Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing

Part 2

Journal of the Association for Management Education and Development
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Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing: dress rehearsals

Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie

Keywords
Co-editing, co-facilitating, autoethnography, critical friendship, authoring, writing, performance

Joined-up writing
It was something of a surprise to find ourselves co-editing one journal, and then, like waiting for buses, another comes along in quick succession. Our previous editorial for the Spring 2018 edition of e-O&P described how our editorial collaboration came about through a process of initial conversation, developing and offering co-facilitated workshops and using the latter as a vehicle for our 'Invitation to Contribute' to the journal.

Initially, we were inundated with expressions of interest from writers, some with experience of that special fear of exposure that is part of the lot of being a writer. As the Spring edition evolved, some of these willing souls found that life threw up obstacles, the unexpected happened, or they were simply not quite ready to submit their work for publication.

Hence, we’re delighted to be able to offer this follow-up edition as another, more timely opportunity for such writers to showcase their work in ways that illustrate various aspects of the relationship between facilitation and writing. In the Spring 2018 edition, we worked with an organising metaphor of facilitation and writing as
rehearsals for a performance. Casting the contributions in this collection as dress rehearsals seems to us to provide a sense of continuity and connection between the two editions.


Here, drawing on years of practice, authors rehearse their carefully annotated scripts, which indicate detailed stage lighting and directions, before an invited audience. This is your special preview, where you can sit back and be informed, educated, entertained and - perhaps, at times - provoked.

**Sustaining critical friendships**

One of the challenges in extending into the Summer edition has been to maintain the high level of attention - critical friendship - that we offered to our previous contributors. Regular contact through emails and phone calls, along with occasional face-to-face meetings has enabled us to maintain our editing collaboration. We've also done our best to engage with authors in similar vein.

Our experience of editing in this way has felt almost like a sacred task. Our desire always to be positive and reassuring has been tempered and extended to include the key function of enabling all of the authors to show their work at its best, and to serve as custodians of AMED's values. In writing, this means grappling with how best to offer feedback through suggestions and comments that aim to move the latest draft towards a final polished article.

As co-editors of this edition, our regular conversations focused mostly on our latest reading of each article. Our style of reading and commenting has been consistent with the approach we took to the Spring edition, in which we wrote:

‘... we have done our best to place our different and complementary styles and interests at the service of both contributors to and readers of this edition. We leave it to you to judge whether you think we have succeeded.’

**Noticing features of our approach to editing**

As we reflected on the latent principles underpinning our collaborative feedback methods, we noted that several key features were beginning to emerge. These include our instincts to: work with reasonably flexible deadlines, diplomacy, spontaneity, considered decisions, using supportive language and balancing written and oral – and never anonymous - feedback.

**Flexible deadlines**

We noticed a degree of flexibility creeping into our initial approach to working within tight deadlines. This stemmed from an awareness that we were curating the writing efforts of a number of authors who were simultaneously busy with other tasks in life and work. (Similar distractions are also at work with the editorial team). It strikes us that this may be a distinctive feature of the e-O&P journal, in that most professional journals will set - and adhere to - strict, inflexible deadlines. We wonder whether our flexibility has been a help or a hindrance, and guess that each (prospective) author and editorial team member will have their own view on this. Mindful that individual experiences will differ, we can say that any shifts in our editorial approach to timescales have been consistently intended to be facilitative.
Diplomacy
We know that any comments on writing, whether or not oral, face-to-face, or written from a distance, can be experienced as hurtful criticism, even though our intention may have been clearly framed and intended in a constructive way that links the notion of ‘critical’ with ‘friendship’. Careful negotiation of meaning and understanding is therefore vital.

Spontaneity
We noted how often our first, independent impressions of the latest draft we received were to be trusted. As co-editors, our comments differed in style, but our fundamental sense of the writing was similar. There was a practical usefulness to this immediacy. Whilst our aim was always to share feedback between the two of us before offering it to the authors, we could, if one or other of us was not available, offer timely feedback to authors – and to each other - without having to wait for the other to respond first.

Decisions before writing to contributors
The decisions we took before offering written (and in some cases, oral) feedback were always mindful of the potential impact on contributors. We both noted an element of anxiety, in us, in the gap between our sending feedback to, and waiting to hear back subsequently from, authors. Invariably, we felt a sense of significant relief when they reassured us that they had received our comments with gratitude.

Supportive language
We preferred the language of support when contacting writers who we thought might need an extra – gentle - reminder, e.g. as deadlines approached. We never saw this as ‘progress chasing’.

Feedback in writing
There is something quite different about interpersonal, face-to-face feedback. One can look another person in the eye, develop and deliver the (in)famous feedback sandwich and gauge their reaction, including non-verbal cues and clues. After delivering written feedback electronically, when the send button is pressed, our only chance is to make amends later if the recipient has felt it as a blow. When discussing this challenge in the Kennington Coffee Shop one Friday lunchtime, prior to a meeting of the AMED Writers’ Group, we wondered whether this might have something to do with the process inherent in ‘The Johari Window’. Here, when sensitive feedback may be necessary, the Blind, Hidden and Unknown Areas are often best enlarged through the mediation of feedback, sensitively and bravely offered and received face-to-face.
An overview of the articles in this edition

As in the Spring 2018 edition, the articles in this edition are all drawn from the lived experience of the writers as facilitators. From this common ground has sprung a wide range of perspectives.

Writing in a refreshing and contemporary style, Michael Ambjorn explores how writing can be both practical and facilitative, especially when the writer is supported by ‘critical friends’ who help to ensure that their writing is the best it can be. He introduces us to, and acknowledges generously, several of his own critical friends, and to some excellent tools and techniques. Helpfully, Michael draws our attention to relevant literature and online resources that can support our efforts to act as critical friends to authors. His catalogue includes simple feedback measures, attention to the ‘tone of voice’ of our articles, and checking mechanisms for ‘readability’.

Grounded in her experience of facilitating women victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Vicky Cosstick distinguishes clearly between ‘writing as product’ and ‘writing as process’. She identifies different audiences for writing, each of which requires a particular style. Then, she explains how she notices and decides to use the tension between these differences to energise a hybrid approach to working at a facilitative edge. Vicky makes a compelling case for writing as process as a means to facilitate real change.

Steve Hearsum reflects on his own development as a facilitator in a way that will resonate powerfully with others. For Steve, ‘learning edge’ is a core notion, which has changed/moved for him significantly over the years, enabling him to make and accept challenge more readily. Steve reflects on the impact of his greater ease in working at this edge, to the benefit of both himself and on the individuals and groups who he facilitates. He also makes a strong case for the use of evidence-based interventions. He is not against intuitive facilitation per se, but he argues strongly that this should be supported by data.

Paul Levy reflects deeply on the differences he has observed, within his own practice as a facilitator, between writing with a pen (manuscript writing) and using digital tools for writing. He gives examples of his own written reflections and explains how he uses them to support the groups he works with. Paul makes a soft hypothesis – open to further study - that writing by hand can lead to deeper reflection, more people-based ideas and ultimately better facilitative outcomes. His style is conjectural, preferring the language of ‘maybe’ rather than definitive suggestions or claims. In doing so, he invites us to examine our own use of writing as facilitators.

Bella Mehta writes with a keen emphasis on how her facilitation work is essentially based on relationship. Her valuing of other people, clients, colleagues, writers and teachers, shines through her enquiry into the positive impact of facilitation on organisational life. Bella cautions us not to be seduced by inappropriate positive thinking, instead encouraging us to see, feel and work through difficulties that lie under the surface of day-to-day reality. Her summary includes a heartening example of the way facilitation can make a difference.

Through the creative use of a novel that inspired his article, and drawing upon episodes from his ‘childhood story’ (Kantor 2012), Bob MacKenzie provides a brief, deep, insight into his formative years, as the basis for tracing his development as a ‘learning facilitator’ in puzzling over the bigger issue of ‘facilitator identity’. He then weaves these disclosures into his current working world, and proposes an organising theme that writing, learning and conversations are closely intertwined. Through his writing, Bob illustrates the three principal roles that he identifies - namely those of learning facilitator, scholar practitioner and critical friend. He invites
colleagues to assess for themselves the usefulness or otherwise a *vade mecum* that he’s been developing to inform his work as a ‘writing-as-learning facilitator’. Bob’s current interest in ‘writing in a social space’ is the latest development in a life-long learning journey.

**John Sweet** highlights his inner relationship between a particular system of ‘reflection as facilitation’ and the journaling stepping stones he has developed and adopted to make that method his own. Through use of a series of audio recordings of his facilitation, crossing many years of his practice, he uncovers and reconsiders memories of ‘how things went’ that he has held as good and bad. John ends on an optimistic note that groups can be forgiving of many facilitative mistakes. Perhaps we facilitators could be similarly forgiving of ourselves?

**Complimenting the authors and complementing each other**

As in the Spring 2018 edition of *e-O&P*, we are delighted by the quality of contributions that we are proud to present here. We congratulate the authors on articulating so tellingly their experiences of, and thinking and feelings about, facilitation and writing in its various forms and contexts. We hope that you enjoy and benefit from reading these articles as much as we have done co-editing them in a spirit of critical friendship. As we’ve written elsewhere, as co-editors, we’ve done our best to place our different and complementary styles and interests at the service of contributors to, and readers of, this edition. We leave it to you to judge whether you think we have succeeded.

**Acknowledgements**

In addition to the authors who appear here, this edition could not have come about without the invaluable contribution of many different people. So many, in fact, that it would be difficult to name them all personally. However, we cannot let the vital backroom contribution of **David McAra** pass unrecognised. As he has been doing on AMED’s behalf for many years, David has patiently and expertly fielded all the pre-formatted versions of individual articles with which guest editors bombard him towards the end of any particular publication cycle, and burns quantities of midnight oil in creating the particular aesthetic form for which *e-O&P* is noted. As a member of the *e-O&P* editorial board, he has also been a cornerstone of AMED’s publishing enterprises for well over a decade.

The AMED editorial support team of **Linda Williams**, **Julia Goga-Cooke** and **Ned Seabrook** have also played their largely unseen part, as have all the participants in our various **AMED Writers Group** and other Gatherings and exchanges so far. To everyone who has contributed wittingly or unwittingly to our publishing project, we offer our grateful acknowledgements, and invite your continuing participation. (We’re hoping to arrange a post-publication Gathering in late Autumn or early Winter 2018. So watch this space for more details).
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About Steve and Bob
Steve (steve.dilworth@gmail.com) is deeply interested in the process of facilitation, and in particular in what helps/hinders facilitator presence. Most of his work is currently in the public sector, often supporting staff in areas where there is a high degree of emotional labour, e.g. end of life care, custodial settings and mental health.

Bob (bob_mackenzie@btopenworld.com) is commissioning editor of e-O&P and convenor of the AMED Writers’ Group. His abiding interest is in the potential of all forms and formats of writing, text and conversation, interacting, to foster meaningful personal, organisational and societal learning and development.
Writing about facilitation in ways that help others

Michael Ambjorn

Keywords
Writing, Tone of Voice, Critical Friends, Fog Factor

Traces in the sand

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

[Ozymandias (Extract), by Percy Bysshe Shelley.
(The Poetry Foundation has a helpful Poem Guide if you are interested.)]
Communicating in writing, and visually, can carry a message across centuries. Indeed millennia! Here, however, I’m not concerned about the blunt intent behind the inscriptions of, say, Ozymandias. Engravings that assert the power of an individual at a time in history (Ramesses II), yet leaves little else of use behind.

No, in this article I won’t get stuck in those sands. I want to build something that has both utility and is - to use a fancy word - edifying. Something that stands on firm ground and can be built on. Something that can add constructive insight and lead to useful action.

*Writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind but supply it, too.*

[William Strunk, Elements of Style]

Specifically, I want to look at how we can write about facilitation in ways that help others. I’ll focus on how to write in a practical and engaging way. To this end, I’ve introduced a couple of frameworks, concepts, and a checklist.

**Critical friends**
At a workshop titled *Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing and critical friendship*, Khorsheed Bhote and I were matched up as Critical Friends. Bob MacKenzie, in his paper *Critical friendships for coaching and mentoring in writing*, defines such a relation as:

“A shared characteristic [...] appears to be that of mutual commitment and responsibility.

*In critical friendships, as I understand it, ‘critical’ can mean variously ‘key’, ‘crucial’, ‘scrupulous’, or ‘constructively challenging’, whilst ‘friendship’ denotes the well-meaning, generous, intimate intentions of those relationships.*”

Khorsheed Bhote and I had each brought a text along that we were looking to develop further.

Khorsheed’s piece ‘Empowering learning through facilitation’ has since appeared in the Journal of the Association for Management Education and Development (*Spring 2018 issue: Sharing experiences of facilitation through writing - Part 1*). This article is about our meeting as Critical Friends prior to this.

Ultimately our aim was to engage with the texts in a deeper and more meaningful way than we might have done on our own.
Steve Dilworth developed ‘the iceberg model’ in 2008 that neatly captures the layers of challenge and conflict that can exist within oneself - layers Critical Friends can arguably help each other to navigate.

In this article, practical in its intent, I’d like to illustrate how you too can do this, based on a practical example: how Khorshed and I structured our mutually supportive discussion.

**Ground rules**

First of all we agreed some basic ground rules. In the literature, this is known as the Critical Friend contract (or CF contract for short). We asserted our shared intent to be constructive, curious and positive. Peter Martin (quoted by Bob MacKenzie) sets this out quite nicely:

‘I think that somewhere the danger of collusion resulting from the more general friendship (above) needs to be acknowledged and explored. It appears to me that CF stands in contrast to the adversarial system so prevalent in so-called centres of Educational and Publication Excellence. But I think it would be helpful to acknowledge that, without careful contracting, and re-contracting, the approach could become at worst a kind of shared solipsism!’

[personal communication to Bob MacKenzie, from Peter Martin, 16/3/15]

**Clarity of intent**

In order to give constructive and useful feedback on a piece of writing (as was the purpose of our meeting), we found that it is helpful to know what you’re reacting to as a critical friend. Writing can go in lots of directions, and understanding the intent and aim is helpful.

To that end we shared what the objective of our respective articles were. And the audience we had in mind. Including accessibility and the importance of plain English. Both of us wanted to make it accessible and easy to read. We both had in mind fellow facilitators, and others interested in facilitation.

We also talked about what we were hoping the reader might do next. Our initial hope was to help generate some reflection, and then prompt action: inspiring ourselves and others to write about facilitation too.
We then discussed the kind of Tone of Voice we had in mind (rather than what might actually be on the paper). Basically how the text will sound to people. See the box below about Tone of Voice if you’d like to dig deeper into this area.

A note about Tone of Voice
Most facilitators will be familiar with the importance of Tone of Voice in the verbal context. John Heron talks about it in his 1993 book *Group Facilitation* and its importance is also referenced in Sam Kaner’s *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision Making* and in The 2012 *IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation* and so on.

The concept of Tone of Voice may however be new to facilitators who are writing about their work.

A brief primer for those who want to dig deeper
Kate Meyer from Norman Nielsen Group (a firm specialising in evidence-based user experience research, training, and consulting) suggests there are *four dimensions* of written Tone of Voice:

- funny vs. serious
- formal vs. casual
- respectful vs. irreverent
- enthusiastic vs. matter-of-fact

Whilst the variations across the above are almost infinite, it won’t take you long to think of some examples that can easily be plotted against these statements. E.g. you’d expect a letter from the tax authorities to be serious, formal, respectful and matter of fact. That also means it’ll be very dry! And if you don’t want people to react to your writing as they might to a letter about their taxes, you’ll want to think about Tone of Voice.

Whilst we didn’t go as far as plotting the sought-after tone as one might using *Meyer’s Four Dimensions*, we both wanted our texts to be warm and welcoming.

Last but not least, we talked about how we could structure our mutual feedback to make it as constructive as possible.

We settled on a format which can be remembered with the mnemonic *GDD*:

- What was Good?
- What was Difficult?
- What might you do Differently?

And then, and only then, did we swap texts, read away, and mark up!

*To give you a flavour of the GDD process that Khorsshed and I followed, here’s our review of the overall Critical Friend exchange, using this conversational format.*
What was good?
Having a framework to hang our feedback on was useful - and in turn we checked off each item. So we were largely in good shape. The checklist is included at the end of the article, in case you want to try it for yourself. Our respective writing styles are very different (see Khorshed’s article in Part 1 of this edition if you’d like to compare). Helpful for bringing contrast - and inspiring tweaks. Finding that ideal balance between personal narrative, interesting metaphors and practical advice.

What was difficult?
When you write, it can sometimes be hard to see the effect of your own words on the paper, versus how they are in your head. We checked: is there a clear call to action?

As a practical example, our discussion helped inform the recommendations in Khorshed’s article, which were:

1. Be a reflective facilitator
2. Create a Facilitator’s toolbox
3. Continue your professional development

And the article I had written ultimately turned into this guide!

We wrote all this in active voice, because:

“Never use the passive where you can use the active.”

[George Orwell, Why I Write]

We also tried reading the texts aloud to ourselves and each other. It is the quickest way to find non-sequiturs, awkward jargon and acronyms. All such infelicities should be avoided as they make the text harder to read.

“When you read [your work] aloud, there are parts you might skip over—you find yourself not wanting to speak them. Those are the weak parts. It’s hard to find them otherwise, just reading along.”

[George Saunders quoted on LitHub]

A tip: If you’re shy at first, here’s a digital alternative to reading aloud
In case you’re uncomfortable reading a text aloud at first, then many computers can do it for you. You’ll find the functionality in the accessibility settings. You could even test it with this article.

Learn how to:

- **Hear your Mac speak text** - guidance from Apple for Mac users
- **Hear text read aloud with Narrator** - guidance from Microsoft for PC users

What’s your Fog Factor?
We also ran the text through Hemingway (see also readable.io below), a free web app, to check for impenetrable sentences. That is a plain language way of saying: stay clear of the high Fog numbers.
The Gunning Fog Index is one of a range of readability tests designed to show how easy or difficult a text is to read. It is calculated by counting the average number of words in sentences + the % of words of three or more syllables timed by 0.4. The resulting number is a quasi-objective measure of readability. For more on this, see the accompanying box below.

“Short sentences aren’t hard to make.
The difficulty is forcing yourself to keep them short
There are innumerable ways to write badly.
The usual way is making sentences that don’t say what you think they do.
Which can the reader possibly believe? Your sentences or you?”

[Verlyn Klinkenbord in Several Short Sentences about Writing]

We agreed to aim for a Fog Factor of grade 10 or below. The quickest route to that? Taking out difficult words, acronyms and the like. And shortening and simplifying sentences. Otherwise it is hard to read on a smartphone or in a rush… and we’re all in a rush.

For a second opinion, we also played around with insights from readable.io - always sobering.

A note about readability
The Hemingway App is one useful tool, but if you really want to geek out, try readable.io/ - it analyses across a whole host of the different available indicators.

As an example, the scores for this article according to readable.io/ are:

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What might we do differently?

- Keep the Critical Friendship going! Keep writing, sharing and learning.
- The checklist has utility.
- The interaction and reflection has the edification.
- And don’t forget to have some fun too.

It’ll help you write about facilitation in ways that help others.

Some writing resources

In summary, here are a few resources that we found helpful, and some of which you might find helpful too:

... our Writing Checklist for Critical Friendship conversations

1. Set ground rules
2. Clarify intent - including objective, audience, tone - and hoped for action
3. Read the texts aloud
4. Analyse using objective tools
5. Discuss what was good
6. What was difficult
7. What you might do differently
8. Edit, rinse and repeat
9. Don’t forget to share…

... and here are two online tools for writing which you can use

- hemingwayapp.com - quick and free to use online, offline app download also available
- readable.io - broader analysis of your writing - try for free.

Also, you might like to explore these four books on writing

- Several Short Sentences about Writing - Verlyn Klinkenborg
- Elements of Style – William Strunk
- Bird by Bird: Instructions for Writing and Life - Anne Lamott
- Why I Write - George Orwell

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Acknowledgements
To Steve Dilworth and Bob MacKenzie for co-facilitating the AMED Writers’ Group workshops at Roots and Shoots and for the critical friendship they both extended me in bringing this article to publication. And Martin Gilbraith for suggesting I attend the session in the first place.

About Michael
I've run organisations, chaired boards and developed changemakers. I provide 1:1 advice to Chairs, Chief Execs and senior leaders on strategy, change and turnarounds. I'm particularly interested in how strategic alignment can focus people - and enable growth. A key element within this is the kind of deep, constructive conversations enabled through Critical Friendship.

With my colleagues at Align Your Org, I facilitate strategy for organisations that want to enable all their people to put a shoulder to the wheel. Organisations don't make things happen. People do.

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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/supervisory/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.
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))

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.

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.
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 “retraumatises” 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-traumatisation 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”.

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Without edge and stretch, what’s the point of being a facilitator?

Steve Hearsum

Getting ‘into the groove’ of facilitation can be intoxicating and a breeze, for me at least. I have begun to notice that those moments of ease, when a group is on task and I am thinking “this is going well…this is flowing…”, that is data that I might be colluding with the group and/or individual participants in shying away from the edge that is there to be explored, if the purpose of our work together is genuinely about some form of transformative learning.

Keywords
informed intuition, transformative facilitation, learning, edge, challenge, provocation, stretch, compressive intervention

Overcoming the shame of ‘being seen’
My relationship with group work, and therefore facilitation, goes back to my first foray into facilitating cross-functional groups on an organisation-wide review of processes when I worked at The Guardian around twenty years ago. Subsequently I worked regularly on technology-driven change programmes gathering requirements and then ultimately moving more to explicit training or learning contracts. In the midst of my own development as a practitioner, whilst attending one of the group modules on my Masters, I had the experience of being taken to my own edge and being stretched to the point of snapping.

‘Edge’ and ‘stretch’
When I talk about ‘edge’, I refer to what I imagine many might think of as ‘learning edge’, which can end up sounding like a platitude or facilitator jargon. The OED defines ‘edge’ as:

1. The outside limit of an object, area, or surface
2. The sharpened side of the blade of a cutting implement or weapon.

In the context of learning, in particular transformative learning which occurs not solely at a cognitive and intellectual level but more deeply, I mean ‘edge’ that is indeed at my limit (of understanding, competency, courage, comfort, physical or psychological ‘safety’ etc) and that has this sense of sharpness, an awareness that it can go deep, skilfully, and that may be painful even if needed and welcome.

‘Stretch’ may follow, but is not a prerequisite. I may have encountered my edge, but choose to step back from learning more, for a whole number of reasons. Stretch may occur without it being in an area that is at your edge, and it is when the two combine that practice really develops.
An example from my own life. I did the MSc in Change Agent Skills & Strategies at the University of Surrey (2005-2008). The programme no longer exists, which is worthy of a wholly different inquiry into how Universities and Management Education struggles with learning that offers edge and stretch at a human systems level. In a seminal moment, I had the epiphany that, despite calling myself, amongst other things, a ‘facilitator’, I realised that I found working with and in front of groups deeply distressing, exposing, scary and plain un-enjoyable. There I was, in front of the group, held by the skill of the facilitator, Simon Cavicchia (the embodiment of compassionately facilitating people to work at their edge), stripped emotionally naked, raw, exposed, utterly overwhelmed with the shame of ‘being seen’. For me, with my story, that was terrifying.

On that edge, in that stretch, I had an experience of transformational learning. I teetered with two choices: to run, metaphorically and/or literally, or to dive headlong into the painful absurdity of how I had ended up as a facilitator who hated to facilitate. I chose the latter.

Fast forward from 2007, mix in five more years of therapy and the last four and a half years developing and deepening my practice at Roffey Park, and I show up as a different practitioner with a different experience of myself in group.

That’s not the point, though. In a sense: big fat, hairy deal. So what? So what if I have learned about myself? So what if I have had my own rich experience deepening my practice (whatever that means – it seems like a euphemism for something, although I am never sure quite what. How deep do I need to go? Do I need a rope and a torch?).

Part of the shadow side of facilitation practice and Organisational Development more widely is that both can end up being self-referential, self-absorbed and more concerned with the practitioner’s journey than in utility and relevance to clients. Yes, it is important that I increase my effectiveness as facilitator (or coach, or consultant etc.); it is vital, however, that I am clear enough on the balance between what I need and what is in service of others.

**Facilitative edge**

I have a couple of edges as a practitioner that I pay particular attention to at the moment, and these have been the main ones on and off for a few years. They are improvisation and challenge.

**Improv**

Every strength has a shadow when over-egged. I am extremely comfortable with working ‘in the moment’, and will happily respond to what is emerging in order to ensure that what the group/client needs to achieve/work on is attended to, even if that means tearing up a design/session plan and doing something totally different. Lean too far into my ease with improvisation, and chaos might ensue, or a shoddy learning experience. Thankfully I seem to tread the right side of that line most of the time, with the occasional kick up the arse administered by life.
Challenge

The other edge is around my experience of challenge, of what happens when it manifests as, say, conflict between others or between others and me (that's the son of an alcoholic in me and much of the material for therapy, in case you were wondering). In recent years, my ease with gristle, grit, aggression and anger has increased. Not only in others, but also in terms of awareness of my own and my willingness to express it/use it appropriately and/or as data.

"Working in/with conflict has felt at times like it might be toying with danger ...."

Nested in this developing comfort with what happens when differences are named and generate heat, I have noticed that the more I trust my instincts and couple that with critical reflection on what the data might be telling me, the greater the ease with which I am straight, direct and clean in offering observations. In turn, the feedback and observations from clients has been intriguing and useful. It has sparked the material for this piece of writing.

"How far should I go?"

Working with a group recently, I had a sense from a participant, in how they were framing their story, of someone who is hard on themselves. The programme is an Organisational Development Practitioner Programme that offers a Graduate Certificate, and is run for internal HR, L&D and OD people within a major
UK manufacturing business that has a globally recognized brand and presence. This person had not attended the first learning set (this was the second of a series of five, that forms part of the self-managed learning nature of the programme) therefore I was still getting to know them. My data was limited. Nonetheless, as I think back to that moment, I was acutely aware of a wrestle in me: do I name what I think is the harshness this person applies to themselves, do I soften, do I shy away entirely? The truth is, a few years ago I would not have done what I actually did; I would have facilitated but not named the edge as directly.

“How far do I go?”
I made the following intervention:

Me: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how hard are you on yourself?”

Participant: “A 10 easily.”

Me: “I thought so.”

I was sure this was a challenging question. I was also ‘having a stab at hinting’, as my former tutor and colleague Simon Cavicchia would say – this is a kind of informed intuition, a term I have not come across until recently, in conversation with the author of this soon-to-be-published book.

The Art of Transformative Facilitation
That is the sub-title of a forthcoming book by Keith Jones and Tessa Sharp, and ‘transformative facilitation’ is the nub of what I am discussing: facilitation that goes beyond the setting up of conditions for a container for learning, rather it asks the question: just how much learning are you really up for? As the facilitator, it sets a different challenge: to what extent are you prepared for the ‘edge and stretch’ that may be required?

Keith and I were discussing the edges of our own practice and where we see facilitation as being the most useful to clients. This idea of “informed intuition” I love. I confess I find the worshipping at the altar of intuition by some practitioners irritating and not a little depressing, as it is actually a blinkered form of black and white and either/or thinking. Daniel Kahneman’s work, e.g. in Thinking, Fast Slow (2012), in evidencing System 1 and System 2 thinking has, in recent years, gone some way to rebalancing the narrative around ‘intuition good’, ‘rationality bad’ that for a while seemed prevalent. A wonderful conversation between Kahneman and Gary Klein is worth a read here as well. Among the many insights they offered was this, from Klein:

‘It depends on what you mean by “trust.” If you mean, “My gut feeling is telling me this; therefore I can act on it and I don’t have to worry,” we say you should never trust your gut. You need to take your gut feeling as an important data point, but then you have to consciously and deliberately evaluate it, to see if it makes sense in this context. You need strategies that help rule things out. That’s the opposite of saying, “This is what my gut is telling me; let me gather information to confirm it.” ’
In the context of the above, Keith’s description of a “compressive intervention” is worth chewing on. This is not just an intervention that has an impact per se; rather by its very nature it intentionally seeks to increase the pressure in service of creating the conditions for greater shift. Here is the thing, though: there is no guarantee. Looking back at the exchange above, the truly ‘compressive intervention’, which hadn’t even occurred to me until Keith suggested it, would have been to follow up with: “Why stop at 10, what’s wrong a 12? …” To point out that someone is a 10/10 has a utility; to invite them to consider just how much harder they could be on themselves creates the possibility that they may see that they are not really trying, and how inherently absurd it is to do so.

In a subsequent conversation, Keith made the point that the facilitator “treads a line between what is conscious and what is unconscious”. That is not news to me; what it did, however, was to frame precisely what was going on for me in the exchange above.

The implications, which Jones and Sharp's book outlines in more detail apparently, are several. The facilitator needs to line up:

1. The timing of their intervention
2. Attention to their informed intuition
3. Their courage, specifically to “step into their inter-subjective self”
4. The role of courage and the willingness to step into the learning zone of the participant(s)

The above begins to lean into what in psychoanalytical terms is referred to as the ‘third entity’ (Stolorow, 2000). This arises in the interplay and relationship between therapist (or facilitator in this case) and client, whether the latter is one person or a group. Skilled facilitation of group dynamics involves playing with this third entity.

**Evidence based interventions**

Reflecting further on the above, it’s worth offering a brief word on ‘data’, because, regardless of whether you are acting based on intuition or cognition, System 1 or System 2 Thinking or seeking guidance from your spirit guide or aliens, implicit in this is that you are doing so based on some form of data. That may be somatic, on your part and/or observations of your client(s), or felt, or informed by meaning in what is said/not said: all of these are data. Facilitative interventions without acknowledgement of what data is being used as a basis for choice, even if it is post-hoc and through reflection after the event, runs the risk of being a conscious and/or unconscious abdication of responsibility. I confess that I get deeply suspicious when I hear facilitators or practitioners of any persuasion place intuition above all else. To do so smacks of abdication of responsibility at the minimum, or more worryingly of a willingness to use intuition as justification for decisions that might have been more useful and supportive, but for a wee bit more engagement with our decision making faculties.
The subjective and inter-subjective dance of challenge

Assuming that I set out to ‘challenge’ in my facilitation, how do I know it is enough? How do I calibrate the reach and depth of challenge? Even if I have a crystal clear idea that I want to make an intervention that is going to provoke deeply, in service of learning and done with positive intent, I am still taking a leap of faith. I simply will not know how it will land until I act. The greater the degree of challenge I offer, the

If you can’t ‘dance’, between what is going on in you, around you and between, then effective facilitation will be nigh on impossible

more courage I potentially require. If I am probing in an area I know I have a developmental edge but I still choose to go there, then more so.

There is also another flavour of challenge here. What if I have become so used to showing up and intervening in service of my client, of doing so with a willingness and clear intention to go where I believe I need to in order to support the client to get the most out of whatever work we are coming together to do – in short: what if I begin to re-calibrate my own definition and experience of what ‘challenging’ is and is not? And what are the implications for my practice and, more importantly, for my clients?

To make this last point clearer, how aware am I of what is and is not challenging? If my frame of reference around challenge shifts and evolves over time, how will I know how that might be influencing how I therefore challenge others?
In the last two years, I have had a lot of observational feedback from friends, colleagues and clients about how I challenge and ask questions. I have different modes, depending on mood and context; sometimes this is done with awareness, sometimes not, and I am learning heaps from that on-going process. Recently, I had the privilege of having a mirror held up to me and my practice that confirmed something I had begun to suspect, but did not know for sure.

**Reflections from a mirror: challenge is subjective**

Working with another group, in checking out at the end of the latest in a series of sessions, a delegate commented to the effect that they had valued and appreciated the level and depth of challenge I had brought.

*Me:* “Do you want more challenge next time?”

*Participant:* “God no! That was enough – just right, but wouldn’t want any more.”

The good news: they genuinely appreciated the edge and stretch I offered. The edge for me, then, is that I have become so used to a level of directness and honesty, of comfort with others being like that with me, and offering similar to others and (generally) it having a deep – and useful - impact, that I have missed that my ‘new normal’ is actually, for some, way out of the norm. Intellectually, I knew this before, but I did not know it at the level of awareness I needed to, to make the connection in the moment to how this unfolds in my facilitation.

**Implications for my practice**

The risk with any summary relating to practice is the tendency towards overly neat conclusions and lists. Equally, I acknowledge that some highlighting of themes has utility, in terms of conveying what I believe are the key considerations. I offer the following, therefore, as pointers and things to ponder, rather than as a definitive list.

- The word ‘facilitate’ is the Latin for ‘make easy’. Even if that is too literal and a more accurate reflection of what we do is something like ‘making what is difficult easier to address/work with’, the risk is that success becomes equated with removing or moving away from difficulty. At one level, yes, and without acknowledging the shadow of that – that we do not serve clients always by staying with what is easy for us or them – the risk is that opportunities for transformative learning are missed.

- Without dialogue with clients around what is challenging and what is not – or more accurately around where the edge is and what is the degree of stretch that they are seeking/need – we run the risk of assuming that we already know.

- The context makes a difference, particularly if one’s facilitation is that of an internal as opposed to an external practitioner. In recent years, I have noticed that OD and other internal change agents or consultants seem to get lumped in with externals. The dynamics of working as an internal are significantly different, as the double binds are more acute and the consequences sharpened as you make choices – in the moment or strategically – around when and how deep to challenge.
One of my colleagues at Roffey Park, Sue Binks, early in my time at the organisation when we first worked together, said to me that facilitation, when you are working at the edge with groups and getting into the 'mush', is like “skiing down a black run, off piste, blind folded and with both hands tied behind your back.” That has stayed with me ever since as a neat metaphor for both the adrenaline rush of not knowing what the hell you might discover as you work with group dynamics, and the hat tip to the fact that it could all go Pete Tong. Which is the point: as facilitators, we get things wrong, and a willingness and humility to work with that, in the here and now, is crucial.

I don’t have anything to add at the moment, as it will by definition be a list that changes over time as I learn (or don’t). For now, that suffices. However, here’s a final suggestion for what we might usefully hold in mind. The moment a facilitator takes her/himself too seriously, they have missed the point. If we lose sight of our inherent absurdity and fallibility, we miss out on the ‘serious play’ that can be enjoyed and engaged in.

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About Steve
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Ink and pixel; pen and stylus: 
paper-based and digitally-based reflections on practice
Paul Levy

Keywords:
Autoethnography, Facilitation, Organisation Development, Reflection, Digital, Handwriting

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

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

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

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

(Ellis et al, 2011).

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

I still have that notebook. You can notice the improvement of my handwriting as I got better, week by week. I also noticed how my physical hand writing tired me - not mentally, but how weak my fingers felt from years of hardly writing on paper at all. As it turns out, there can even be longer term injuries that result from this selective use of my fingers, hands and arm.
My finger muscles got stronger the more I wrote, and I noticed something else: compared to my texted writing on a computer, tablet or smartphone, I noticed I was writing 'I' and 'Me' more, especially when I was personally reflecting on my recovery, and on my life more generally. You may notice I am using those two words quite a lot in the introduction to this article. That has been happening more in my digital writing, the more I have also been writing on paper. The hand-based writing has been 'rubbing off' on my digital writing in terms of a more personal style.

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

**A simple experiment**

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

**The Aim of this Article**

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

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

In recent years I have written increasingly using digital devices. Primarily my reflections on my practice have been recorded on my smartphone or tablet using my fingertips or a wireless keyboard (I have rarely used a stylus pen). I have also used a laptop computer with a built-in keyboard. I used to use physical notebooks with pens a lot more. In my earliest days as a facilitator, pen and ink was the only available method. (I didn't use a dictaphone). I had a growing feeling that the sentences in my digital writing were becoming shorter and also contained less variety, more repetition, with less use of the word 'I'. My reflection on myself was become depersonalised.
This bothered me (though I wasn't clear why at the time). I looked at a sample of my digital and my physical writing and found some support for my instincts. As a reflective practitioner I was concerned that the quality and helpfulness of my reflection was dropping via the seemingly more convenient use of digital tools. I had also become lazy - why write by hand if you only have to type it all up later? Why not write directly using the digital tools available? But I felt less emotionally connected to my digital writing, even less committed to engaging with it on a slower, deeper level of reflection.

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

**Digital or paper?**

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

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

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

**An open question**

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

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

**Five self-observations**
Self-observation 1 - Intellect and Emotion contrasted
I’ve noticed that my digital writing is more impersonal than my paper-based writing. I feel less emotionally engaged with my digital writing and treat it with an intellectual style of reflection. I tend to reflect more emotionally and deeply with paper-based writing. My digital writing is more ‘hands-off’ and detached, enabling an emotionally more detached view, but limiting reflection that is based more on emotional exploration and engagement. This, of course, is not an absolute statement of my behaviour; it is simply something I am increasingly noticing as a tendency in my reflective writing.

Self-observation 2 - The Sacredness of the new notebook
A brand new note book doesn't cost nearly as much as a brand new laptop or smartphone. I turn to the first page and hesitate (I always do this). The commitment of those first words to the fresh, white page leads me to pause. My first few words are based on a firm decision to commit those words to paper, I am mindful of them in advance of writing them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Self-observation 5 - Measuring the I and Me**

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

My ego ratios (in a much larger sample of my autoethnographic writing) are closer to 30:1 in my digital writing. In my physical writing they are closer to 15:1. I also notice the much lower ego index in this paper! This is probably a result of the topic covered, and the focus of self as object of my research. It could be that autoethnography generates a lower Ego index regardless of the tool chosen.
This could suggest that the more embodied, physically committed nature of holding a pen and pressing onto article adds a sense of physical value and commitment to the process. Also because more of ‘me’ is physically involved, then I feel more myself and I locate my writing more in the first person, due to that higher degree of embodiment in the writing process.

**Case 1: Two comparative illustrations**

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

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

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I’m feeling energised from the session I facilitated today.
40 people but fixed chairs in row format. For me, that involved (as usual) trying to step away from lecture-style which drops the energy. I’m there in the middle of the chairs, instead of standing at the front as I try to encourage and demonstrate informality and its value in learning. It worked and I didn’t make it work.
Everyone did.
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**Sample 2: Some of my digitally-based reflective writing (Paul Levy 2018)**

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A good session. Plenty of engagement- got the host to welcome everyone before they all sat down, in the coffee area - a risk and he was nervous, but paid off. Felt informal and relaxed from the start and carried onto the discussion group. Enabled me to facilitate more minimally. But there were PowerPoint talks and that relaxation makes people more intolerant of the formality. (and often more boring!). Need more on the go Q and A.”
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Case 2 - Comparing digital and paper-and-pen reflection and the resulting cultural conclusions

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

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

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

Observations on Example 1

Ego Index: 10:1 (approx.)

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

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

"Tired. A good, productive day overall, though a lot of confusion over the Finance Director's strategy model. Not really enough time for questions and I'll have to add fifteen minutes to the start of tomorrow as the next stage won't be achievable if people aren't on the same level. Room was too hot, and need to get that sorted. Need more copies of the priorities exercise. Plenty of creative energy in the team, but danger of "work back at base" claiming people's attention. Strategy sessions need to be in comfortable spaces and time planning needs to be 100% realistic."
Observations on Example 2
Ego Index: 80:1 (approx.)

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

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

My reflections so far suggest that both paper- and digitally-based reflections are potentially complementary, offering different qualities and nuances to support reflective writing. My hand-written reflection (Example 1) appears to address itself (more as a bias than a conscious choice) to the human-centred and cultural aspects of organisation development. My digitally-written reflection (Example 2) is more detached, addressing itself to processes and a systems view. In terms of the digital-physical construct, it appears to be a case of both-and, rather than either-or. Yet a bias towards digitally-based reflection could limit the self-knowledge that can arise from attempting to write down our thoughts and feelings.
Digitally-based reflection on myself, due to its more impersonal nature, could help me to observe and report on my practice from a more detached point of view. It can allow a reduced sentimental attachment to what I am reflecting on. Paper-based reflection could offer a complementary perspective that is consciously more immersed, emotional and subjective.

**So, some conjectures**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The organisational impact of facilitation skills

Bella Mehta

Keywords
Organisational Change, Humanistic Psychology, Organisational Impact, Gestalt, Sophisticated Work Groups, Group Process, Association of Facilitators

Introduction
I am one of the several original co-founders of the Association of Facilitators (AoF). Our offering grew out of the humanistic psychology movement, in particular the work of the Human Potential Resource Group at Surrey University, the emergence of Facilitation Styles training, and the integration of Gestalt approaches into organisational development.

This article attempts to describe the principles of facilitative working that seem to generate a positive impact within organisations. I do not intend to dwell for too long on what a facilitator is, does or should do. This is brought to life more clearly in writing elsewhere (others’ and our own - AoF), our training course offerings, and is well-represented by AoF’s competency model, FACETS®, developed by my AoF colleague and co-founder Brian Watts.

The principles I write about have emerged over years from organisations and groups as ‘figures of interest’, telling us what we do that has impact for them personally, for their team, for their organisation and in their wider life. These themes, arising from feedback, seem to point clearly to what is often missed in (or missed out of) working life. So, with my essentially positive, optimistic and humanistic proclivities, I believe that these themes have great potential for us to create human-centred places of work.

Writing this article
As this issue of e-Organisations and People (e-O&P) invites writing in the auto-ethnographic style (e.g. Weil, 2008), I offer upfront my strong sense that my contribution to organisational change as a facilitator is more impactful than other configurations of “helping teams and people” I have tried. These include being a management consultant and project manager as well as being a coach, mentor and trainee therapist. No doubt I have learnt from and integrated aspects of all of these roles into my personhood and also there are aspects of my history and preferences that mean the ‘facilitator configuration’ is the best fit for me, here and now. Also, doubtless my style will continue to evolve as my views and values do and as I experience, with others, moments of transformational change as well as periods of immunity to change.
For several years, I have been reluctant to write about our work for several reasons (beyond the usual procrastination and busy-ness!). These include:

- Facilitation is a relational process involving an organisation, group or individual and a facilitator. In writing about my own experiences, I have also tried to represent the voices of those I have worked with. These are true representations which are as far as possible, are included with context and depth, but inevitably fall short of a second-person view on this first-person description.

- I have an aversion to reading articles where an agent of change, such as a facilitator or consultant, acts upon a system, such as a department or team, to produce an inevitably positive shift through his or her (highly skilled and clearly discernible) actions, charisma or presence. This polished style invites a hurrah for the facilitator, or a purchase of the book, course or consultancy while glossing over messiness and complexities of personal contributions, journeys and ‘colour’. I fear I may reproduce this style of article by mistake!

- The work isn’t only my work – the process by which I facilitate, or the values that I express when I facilitate, are not just “my way”. I am learning continually from my colleagues, clients, group members, others who have facilitated my learning, authors whose books I have read, back through my personal history to Greek philosophers and beyond. So the process or case studies are never fixed or complete, but rather a reflection of time.

I was persuaded to pick up the pen by knowing of Steve Dilworth and many quality conversations with him about both facilitation and writing, and by AMED dedicating this issue of its journal e-O&P to facilitation. Also, I read so avidly and keenly and find it a key pillar of my continued learning that it seemed disingenuous in some ways not to offer something, as someone who is interested in facilitation, reading, writing and sharing experiences. So, this article and the facilitative AMED framework have helped me wrestle with some of my objections, and I reframe these self-quarrels in service of my own learning and that of others.

**Experiencing positive impact**

It is difficult to pinpoint “positive impact”, but its ripples would definitely include greater learning, happier people, achieving shared goals, more joy and greater kindness (Nye 1995).

Having shared my reticence and ambivalence above for context, I have included below part of an email to me from a member of a client group I worked with over a couple of months. In it, she includes her reflections on the day. This email, memories of her and her group, and other similarly well-received work, together paint a picture of what I mean by positive organisational impact:

“All in all the presentation seemed to be well received and if I am honest I think we surprised our chief executive (in a good way).

Thank you for your comments. I think the task was quite ambitious and I am impressed that we managed to pull it off and have the presentation pretty much ready on the day.” …
“I think these two sessions with you have been invaluable and if it had not been for the first session in particular I do not think we would have achieved the task at least not to a level we would have wanted.

- You have given us structure which I think we were lacking us a group.
- I think we are a “team” now rather than a group of people that work together.
- You have got us to look at our own behaviours and the behaviours of others within the team.
- We are now hearing from each team member rather than some more than others, encouragement has been given and we are more open with ourselves and each other.
- You have highlighted where some of us have ended up in a position where we do not defend ourselves or challenge things that come from the Executive. We are all adults after all and were employed for a reason to do our jobs. Empowerment has been lacking for some of us!!
- We have proven we can work together and work together well to produce results.”

She adds a P.S.

“P.S. Normally I would have sent a brief response to you because “I had too much other stuff to do” which I have, but this is important and warrants time for a long-term view. My behaviours are starting to change…”

How might facilitation help such positive impact to come about?

**Enquiring into positive impact**

In recent years we have been engaging in practitioner-research (Barber 2006) into how facilitation skills support positive organisational impact and - its twin concept in our model - personal presence. This followed many reports of changes in both the inner and outer world of facilitators who we worked with in a training capacity and teams who we worked with as facilitators. We are of course familiar with the “just been on a training course/away day syndrome” where enthusiasm, engagement and optimism are high but perhaps not yet grounded. As a check point for this article, we specifically enquired into the experiences of the twelve members of an in-house Facilitation Network following a six-month action-learning based programme facilitated by us. Although this network is largely self-managing, we are still alongside the organisation and the embedded network at certain points, such as the one-year review, which took place in January 2018.

Gathered together with the experiences of this network are the past and current stories of those from many organisations (over 100), large and small, charity and FTSE100, local and global, who we have worked with, sometimes briefly and as individuals and sometimes as ongoing groups over several years. With our relational frame of reference, we consider impact to be a two-way flow (see Figure 1 below).
At its best:

- The facilitator impacts the individuals, group and organisation they are working with and/or part of.
- Working with individuals, groups and organisations impacts the facilitator’s wellbeing and development

We consider that positive impact is holistic, long-lived and involves changes in mindset as well as skills. Over time, personal discoveries and darker shadow material are assimilated, integrated, embodied and characterized and the change can be both “seen” and “felt”.

**What does a facilitator do?**

Many of the people I meet outside my world of ‘work’ don’t understand what a facilitator “does”. Some have the impression that facilitators administrate, charm, entertain, cajole, mediate, neutralise or bully a group into doing what it should have done all along (like we know!).

It is striking, how often groups express their surprise in the way that we work: “you just sat down and talked with us”, “you really listened to what it is like for us” or “you opened up space for us to really think”. Behind this simplicity is our dedication to person-centred principles, dialogue and working with what-is rather than what-should-be. Any such list of principles or description of style, tools or theories, however, provides only part of the answer to the question of what a facilitator does and doesn’t capture the depth, breadth and range of change that we witness in our work.

My consistent experience is that facilitation can lead to transformational change and long-lasting impact for people, groups, communities and organisations. Working facilitatively, we explicitly place awareness, culture, values, ethics and relationships centrally, when these are most often treated as peripheral or optional. No doubt there are consultants, trainers, supervisors, leaders, managers, therapists, change agents, artists, scientists (and so on) reading this article who also work in this way. Whatever we call ourselves, my sense is that the facilitative work that we are all doing meets a deep and often unarticulated need around human purpose, human potential, high performance, connection and relationship.
Organisational Impact – can we improve on 30%?

“Organisational Impact”, as well as being part of the title of this article, is also the name of a module we offer on our Certificate Programme in Facilitation Skills. This two-word title could equally describe Social Action, Community Development, Team Coaching, Group Process, Action Learning Set, Organisational Development (‘OD’), Human Endeavour, Public Service and so on. In each case, you can see that in our picture of working facilitatively, in addition to the facilitator, there are (1) a group of people and (2) a shared developmental purpose in a positive direction.

A McKinsey survey in 2008 upheld John Kotter’s 1996 findings that only 30% of organisational change programmes succeed. Lack of success in itself can fuel cynical thinking and further failure, although this disappointing figure is clearly not “all in the mind”. The devastating cost that human beings pay as a result of failing systems and unfit organisations is all around us and the distress of seeing it and feeling it is rarely far under the surface.

Gareth Morgan (1986) offers several metaphors for organisations, ranging from machines, brains, computers, instruments of domination and psychic prisons to organisms and cultures. AoF is most aligned to his view of organisations as “flux and transformation” although we work with people who view their organisations in different ways, such as those outlined above. Sometimes our impact lies in getting people to simply see and question how they view their organisation and their place in it and adjust to different ways, less bound ways of seeing themselves and others.

Emerging figures of interest

There simply cannot be one way of addressing change which fits all organisations and people. Clearly we (humanity) haven’t found an answer and I am certainly not claiming here that we (AoF) have. Approaches to change will always be matched with our contextual understanding of the world and our prevailing worldview is that the world is interconnected, relational and emergent. Given this, I have expanded on several figures which emerge as being ‘of interest’ when I consider how we have impact.

Power and Diversity are key

Aristotle’s political ideas provided “a means of creating order out of diversity while avoiding forms of totalitarian rule” (quoted in Morgan, *ibid*). The connections that Aristotle made back then - between the individual and the collective and between external control and internal satisfaction - are ones one that most of us working in organisations (the modern equivalent of Greek city-districts?) will recognise today.

The work of John Heron (2001) has much to offer about working with power in groups. His “modes of authority” model describes how a facilitator can be in a place of hierarchy, cooperation or autonomy, and depicts this as a scale with intermediate positions (see Figure 2 below). At the former end of the scale, the facilitator directs the group, make decisions and choose for the group (‘leads from the front’). At the other end, the group chooses its own learning and direction and the facilitator is a ‘group resource’.
In itself and on its own, this is a very practical model to help facilitators increase their range and act with intention and awareness. Our work is highly experiential so we have seen facilitators making sense of this model in many varied and rich ways, often starting from previously unseen rules and limitations (“I don’t… I can’t… I long for… I must… I should…”).

- Exploring their own relationships to power positions and personal dynamics (“I don’t want to be in charge”, “I want to be a likeable facilitator”, “Facilitators must cooperate”, “Facilitators are neutral”, “I can’t know more than someone senior to me”).
- Noticing power hierarchies (“I can’t say that because my boss/team is in the room”, “The customer/market is king”, “why don’t they just do what I tell them to do?”)
- Exploring their own unique preferences, skills and abilities and ability to contribute (“My natural style is x but I can stretch to y”)
- Expressing conscious feelings and becoming aware of unconscious feelings about themselves and others (“I don’t want to look incompetent in the presence of others”, “I can’t say what I really feel”)
- The influence of the wider systems – family, historical, social, psycho-social, situational, global (“I don’t belong here”; “my role is to be the one who…”)
- Ethical observations and explorations (“Who am I to impose my philosophy and style on others”, “What if I don’t agree with the purpose or values of this group?”).

We see confidence and competence increase when facilitators explore this model experientially as they discover for themselves an extended range and greater possibilities to offer their groups through autonomous learning and conscious hierarchy.
Significant systemic and personal pressures, particularly those of diversity and inclusion, can be made visible by exploring power relationships. For example, differentiation at the forming/storming stage, necessary to move forward into performing/norming stages (Tuckman & Jensen 1977), is often welcomed by the lower power group (who know they are different from the prevailing norms) but resisted by the higher power group (“we’re all the same”, “you’re one of us”, “we’re all human”) which maintains the status quo.

For the richness that this offers, exploration of power and diversity dynamics is key to organisational impact and also to lifelong learning.

“I intend to reflect and build further on the mode of power model. I am keen to move away from a natural default “hierarchical” style where I feel I can box myself in to incorporate the other modes … with an emphasis on building greater connection…”

Learn From Experience

![Kolb's experiential learning cycle](image)

The impetus for engaging or developing facilitation skills generally arises after a period of professional experience where the “rubber hits the road” and the theory of organisational life does not match with the practice. We have (with no small sense of satisfaction) had MBA graduates tell us that with us they learnt “everything I didn’t learn on their MBA” and have seen many trainers come alive with the possibilities offered by whole-person learning (Taylor 2007).

David Kolb (b 1939) is the person most associated with experiential learning theory. He expressed the learning cycle as a continual process of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and application. Kolb et al’s model of experiential learning, depicted in Figure 3, guides us in our way of working. We hear from groups that what we offer is often the environment, time, and psychological space to reflect and make sense of experiences in the here-and-now.

We observe how often this cycle is short circuited – or steps are missed out - in our workplaces and beyond. Organisations often lurch from experiences (“Just Do Something!”) to planning for a different experience (“It didn’t work! Do something new!”), as depicted by the dotted line, without having engaged in a time-efficient fuller version cycle of learning. In our wider systems too, we see quick-fixes, soundbites and knee-jerk reactions to things not going as we would want.
Working in a group experientially enables us to learn not only from our own experience but also that of others, plus from all of the interrelated dynamics and patterns that occur in a diverse group, and to our reactions to them. It is truly lifelong learning and this dawning of awareness is daunting and expanding.

I particularly valued being allowed to take time experimenting with styles, allowing me to build an understanding of how they worked for me and other people… Being allowed and encouraged to discuss this and reflect on these differences and how they can be used to our advantage was a huge eye opener for me…

Resistance

It is familiar for us to encounter resistance to a way of working that includes reflection and integration. In our experience, the avoidance of reflective and integrative practices steers us away from an explicit exploration of our situational context, power structures and our own personal authority.

Most frequently in organisations we hear about the rapid pace of work, the pressure not to make mistakes and the high workload.

“I don’t think that I spend enough time focussing on myself and how I want to be perceived, and how I can add more value to some of the work that I undertake. I have a large geographical area and seem to spend most of my time driving around the country, having meetings, putting fires out and then catching up on admin and emails on evenings and planning for the week ahead on the weekend. The workload is exceptionally high and unsustainably so at the moment…”

It seems to us that ‘mistakes’ continue to be made despite or even because of this pressure, or more accurately in our frame, experience doesn’t necessarily lead to learning through reflection. Barriers to the reflective phase frequently reference pace, time and “the real world” and these defences generally overlay deeper defences to personal development work. Potential traps exist in getting stuck in reflection (“naval gazing”), sense-making (“analysis paralysis”), planning (“control freaks”) or in continual action (“experience junkies”).

Another blocker to healthy learning is the shadow side of positive-thinking approaches (perhaps including aspects of humanistic psychology), which prevents uncomfortable material being brought into the light. I refer to this as the “tyranny of the positive”. Any well-intentioned approach which is badly implemented can generate more rule-bound repression rather than freedom, development and creativity. We view this shadow side as an essential consideration, and equally take care to ‘delve’ into shadow material no more than is implied by the group contract, context and aims.

On reflection (!) though - and working through resistance however it arises - we hear how valuable the full cycle of experiential learning in a peer group is to:

- Tell the truth
- Build connection
- Receive feedback
- Share best practice
- Update one’s self perception
- Become a critically reflective practitioner

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- Tell the truth
- Build connection
- Receive feedback
- Share best practice
- Update one’s self perception
- Become a critically reflective practitioner
- Understand and take responsibility for one’s own situation
- Approach learning in a holistic manner including body, feelings and energy
- Examine deeper thoughts and feelings that we have about ourselves and others
- Remove the mask (e.g. of serious, competent activity) and connect with one’s lightness
- Meaningfully sort through and evaluate the complexity of culture, history, goals, abilities, blind spots, shadow material, defences and compulsions
- Experience the Paradox of Change as expressed by Beisser (1972):

  “change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not.”

**Attending to Group Dynamics**

Wilfred Bion’s research (1961) suggested that beneath all organisational processes there lies the realm of Group Process (= group dynamics = relationships). Bion described high performing teams (‘Sophisticated Work Groups’) as working with what is above and below the surface, i.e. explicitly including elements of the human process. He found that lower performing teams (‘Basic Assumption Groups’) would only work at the level of the task, i.e. above the surface. There is much left unsaid in Basic Assumption Groups and activities are diverted by powerful and common emotional drives (anxiety, fear, guilt, dependence and so on).

This ‘fact of life’ is the well-known idea that we can live and work superficially (on the surface) and/or at depth. At AoF, as you may have gathered, we attach great importance to what lies beneath the surface of groups and we consider working at depth and with awareness to be key facilitator competencies.

We often sketch out the levels of experiences in groups in a flipchart picture which we refer to as ‘The Iceberg model’ (see Figure 4), where sea-level is around the middle of the iceberg. We mostly find that there is pressure on organisational groups to work at the surface, generating visible results and taking action. It is rare for an organisational group to prioritise relationships over task, unless (or until) they hit “crisis mode”.

The contract we develop with most groups is to work at depth to support and underpin any surface “task” rather than committing to any end point or goal. As with the reflective practice earlier, we encounter resistance and hit defences at individual, group and systemic level which we facilitate groups “through”.

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**Fig 4: Levels of experiences in groups: the iceberg model**
**Depth work: the power that lies below the surface**

One of the joys as well as the *raisons d’être* of our work is helping groups to achieve their shared aims through acknowledging the power of what lies “below the surface”.

**Case Study 1:**

A Board of Trustees for a professional association was stuck with formulating their strategy. The President gave me free rein for the agenda and we agreed to “work at depth”. After various scene setting activities in the morning to get to know them, “tune in”, identify issues and build trust/safety (constellations, agenda formation, contracting, truth telling, dialogue) the group, who don’t meet often, was connecting well and enjoying doing so. After lunch we hit a brick wall as we approached the topic of articulating the strategy. The pressure of time was starting to build and our room felt cramped and airless. I invited them to take a short walk in pairs around the block rather than push harder at the task. My embodied sense while they were out of the room was that the activity had become stuck as it was detached and “out there” rather than accessible and “in here”. On their return, the room instantly felt bigger and less cramped. We sat close together, and I invited the Board Members to answer a very simple question in a structured and repetitive way: “Why am I here?” Out of that activity emerged three key themes: Support, Sharing, Learning. The atmosphere was electric as the group realised that their own personal themes and shared reasons for being there were also their strategic offering to their membership.

In practice, as well as being a joy to work with and to witness as it comes together, depth-work can be uncomfortable and slow. What is highly challenging within one group may not be to another and groups need us to meet them where they are and stay alongside them as things emerge.

**Case Study 2**

In working with the leadership team from a domestic abuse charity, we ended up with many post-its on the floor during a planning exercise. As the exercise slowed down, they seemed to want to push on and tidy up and the vibe was “antsy”. I enquired how it would be to leave the messiness on the floor and experienced a great blast of reactions as they all told me about their “OCD-like” tendencies to tidy-up around the office. This led to an in-depth discussion of how painful and out-of-control it could feel to work in the complex and messy arena of domestic abuse.

**Defences, Feedback and “A Bit Like Therapy”**

Often, in this group environment, our defences, far from being impossible to overcome (as we fear) are blown away as we learn about ourselves and our impact on others. We aim to build participants’ capacity and capability for self-regulation by practising skills in giving and receiving feedback. We aim to build the ability to self-confront (become more self-aware) through building confronting (awareness-building) skills in the group environment. We guide participants to pick up accurately on cues (internal and external) and to become aware of the lenses they use to navigate the world and how, for each of us, our personal ‘story’ influences how we ‘read’ others. Whether historic or situational, our defences never really work as well as we think they do. Healthy group environments are tailor-made for offsetting the possible pain of this learning with the potential for laughing with others at our human absurdities.
As facilitators, working with groups as defences and projections arise, we aim to work in an encouraging way, supporting the person while confronting personal, group or organisational myths. Our work at its best reflects our dedication to core Person-Centred principles (Rogers 1957) and to effective Organisational Development for ‘real people’.

Bobbing up to the surface after working at depth, a participant may let out a breath and say “Phew! That was a bit like therapy!”. Certainly our approach does share a basis with therapies, particularly humanistic ones, and with any modality which develops greater health and wellbeing. Typically, the people we work with are articulate, high performers and to begin with at least are more comfortable discussing performance than ‘personal development’.

I feel that we do get tired and overwhelmed and as a result it impacts on our results, (that is definitely the case for me personally). We are not as productive as we could be at times because we get too bogged down in things. I think as a group and individually we probably need to work smarter rather than harder. We often duplicate tasks around the building because we are not communicating properly with each other, I think the change in format of our Inter departmental monthly meetings should start to improve this situation though. I think because we are generally under stress/pressure we do not support each other properly and probably miss out on opportunities to make our work lives a bit easier as a result.

![Diagram of Organisational impact]

© Colin Heyman (Maine Stream, 1999) Adapted with permission

Fig 5: Linking whole person and whole organisation approaches for transformational impact
Our work with teams, while not therapy, is therapeutic, restorative and healing. We introduce to some for the first time the concept of the Wounded Healer (Jung 1951) and many go on to deeper personal work, with us or others.

Our analysis and synthesis of many models and maps provide pathways to link the whole person approach with a whole organisation approach and consider how only both together have transformational impact (see Figure 5, above).

In closing I return briefly to the autoethnographic theme. A major driver for me personally is to offer support to enhance well-being in families. I have previously co-written a book for female-led businesses (Martin & Mehta 2006) and I co-lead a Community Interest Company dedicated to childcare. Given my background, experience and interests I am occasionally asked why I don’t work with families. My answer, quite definitely, is that I do! All of the people within organisations are also family members, in whatever form that takes. A member of a financial leadership team I worked with said that he had slept better as a result of improved teamwork and clarity about his role and performance. When he added simply, almost as an afterthought, that he had been nicer to his wife and children as a consequence, I was not alone in welling up with tears.

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About Bella

Bella Mehta is one of the co-founders of the Association of Facilitators. She grew up in Bangor and feels a strong connection to North Wales, where her parents settled following their immigration. In the 1980s, she moved to the bright lights of London; more recently she turned down the dimmer switch and moved to the countryside. She lives in Berkshire with her two children, two dogs, two cats, two jobs and one husband.

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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_Mielot_dans_son_scriptorium,_dans_Miracles_de_Notre_Dame,_f.19.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:

Variously, 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.


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.

This approach is informed by principles of *writing in social spaces* (Murray 2015), action learning (Revans 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’]

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About Bob
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Facilitating for reflection, one stepping-stone at a time

John Sweet

Introduction
Since 2011, I have been facilitating a particular form of Reflective Writing retreat workshops, which run sequentially over a period of six days. This is quite a demanding brief which follows an established protocol of quiet reflection, where sections of a reflective journal are verbally introduced, one reflective process at a time. In this journal, all life experience has a place where it can be described and elaborated. Unlike most teaching models, facilitators do not introduce any new writing content, just suggestions on how and what to write from participants' prior knowledge and experiences to aid their learning. [See Appendix A with a list of standard Journal section headings]

Participants have kindly permitted me as a facilitator to audio record a number of these workshops in an attempt to identify good practice in facilitating such workshops and possible strategies for improvement.

Keywords
Reflection, Learning, Facilitation, Writing, Dialogue, Change, Journaling
Ethnography and autoethnography

On reflection, I think of Ethnography as the ultimate qualitative methodology for such a project. Despite being probably the most widely used and comprehensive qualitative method, I have the image of a fairly simple process. However, here, I have been asked to adopt an autoethnographic approach to write about how I have come to understand my own approach to facilitating for learning and reflection.

Auto-ethnography is a different matter altogether. In my own case, I cannot but have an underlying concern and question about how I have best performed in helping participants learn? My facilitation has its own history and learning curve. At times it has been a rocky climb, sometimes more like wading through swampy undergrowth. But it has not been without pinnacles of serene and rewarding engagement. My facilitation has its own life, so here, I follow a process that mirrors how I facilitate in reflective journaling workshops. In this, one fundamental process is to place life’s sequences into named ‘steppingstones’, to gain a sense of the continuity of experience (Prigoff, 1992) Table 1 below is an example of stepping stones I have drawn up for my own practice.

My facilitation steppingstones

Table 1. My facilitation for reflection steppingstones

- Not letting the teacher take over
- Do not tell others what to do
- Support others to take responsibility
- Use of storyline and props
- A Long Story
- Humour – one liners
- Life in events, organisations and society
- Action Learning Discussion processing
- From a position of strength, visit the haunted house

The rest of this piece is organised around these stepping-stones.

My recorded history

My facilitation experience/practice has been a personal learning curve recorded over the years from original reel-to-reel audiotape to compact discs, and will possibly end up in the clouds? I enjoyed pushing the bounds to get learners to question. That seems fundamental. My ‘best of times’ facilitating appeared to be when I mobilised the greatest resources for the learners and when I was willing to take the greatest risks. On occasion, I have dipped into these recordings. Re-visiting the early ones has been hard work emotionally.
Underpinning theory and practice

More recently I have adopted a more relaxed approach of support, taking care to create the right atmosphere and storyline to encourage learning. In this, *Appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, 2005) has been a major influence. To be able to say unconditionally that this is the best I can be learning or doing has a profound effect on all that follows. As Reed (2007) says “what works gives life to a community, group, or person, we participate in the construction of the reality of potential”. On the other hand, “If we ask questions about problems, we create a reality of problems.”

*Accelerated learning* literature (e.g. Rose, 1985) advocates a range of positive approaches to learning where the right motivational feel or atmosphere is essential, as is gaining an overall picture of materials to learn and identifying and working with your own best ways of learning.

In addition, learning is enhanced by reflective practices. I enthusiastically follow two main methods of reflective practice. The first is following a *Journal method* (after Progoff, 1992), where experiences are logged in a similar way as in a diary. Unlike the diary, however, we work with these experiences in a non-judgmental way with a set of processes to take feelings, ideas and actions forward with some direction.

The second is that of *Action Learning* (after Revans; 1998) which entails unpacking issues by careful supportive questioning. The original action learning process is a deficit model, starting with a problem, but this can be effectively inverted and subverted with talk of opportunities.
The Dark Side – visiting the Haunted House
But there is a black hole in my personal history of facilitation which predates my current uptake of appreciative inquiry. Like visiting a haunted house, you know there are unpleasant things there to tease you, but you do not know if or when they will appear. Following an apparent success at a workshop at the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) conference in 2005, I formulated another session in 2006, which, as I remember it, went terribly wrong. Was I taking one risk too many, gratuitously juxtaposing noisy, active social engagement with more than a moment of quiet introspection as a group activity? I certainly remember making some participants uncomfortable, judging from their body language. So dark it was, that I have never until now returned to that 2006 recording – clearly a missed opportunity for reflection.

For this article, I’ve adopted an appreciative focus. I girded my loins, and listened to that CD for the first time in 12 years, to see what I can learn from what at the time I perceived as a horrible experience.

My facilitation steppingstones, one–by-one
In what follows, I discuss key elements of realisation about my facilitation formulated in my steppingstones (see Appendix A), one-by-one, virtually in historical order. The exception is that black hole of ghostly memories, which I will unpack for the very first time, but leave until last.

Not letting the teacher take over
A teacher is usually obsessed with a particular content or discipline, whereas a facilitator is more obsessed with the learning. At the start, attempting facilitation, I was talking too fast and for too long, acting centre stage as teacher. Fortunately, as I listen, participants would spring into life once liberated to do so, apparently forgiving my digressions and attention seeking.

Do not tell others what to do
‘Do not tell people what to do, rather support others in reaching for third-party standards and goals.’ This was the advice of a developer who had the difficult task of turning round the nationalised Flour Mills, when I was working in Trinidad as a lecturer in dentistry in the early 1990s. His other insight was that of course you needed to have your participants on board following your strategy. However, in a group, probably around 40% of active members is enough to elicit change. So not to panic!

Support others to take responsibility: moving from teaching to facilitation
Teaching in a ‘past life’ of clinical dentistry, my first thoughts might have been that dental students need to be organised and told what to do all the time: a traditional Higher Education clinical training. My investigations into (dental) chairside teaching (Sweet et al, 2008) subsequently found that dysfunctional family relationships between lecturer and students sometimes prevailed. Students would hate being humiliated by a grumpy dysfunctional “father”, and dentistry consultants complained that students were behaving like “naughty children”. In dental teaching much clinical work is repetitive and in a workplace setting, so that organisational rules and values relating to standards of behaviour can be formalised. In a dental clinic, students would work in six pairs, respectively as operator and assistant. The traditional role of teachers would be to organise everything and supervise each of the workstations in turn.
Students taking responsibility as organisers

Instead of this, I imbibed the “Adult Learning” literature (Knowles, 1980) and acted to give students responsibility as clinical organisers and recorders. The pairs would arrange briefing sessions at the beginning of the clinic to check that all were present, sort out late appointments, and record the clinical work done in such a way as to emphasise group learning. They would video record the learning of individual pairs so that all could view a short video clip of each pair on a TV at a debriefing session at the end of the clinic. As facilitator, and lead clinician, I was thus freed up time from organising to be available for more clinical demonstration and advice on treatment planning, some of which could be recorded and viewed by everyone. As a group, we could learn from each other through watching video clips and sharing experiences. Good facilitation seems to be about putting the learners in a good place for self-directed learning and enabling them to take action and collective responsibility.

Students acting as clinical organisers and recorders.

Far from children goofing around, these were smart professionals concerned for their patients, ensuring that advice they received was up-to-date and from scientific sources, and all behaviours were to a high standard.

Adult learning principles: andragogy

Knowles’ (1980) fundamentals of adult learning came to light in front of our eyes. Students knew why they were learning, and could choose what they needed to learn. They were starting to accumulate their own resource of experience and knowledge. Their learning was related to real life action and was task orientated. Good learning occurred especially when they were tapping into their own unique capacity for learning. Seeing learning as a journey appeared to give insight into integrating different aspects of learning and embrace
change, especially when being engaged and voluntarily “on-board”. Good examples and choice of resources that I as facilitator had made available in this new environment helped the whole group progress with their learning and ensure that nobody was left behind.

**Use of storyline and props: the talk of a SEDA Conference**

Stepping on this stone, I based the whole workshop on the story of a circumscribed journey, with one session leading to the next with a sense of immediacy or timing. I used short presentations to set the scene to emphasise the purpose of each session and to make them sufficiently challenging and not too lengthy. And they were goal- and task-focused.

I gave each participant a printed rail ticket to induce a sense of belonging, and set out seats like railway carriages. An early introspection session was a short break from a speeding journey being ‘shunted into a siding’ for a time. Appreciative inquiry demonstrated a practical aspect to help frame the whole workshop in a positive light. I brought along a mass of materials with which to model standards, setting up stations in which the groups could work, to produce a story that could be videoed. Magnets on strings, piles of money, coins of all different sorts and sand with various creatures, floats and water, were all on display. One enterprising group discovered, located in the room, some different shaped coat-hangers and a stand for their short programme. I recorded each modelling over a period of 10 minutes. And when finished, we all gathered around the TV and shared these video clips. Their story lines held up well. All manner of angles on ‘standards’ were raised from the various unusual takes demanded by the texture and form of the modelling materials. Overall, feedback was very positive and the workshop became the talk of the Conference. Individual participants expressed how useful they found the various materials to express the impact of standards and standard setting on their lives and their work, as well as in enabling an insight into other participants’ views and situations.
A ‘long’ story

When I was a student at 22, I was interested in the then fairly new concepts of introvert and extravert. Just published was the English translation of Jung’s book, *Psychological Types* (1971) which I purchased and went straight to read chapter 5. Here, Jung explains the concepts of ‘intro’ and ‘extra’ with reference to an epic poem “Prometheus and Epimetheus” by Carl Spitteler (1931). It is extraordinary, anthropomorphic and subjective. Prometheus is a slave to his own soul, who appears to him like a Goddess. She:

approached him and laid both hands in greeting on his shoulders, incline her head, and looked at him, glance for glance and eye to eye. And at her gaze his life died and rose again, his blood first seethed and then froze, and all his feelings became enslaved to her in boundless and self-forgetting love.

[Spitteler, 1931].

Because of this, Prometheus gets nowhere in the world, whereas his brother Epimetheus succeeds to become King. But he, Epimetheus has to rely on his conscience to guide him. This little animal goes hiding just at the wrong moments, and Epimetheus becomes discredited. Prometheus is called upon at the very end of the day to put things right.

Much later in life I return to reading Jung’s Psychological Types, and once again decide to obtain a copy of “Prometheus and Epimetheus”. After a detailed investigation I tracked the book down in a library. Inside the book was the exotic accession image I remembered. But more than that, on page 69 there was a clearly marked ‘J’ (for John) in pencil! I had defaced this book 34 years before in 1969. Tears came to my eyes – reunited with the self-same book. Sometimes a heart-warming interlude can produce a valuable ‘stand and stare’ moment!

Humour – one liners

When you are writing Steppingstones in the Journal process, these are relevant to your situation now, and are not supposed to be an attempt at historical accuracy. They are more in alignment to the world of Prometheus and Epimetheus, but with relevance to the ways things are moving for you now. When talking about this, I often quote a lady in the States who used to say, when talking about her life Steppingstones: *my ex-husband fell off my list of Steppingstones 10 years ago, and I don’t think he is coming back on, anytime soon!*
Life in events, organisations and society

My mother is 90 now, but every 30th August she remembers vividly that date because of events in 1940. The first torpedo hit the cruise liner, SS Volendam, on which she was a passenger, in the bow. It exploded and the vessel started to keel over. A second torpedo sank into the ship but did not go off. 350 children, including my mother, were transferred to lifeboats and then to other merchant shipping to make a return journey to Britain only, never reaching Canada, which was their original destination. So after that event, do you think my mother has ventured out on the high seas much in her life? What this illustrates is that an event can act like a bully, and have a life of its own, ready to torment. In the Journal process it is possible to dialogue with the ‘person’ behind the event. Once a dialogue has taken place, the perspectives that person holds will never be the same again. The unreasonable bully can lose its power. Such dialogue, created by people, gives them permission to move on!

Action Learning group discussion processing

Reg Revans (1998) devised a method of reflective practice to empower those working at the ‘coalface’ of businesses and organisations. Each member of a small group has ‘airtime’ to voice issues that are important, stimulated by being asked questions, crafted by other members of the group. Much is gained from the cohesion of the group, by not giving advice, in a spirit of confidentiality and honesty. Group learning is largely gained through an important additional phase of ‘group discussion processing’. Dedicated time is given to discussing the processes that occurred in the session they have just experienced. Asking “What on earth is going on?” can sometimes be transformative for individuals and groups and a useful tool to the facilitator’s box.

Now, we return to what I’ve been putting off for so long.

From a position of strength, re-visiting the haunted house
The horror audio

The offending CD I mentioned earlier took quite some time to find. Initially, I thought (perhaps, even secretly hoped?) it was lost. Found, I slipped the CD into the rarely used bay on my laptop, expecting it not to work or get stuck. But no, the audio came through strong and clear. I found that the session had already started at the point when participant pairs were in plenary reporting on “What evidence-informed means to me”. To my surprise the participants appeared enthused, even ebullient, and the points made were wide-ranging and thoughtful, but I had left no time to reach a consensus, even if that were possible. I had just carried on with my pre-set plan, asking “How closely attached to this concept or thing do you feel?” I then rambled on, going through reflective Journal process theory interspaced with meditation, following a calming storyline.

The stares and body language from just a few participants is inaudible, but some explained later how they felt.

The mixed response from participants’ feedback for the last 20 minutes showed a willingness for participants to make the most of what was offered. Nobody walked out. Half a dozen explained how they had difficulty and could not link the topics of evidence-informed and journaling, but just as many thought the Journaling relevant to life issues and especially to reflecting on change. Two presented what you might call inane ideas. Two thought that they might get the link to work, but that they would both go about it a different way.

It’s like I am not supposed to sit and do meditation - to do that in academia. We have not had permission to work so - We must work at the rational and intellectual level  And to do this workshop - I know I wouldn’t do it like this - have to have some lead in!

A final comment was that “Some people have had quite deep insights”.

I had a problem with the evidence-based until I found the points you made about the stepping stones making something evident to you. So I feel when I go back to these notes later on my own it will be part of a reflective practice and will give me insights into what is evident in the material.

Some insights from this

So it was uncomfortable to listen to this 12-year-old recording of the workshop, but it was not without merit in gaining a range of insights about my rambling style, what the meanings of ‘evidence-based’ or ‘informed’ could be, and eliciting some appreciation of Journaling as a method of self-development. Compared to the 2005 workshop, that of 2006 lacked the links and cohesive story to hold the different parts together. The story did not flow and opportunities to return to the evidence-informed ideas were not followed up. I did not use the wide range of physical and digital materials and technology as a resource. In particular, the session lacked immediacy, that precious quality to ensure good timing for events. But it was not without humour:

What I was actually thinking follows from what you are saying about spontaneity and creativity and where they come from. What I found really useful from that is that you can be fundamentally lazy and do nothing, because I am often worried about busy people. They often tell me they’re busy and they do bugger all! I’m not a busy person. I’d rather read a magazine and engage in anything intellectual and be superficial as well. But doing that, perhaps allows the waters to stir in an unconscious way. So I can tell my colleagues how busy they are: that they’re just clinging to rapture land. I just tell them to get on with it and stop moaning.
Final thoughts: confronting – and learning from – past experiences.
With this gift of hindsight, I need not have hidden for so long from a 12-year-old audio recording. It helped me to define what makes good and bad facilitation. Staff and educational developers can be such caring and forgiving participants when being facilitated by one of their colleagues.

Appendix A: Some Journal Sections
- Following Shifting of Perspectives
- Influences on where you are now
- Steppingstones of events over time
- Memories of roads taken
- Roads not taken
- Inspiration from images
- Following lines of wisdom and connection

Dialogue with perspectives for change

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