



Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 2

Journal of the Association for
Management Education and
Development



Edition Editors: Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie

Thanks to our friends at [Triarchy Press](#) for their continuing support.

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Bob MacKenzie
David McAra

A way with words: writing in a learning facilitator's practice

Bob MacKenzie



Writing, in its various forms and formats, as both artefact and process, has made a significant contribution to my understanding and practice as a learning facilitator. Here, I draw inspiration and resonances from Sebastian Barry's novel 'The Secret Scripture' (2008) to reflect upon formative influences in growing up as a 'war orphan' in the Scottish care and educational systems. Then, I claim and weave together three identity strands – those of learning facilitator, author and scholar practitioner - to account for how I have come to perform my professional role. Next, I introduce a 10-point vade mecum that I've evolved to help guide me in integrating these strands as a learning facilitator and I make a link to 'writing in a social space' as an approach to developing a more creative and fruitful relationship with writing. Finally, I identify briefly several forms of writing that I've drawn upon here in explaining what I do and how I do it.

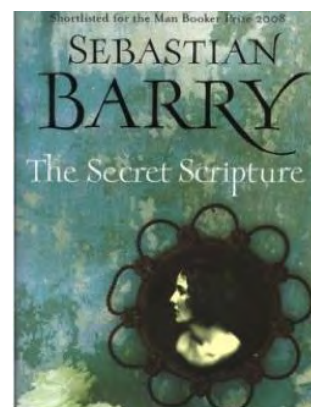
Keywords

writing, writer, explication, scholar practitioner, learning facilitator, facilitation, action learning, explication

Bringing writing into the open

In my wrestling with whether and how to write this article, Sebastian Barry's novel, 'The Secret Scripture' (2008), struck a particular chord. It intertwines two stories: those of an old woman, Roseanne Clear, and William Greene, her psychiatrist. Roseanne, now the sole inmate, and one of longstanding, was incarcerated for much of her life in an asylum, which is about to be shut down. Her crime was to bear an illegitimate child. William is responsible for overseeing this final, transitional phase. Roseanne manages to retain some of her sanity by keeping – hidden away under the floorboards - a secret diary. Meantime, William, troubled in his personal life, is keeping his own commonplace journal.

The two characters write their narratives in the context of Ireland's troubled history, in an attempt to make sense of their respective lives and the wider contexts that shaped them. Through writing, they eventually discover a deeper and surprising significance in their relationship with each other. They do this in a series of stops, starts, lacunae, reticences, confusions, silences and revelations. As Winslow (2009) observes, the two protagonists play cat and mouse with each other, and yet their accounts illustrate that 'experience and narrative are inseparable.'



Resonating with some of my own story, this tale of secret scriptures enthralled and emboldened me – in tandem with sustained critical friendships - eventually to tell something of my own journey towards claiming to be a learning facilitator. Autoethnography can be daunting (Weil 2008). It's also prompted me to propose that the parallel, complex yet ultimately touching relationship that develops between Roseanne and William might similarly exist between facilitating and writing, in which each helps to fashion, enhance and make sense of the other.

A question of identity

'What I have struggled with is who I am'

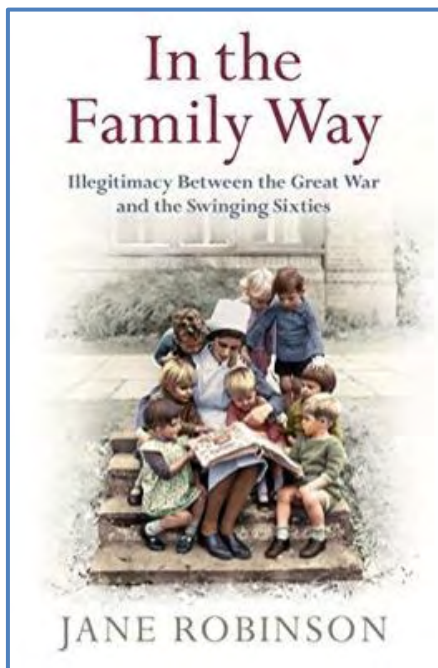
[Peter Abbs 2003]

It has been said that we live in an age of identity politics. If so, perhaps this helps to explain why an increasing number of facilitators are coming forward to explicate and claim their role as such, as in this and the Spring 2018 edition of *e-O&P*. Who are we facilitators, both as a tribe and as individuals? What do we do? How do we do it? (Why) do we matter?

This essay is a 'coming out', and I have written it with some diffidence and hesitation. It has been a long time in the writing, and it almost didn't appear. However, through a series of rehearsals in writing my doctoral Explication (MacKenzie 2005), I have become more comfortable in working with a postmodern notion of embodying multiple identities, and I now feel more able to claim explicitly that three aspects of my multiple professional selves are those of writer, learning facilitator, and scholar practitioner. As 'one of the kids from the children's home', being personally facilitated through my often unhappy formative years predisposed me later to wish to learn through, and repay, that support, ultimately by becoming a learning facilitator in a more intentional and conscious way. It has also contributed to my seeking to develop my practice through asserting the potentially beneficial contribution of writing in facilitating my own and other people's learning, whilst acknowledging its attendant difficulties. I argue that this potential holds for both readers and writers, who can be one and the same person. Indeed, I have become increasingly interested in paying attention to *the benefits of writing for authors themselves*, and in offering opportunities and spaces to realise them.

Some formative influences

As a bookish child who was brought up in the Scottish care and educational systems, I grew up extremely confused about my identity. I was torn between two mothers from different social classes – my working class Scottish birth mother, who was a single parent, and the genteel English matron of a children's home, who had a predominant role in my day-to-day upbringing. This induced in me a difficulty in forming lasting attachments, although perhaps a benefit has been a capacity for detachment and observation, which has stood me in good stead as a coach and facilitator. One consequence of my illegitimacy has been that, for many years, I was rarely comfortable in my own skin, and frequently resorted to inventing cover stories about my parentage. Apparently, this is quite common for people of my vintage who grew up in care.



Typically, from the 1940s to the 'Swinging Sixties', hurt, shame, stigma, marginalisation and family secrets were typically associated with the condition of bastardy, surprising though it may seem in today's more permissive and relaxed social norms (e.g. Robinson 2016). Today, therapists sometimes use the term 'anachronistic shame', and urge their clients to consign it to the past. But I've not found it easy to rid myself of this deeply internalised, uncomfortable feeling. Like Roseanne in Barry's story, I've found it difficult to come up with a plausible answer to questions such as 'Who am I?' or '(Why) do I matter?', and I've generally preferred to remain reticent about my struggles to address them. Hurt is a feeling I've had to learn to live with. Conversely, intuitively at first, I've become adept at spotting or sensing secret hurt, defensiveness and reticence in others, which perhaps gives a certain edge to my professional practice.

From early adulthood, I became a kind of self-imposed exile from my native Scotland, living and working in several different countries. Initially, this was mainly in Africa, influenced by post-Independence notions of nation-building and adult learning theory (e.g. Knowles, 2015), with subsequent briefer spells in India, the USA, and Europe. Now, I am based in the very south of England, in Southampton. This semi-nomadic, expatriate existence has helped me to become more sensitised to negotiating my way through different cultures, customs, traditions and mores, which has enriched my repertoire as a learning facilitator. Many of my interactions and interventions have been ascribed to 'learned behaviour', although this begs the nature-nurture question. Over time, I have learned from my identity struggles to become more authentically who I am, or at least to use such confusions in service of those whose learning and development I seek to support. I'm now prepared to accept that a facilitator doesn't need to be perfect after all.

Where writing comes in

'You finish (writing) a book knowing more than you started.'

[Salman Rushdie, the Hay-on-Wye Book Festival, BBC Radio 4, 8.40 am, The Today programme, 26 May 2018]

My doctoral Explication (MacKenzie 2005) drew upon four writing traditions – functional, academic, creative and autobiographical - in a kind of fusion writing. Learning from and encouraged by this approach, whenever I can, I try to promote greater interchange between these four writing camps, which are often held to be mutually exclusive. In recent years, much of my writing (including this essay) has been intended to illustrate how such fusion writing can enhance learning, both for me as a learning facilitator, and for individual clients and the work groupings to which they belong.

Explication

Working with explication (e.g. Franklin & MacKenzie 2006), I began to feel able to claim for myself a more coherent identity as a learning facilitator, writer and scholar practitioner. My Explication was a cocktail of reflexive reflection, analysis, scholarship to make sense of my current practice in the light of past experiences, experimentation and systems thinking, through an extensive and intensive process of writing. After several false starts, I began noticing, claiming and explicating a professional identity as a learning facilitator.

Learning facilitator

Theories and practices of facilitating, writing and learning are varied and contested. The best are probably context-specific. I assume that the purpose of facilitation is to help make (potentially) difficult issues (including writing) easier for self and others to address. It is not primarily to make things easy *per se*. Often, it involves paying attention to the stories of others, acknowledging their claims for attention, and fostering an ethos of honouring the sounds of each other's voices (Bunting 2018), thus enabling learning conversations and informed actions to take place.

I understand a learning facilitator to be someone who aids the learning and development of other people, whilst continually learning to hone her or his own effectiveness in this role, either alone, face to face, or in an international, digitally networked economy. They do this mindful that their own learning must never happen at the expense of, or cause harm to, their clients, whose needs are paramount. Learning facilitators can be either internal to an organisation (e.g. a manager or colleague) or external to it (e.g. an independent consultant, such as me).

*'The expert and doctor [consultation] models fix the problem; the goal of process consultation is to increase the client system's **capacity for learning** so that it can in the future fix its own problems.'*

(Schein 1999: 18-19; original emphasis).

Through writing my Explication, I was enabled to make more explicit a hitherto implicitly or tacitly understood awareness of the evolution over many years of my role – and of writing within it - into that of what I now call 'a learning facilitator'. I see learning facilitators as working with a mandate negotiated within and between themselves and their clients. They are scholar practitioners (see below) who integrate the cognitive, affective, reflective, philosophical/ethical and practical aspects of their multiple selves. At times, humour and fun can help, too. They need to give themselves permission to be 'good enough' (Winnicott 1973), holding on to the possibility that, as human beings, they might sometimes do more good than they can ever know.

Scholar practitioner

McClintock (2004) seems to me to encapsulate the idea and ideal of a scholar practitioner very well. He writes that 'The scholar practitioner ideal has been analysed from various perspectives as to the nature of skilled and principled action ranging from adult development and higher education to epistemology.'

The term scholar practitioner 'expresses an ideal of professional excellence grounded in theory and research, informed by experiential knowledge, and motivated by personal values, political commitments, and ethical conduct. Scholar practitioners are committed to the well-being of clients and colleagues, to learning new ways of being effective, and to conceptualizing their work in relation to broader organizational, community, political and cultural contexts. Scholar practitioners explicitly reflect on and assess the effectiveness of their work. Their professional activities and the knowledge they develop are based on collaborative and relational learning through active exchange within communities of practice and scholarship.'

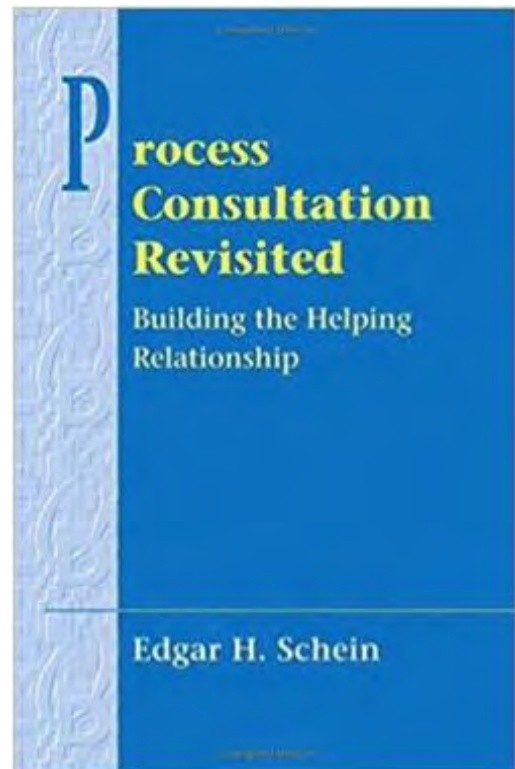
(McClintock 2004)

Thus informed, in performing our role, facilitators make interventions - we decide whether or not to take certain actions to help staff, colleagues or clients or, indeed, ourselves. Following Schein (1999), I tend contingently to offer certain kinds of interventions – particularly learning interventions wherever appropriate.

Learning interventions

Schein (1999) identifies three different kinds of interventions. These are respectively for the purposes of relationship building, diagnosis, and learning. For him (and for me) learning interventions are designed to 'stimulate, produce insight, and eventually facilitate changes in behaviour, beliefs, and underlying assumptions.' These interventions 'are deliberately designed to aid the learning process on the part of the client.' (ibid: 122). For Schein, 'Everything you (the consultant) do is an intervention.' (ibid: 243). I take this to mean that this also includes what I *refrain* from doing, such as keeping quiet – holding a safe space to enable an uncomfortable creative conflict to play out for a while fruitfully.

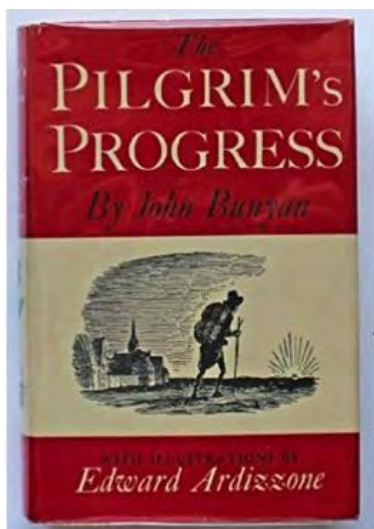
Learning facilitators and clients use writing in a variety of ways, including as written interventions. I draw a distinction between the writing process (real-time writing) and the writing product (the shared written word – an artefact). I also recognise that writing and reading - often in conjunction with dialogue - are interdependent processes. Moreover, I find it helpful to distinguish between writing on behalf of oneself, and writing on behalf of one's organisational role, or on behalf of other people.



My uses of writing as a learning facilitator: a *vade mecum*

*Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side.*

[The character Knowledge in a medieval play, quoted on the title page of the Everyman book series]



Writing can be scary. Rightly or wrongly, I often feel held to account more for what I have written than for what I have said. Do attitudes towards writing depend on particular personality types as well as on specific contexts? Do we each have our own preferred writing strategies, modes and preferences, conditioned by our unique histories, experiences and circumstances? Whilst wary of labelling, my latest MBTI profile was INTP, in which introversion features prominently. Some people prefer not to write at all. Others do so reluctantly. When they do write, typically, they often perceive writing as a solitary, inhibiting, 'secret' pursuit that they prefer not to expose to others. They keep their writing under the floorboards, like Roseanne in 'The Secret Scripture', until the moment when publication becomes inevitable.

As a learning facilitator, over the years I've developed a 10-point pocket travelling companion to inform my writing as a learning facilitator, which I summarise next.

1. Writing always takes place within a specific context:

I think of writing as embedded in wider societal and organisational communication systems, and I recognise that there are different – contested - theories of, and discourses about, writing and reading. As an author, I regard writing as experimental and anticipatory – a kind of laboratory for testing and communicating ideas in a conversation with myself and others. I do this by imagining or anticipating provisional learning experiences, often introducing writing and other relevant media to fashion and work with an emergent agenda.

2. Anyone can learn from and through writing if they have some level of literacy:

Wherever possible, I encourage people to write and to create appropriate writing psychological and physical (the contemporary scriptorium) spaces for themselves and others (see '*Writing in a social space*' below). Various forms of writing might be involved - continuous, bullet points, key words, and note-making etc. to help generate and record critical thinking and informed action.



Jean Miélot dans son scriptorium, dans *Miracles de Notre Dame*, f.19 From [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_Mi%C3%A9lot_dans_son_scriptorium.jpg)

3. Writing on behalf of others requires careful thought:

Some people (including, from time to time, me) write anonymously or professionally on behalf of others. Civil servants write briefs for ministers; ghostwriters and speechwriters draft texts on behalf of people who feel that they are too busy or otherwise inhibited from doing the initial writing themselves. Marketing professionals write copy on behalf of the principal decision-makers in organisations. Co-facilitators often scribe on flipcharts, thus giving the lead facilitator and participants time to think. Managers pass on in writing official decisions, orders and information etc. that originate from other sources. Nevertheless, similar principles for writing apply to both principal or surrogate authors.

4. Work to overcome barriers to writing:

I often need to help people overcome negative perceptions or prior experiences of writing. In administration, writing is frequently associated with wasteful bureaucracy. [Weber](#) (1964) used the term 'bureaucracy' positively to denote a rational and efficient form of organising. Typically, bureaucracy now carries pejorative connotations of inflexibility, waste and red tape. People see bureaucrats as purveyors of impersonal, sterile and oppressive template or formulaic documents that assert a disciplining form of control. Yet this need not be so: used thoughtfully and sensitively, writing can also have positive, liberating and creative potential. It's a double-edged sword.

If imposed, writing can often evoke strong negative feelings and memories, such as fear, apprehension and resistance. For many people, writing is difficult. I often hear people's stories of significant barriers to their writing and reading, including cultural, physical, psychological, learning and writing disabilities, e.g. dyslexia, high-level illiteracy etc. So where I can, I try to tap into adequate resources, political will, the judicious use of learning conversations, creative facilitation and modern technologies, to help dismantle such barriers.

5. Introduce the prospect of writing with clients as early as possible:

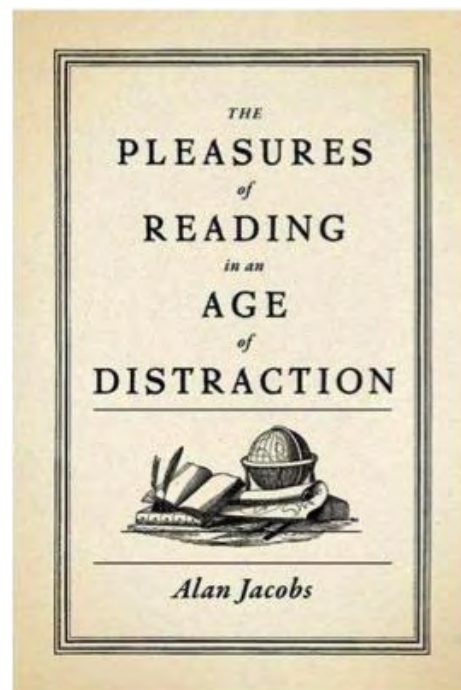
I'm always looking to introduce ways of taking some of the fear out of writing, through the sensitive negotiation of learning and psychological contracts (i.e. through learning conversations) between fellow facilitators, co-editors, authors and clients. Critical friendships ([MacKenzie 2015](#)), can support people to benefit reciprocally from writing.

6. Encourage diverse writing strategies and forms:

There's no single blueprint for developing a suitable writing strategy. Different learning facilitators and authors use different types and technologies of writing and reading, digital or manuscript, differently (e.g. flipchart, case studies, handouts, diagrams, reports, electronic equipment etc.), depending on context.

7. Usefully, writing can help to slow things down:

This seems to me to be a particularly important proposition. A common criticism of writing (and of reading, e.g. [Jacobs 2011](#)) is that it is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive in a technologically rich and time-poor environment. Yet it seems to me that this very objection might also suggest its under-utilised potential. *By slowing things down*, writing and the dialogue that flows from, towards and within it can generate more considered thought and action. Writers can enter into a state of near *reverie*. Reverie is a state that can also be induced through contemplating great art, fiction, poetry, music, the natural world, and live and recorded performance. It can refresh the quality of our worldview and thinking, and can help us to access our creative potential which is often diluted or suppressed in the hurly-burly of daily life.



8. Handle written feedback with care:

Variouly, I have experienced written feedback as negative or positive. Organisational policies generally attempt to set out clear guidelines and boundaries to guard against destructive criticism, e.g. in appraisal or supervision template forms. However, I notice that boundaries are easily transgressed, if unintentionally. Unwittingly and thoughtlessly, I myself have sometimes given or received written feedback which has caused pain. So I aim to exemplify giving and receiving written feedback more consciously and carefully, and encourage others to do likewise.



9. Memo to self: guard against over-indulging my enthusiasms.

I need to keep my evangelistic tendencies in check. Writing is not appropriate in every culture, situation or context. In more oral cultures such as in Botswana at the time, I've worked with others on [Popular Theatre](#) (PTC 1978) in an attempt to facilitate alternative forms of participatory multi-media, artistic or performance interventions in which writing has a more marginal or complementary role to play.

10. New digital technologies will not replace the need for writing: they will expand and enhance its forms and possibilities:

Sperber (2002) prophesied that writing as we know it today may soon become a relic of the past, as rapid advances in new digital technologies enable the automatic transcription of speech. Artificial intelligence (AI) is also rapidly making its mark. However, there is a countervailing view that real-time writing remains essential to critical thinking. Enabled by new technologies and software, writing will no doubt change in certain respects. However, writing's contribution in multiple forms, combinations and contexts is likely to be enhanced rather than diminished.

Facilitating writing in a social space

In writing out my thinking through this essay, I've emerged persuaded even more strongly of the need to help myself and others to engage in appropriate forms and contexts of writing. One way of doing this, with which I'm currently experimenting, is to create opportunities to write in a social space.



[ISBE Writing Support Group, Warwick University, March 2018]

This approach is informed by principles of writing in social spaces (Murray 2015), action learning (Revens 2011) and critical friendship (MacKenzie 2015), and by three sets of assumptions. These are that:

1. Writing involves supportive social/relational as well as individual/solitary activity.
2. It's important to exchange ideas and experiences concerning all sorts of writing-related issues, as an integral part of doing the writing itself. Issues that contribute to writing inertia can be as much practical and psychological as methodological and technical.
3. At any stage of the writing process it can help to come together with others in small, informal, facilitated communities of writing practice.

Through writing in a social space, peers engage with each other in a spirit of reciprocal, well-intentioned, informed and sensitive challenge and support, according to a clear set of ground rules. If you are interested in finding out more about this approach, you can click [here](#).

Postscript

Re-reading what I've written here, I notice that I've drawn upon diverse forms of writing, both manuscript and digital. A marvellous novel ('The Secret Scripture') gave me a way into starting this piece and - boosted by insightful critical friendships - helped me find the courage and inspiration to address and write about difficult identity issues and formative childhood influences. My experience of writing a doctoral Explication in later life was a profound process of self-discovery and understanding, enabling me to trace the genesis and trajectory of my evolving practice as a learning facilitator. A 10-point written personal *vade mecum* or checklist has become a valuable prop in supporting my work. My experiments with 'writing in a social space' seem to offer a promising approach to helping people to realise the benefits of their writing. Underpinning this essay is other writing (and some audio recordings), much of which is invisible on the surface, its depth and extent only revealed by clicking on hyperlinks. Occasional images illustrate yet another kind of visual text which sits alongside and complements written words and sentences. Hence this is a multi-media composition. As in 'The Secret Scripture', much is left unsaid but can be inferred or imagined. I've also drawn upon the published writing of, and conversations with, many other people, as my acknowledgements and references attest.

This act of writing has helped me to surface and articulate more explicitly my current thinking about my identity and practice as a learning facilitator, although of course it's raised fresh questions, too. My writing, conversations and learning continue. The text is never finished.

"No one has the monopoly on truth.... Not even myself, and that is a vexing and worrying thought."

[Roseanne, in 'The Secret Scripture']

Acknowledgements

Many people, living and dead, too numerous to mention by name, have contributed to the development of my writing and my role as a learning facilitator. However, I would like to thank particularly my current critical friend **Steve Dilworth** for his patient and sensitive encouragement during my protracted periods of ambivalence and hesitation, especially during the earlier phases of my struggles over whether and what to write for this edition. **Peter Martin** read my final draft with great care, and offered some typically astute feedback. **Douglas and Chris Edgar** offered me a lovely scriptorium at Lymphoy Stables which enabled me to complete the penultimate phase of my writing-up.

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