1 http://www.strategy-as-practice.org/
2 http://www.gslis.utexas.edu/~palmquis/courses/discourse.htm

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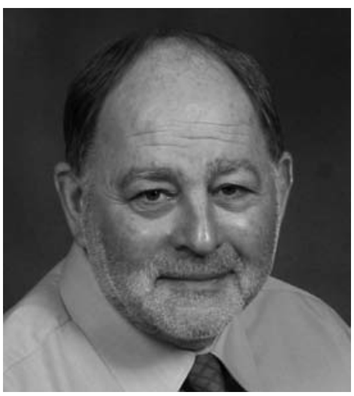
Writing Interventions to Facilitate Self and Others

BOB MACKENZIE



Writing is an essential component of a learning facilitator's repertoire. Writing interventions are both an act or process and an outcome or product. They are used by both facilitator and client principally to facilitate effective leadership, learning and change. However, writing is not a panacea, and not everyone feels comfortable with writing. Hence writing interventions are only effective following a careful assessment of their specific context. Drawing upon the author's experience and a review of the literature, this article introduces a theory of writing interventions, acknowledges some of their limitations, and outlines some implications for their wider application.

KEYWORDS: Writing, writing interventions, learning facilitator, consultant, story, leadership, change.

Introduction

'Do you work, or do you just write?'
(Penelope Lively to Mariella Forstrup on BBC Radio 4, 'A Good Read', 21.6.07, recounting a question from a neighbour)

I am a consultant, learning facilitator and writer. In my practice, I often combine these roles to construct or encourage writing interventions, drawing eclectically upon functional/transactional, creative, autobiographical and academic writing. I am deeply conscious of writing's evolution as a powerful, mysterious and versatile phenomenon which can be put to helpful, harmful, lofty or mundane uses (Robinson, 2007). Writing and writing interventions are often taken for granted, and have two related aspects. They are both an act or real-time process, and an outcome or product consisting of the shared written word.

Interventions

Facilitators make interventions; they decide whether or not to take certain actions to help their clients. Schein identifies three different kinds of interventions (Schein, 1999): those for relationship building, diagnosis, or learning. Learning interventions are designed to "stimulate, produce insight, and eventually facilitate changes in behaviour, beliefs, and underlying assumptions". They "are deliberately designed to aid the learning process on the part of the client" (ibid: 122). Moreover, "Everything you (the consultant) do is an intervention" (ibid: 243). When a client-consultant (or employee-manager) relationship is being or has been established (which brings with it a set of expectations), we can suppose that everything you *do not do* is also an intervention.

Writing interventions

My understanding of writing interventions derives from a creative-critical theory of writing (after Boulter, 2005). I see the *process* of writing as the in-the-moment act of putting of pen to paper. The *product* of writing is a defined output from that process. As such, both process and product can be used for the author's benefit alone, or for sharing with others. Writing interventions fall into three different domains: public, restricted and private.

As a learning facilitator, I locate my understanding of writing interventions primarily within two discourses. Andragogy is the process of engaging adult learners in the structure of the learning experience (Knowles, 1990). 'The learning organisation' envisages a systemic process involving the interplay of five 'disciplines' (Senge, 1999). I attempt to engage with my clients, at different times and in different contexts, moving as expertly as I can between a variety of appropriate helping roles. Taken together, these roles amount to supporting the (largely) self-directed learning of my clients, and also continuing my own learning in the pursuit of the ideal of mastery. Inevitably, there are disconnections and discontinuities in this endeavour, and there must also be safeguards, so that I am not pursuing my own learning to the detriment of my clients.

How I use writing interventions

I use writing interventions for my own and my clients' benefit to stimulate and articulate fresh learning and action. However, when I attempt to encourage clients to tap into the potential of their own or other people's writing, I encounter reactions ranging from eagerness to strong resistance. So I don't do this without careful thought.

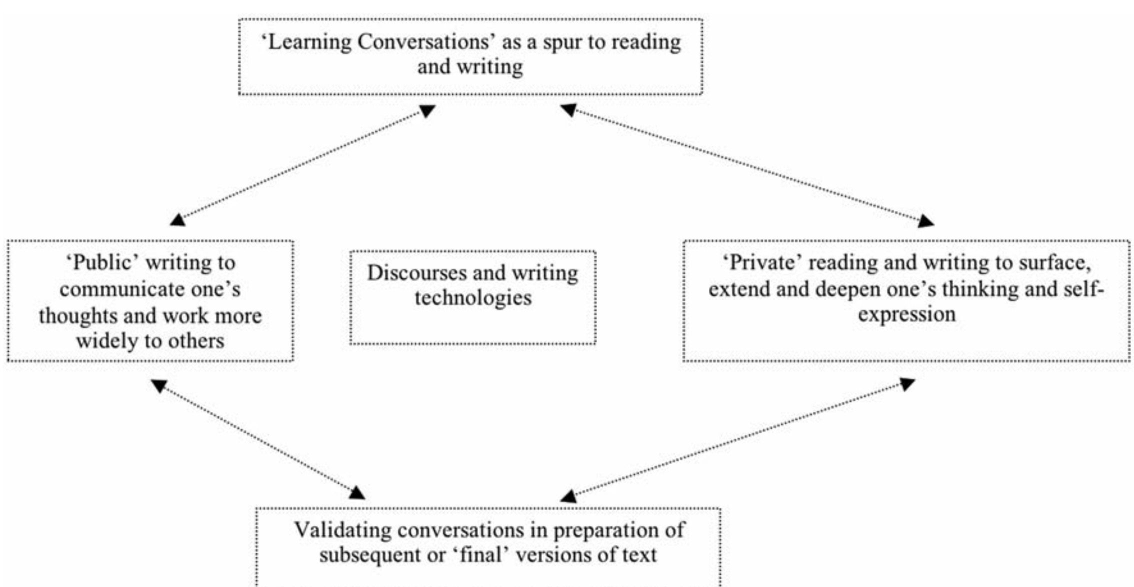


Figure 1: Writing in a multi-media context

Writing rarely—if ever—stands alone. It is generally part of an interdependent, multi-media set of unfolding communication transactions involving reading, images and conversation. Depending upon the specific context, the relative weightings of these transactions will vary. Figure 1 summarises my understanding of these inter-relationships.

To illustrate my approach to writing interventions, I have written the following story.

Tom makes his mark

Some way into a series of Action Learning set meetings, Tom, a Head of Service in a local authority, asked to obtain his set members' help. He formulated his problem as how best to develop protocols for partnerships with neighbouring authorities. During the very first set meeting, he had volunteered that his preferred learning style on the Honey and Mumford scale was strongly activist (Honey & Mumford, 2000). He had also steadfastly resisted my invitations to use a simple template, or even his own notebook, to write about a provisional problem on which he might wish to take action. Tom had shaken his head vehemently, and declared "I do not write. I hold things in my head!" Neither had he ever written down any private insights or draft action plan. Nor had he ever made any bids for air time, although he had readily contributed orally—even excessively—to exploring colleagues' problems.

Today, Tom was unavoidably delayed. When he finally joined the set, he immediately asked to lead the session after tea. He also indicated that he wished to use a flipchart, so that he could make notes prompted by colleagues' contributions. However, the opening minutes of his session were chaotic. Everyone was jumping in with questions and ideas, and there was a great deal of over-talking. So I suggested that we all have a ten-minute quiet period, to make individual notes about Tom's problem, and so that we could then each in turn have uncontested air time to ask fresh questions. While we were writing, so too was Tom, using the flipchart.

During the conversations that followed, Tom recorded some 60 ideas on flipchart to take away for consideration. Set members also wrote individual offers of support on autographed coloured post-it notes. Additionally, Tom asked me to send everyone a copy of a paper that I had published on partnerships in the public sector (MacKenzie, 2004). And he took advantage of the customary quiet reflective time just before the end of the session to make notes in his learning journal. After our meeting, he drew upon all these pieces of writing to draft his own discussion paper for an away day for Heads of Service and Lead Councillors.

In the next set meeting, Tom declared that he had been delighted both with the help he had received from the set, and with the promising outcome of the away day. We then discussed how we had used writing interventions in the previous session. We agreed that, by introducing designated silent writing time, we had enhanced significantly the quality of our learning conversations, as well as Tom's prospects for more effective local partnerships. Several set members vowed that they, too, would now experiment with writing interventions more thoughtfully within their own teams.

Some observations

Bearing in mind the philosophical and methodological issues regarding story-telling, it seems to me that this story gives rise to a number of key propositions about the effective use of writing interventions. These include:

- *Be clear why we are introducing writing interventions.* It's important to make explicit why we are working through writing. Here, I used writing to sustain my own and Tom's experiments in learning through action and reflection. Writing interventions enabled us to play with emerging thoughts and ideas. They also encouraged writer-readers to interpret and respond to each other's writing experiments and accounts from their own perspectives and contexts. In different contexts, we can use writing interventions in different ways for different purposes, ranging from letters, reports, proposals, or seminar papers to flipcharts in a workshop. In so doing, we are drawing upon a repertoire of writing skills and technologies to record and communicate the information and ideas with which we wish our readers to engage.

- *Writing interventions can be used publicly or privately.* Throughout the session, set members made their own spontaneous notes, some of which would be recorded in their learning logs, in addition to writing during designated silent periods. From time to time, they also read relevant material that they had brought along or created, or that I introduced. In their minds, they were also plainly referring to previous or anticipated pieces of writing.
- *Writing interventions can act as a helpful brake.* Writing interventions can sometimes be introduced deliberately to serve as a necessary counter to instant or instinctive reactions. Normally, we think and speak faster than we write, and we are often under pressure to deliver a quick fix. Though often seemingly counter-cultural and counter-intuitive in a frenetic business environment, writing interventions can serve as an invaluable discipline to force us to slow down, and to surface, arrange and examine our thoughts and feelings more carefully. This augments the quality of learning conversations, and hence contributes to more strategic action.
- *The return on investment (ROI) from writing interventions can be significant.* At the right moment, even a comparatively short time designated for writing (or reading) can have significant pay-off. In this story, ten minutes of silent reflective writing resulted in 40 minutes of high quality discussion, and in about five pages of written output on flipchart.
- *Writing interventions can generate further cycles of writing interventions.* Tom is a self-confessed reluctant writer and reader. Yet, through a variety of his or others' writing interventions he was stimulated to go away and engage in further reading, writing and conversations. He shared subsequent versions of his writing with different sets of stakeholders to further a specific leadership and change initiative.
- *Through writing interventions, we can facilitate both our own and other people's learning.* As a process, writing interventions are self-facilitated and self-facilitating acts. We write to aid our own learning—to hear or see and experiment with what we are thinking or feeling. As a product, they are written similarly to stimulate other people.
- *This story illustrates a writing intervention in both respects.* In writing this story (a process that has been greatly facilitated in the drafting stages by Chris, my critical friend), some of my own learning and praxis as a learning facilitator has also undergone transformation. Through both forms of writing interventions, my understanding of writing interventions has metamorphosed from a tacit to a more explicit state, and this is now more readily available for other readers to critique.
- *Writing interventions provide opportunities for reassessment or closure.* The text is never settled. It is always open to re-interpretation and revision. So writing interventions allow us to go back to text, and to reappraise or change it in the light of fresh thinking or new perspectives. However, there are generally arbitrary punctuations in the writing process and the writing product. These punctuations happen when time has run out, or when the writing is judged to be 'good-enough' for its purpose. Often, pragmatically, we simply have to close the book on our writing, and abandon it.
- *Writing interventions benefit from, and require, reading and conversation.* The real-time act of writing involves reading and re-writing provisional texts, and the act of reading often involves some writing, if only to take notes. Writing interventions depend upon, and contribute to, conditions of litera-

cy (Ong, 2002). Thus, at various times, as writers we are also readers and critics of our own writing—an internal process. Boulter (2005:40) calls this authorial duality "the writing personality". We also depend upon external readers (e.g. editors, clients, critical friends or reviewers) to validate our writing, or to give us developmental feedback. Writing, conversation and reading are interdependent, and will probably continue to be so, despite the advent of text-to-speech or speech-to-text software.

- *The meaning of all shared writing is co-created by writer and readers.* It is not determined by the writer alone. As people read, they make sense of it though their own frames of reference. This process can be mediated by conversation, leading to joint sense-making; but even if the author is party to the conversation, s/he cannot unilaterally dictate the meaning that people take from it.
- *Writing interventions facilitate critical thinking.* I often use writing interventions to encourage my clients and myself to read and write critically, drawing upon the notion of the writing personality. From our different perspectives, we write to get the words out, whilst continually re-reading and re-writing them, and we work with this process to take action in the external world. We can encourage writers to read their own and other people's work critically, by addressing such questions as:

    - 'What is the writer trying to say?'
    - 'What are the hidden politics/agenda behind this writing?'
    - 'How can I use/adapt these ideas?'

    (After Abbott, 2002)

Often, I find it helpful—at least initially—to encourage clients to read as writers in a facilitated session. This learning habit needs to be sustained, as, without constant mindfulness, there is still a tendency for many of us to revert to uncritical or unreflective writing, reading, thinking or externalised action.

Some implications for practice

My story about Tom suggests five ways in which we can promote the effective use of writing interventions. These are:

- *Recognising the barriers to and limitations of writing interventions.* I am well aware of my own enthusiasms for writing. So I must constantly guard against imposing this tendency inappropriately upon others. For a variety of reasons, many people find writing difficult, tedious, inappropriate or impossible. They might have dyslexia, learning or physical disabilities. Or they might lack the ability, time, confidence or motivation to write. A wider context is what Ziegler (1981: 2) calls a "crisis in writing skills", brought about by the impact of computers, the Internet, TV, the educational system's shortcomings, lack of parental or managerial role modeling, and a problematic youth culture. Digital technologies tend to privilege speed over deliberation, and many businesses reward 'performativity' over creativity (Lyotard 1984:53).
- *Collaborating to develop greater understanding of writing interventions.* Working together, learning facilitators and members of other management and organisational development networks can create a critical mass to generate greater understanding of the role of writing interventions in their work. The AMED Writers' Group, ODiN and the Change Alliance are already making an important contribution here, as this special issue of *Organisations & People* demonstrates.
- *Encouraging the greater use of dedicated writing spaces at work.* The more considered use of demarcated physical and temporal spaces for writing at work (e.g. designated quiet rooms and times) can help clients to operate in physical and psychological conditions that are more conducive to writing and to sharing the written word. This can enhance the quality

and effectiveness of their leadership and change initiatives.

- *Acknowledging explicitly that writing interventions are an important part of a facilitator's and manager's repertoire.* In one form or another, facilitators and managers will inevitably make use of writing interventions before, during or after many of their transactions, even if these events that are not specifically concerned with writing. By consciously developing our skills in using writing interventions, e.g. in our own professional development programmes, in planning and participating in meetings, or in reporting, professionals extend the strategic impact of their interventions.
- *Minimising the gap between our espoused theories and theories-in-use.* As internal or external facilitators, we must practise what we preach when we make writing interventions. Their only rationale is to facilitate effective learning, development and action. So we must use writing interventions sensitively and thoughtfully, and actively seek constructive feedback on how we do so.

Conclusion

Writing interventions have significant strengths and limitations, and must be used appropriately. Their most suitable purpose and form can only be determined by appraising the context in which they are to be used, and through negotiation with individual learners/actors. They can evoke strong passions—positive or negative—and they are often felt to be counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Rarely, if ever, do they work in isolation from other forms of communication. Nevertheless, by introducing writing interventions with care and skill, we can develop improved ways of thinking and being in the world, and of facilitating effective leadership and change.

Acknowledgements

A number of people have supported me as I was developing this article. In particular, I would like to thank Chris Rodgers and Vicky Cosstick for taking the time and trouble to read carefully my several drafts, and for providing me with constructive feedback.

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Letter-writing as an Appraisal Tool

ROBERT MARSH

Writing letters is an integral component of certain psychotherapeutic traditions. This paper discusses the transfer of letter-writing from a therapeutic into an organisational context for use by managers as part of the appraisal process. Both the outcomes and the processes of using letters in appraisals are considered.

KEYWORDS: Letter-writing, psychological therapy, management, appraisal

Introduction

Why are annual appraisals not always the most enthralling of tasks? In the NHS Trust and the university where I work as a psychological therapist and manager, the outcome of annual appraisals should be a 'personal development plan'. The plan builds on the achievements of the past year by setting goals for the next, and identifies the means by which those goals could be accomplished. This is linked to the 'Knowledge and Skills Framework' (KSF) which identifies dimensions in which a clinician needs to show competence, such as 'communication', 'quality' and 'information collection and analysis'.

Whilst these reviews may have a real impact on assessing and improving performance and making pay awards, the language and format can be a real turn off, and reduce a person to a function. They tend to be done because it is time to do them, like taking the car for an MOT, rather than because the process is relished in any way. Unless the manager chooses to deviate, the appraisal will not necessarily take the participants into a discussion of the process, as well as the content, of the work. It may cover what and how much has been done and remains to be done, but does it allow for a discussion of what it was actually like doing it?

In public sector organisations, quantitative measures—for example, the number of papers published or waiting list times—are increasingly privileged over the qualitative experience, Mintzberg (1996) writes that:

> by focusing on the numbers, they (organisations) depreciate true value and reduce the richness of a business to the poverty of its financial performance….measurement is fine for figuring out when to flip a hamburger….but when it is used to estimate the worth of a complicated professional service, measurement often goes awry.

The focus on what is measurable rather than on what is meaningful alienates managers from those they manage. Roberts (2006) discusses how the "triumph of technique and instrumentality over purpose has led to an 'institution of shallowness' in organisations." She argues that "it is the discernment of purpose that poses the greatest challenge to leaders—the whyness of what we do."

Letters in therapy

Years of research have yet to establish any definitive advantage for one particular therapeutic or theoretical framework over another. The evidence does suggest that the 'therapeutic alliance'—the quality of relationship between therapist and client—is significantly linked to the clinical outcome (Krupnick et al., 1996; Martin, Garske and Davis, 2000). My own experience as a therapist suggests that without a good therapeutic relationship, we might as well both go home.

Within the model of therapy that I use predominantly (cognitive-analytic therapy), letters are routinely written by the therapist to the client. This usually happens after about five sessions, when there is an emerging sense of the client, her history, and the likely focus of the rest of the work. A letter is written again at the end of the therapy, when the client is also invited to write to the therapist. Ending letters summarise the content of what has been covered in the therapy, but ideally also include thoughts and feelings about the process. Letters are brought to the sessions and read aloud. This allows for immediate clarification and for the processing of immediate emotional responses, and functions to strengthen the therapeutic alliance. Research on the effectiveness of therapeutic letter-writing points to a whole range of psychological, social and physiological benefits (Lowe, 2004).

Letters in management

As a therapist, I have been writing letters to and receiving them from clients for some years. When I became a manager, it occurred to me that letter-writing might enable the appraisal process to become more personal and alive, enhance the appraiser-appraisee relationship, and explore the process as well as the content of the previous year.

Forming good quality manager-employee relationships, which recognise the person behind the function, is a challenge. Work environments tend to be very busy, with heavy email usage, text messaging and limited protracted loyalty from either the manager or the employee. However, managers fail to connect with employees at their peril. Studies suggest that quality of the manager-employee relationship is the factor most highly related to performance (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999; Judge et al, 2001). Management practices that increase employee satisfaction have positive effects on customer satisfaction, productivity, profit, employee turnover and accidents (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes, 2002).

Writing letters for appraisals

I am currently piloting the following experiment in a small number of cases both as an appraiser and appraisee. I start the annual process by giving the appraisee an information sheet. This gives people the rationale for writing letters and tells them what to expect, including the extent and limits of confidentiality. The appraisee then writes a letter to the appraiser. The point is to keep the exercise reasonably unstructured, although the letter might address the following:

- What was inspiring, challenging, frustrating or exhausting during the last year?
- How have your relationships with your colleagues and clients been?
- How have we (appraiser and appraisee) been working together?
- What hopes and concerns do you have about the future year?

The appraiser writes a similarly unstructured letter along complementary lines. However, I focus on my sense of the appraisee's development over the year, on his or her relationships, including with me, and in particular on what I appreciate about the work s/he has done. Comments made by colleagues in 360 degree feedback may also be included.

At the appraisal meeting, both parties bring their letters to the meeting. Letters can then be handed over simultaneously to be read silently, or aloud one after the other. A discussion ensues about what each has heard and what has been evoked. Any necessary forms can then be completed; sections of the letter may answer some of the questions in those forms.

Outcomes of letter-writing

I am receiving feedback that the extra time required for writing a letter is well spent. It encourages both parties to prepare more thoroughly and reflectively for the appraisal and makes for a more meaningful and enjoyable exchange. Having someone reflect about you by letter in such a considered way seems to strengthen the relationship. It is hard to imagine an appraisee coming away from such a meeting thinking that his manager never keeps him in mind.

One appraisee said that the letter provided him with an opportunity to bring up things he might not otherwise have raised. It did seem to allow us to go to a greater depth and include a more nuanced complexity than would otherwise have been likely from questions on a form or rating scales, which cannot capture a lived experience. Issues have included subtle changes in motivation, feelings about ambition, descriptions of feelings of loss at the dispersal of the members of a department, or of gratitude. These areas are crucial to the way someone feels about their work, and may well contribute to whether a person moves up or on.

The mutual exchange of letters, in which each person is free to write what they want, offers a voice to both parties. It can foster a consultative, collaborative atmosphere and provide a vital foundation for understanding a person's strengths and ambitions, and therefore make it easier to decide on what type of personal development plan is likely to work. Letters allow people to reflect on what might have been hard to assimilate face to face. If clearly worded, they provide a record of aspirations, plans and commitments that can be revisited and present less room for confusion.

Feelings about the letters

Writing letters is time-consuming and this is an important consideration, particularly if a manager has many people to appraise. However, it is in those very hectic work environments that space for reflection is most needed and, with practice, it takes less time.

Clients can become anxious when invited to write a letter at the end of therapy and experienced clinical psychologists can also be anxious at the prospect of writing letters. Perhaps this is about sharing something that is unusually intimate. Such feelings seem to affect whether people want to read their letters aloud or hand them over silently to be read. Having tried both, reading aloud feels like it has more potential for communication and connection. People seem instinctively either to start reading or to hand over the letter to be read, as if there were no alternative, and then seem surprised when this is pointed out to them later.

The other main concern is a sense of the unalterability of what has been written, about it being kept on file and who else might then see it. This is a valid concern, which needs to be addressed in the initial explanation and may require a flexible approach. Some appraisees may be quite happy to have their letter kept on file, especially if it is written with an awareness of its final destination. Others may prefer to retain the only copy, perhaps with an edited version for the file. Alternatively, the appraiser can write notes up for the file in a form that is jointly agreed by both parties. Hand-written letters may need less time spent on them and are likely to feel more personal.

The degree to which an employee feels able to be open is affected by the level of trust and by what needs to be said. If there are predominantly positive things to write, then it is easier for the appraisee to allow this material to be accessible, for instance to third parties via the file. If the appraisee has a problematic relationship with the appraiser or with others in the organisation, it is going to feel much riskier. In such cases, it is the role and responsibility of the appraiser to address such problems and the balance of power makes it safer for her to do this.

The immediate dyadic relationship is not the only factor in conveying trust. It is itself conditioned by the safety, or lack of it, conveyed by the wider system in which that relationship operates. Some of the concerns about confidentiality are therefore likely to be affected by the climate of the organisation. Where processes are opaque, where people seem unaccountable and ill-intentioned, and where structures are unstable, this may make openness in any form seem ill-advised. Under these conditions, a reluctance to write a letter for an appraisal may also be a signal to discuss wider organisational processes as well as immediate ones.

Conclusion

It is early days in my use of letter-writing as a management tool in appraisals. I have found the experience more complex and anxiety-provoking than I expected. However, this may be due partly to the newness and unfamiliarity of the project for everyone. Clear explanations of the process are necessary in order to gain the truly informed consent of the other person, as are jointly made agreements about the extent and limits of confidentiality as applied to the letter. Concerns about confidentiality, whilst entirely valid, could also be indicators to think further about the quality of the immediate managerial relationship and culture of the wider organisation. On balance, the rewards of this approach in terms of greater vitality and reflectiveness, and of improved manager-employee relating, seem well worth it and may contribute to greater employee engagement and productivity. Isn't it worth trying a promising alternative to the deadening standard appraisal form?

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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RSVP

Writing for the Computer Screen

PAUL MATTHEWS

The way readers interact with screen-based writing requires changes in the way we structure and format our writing for the screen. This article is based on the experience of developing a PC-based knowledge support system for managers and leaders which would be viewed on screen.

KEYWORDS: Writing, computers, leaders, managers, change agents.

"It's writing, Jim, but not as we know it."

"It's life, Jim, but not as we know it." All Star Trek aficionados remember the immortal words of Mr Spock as he and Captain Kirk cast their sensors over some swirling mass of energy. We encounter a similar phenomenon every time we sit at a computer and type away. We are writing, and it is close enough to the writing we have done for centuries to seduce us into thinking the same golden rules apply. But they don't!

Compared with writing on stone, papyrus, vellum or paper, effective writing for the computer is radically different. Everything has changed. The irony is that the very people who are responsible for communicating change in our fast-moving world are often blissfully unaware of this. As a result, change initiatives can falter at the first hurdle through a lack of basic, easily-acquired skills.

The theme of this edition of *O&P* is writing within the context of leadership and change. How much is written and then read on screen during a change initiative? How important is this writing? How much extra work is generated when communicators don't follow some simple practices around writing for the medium they are using?

Remember, an ineffective message is a waste of everyone's time.

Actually, the problem is not so much the writing, as the reading. We don't read on-screen text in the same way we approach the printed word. To take this into account, we need to write differently so our ideas are effectively communicated to the reader. As the uses of computerised information continue to proliferate, so the need for a writing method suited to this new and very different medium, and to the way we access it, increases. Screen writing has actually become the published copy.

Reading from the screen

We are flooded with information on our screens, and we tend to train ourselves to cope with this, particularly when we are reading web pages. Eye-tracking studies of people reading web pages show that they skim fast and alight on words or phrases that literally catch their eye. The predominant pattern is also to spend more time around the top of the page and less at the bottom, and more on the left than the right.

One reason for the speed with which we skim screen information is because there is so much of it to get through. Another is because it is less comfortable to read from the screen. We tire at least 30% faster when reading from the screen than from the page. How often have you printed out something in order to 'read it properly'? This is due to the relatively low screen resolution: text on a computer screen is less well-defined and not as accurately spaced as printed material. In addition, there is less contrast between the text and the background. We also have to cope with reflections and some older screens can be fuzzy and flicker. In time, high resolution screens will solve these problems, but for now we are adapting our reading behaviour to cope.

Screen-adapted reading

How often have you had to follow up on an email where you asked two questions, but only one was answered? This adaptation is the problem. Once we have altered our reading to deal with an internet overloaded with information, we carry that reading behaviour into everything we read on screen—emails, reports, letters, procedures manuals, specifications and so on. Unfortunately, most of these are not written with the screen in mind, and our adapted reading behaviour means that we miss important points. This is not the ideal when reading up on the procedure to repair a mission-critical piece of equipment or a legal agreement!

So much material is now displayed only on screen, yet we have not really learnt to use the new medium well. Think of the transition from stage to the big silver screen. It took decades for the cinema to be understood as a medium in its own right and not just as another way for watching a play. Our use of the written word on the computer screen is in many ways still quite immature.

Five Gotchas

LESS READING TIME

People will take far less time to read on screen than you might hope. If the ideas are not easily and quickly accessible, the writing has failed because, on screen, people simply won't spend the time to unravel it. People seldom luxuriate in screen reading as they might with a good book of the same prose.

THE ON-SCREEN TEXT IS TOUGHER FOR OUR READERS

You can read your own writing on screen perfectly well. You understand the flow, the ideas, the phraseology. Your reader does not. So as you proofread your emails (you do proofread them don't you?), your reading experience is not the same as your readers will have. They will have a much tougher time of it.

THE COMPUTER OR READER CAN ALTER THE FORMAT

What you see on screen may well be quite different from what your reader sees. With the printed form, we have ultimate control over how it will look, apart from the amount of light available at the time it is read. With the screen, we have at best dual control, and we can be easily overridden by both the reader and the computer on which the piece is being read. The reader may have set preferences, automatically changing things such as font types, sizes and background colour. A common example is plain text vs. formatted emails. The reader may have a different size screen to yours, or may be reading within a smaller window so the text wraps in a different way.

ON-SCREEN TEXT COMPETES WITH OTHER DISTRACTIONS

On screen, there are so many distractions. These include buttons to click on, popups about your incoming email or the latest stock quote, plus other windows that may be open, with programmes running ready to seduce your reader away at the slightest pretext. You seldom have their full attention in the first place, so losing them is easy; the difficulty is that when you are writing, you have no idea who else will be competing for your reader's attention.

THE SCREEN HIDES OUR ERRORS

Most writers adopt a carefree approach to writing on screen: we just let the words out because we know that it is so easy to go back and correct them, and there are spelling and grammar checkers to help us. The problem is, we often *don't* go back and check things properly, especially with shorter pieces like emails. Our mind plays tricks on us so that when we get to the end it is finished; it looks neat and tidy and it looks finished! And so we move on, leaving mistakes and simple errors in our wake.

Eleven tips for writing for the screen

Writing for the screen is a huge subject and any web search will throw up a plethora of results (including how to write a blockbuster Hollywood screenplay!). The advice will differ according to whether you are writing an email, a user manual or for a website and so on.

The tips that follow are general. Use them where they fit. Just being aware of the reasons for writing differently and understanding some of these tips means you will start to see your writing habits change. And your readers will appreciate it!

STRUCTURE

1. Use the inverted pyramid style of writing

The inverted pyramid style of writing was developed by journalists to get their message across faster, and this is just what we want to do when writing for the screen. Put your most important point first, then your next and so on in order. In addition, make sure the first few points are actually a summary, so if the reader never gets any further, they have the essentials.

Newspapers still use this technique today. It is great for editors who can then easily prune the end off a story to fit a space. It has been said that the inverted pyramid style was invented by 19th Century wartime reporters as a hedge against the transmission being cut. And when reading from the screen today, this is again a factor, though in this case the 'transmission' can be cut by distractions, impatience, confusion and even boredom.

2. Provide an overview and signposts

Reading is easier if we have a sense of where we are in an article or document. This is especially true of longer pieces. Anyone reading from the screen is focused on what is on the screen, almost to the exclusion of everything above and below what is visible. The reader cannot easily flick their eyes back to earlier paragraphs to confirm a sense of 'position' or 'path', so this must be provided by a coherent and logical structure.

Set up your structure and headings in a table of contents where the reader can get a sense of the whole piece. It is good practice to use outline numbering (1, 1.1, 1.2, 1.2.1 and so on) so that wherever a reader is within the document, the sight of a heading will give them a sense of their 'position' within the document. This also means that it is good practice to size your headed sections in such a way that there is always a heading visible on screen.

3. Use hyperlinks effectively

Linear writing is useful for telling a story. However, this kind of narrative does not work so well for business information, which is interlinked but not necessarily sequential. One huge advantage of reading from the screen is that we can meet the needs of this type of information by jumping around a document with the aid of hyperlinks.

These mimic the old style 'see page 42', but with a hyperlink there's a major difference: we have no idea how far or in what direction we have travelled, or even if we are in the same document. We have truly gone through the wormhole and emerged where we could find life, but not as we know it. In order to allow a reader to re-orient quickly, structure and headings provide the sense of cohesion and coherence that hyperlinks can destroy. With these markers, we can boldly use hyperlinks and it is up to the reader to follow them... or not.

STYLE

4. Use smaller chunks of text

Chunk your material into smaller pieces than you would typically use for a printed document. Use smaller paragraphs and fewer ideas, or even only one idea in a paragraph. Since people are skimming fast, they will often only pick up one major idea from a paragraph, so if your writing is packed, people will miss most of what you are saying.

5. Write succinctly

Keep your sentences short and, where possible, use shorter words to say what you mean. Mark Twain once said "I never write the word metropolis when I get paid the same for writing the word city." Think about how you can make your writing succinct. You should be aiming for a word count about half of what you might write in a paper document.

6. Use bullet points and lists

You can achieve concise writing by using bullet points and lists. These avoid the 'padding' words that would otherwise have to be there to link the ideas into a word flow. Another advantage of bullets is that they act to slow the reader's eye as they skim.

FORMAT

7. Leave plenty of white space

Provide plenty of white space around the text to reduce the perception of text density. You can leave double spaces between paragraphs and extra space before and after headings and bullets.

You can also leave the right edge of paragraphs ragged rather then justified. Justified looks pretty, but lowers comprehension, as people skim more quickly and perhaps even miss lines if there's no variation in line length.

8. Avoid using italics

Avoid italics, especially in large blocks of text, as they are much harder to read than normal text. Generally, if you want to emphasise a word or two, use bold or capital letters, but not to excess.

9. Choose your font carefully

The best fonts are the subject of much debate and the choice often comes down to personal preference. Most people find a non-serif font, such as Arial, easier to read on screen than a serif font, such as Times. The fonts Verdana and Tahoma were designed specifically with the screen in mind, so these are good ones to use. They are also installed by default with Windows and have Mac equivalents, so the reader will see what you, as the writer, see. If you use an obscure font that the reader does not have installed on their PC, their computer will substitute some other font so all your design work will come to nought.

One way of making sure that the reader sees what you see is to publish your work as a PDF file with embedded fonts, but this clearly won't work for emails or collaborative documents.

10. Use a sufficiently large font

Make sure that your font size is sufficient so that readers can just open the document and read without having to adjust magnification. In other words, make your writing accessible. For example, Verdana 12 is eminently legible to most people.

11. Use simple colour contrasts

Take care with coloured backgrounds. It is so tempting to play with all the graphics capabilities of a computer, and yet many of these reduce the readability by reducing contrast between text and background. Black text on white background is best for main body text.

Conclusion

We need to revamp our screen-writing practices for two reasons. One is to bring the art of writing up to date for the new media. The other is to address the way that people interact with the computer screen when reading.

When writing for the screen, leaders and change agents would do well to heed the words of Confucius. "If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone."

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paul has boldly gone to a few places on the planet where few people have been, but you will have to ask him about that. His most recent project is the development of a huge PC-based knowledge resource of management skills with over 90 contributing authors.
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Reflective Writing and Organisational Anxiety

HESTER O CONNOR

I examine why speaking about anxiety remains a taboo subject in 21 Century management literature. I present a narrative of how I used reflective writing to make sense of a situation where I felt anxious at work. The narrative demonstrates how the wish to preserve a coherent sense of professional identity at work can be anxiety provoking and the pressure to be in control and competent amplifies this feeling of anxiety. I explore how reflective writing is a helpful means of making sense of the common-place experience of anxiety at work.

KEYWORDS: Anxiety, identity, reflective writing, management literature, individualism.

Introduction

At the heart of professional activity lies interdependency, identity and the anxiety to which this gives rise. We need to preserve a stable sense of who we are in order to function within the myriad of social networks that form our working lives. Anxiety and threats to identity abound in working life because working life is not the activity of autonomous separate individuals; rather, as we interact with colleagues and clients we seek unconsciously to preserve a coherent sense of identity. The type of anxiety to which I refer in this paper is the recognisable free floating visceral sense of feeling ill at ease with oneself and with the world around you, yet the feeling is not so bad that it impairs functioning.

I am proposing that anxiety is a natural response to the pressure to sustain a coherent sense of being in control and maintain one's professional identity at work. If my proposal is correct why does the theme of anxiety seem like a taboo subject in 21st Century management literature? In this paper I seek to answer this question by exploring how I used reflective writing to make sense of a situation where I felt that my identity was threatened at work.

Taboo subject

I believe there are two myths that explain why the theme of anxiety is rarely mentioned in management literature. First is the dominant Western individualist assumption that we are autonomous individuals, which brings with it a sense of personal responsibility, blame and a fear of showing vulnerability. The second is the myth of control: to be a professional means to be competent and in control at all times. I will briefly examine both.

Myth of the individual

The myth of the individual who is free to choose to act freely 'on' his environment is one that underpins Western thinking and is based on a cognitivist understanding of the world. The cognitivist theory postulates that (1) the world is pregiven; (2) we cognise this pregiven world by representing its features in our brain; and (3) we act on the basis of these representations. From this perspective the brain is understood to be able to represent the independent external world (Varela et al, 1993: 136). Most organisations and professions are based on this cognitivist paradigm. Parker (1997) suggests that the rise of the individual may be seen as a collective fantasy: a defence against the social group per se, as interdependency, inter-connectedness and complexity becomes steadily more anxiety-provoking to each one of us.

My view of our interdependence at work is influenced by the work of Elias (1991) and Stacey (2001). They propose that we are social to the core; therefore it is not possible for us to behave autonomously as if we are separate from others. If the professions are based on this individualist paradigm it is hardly surprising that feelings of anxiety at work are kept quiet or denied because we fear that such feelings reflect badly on us. The myth of the individual links with the myth of control in organisational life.

Myth of control

Streatfield (2001) examines the notion that the manager is expected to be in control at work at all times. He or she is expected to show leadership in the face of a crisis. The leader is expected to declare that things are in control and that they are on top of things. Streatfield suggests that to admit feeling unsure would create too much uncertainty and insecurity for others and this could destabilise the business. I believe professionals similarly are expected to be in control and competent. It is perceived as failure to let others see that you are unsure of what step to take next. Increasingly, professions are identified by a clearly defined set of measurable competencies that demonstrate that the person is able to carry out the tasks required of that profession.

I now want to relate a narrative of how my coherent sense of professional identity at work felt threatened and how I responded to the feelings of anxiety by 'hiding' in supervision. Writing played an important role in helping me make sense of the anxiety I experienced both with a group of service users with mental health problems and in my supervision with colleagues.

A tale of self-censorship

On Thursdays I run psychotherapy groups in the NHS. On one day in 2007, after another gruelling one and half hour session with my psychotherapy group, I decided to try and make sense of what had gone on in the two previous sessions, and in the subsequent supervision session with four colleagues, by putting pen to paper. I planned to bring the piece of reflective writing to a peer supervision session with two clinical psychology colleagues. This narrative is drawn from that piece of writing:

> Of late the group has dragged and I try not to clock watch because this makes the time drag even more. I have been with this group for fourteen months now. Today it felt like all hell had broken out when Ollie and Cindy joined forces telling me

what a bad job I am doing. Cindy asked if I could find her a more experienced therapist, as she unlike the others is a trained counsellor and she explains, 'no disrespect' but she has gone through most of what they talk about in the group. Ollie explained how he is getting very angry that I just don't understand him. Jim without speaking nodded to indicate that he was with Cindy and Ollie. Jules spoke of putting a pie in the face of the Chief Executive for not providing the right services for people with mental health problems. In my mind I was feeling that I was the real target for this pie therefore I asked Jules if he wanted to put a pie in my face?

Soon after as the conversation continued I felt that I hated this group and I found it hard to know how to speak in a way that might not bring further attack. I felt kicked in the stomach and I left the group feeling tearful for most of my lunch break. After the group I noticed that Cindy, Jules and Ollie remained in the group room and could be heard gossiping about me. I resolved that I needed to reclaim some authority next week especially regarding the boundaries of the group.

When I got into the group the following Thursday, feeling determined to reclaim my authority, I said how hurt and upset I felt about being spoken about after the group had ended the previous week. This led to an open and honest conversation and Ollie and Cindy explained how difficult they find it in the group. They hate the fact that I don't join in as they do. Mick explained how he felt that I did not challenge Cindy because I seem fearful that she will jump down my throat. I acknowledged that indeed this was the case. I was mindful of my intention to try and like the group particularly Cindy and Ollie and I made an effort to have eye contact with them. I always find it hard to maintain eye contact with people I feel angry with.

Towards the end of the session I returned to Ollie and thanked him for his courage in saying how difficult he found communicating with me. I said that I remained committed to the group which is now in its second year. I asked them to please leave the building when the group finishes because I believe that meeting after the group is undermining the therapy we are trying to do together in the group.

What I did not say

I am part of the Group Analytic Network telephone supervision. We take turns presenting our work and discussing our ideas as Group Analytic colleagues. In supervision the week after, I talked about the groups mentioned above:

> I explained how I felt attacked and recounted some of the conversation. I said that I wanted to think about what I am doing to provoke such strong responses from the group. What I left out was what I have mentioned here, saying in the group how hurt and upset I felt. I also failed to mention my effort to like them by increasing eye contact. I left out how it had occurred to me when writing this piece that in fact Ollie is correct when he says I don't understand him. I believe that part of the struggle between us relates to my need for him to fit my expectation of him rather than what I have felt until recently, that Ollie just expects me to get it wrong all the time, like all authority figures in his past. I deliberately left out all of the things that I felt would invite my Group Analytic colleagues to question my skills as a Group Analyst.

Reflective writing

I then gave the two clinical psychology colleagues copies of the above piece prior to our regular meeting. I read the piece aloud to kick off our conversation. We are a self-selected group with an interest in creating a space where we can take risks in reflecting on what we are struggling with in our working lives. A very interesting and thought provoking conversation ensued and I was left with a better understanding of the role anxiety played in both my psychotherapy group and in my supervision group. I've also returned to the narrative for further personal reflection and I now more frequently find myself writing as a means of making sense particularly of troubling situations at work. Although there are many potential fruitful avenues from the piece worthy of further reflection I want to focus now on the theme of anxiety and identity.

Writing deepens reflection

Ollie says, "You don't understand me". It is the business of psychologists and psychotherapists to understand others. Ollie's comment is therefore very potent. The members of the psychotherapy group know I am a Clinical Psychologist and Cindy, who is a trained counsellor, expresses that she knows what to expect and I am not reaching the right standard for her. She asks me "to find her a more experienced therapist". My sense of identity is threatened as I am challenged by the group. After I overhear my clients gossiping about me after the group, I decide that I need "to reclaim some authority". Later, I do not want my colleagues in the supervision group to think I have behaved in a way that is not customary for group analytic psychotherapists. In this group my identity as a psychotherapist is very important and I want to present myself as I believe is expected of a member of this group, which has its own recognisable norms and customs. It is not usual as a psychotherapist to speak about oneself to one's clients, therefore I did not want my colleagues to know that I had revealed too much about myself when I told the group that I felt upset and hurt.

The reflective writing enabled me to understand my feelings of anxiety and threats to my sense of identity. I will now explore the importance of the relational sense of professional identity that I am proposing here.

Relational view of identity

Identity is how I define myself both to myself and to others. According to Elias (1939), identity is shaped by the norms, culture and values of the groups one is part of and the image of the nation one belongs to. Elias suggests that these values are experienced by the individual as aspects of their own self worth and self esteem. Following Elias, I understand identity to be created and sustained relationally. This is crucially important for making sense of the type of anxiety that I am referring to in this paper.

This relational view of identity flies in the face of much management literature which is written from the individualistic perspective predominant in Western thinking, with the implication that individuals are responsible for their thoughts and actions. Therefore the anxiety that I describe here is seen as my responsibility. I am suggesting that from a relational view of identity the anxiety I describe is not just an issue to be taken seriously by me. When we become socialised into the particular norms and habits of professional groups, a threat to that sense of belonging to a particular group is likely to lead to feelings of anxiety. Closely linked with this view of identity are the norms and habits of the different professional groups or organisations to which one belongs.

Norms and habits

The norms and customs that I am referring to are not written down anywhere, but I have been socialised into behaving in line with them through my training and years of membership of both groups, as a Clinical Psychologist and as a Group Analytic Psychotherapist. Identity is relational and it is in living out theses roles at work that I remind myself of who I am. The sense of threat is important because it arises in interaction and it is common for us to seek ways to 'manage' such threats. I suggest that the feeling of anxiety that I experienced both in relation to my work with my clients in the group and in deciding what to leave out of supervision arose because of feelings of threat to an ongoing sense of coherence that I have about my professional identities. What is crucial here is that the anxiety, the feelings of threat and my responses arise socially rather than within me as an individual acting autonomously and separately from others.

Conclusion

I have discussed how writing about my personal experience of anxiety at work helped me to understand how the sense of threat led me to behave in a manner by which, without realising it at the time, I sought to preserve a coherent sense of identity. By writing about my experience in order to make more sense of it, I have come to appreciate how anxiety and threats to identity are commonplace in my daily working life. The act of putting pen to paper has led me to a more fulsome sense of the importance of this theme of anxiety for all professionals. Because of the myth of the separate individual who is in control at work, it is not surprising that anxiety is scarcely spoken about and remains a taboo subject in management literature. In fact anxiety is an understandable response to threats to the sense of self that we come to rely upon once we have acquired the competencies to join a particular organisation or professional group.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Vicky Cosstick for helpful and encouraging comments on drafts of this paper.

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Writing Stories to Facilitate an African Merger

TONY PAGE

Stories became a valuable tool in a business merger that aimed to align a dispersed organisation of 500 staff spread across the African continent. Evidence shows this organisation shifted its performance and its identity, while research hints at how story delivers benefits to individuals and to corporations, and can make a wider contribution to economic performance and society.

KEYWORDS: Story, merger, leadership, engagement, alignment, change.

Introduction

> Richard Parsons (Chairman and CEO) held Time Warner together … after its merger with AOL … despite pressure. The share price yesterday is little-changed from his first month in charge… May 2002.
>
> *(Times Online 27th October 2007)*

We all know that mergers, as at Time Warner, often disappoint shareholders. In any big change, stories might seem irrelevant alongside serious questions people care about, like performance, share price, 'do I still have a job?' and 'will my best work survive?'. This article, about my most exciting project, illustrates how stories are a powerful tool for a facilitator and a leader to align people and deliver results.

Where did this story come from? It was written while an organisation of 500 staff, spread across 15 African countries, merged, shifting its performance and its identity. How was it useful? I will describe how this and other stories contributed to a successful change.

Loss of confidence

First, let me take you to Marrakech in spring 2006: two regions of a British Agency in Africa, North and South, were merging. I was a facilitator working with David, the regional director, to engage a team of 30 leaders. In fact our struggle

The People Who Turned into Hippos, Lions and Gazelles

The people in the villages worked hard. Each season brought fresh rains to water their crops and they became well-fed and prosperous, but with each passing year they became sleepier.

One year the rains failed and the crops did not grow tall, but people carried on as before, saying we have stored enough grain. When the following year the same thing happened, their stocks became low.

Chapter 1. Looming danger/opportunity and the first call

The people in one village appointed a brave young chief who with fresh eyes saw the looming danger. He called together the Chiefs from other villages and told them: "the rains are changing, if we do not adapt we are storing up great problems", but they did not believe him.

Unafraid and fierce like a lion, the young chief waved his stick but like old male hippos (big, thick-skinned and sedentary) the other Chiefs were hard to rouse. Then savagely they turned on one another and the young chief looked on with disbelief. After much bellowing and baring of teeth, a plan was agreed and the lion went away believing he had called the Chiefs to action.

Chapter 2. Lame response and the second call

The Chiefs returned to their villages, but instead what they had agreed, they said to their people: "Do not worry. Nothing has changed". And soon their people began to suffer: the rains were light again, food stocks were running out and doubts grew within them.

When the young lion realised the Chiefs had failed to act he became angry. Waving his stick, he called The Chiefs a second time to accept things had changed and build a new future together. He boldly took charge of the seed supply, sending more to the few who were adapting to suit the reduced pattern of rain. Then the simmering resentment of the hippos erupted: some wanted to fight him for his high-handedness, others were afraid because he had shown his power, and one or two fell asleep because it was just too frightening.

Chapter 3. Leaders fall apart then re-group

For months some hippos remained angry, others confused, then they felt defeated with the happy era passing. Starved of information their people felt more and more anxious.

Then happily one day the young chief discovered new seeds needing less rain, and despite his frustration, he gathered the Chiefs a third time. Remembering an old saying from his tribe, "One head does not contain all the wisdom", he decided there and then to change his approach. Instead of waving his stick, he simply pointed to the declining food stores and calmly stated: "There is no going back: unless we accept this, we will all die". He asked the Chiefs to sit together as their fathers had done in the old days, to decide on a solution.

They were gloomy but as the Chiefs grappled with the challenge a new mood took hold and they declared: "We have had a change of heart. We are all in the same boat!". Relieved to have seed for new crops, they felt much more confident.

Chapter 4. People fall apart then step up

What the Chiefs least expected when they returned to their villages was to suffer the young lion's problem. Their people had lost confidence in them and rejected the call to change saying: "You have betrayed us and we no longer trust you".

From afar the young lion stepped in. He ordered each village to send a representative to a special meeting where the Chiefs would just listen. The representatives returned saying: "We have voiced our concerns… but the danger is real and it is not the fault of our leaders. They do not have all the answers and we must tackle this together". With renewed faith the people were ready to plant the new seeds and fight back.

Chapter 5. Identity shifts and they seize the moment

At the end of this story a remarkable thing happened: the villagers looked in the mirror and the Chiefs were no longer thick-skinned like hippos, and the people were no longer blind. What had they become? Not slow elephants, nor tall giraffes, nor crafty hares, but animals that were faster and more cooperative. The Chiefs said "we have become like gazelles", and the people happily responded: "Yes we are lean, adaptable, and ready to run energetically together to find the best pastures".

Since that day there has been a new confidence, with females and minority tribes also contributing their voices alongside others. The people suffer less as they face up to reality, create solutions together and are leaders influencing each other. The young chief is no longer needed and has moved on to be a chief of chiefs in another land.

This story of hippos, lions and gazelles is now told to all the young gazelle children, and acted out in their games. Before adulthood each child learns how to turn themselves into a lion and how to deal with any territorial hippos they might meet, just in case.

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began a year earlier, with an apparently successful meeting in Cairo, after which nothing happened. So we reconvened the "leaders" in Lusaka, pushing them hard until the penny dropped and they left down-hearted. Months later in Marrakech, after a welcome change of heart, they were inspiring one another with positive actions they would take on their return.

After the high of Marrakech, the last thing I expected was the MORI survey which reported that 500 staff had lost confidence in their leaders. From a story perspective I saw that David, the leaders and the 500 staff were in separate stories. My work was somehow to bring them together.

So I began with David, asking provocative questions to draw out his story: what were your intentions when you set out on this journey? What have been your biggest accomplishments… and biggest struggles? What dilemmas do others now face? How do you know? David told me how he intended the 30 leaders would engage their 500 staff, drawing creativity and purposeful contribution from everyone.

This led us to seek out the staff perspective. We briefed the 30 leaders to reach deep down into their teams to collect stories of what creates or destroys staff confidence. While waiting for them to report I became concerned. How could we get the issues on the table without blood on the carpet? With our colonial legacy and people from diverse backgrounds (British and African, male and female, Christian and Muslim…) were we opening Pandora's box?

Telling tales

When we brought the leaders together in Johannesburg, David and I had prepared carefully. He wanted to address 'the leadership issue', and while I was intuitively drawn to Springboard Stories (Denning, 2004) and Success Stories (Cooperrider, 2005) we particularly also needed a contained way to include negative stories.

We decided to split the leaders into two separate rooms. The mostly white, British, middle-class, middle-aged Country Directors were to write the story of progress towards their vision. Meanwhile, next door the African Leaders, mostly black, from 15 different countries, diverse backgrounds/tribes/religions, mix of male and female, would analyse the stories they had collected from staff. The next day the African Leaders bravely told tales of people dreading coming to work, not receiving hellos, emails ignored, managerial decisions avoided, and high performers overloaded. They were speaking to their bosses of course, and also, as senior managers, taking criticism themselves. In a poignant moment, a voice seeming to echo in people's hearts declared:

> How can we modernise the relationship between UK and African staff? Currently it is master-servant, with accountability one way: I say you do. There is little pursuit of mutual benefit. The consequence is emotional disengagement. This is a big opportunity. Staff want respect, fairness and a leadership which engages rather than imposes. They also want challenge and space for creativity.

Moved by this, pairs worked with the notion "if you value someone you communicate with them" and we spent a long hot afternoon in a whole group dialogue which produced some significant shifts:

- The Country Directors, emerging from shock and anger, conveyed to their African colleagues "we need you in our team if we're all going to survive".
- The African Leaders noted that Country Directors "are in a difficult position too and we are moved by your humility".

In the next few days stories of the meeting rippled back into countries and the whole system seemed to unlock! We found that simple leadership behaviours were already changing and morale was rising as a result.

Flash of inspiration

Cathartic though the meeting was, some were not sure exactly what had been accomplished and, although David was upbeat, he was also unclear about what to do next. This prompted me to draft the hippo fable. I found this ancient Bantu story form (Greaves, 1988) helped me stand back and see the patterns, then imagine how to complete the story. David later helped me make the story feel more African.

The fable set the stage for a coaching session with David, after which in a flash of inspiration in a taxi he realised there were "six key challenges" (i.e. attract new income, increase impact, branding, etc) for the leadership team.

In our fifth meeting of the 30 leaders in Tunis, we began by asking them to write the story of their journey so far on post-its in response to questions we put on flipcharts. It said:

> Two years ago in Cairo it was all air and nothing real; we were suspicious. It has been a struggle, with lots challenged and changed before getting to products that staff believe in. Johannesburg was about leadership: how, despite the tension of change, you can still engage everyone. We went away with commitment. This region is now succeeding because we are not afraid of difference.

A newly arriving Country Director said he could immediately feel this team's style but before the story it was like "arriving in a film half way through". For others, who lose the plot between meetings, it was like "meeting up again in the fog, realising we have something to do together". In the days that followed the energy levels were high. David appointed leaders for the six challenges and others joined the one they had most passion for. Instead of old hippo conversations, new gazelle ways were enacted "on the hoof" (e.g. leaders expose the deep dilemma behind their challenge and draw fast feedback from colleagues). We knew it was 'for real' when each group defined actions for the next six months, which were bold (eg. close a building, introduce a new pay structure...) but also doable. A Country Director spontaneously filmed the meeting to tell the story of Tunis to staff back home.

The contribution of story-writing

How do we know if we have changed this organisation? The evidence is in what the organisation is now delivering: a few big shared products, having released funds by decommissioning hundreds of small local products. The new MORI survey gratifyingly shows the region has risen to number one for leadership out of 13 regions worldwide. Positive responses David receives to his staff newsletter bear this out. People are aligned.

But how did writing the stories contribute? Significantly! In a separate piece of research in 2006 I explored how stories drive change, and not just for Africa. We asked people (in UK, Europe and Asia) to write down their story of 'breaking out' from one life situation into another and we soon had a diverse collection (e.g. from being sacked, to surviving a company sale, to stepping off a roller-coaster, to following a dream…) which we analysed prior to gathering writers for a meeting in London. Our project concluded:

1. When you tell a story that is real and personal, it touches people and resonates.
2. Stories that contain struggle are powerful because they reassure you you're normal and

call to the heart: people do not just want success stories.
3. Writing a story is more powerful than hearing one: it wakes you up, gives perspective, clarity of choice and a way to commit.
4. Not everyone is ready to write their story: it can be too recent or raw, and some just don't want the wake-up call.

Writing your story is powerful. In Africa a shift had already happened before the story-writing began but it was fragile and would be short-lived. Writing the fable sparked insight into what was needed next, and when I shared it at Tunis some laughed uncomfortably recalling the hippo chapter, while the "aligning herd of gazelles" made sense to most people. Then David asked the leaders an interesting question: "Who are you being in this meeting compared with two years ago?". They responded: "We used to be separate countries, not wanting to share… but now we are accountable decision-makers, leading the change process in North and South Africa". This response marked their identity shift into leadership and, as if looking in a mirror, they saw themselves refreshed, grown taller… and they were delighted. Our fable had provoked them, but it was their own story that remade them.

The more conscious I become of the story form (e.g. Campbell, 1988), the more it shapes my practice. For example, I now realise the Africa project contains multiple overlapping stories:

- Of a facilitator-fearless leader collaboration.
- Of a dispersed leadership team.
- Of an emergent steering group.
- Of shifting a whole system.

Today when coaching and facilitating I respect the integrity of the story and ask: "What brought you here and what is trying to happen next?". Expressing a past story is a great way to dump emotional baggage. Expressing a present story brings clarity and taps into deep motivation. Expressing a future story lays down new pathways in the brain, channelling energy and creating direction. One breakout story writer caught the power of story both personally and organisationally:

> Writing and telling my story I was wobbly like a baby giraffe, standing in my own skin in my own truth. It took courage and drew welcome affirmation from others which quickly created a sense of community. We rediscovered from first principles the importance of presence, which in corporate life brings forth motivation, creativity and performance: antidotes to alienation, and mistaken command and control.

Beyond making sense of a personal transition (Bridges, 1996) this points to the use of story for increasing performance of organisations. Douglass C. North, a Nobel prize-winning economist (North, 2005), links the patchy economic development in sub-Saharan Africa (and elsewhere) with the rigidity of institutions and personal belief systems. Bombarded as we all are today by unanticipated change, story is a sensible way for our teams to learn and keep up with new realities. This kind of adaptive efficiency, says North, is the key to economic progress, not just in a company but in a society.

After a merger you inherit a situation you did not create. You can be stuck in a false, unhappy marriage, but to really merge is to transform your identity: embracing another's past and present, joining together on a new path, pooling energy and sparking inspiration to overcome unforeseeable obstacles. The tool of story propels the change inside that in turn frees up our joint capacity to deliver all the results needed.

Acknowledgements

To Andy Harmon who introduced me to Campbell's 'monomyth', to Ben Parker my

colleague throughout this journey, to David and my friends in Africa, and to Annette Broerse-Nijsen and all in the breakout stories project.

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An Invitation to a
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Pragmatic Writing Responses in Complex Change Conditions

GARY PASS

The case-focus of this article provides several examples of how writing was used as a pragmatic response in complex change conditions in a local council. It casts light on writing as part of a creative, dynamic process as well as the way that reflection and inner dialogue—in the act of writing—develops thinking and supports action. Outcomes in terms of success and failure are not always clear. The article contributes further evidence for the idea that simple cause and effect in complex conditions is misleading.

KEYWORDS: Complexity, conversational inquiry, organisational change

Introduction

I am an independent practitioner in the field of organisational change with a bias towards understanding organisations as complex social processes (Critchley, 2003). The focus of this article is a client assignment I undertook in 2005 in which I was engaged to provide change support to a local council. The aim was to develop and implement a strategy for improving citizen access to council services via improved channels and processes of communication. I was contracted for the first 'scoping' phase of this 'service transformation' programme.

The broader conditions were complex: a wider strategic process involving a number of interdependent change projects driven by central government to achieve cost-savings and improve the delivery of local government services.

Complexity was also apparent within the organisation. Prior to my involvement several directors, including the CEO, had resigned. A temporary strategic team was in place largely composed of senior managers who were 'acting up' from their substantive roles. A new customer services manager (CSM) had recently been appointed, although not to the strategic team, and was charged with co-ordinating the development of the service transformation programme. A new CEO had been recruited and was due to take up the appointment mid-way through the assignment period.

At the point of my involvement the assignment frame was clearly laid out in terms of principles and plan to bring about sustainable change, tailored to meet central government funding criteria of measurable returns. The new CEO was briefed in advance on service transformation and the approach to change, and expressed support for both.

Divergence from plans—an emergent working method

Part of the emergent reality, from early in my involvement, was that the acting team was fully stretched just by the day-to-day responsibilities of their new roles. In contrast, the new CSM was enthusiastic to take ownership for service transformation and to make progress in scoping the change process.

This marked a critical moment for me: I was acutely aware of the risk that the strategic team might delegate responsibility for service transformation and treat it as just one more project to be managed. However, I judged that I should step towards a partnership with the CSM, as I felt we might be able to influence and attract wider involvement. I chose to follow the energy for change even though this meant stepping into greater uncertainty.

Our method was to keep initial plans clearly in mind, as a guide to track progress, but to work flexibly and openly in terms of focus. I adopted a 'conversational inquiry' approach (Shaw, 2003), which allowed us to explore what occurred conversationally in relation to bringing about service transformation. In my experience this approach contrasts markedly with a more familiar project-logic of dealing with tasks in a step-by-step fashion with a close eye on planned time and outputs.

We attended to the rise and fall of our energy and interest, as we explored and developed our ideas, using writing pragmatically to explore their scope and complexity and develop a view of connections and patterns. Writing also provided a focus to identify specific actions and to support communication. The improvisational nature of our dialogue was matched in the way we used writing. Where our dialogue was open and free-form we used open forms of writing like mind-mapping. Where we became more concrete in our ideas we used more fixed forms such as detailed plans of tasks, timescales and resources. Detailed plans grew out of the energised flow of conversational inquiry rather than from a prescriptive list of tasks in a master plan.

Writing as intervention

An overriding feature of the role writing played in the assignment was the interplay between thinking, speaking, writing, communicating and acting. Several examples illustrate the mix of form and range of use of writing, which emerged in response to our needs and in support of the wider process of change: mind-mapping, work notes, email and a PowerPoint 'Review Feedback'.

Mind-mapping

Conditions of change require us to mobilise our energy and intention as well as develop ideas and construct plans. Energy and vitality guided me in how to use writing whilst working with the CSM. In the opening phase of our collaboration the freeform nature of mind-mapping was a catalyst which enriched our understanding and insight, and galvanised us to focussed action and communication as we sought to influence and include others in the process of change.

Mind-mapping quickly led us to other more structured forms. We realised we needed to construct a list of stakeholders matched against a variety of forums in which they participated.

This is a conventional approach in change programmes. However, the energy and insight that grew out of our free-form conversation and mind-mapping provided focus and motivation that was vital to the way we viewed our 'stakeholder map', providing a qualitatively different foundation for our communication and engagement with people in the wider organisation.

Work notes

Work notes were a more structured form of writing that also grew out of conversational inquiry and mind-mapping. We needed to combine typical project management conventions like 'agenda', 'issues' and 'actions' with space to note reflexive thoughts as they arose in our minds. Sometimes these thoughts were relevant to existing headings in the current work notes. On other occasions we simply created a new heading of 'Reflections' and added these thoughts.

The spontaneity of ideas was as important in writing as it was in the process of conversation. Emergent thoughts often carried us forward on an energy of realisation and understanding. They helped us to act and communicate in ways that drew in and involved other people in the 'what' and 'how' of bringing about service transformation. Work notes enabled us to stretch beyond conventional limits by adapting the form and use of writing to match the conditions and arising needs.

The power of email

Email has the power and flexibility to be both a one-to-one, intimate medium and an instant broadcast medium, and we used both.

After a working day that contained interplay between conversation, writing, transformative thought and action the CSM and I hit a moment of energised realisation that wove together strands of connected ideas. These ideas spanned concerns about interdependent projects, engaging key individuals and teams, the effect of the accession of the new CEO and our alignment with the acting director responsible for service transformation. We realised we now needed the direct involvement of the acting director to develop the fabric of our ideas about wider participation in service transformation.

We aimed to meet the director at the beginning of the following day to give her a condensed and quick-to-read orientation. The value of our work notes and the power of email combined and I was able to quickly cut-and-paste a concise list of proposals. The process of selecting thoughts from work notes to construct the email served to increase the clarity of ideas and my sense of confidence in the importance of meeting the director.

Review Feedback—intent

The need for a more substantial document arose soon after the new CEO took up his post. Naturally he had a daunting task and his early days involved meetings with all stakeholders at all levels of the council. I was invited with the CSM to one of his first meetings with the strategic team. It became rapidly clear, to my surprise, that our expectation of alignment with the CEO about the strategy for change was in question. I was wrong-footed by the earlier impression of positive support.

I left the meeting, with the CSM, expressing a furious realisation that the CEO urgently needed a more tangible understanding of our work and its effects. The benefits of working in a dynamic, improvisatory fashion had left us with a problem: we had no concrete, written presentation to share. Also the available data was qualitative, dispersed and unstructured. Whilst we had planned to develop a report at the end of the scoping phase, it was clear that something written was urgently needed now!

The need was to influence and engage so there was value in being able to operate beyond the limits of quantitative reporting. The subjective data available to me, through the lens of qualitative inquiry, was valid and could be fed back to the organisation as a means of generating insight and motivation.

I aimed to transform the data of mind maps and work notes into a sequence of concise and illuminating impressions of how and where change was being embraced. The idea of calling it a 'Review Feedback' came to mind. The title conveyed to me a sense of presenting the journey as well as engaging others in the manner of a survey feedback (French et al, 1994, p. 31). I knew I would need to present the content for discussion and decided a PowerPoint format would be more effective than the extended prose of a conventional Word document.

As I perused the data and selected striking moments I felt more was needed than just a presentation of illuminating impressions. The illuminative intent—casting light on particular features as opposed to presenting a representative survey—reminded me of the way storytelling is used in appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 1995, p. 3). The assumption is that attending to cameo events provides the seed from which new growth may spring. The method involves drawing out themes and using these to generate provocative statements that aim to provoke thought and action towards new forms. I find appreciative inquiry a dynamic means of breaking away from overly rational-analytical thinking and towards creative inspiration and movement.

I drew on the feature of provocative statements and the intent to prod but instead I raised critical questions that came to mind as I reflected on the illuminating impressions I was setting down. I use the term 'critical' in this sense to mean raising awareness to assumptions or patterns that may be hidden or covered over by cultural norms of thought and behaviour.

My reason for framing questions rather than statements was that, unlike appreciative inquiry, I was the author of the text rather than my client population. In terms of intervention style (Heron, 1997) I wanted to be more catalytic and facilitative to balance the confronting and authoritative nature of a report. I hoped by raising questions to encourage active reflection and response.

Using PowerPoint provided an opportunity to employ simple graphic devices to break the pattern of how ideas were presented. In particular I used an early slide to evoke critical thinking by raising four questions about assumptions underpinning a strategy for change. The slide appeared as follows on page 66:

Although I had chosen PowerPoint it was always my intention to use printed copies, with space for note making, rather than project the slides as a presentation. This better fitted my aim to encourage participation, engage all the senses and evoke a shared experienced of dialogue and reflection.

Review Feedback—outcomes

It is perhaps common for practitioners to highlight the successful effect of interventions and not broadcast the ambiguous, problematic or downright ineffective. The problem with covering up ambiguity and failure is that insight and learning are stifled.

I too would like to be able to report that my Review Feedback succeeded in creating a transformation in the strategic team's grasp of their strategy for change for the council. The immediate effect in the meeting was not the enlivened engagement that I had hoped to catalyse. Energy and communication seemed subdued. There were many other contributing factors and the purpose of this article is not to unpick the

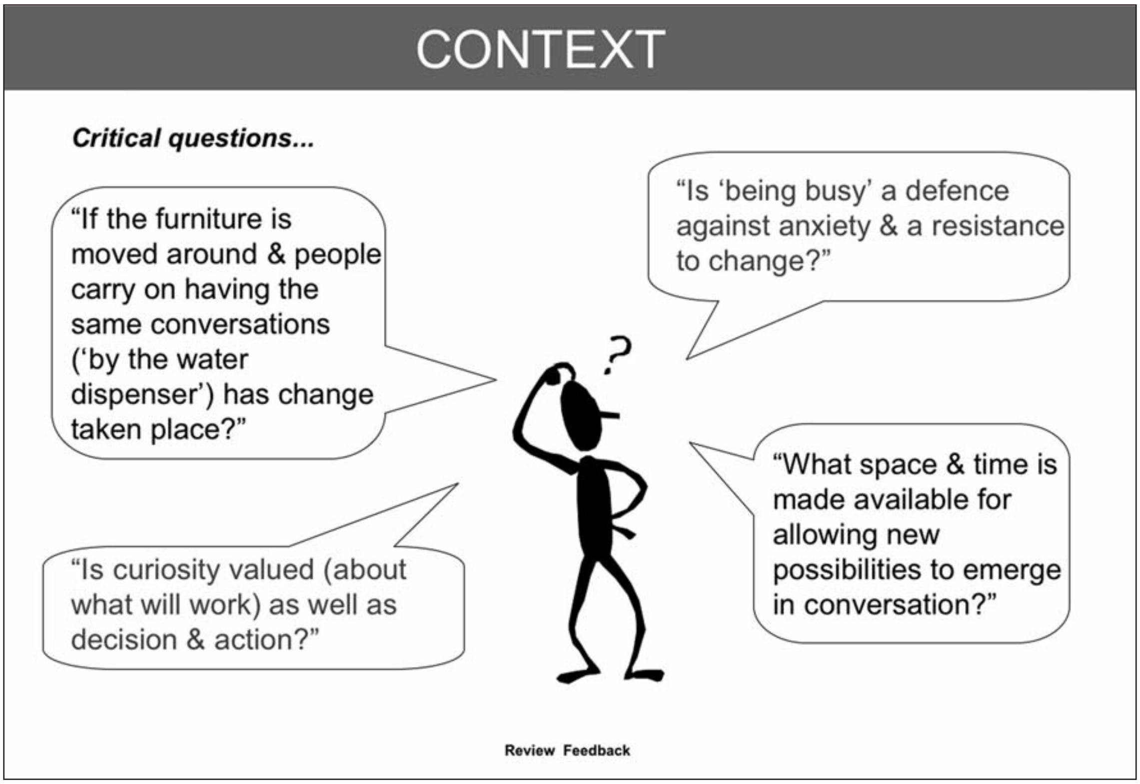

Figure 1: Context

whole assignment.

I had framed the meeting as a gathering for joint sense-making and forward movement on a continuing journey. After the meeting I used the Review Feedback in follow-on conversations of smaller dyads and triads, which could have contributed to deeper engagement and forward movement. However, it became evident that the new CEO's reservations were not assuaged and a decision to complete our contractual involvement followed.

Conclusion—critical thoughts

This article is about the role that writing played as a pragmatic response in complex conditions of organisational change. As such the use of writing cannot be separated from the context in which it was used or the interplay between thinking, speaking, writing, communicating and acting.

I felt disappointment and rejection following the decision to end my involvement. However, the Review Feedback was an important statement that made visible a complex mix of collaborative and creative thinking and action. This is true of the email example too, which drew on earlier work captured in work notes that were themselves a development from conversing and mind-mapping.

The Review Feedback, in particular, helped me to understand and appreciate the choices I had made and the value that I added, especially regarding the creative collaboration with the CSM. The experience of reviewing the qualitative data and crafting the text highlights for me a distinction between informative and transformative writing. 'Informative' conveys a sense of passing ideas on whereas 'transformative' suggests a process of creation and change.

I sought to do much more than inform the strategic team using the Review Feedback. The purpose was not merely to 'let them know' or present a series of logical options. The aim was to catalyse a change of thought and feeling towards service transformation and their part in it. Whilst I crafted the Review Feedback with a transformative purpose for others I found that the process involved a transformative experience for me, which I hadn't expected. Furthermore, following the Review Feedback the new CEO and strategic team displayed an active decision about how to move forward in a way that had not been evident at the start of my involvement.

The writing process was both reflective and creative in a manner that I associate more with the art of the novel than the science of analytical reports. The novelist is the creative well from which the novel is drawn. Likewise, as a practitioner, I am the creative instrument through which transformation of understanding and action is possible. I knowingly draw on this as I intervene in my clients' affairs and seek to support them in their own transformations. It strikes me that working in complex conditions, with spontaneity and the courage to improvise, demands an equal measure of reflection and sense-making as a foundation for strengthening and deepening good practice.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gary Pass is an organisational change practitioner. His first degree in environmental science was followed by an early career in direct marketing and project management. His commercial experience provided a foundation for a deeper exploration of humanistic approaches to change agent practice. The arc of his life now draws all these strands together in a focus on sustainable development in complex human systems. Gary can be contacted via g.pass@baskerleitch.com.

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