



Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 2

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Complexity, voice, awareness: writing as process

Vicky Cosstick



Keywords

Facilitation, writing, process, complexity, Northern Ireland, social media, legacy, Rita Duffy, peacewalls

It is late April 2018, not long after the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), and I am in Derry in the offices of [Unheard Voices](#) (UV), a project that works with hard-to-reach women victims of the Troubles. This is part of my current research into the “legacy” or impact of the Troubles, which raged from 1969 until the GFA was signed in 1998, on Northern Ireland today. It’s my third visit to UV and my second time of meeting Sharon, a Protestant woman whose brother Winston was abducted and murdered by the IRA in 1974, and Ann (for anonymous), whose father was in the IRA and jailed when she was four. In both cases, their mothers couldn’t cope – Sharon’s became depressed and addicted to prescription drugs, while her father became a violent alcoholic; Kathleen’s mother abandoned her four children, who were sent to live with their grandparents in Derry.

Also in the room are the Irish artist [Rita Duffy](#), with whom I am working on my current research, and Carol Cunningham, the coordinator of Unheard Voices.

Rita is drawing Sharon and Ann, and they, initially hesitant, are drawing pictures based on the stories they are telling. Rita and I are asking about their experiences, I am taking photos, and Carol Cunningham is listening in. In the end, we are five women, from very different situations and backgrounds, having a conversation.



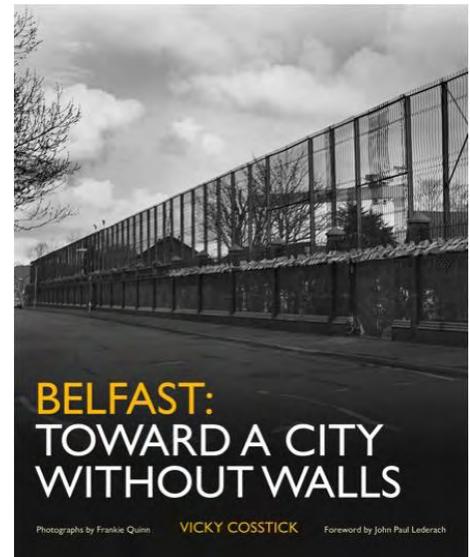
The [article](#) I wrote was published in Northern Slant in the series I have been writing, in an attempt to write in a different way about the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict. I tweeted about that article, which received 19 “likes” and was retweeted twelve times, once by a Catherine Ferrin, who added this comment. Read the article and see what you think.



Writing as Process

Here, I want to reflect on “writing as process”, based on my experience over the last five years of writing about Northern Ireland: first, my book on the one hundred peacewalls, gates and barriers in Belfast (Belfast: Toward a City Without Walls, [Colourpoint](#) 2015); then, my current research and writing project on the legacy of the Northern Irish conflict. In essence, I am reflecting on whether writing can be an intervention which intentionally facilitates change in a given situation (including one of conflict), and what difference that makes to how the research and writing are approached and carried out.

I begin by contrasting, although in shades of grey rather than black and white, writing as process with writing as product.



Writing as product

As examples of writing as product I am suggesting journalism, academic writing and consultancy reports. This is a matter of how the task of non-fiction writing is seen from both the writer’s and the editor/supervisor/client’s point of view, with ramifications for the what, why and how of the writing task, and whether and how the writing can and does influence change.

In writing as product, I would like to suggest that:

- I. The emphasis in the writer’s intention is on the finished product: a consultant’s report, a journalistic article, an academic essay or PhD thesis, for example.
- II. The writer works consciously or unconsciously within a particular genre of writing, accepting the parameters of that genre.
- III. There is a strictly defined audience.
- IV. In all three cases, if the writer were to stray outside the parameters of a specific genre, her work could be rejected on the grounds that it has not delivered on explicit or implicit expectations or assumptions.
- V. The parameters or standards for the work are monitored by an editor, a supervising academic or paying client, who says yay or nay to the completed work.
- VI. In writing as product, there may be little or no attention given to the personality, biases or background of the writer, or to their experience of the writing itself, although I accept that is not always the case.

- VII. Writing as product may, but does not necessarily, lead to change. Consultants' reports may contain rafts of recommendations but are sometimes ignored and sometimes called "another form of shelving". Of journalism, the saying goes: "today's newspaper is tomorrow's fish and chip paper". A PhD thesis or academic book may just end up on a library shelf. Either may be unreadable and academic books are often too expensive to reach wide audiences.
- For example, London School of Economics Professor Maurice Punch wrote a study in 2012 of British state violence, collusion and the Troubles – arguably the most significant unresolved issue inhibiting the peace process in Northern Ireland. I emailed him to ask if he believed the book had made any difference, and he replied that that he didn't think it had had any influence at all. (Punch, Maurice **State Violence, Collusion and the Troubles: Counter Insurgency, Government Deviance and Northern Ireland** (Pluto Press 2012))
- VIII. Of course, in all three genres, the writer may want to make a difference to something, and sometimes she does – but in all three genres, the main focus is on the content of the writing and the final product, not the process which precedes, accompanies and follows the writing.
- IX. In all three cases, the product determines the process, and the process usually ends with the creation of the final product. Once the report, article or thesis is complete and published, the author moves on.

In writing as process, there is a non-linear journey, and the written product or products mark stages along the way. The writing may never become a finished product but may be continually reviewed. If social media – Facebook, Twitter and blogging, for example – are used, then the writing may take on a qualitatively different form and purpose.

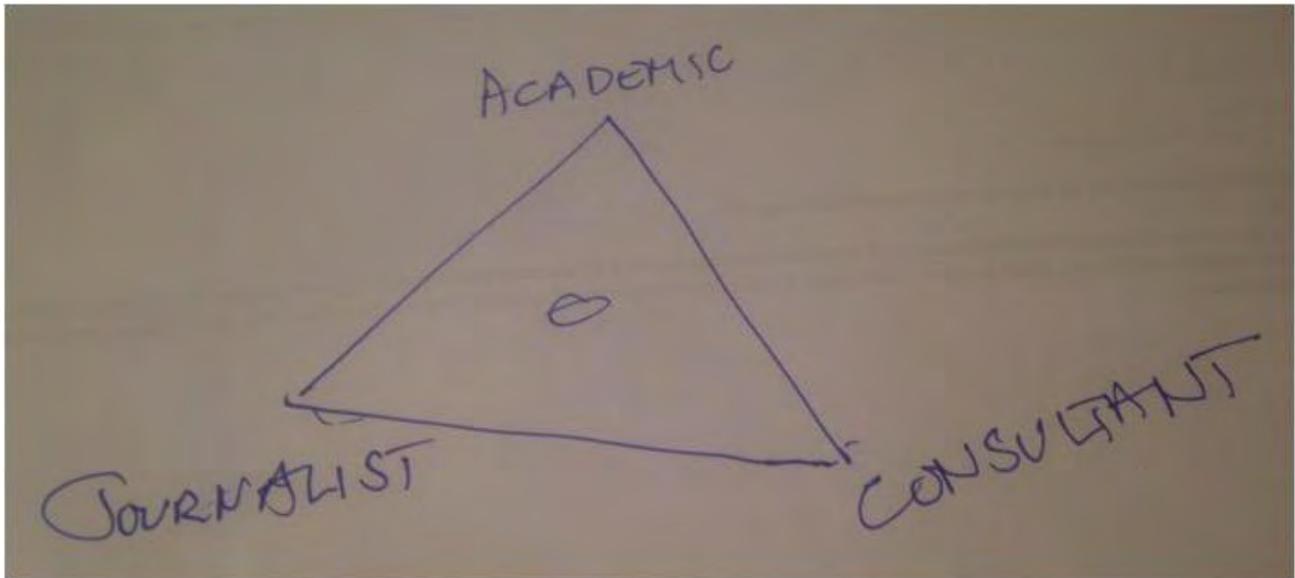
My writer's voice: weaving together three points of view

As I embarked on research for my peacewalls book and on draft introductions and pitches for publishers, I faced the challenge of where I was literally "coming from" as a writer, a challenge that also involved the issue of "voice". Who was I and how was I speaking about and into the reality of post-conflict Northern Ireland? I will return to the related question of whether and how I as an outsider had credibility or indeed the right to speak about Northern Ireland at all. But I knew that the "voice" of the book needed to echo the voices of all those I was interviewing. This certainty came from my academic background and theoretical commitments to ethnomethodology and social constructionism. I could only tell the true story of the peacewalls by telling the many stories of the peacewalls, and of those whose work and life is concerned with them. By the end of my research I had interviewed 110 people: community workers, residents, church ministers, artists, architects, bureaucrats, government and council workers.

The research was also conducted explicitly from a [complexity thinking](#) mindset and assumptions, although not a rigorous academic analysis. In complex situations, it is critical to identify a simple core question. The peacewalls book began with a central question, which remained the focus of my research and writing: in early 2013, the Stormont government made a commitment to remove all of the 100 or so barriers between Protestant and Catholic communities in Belfast by 2023. How could this happen? As a change facilitator and consultant, I was immediately fascinated by the challenge this presented.

The writer John Paul Lederach – who in the end wrote the foreword to my book and whose *Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (OUP 2010) was hugely influential for me – uses the phrase "constructive change" as a euphemism for peacebuilding. (This book by Lederach uses complexity thinking

to reflect on his decades of experience and writing about conflict transformation.) I wanted the book to contribute, in however small a way, to constructive change in Northern Ireland. I also wanted the book to be readable. So, I reasoned consciously early on, I wanted to bring an **academic** rigour to my research, without writing an academic book; I wanted to bring the narrative skills of my background as a **journalist**, and I wanted to apply the ethical standards and analytical skills of a **consultant**, without writing a report. I struggled with this for some time, as if slipping between the three “points of view”, until finally I drew a large triangle in my notebook, with each of the three points marked Consultant/Journalist/Academic, and then I drew a point or circle in the middle of the triangle. I had solved the problem – my writing needed to remain in the tension between those three points:



The result was a book which is explicitly and consciously cross-genre. The publisher, when I eventually found one, had a light editorial hand. There was no client paying me a fee, and no academic supervisor. For the first time in my life, I was able to write for publication exactly what and how I wanted to write; I could “trust the process” and allow the research to evolve, meander and emerge in its own way. I did receive very frank, direct and helpful feedback from publishers who initially turned down the book and from “critical friends” who accompanied my writing process from early to final drafts and helped me to find that credible voice. That was all a welcome part of the process.

There have, of course, been disadvantages to writing in a cross-genre way. The book does not conform to some people’s expectations. It is not necessarily recognised as authentic journalism by journalists, as academically valid by academics, nor is it seen as a “report”. That, together with my status as a British middle class, middle aged female outsider has made me and the book relatively invisible in the Northern Irish context.



[Google Earth image of the peace wall that cuts across Manor Street in Lower Old Park, Belfast]

Northern Ireland is a post-conflict society – although that term, like just about everything else in the region, is highly contested. While the Good Friday Agreement brought an end in 1998 to a campaign of violence, the conflict continues – in the collapse of and continuing failure to restore the powersharing Executive and devolved Assembly, in the presence of the peacewalls, which grew in number for ten years after the GFA, in unresolved “legacy cases” and a society that suffers from trauma at many levels and in many ways. It is a “cold peace”; the factions are no longer armed and the British Army has left the scene, but there is an absence of reconciliation and forgiveness; segregation and sectarianism flourish; the scars of conflict remain.

Truth in this context is also highly contested. Almost all of public life, including politics and the media, is sectarianised – split between nationalist and unionist - and insiders are almost invariably defined as ‘orange’ or ‘green’, coming from one side or another. Outsiders cannot generally be categorised and there is little or no value seen in their point of view. People like me didn’t grow up with the conflict, so what do we know?

At an early stage, I therefore questioned my own biases – I am Catholic, after all – and my own right to speak into this situation. I had to interrogate my own levels of personal confidence. Was I robust enough to embark on this work?

What have I learned about writing?

I can tell you what I learned, but not how I got there. My Catholic faith, I found, is of little interest to anyone in Northern Ireland. Indeed, I am virtually never asked any questions about myself at all. So, I am defined by what is obvious – my accent, my age, class and my gender. Arranging interviews by phone can be tricky – “what’s your name, again?” - so I try to work by email, on Twitter and with personal recommendations wherever possible. Once I am with people face to face, any difficulties usually vanish, especially where my contacts are women – as they often are. I can demonstrate credibility quickly with my listening skills and by asking the right questions. I would rarely choose or be asked to speak in public or on the media – a British accent is simply not heard. As a facilitator I was always interested in the question of ‘how little does a facilitator need to do to make change happen?’ Flying beneath the radar has many advantages.

So, the ‘voice’ I use tries to be always positive and non-critical, to amplify constructive change in Northern Ireland. My writing tries to tell the story of what people who are in the front lines of the peace process themselves are saying and doing. I try to tell a story that others aren’t telling, and to hold up a mirror to Northern Ireland of itself. I am always looking for where constructive change – i.e. peacebuilding – is happening, and looking for how it is happening, which nearly always comes down to relationships and conversations.

So, my writing aims to be more than tomorrow’s fish and chip paper or to gather dust on a shelf. It attempts to identify, mirror and amplify where and how constructive change is happening, although I rarely if ever specify what that change should look like.

My writing’s legacy

Although my book was published three years ago, I am still in touch with many of the people I interviewed. Fifteen months ago, I brought together a group of my contacts and raised private funding to pay for a facilitator to help them explore how change was happening around the interface areas. Several new and helpful relationships among participants emerged from that meeting, which also inspired an article I finally had published in [The Irish Times](#) last July. I am still tweeting, posting on the Facebook page, or writing whenever possible about the peacewalls. In complexity thinking, small interventions can have large and unpredictable, indeed unmeasurable, effects; I genuinely believe that to be the case.

Last summer, after several months of exploring the question of legacy, I submitted an application for a grant, to Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, to cover expenses. Once again, I identified a core question – What, actually, is the legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland as the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement approaches? – and mapped the issues and questions that emerge: the “frozen” nature of the peace process; trauma, and its transgenerational and cultural impact; the role and responsibility of the British state for collusion and illegal violence; gender and the role of women; human rights issues; infrastructure, including peacewalls; the role of the arts and media. Unlike the peacewalls work, many of the wide range of issues have been well covered in the media and some are “taboo”. The work aims to explore and analyse at a high level, illustrating the issues through particular narratives, for example of [the Ballymurphy Massacre](#). It aims, ambitiously and ultimately, to connect the dots amongst many issues and, from the advantage point of the outsider, suggest new ways of looking at the problem of post-conflict Northern Ireland.

I did not expect to receive a grant; after all, I was refused a grant for the peacewalls book. But the tight discipline of the grant application – four pages of A4 and a few clear questions – enabled me to clarify my thinking for myself. I also decided that much as I had come to love Belfast and be fascinated by the progress of the peace process and comfortable with the role of outsider, I could not continue without funding.

Quite quickly I was told, to my surprise, that I was being put forward to the second and final round of consideration for the grant. I needed to answer a few questions, which mostly had to do with impact – could I demonstrate that the peacewalls book had made a difference? I had just a few days, so I sent an email to over 30 close contacts, and within 48 hours had received a dozen replies with qualitative, anecdotal evidence that yes, the book had contributed to change around the interfaces.

Two examples:

Loyalist (Protestant) community worker: *Perhaps the most striking impact of the peace walls research and book is that it has brought conversations about their future back into the public domain.*

Former Justice Minister: *DOJ (Department of Justice) welcomed the extra publicity around tackling/removing walls. Although the book did not directly affect existing Departmental policy, it probably encouraged some of our partners to engage more enthusiastically.*

The quotes showed that my book had the impact I might have dreamed of in my most optimistic moments, namely, that it (the writing) had stimulated conversation and engagement. According to complexity thinking, “if you want to change the system, change the conversation”. The most I can hope for from my work is that it influences the conversation, most likely in invisible and unmeasurable ways. I was awarded the grant by JRCT in early December 2017.

As you might expect, with “writing as process”, there are significant differences in the what, why and how of the current writing project. For the legacy research, my previous relationships are not so relevant and I have less support. It is more difficult to remain, and to be seen as, neutral or balanced. For example, to be interested in the Ballymurphy Massacre is seen by some as taking a pro-Republican stance, even to be supporting the IRA. Because the issues I am researching are live and often sensitive, potential interviewees are busy and sometimes reluctant to speak. While both projects have been hard work, the peacewalls book felt like chasing a snowball downhill, the legacy research feels more like trudging uphill through mud – although with enough breakthrough moments to make it worthwhile. I might have wanted or assumed the current project would be like the first project, to replicate the process, and it hasn’t been – it is a different process.

A multimedia approach

For the legacy work, I am much more dependent on and intentionally engaged with social media, which have become an integral part of the process. Shortly after I received the grant, I was approached by Connor Daly, the bright young editor of a new website, Northern Slant @NorthernSlant, and invited to contribute. I realised [I could publish “episodes” of my research](#), and experiment with content and voice. I now have almost 500 followers on my Peacewalls Facebook page. I post all my Northern Slant articles on the Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/BelfastPeacewalls>) and spend very small amounts of money (under £10.00) to boost my articles and attract new readers to Northern Slant. Because the issues I am researching are live, I use Twitter @CosstVictoria extensively, following 850 accounts and being followed by over 600 for research, timely information, contacts, and to promote the Northern Slant articles. The strategic use of all three media together – Facebook, Twitter and Northern Slant – ultimately to enhance influence, creates a new and unique dynamic.

Re-view

I have tried to suggest in this article the ways in which writing as process, writing which aims to facilitate change, is different from writing as product. Much of this, I believe, is about awareness: awareness of the relationships built through the writing, awareness of my intentions and of my presence in a given situation, awareness of the ethical implications of the work, awareness of the conversations that precede, accompany and follow the writing. During the conversation with the women of Unheard Voices, I asked them whether telling their story “retraumatizes” them:

“They tell their story over and again, and, says Ann, sometimes she comes away feeling exhausted, but ‘more often than not I come away feeling lifted, especially when someone says something you hadn’t thought about. It’s like therapy without being therapy.’ ‘Re-traumatization is part of the process,’ says Carol Cunningham.”

And as we talked, I became aware, as if I had never known it before, of the impact of trauma on my own life. My mother’s father committed suicide in New York in the Depression; my mother was seven, and her brother five. The family were impoverished, her mother became an alcoholic, my uncle went on to volunteer as an under-age recruit in World War II and died in Italy; my mother suffered anxiety and depression, was dependent on sleeping pills, and died way too young; I can, just now, see the impact on my own life in unexplained anxieties and depressions.

I began this article by referring to the Good Friday Agreement, and to the contrast between writing as product and writing as process. The GFA was, of course, welcomed with justifiable, unforgettable and overwhelming relief and exhilaration when it was signed on 10 April 1998. At the same time, the last 20 years of stop-start politics and the current gridlock at Stormont have exposed some flaws in its implementation. Some elements – such as the approach to powersharing – needed to be constantly monitored and reviewed; some elements were never implemented, such as the Civic Forum; and the document lacked other elements, for example an effective process for reintegration of former combatants and a strategy for unresolved legacy cases – issues which continue to dog the progress of peace. I could argue that peace has stalled in Northern Ireland because, although the GFA emerged from and was designed, I believe, as “process”, once the ink was dried on the page it quickly became seen as “product”. The process or many processes that precede, accompany and follow the production of any document, book or indeed peace agreement may be less visible, and require a different type of skill and resourcing – but are essential if it is to lead to “constructive change”.

Links and References

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