

# Beyond paperwork

## Conversation-entwined writing, or becoming alive to the special qualities of writing and conversation

Alison Donaldson

### ABSTRACT

*The burden of email and paperwork in organisational life these days gives writing a bad name. Yet, if you think about it for a moment, writing is a thoroughly versatile tool. On the one hand it can be used to organise and control, on the other it lends itself to developing thinking, as well as conversing and collaborating. Here I relate an incident from my everyday working practice, which prompted me to reflect again on the different qualities of conversation and writing and how they can best be combined. My reflections make use of narrative writing (journaling) as well as conversations with colleagues. Gradually it becomes clearer to me that the future of writing will be healthier if we use these two invaluable forms of human communication (writing and conversation) thoughtfully. This means taking risks and having the courage to improvise and invite response from others. The notion of 'conversation-entwined writing' emerges as my central theme.*

**Key words:** writing, conversation, collaboration, reflection, email, iterative, journaling, narrative, unfinished

### Introduction

Many people are exploring how newer forms of writing – e.g. email, text/SMS, blog, chat/IM – are changing the way we communicate. In my work, I am especially interested in how people combine writing and conversation. I also find myself constantly questioning the many organisational habits that have grown up around writing. These include using email when it would be more productive for people to talk to each other; subjecting audiences to long and dense PowerPoint presentations with list after list of bullet points; constructing over-elaborate written agendas and dull meeting notes; and obliging practitioners to spend too much time ticking boxes and filling out forms. These kinds of practices give writing and written communication a bad name.

So let's go back to asking ourselves what writing is capable of. When you think about it for a moment, you realise it is in fact a singularly versatile form of communication. For example, it can be used to organise (lists, plans, agendas), to entertain (novels, film scripts), to converse (email, text messages), and to learn and educate (books, articles, essays, reflective diaries). The trouble is, reading, writing and documents are so much part of our daily lives that many people use them without question or deeper reflection.

I am therefore suggesting we all become more aware of how we interweave talk and writing, taking seriously the different qualities of these two major forms of human communication. To show more specifically what I am talking about, I will begin by relating a story from my everyday work.

### **Not writing when what's needed is a conversation**

A close colleague (Irene Roele) rang me one Friday afternoon to update me on a piece of work we were doing together – she had invited me to help her facilitate a 'strategic conversation' with a company board about a month later. Some time into the phone call, Irene said 'If you have any thoughts about the shape of the day, do let me know', or words to that effect. It was clear she wasn't expecting me to come up with an answer straight away.

I recall being immediately aware of *not* having an answer, and I wasn't at all confident that I would find an answer the following week either, especially if I was just sitting alone at my computer. So I suggested that we talk about the day now, as that would be sure to spark some ideas. In particular, I proposed we go over what had happened since the last strategy meeting I had attended three months earlier. I knew from experience that, as one does this, it becomes clear what needs to happen next. To give a flavour, here is a partial excerpt from the reflective note I wrote to myself immediately after our phone call:

*"We ran over what had happened since July. Irene mentioned that the team is 'pretty coherent amongst themselves' regarding the strategy. So I was thinking, how could we test or witness that coherence? I felt we would need to hear every member of the team talk about strategy. Or maybe it would be better to get them to write something down, each one of them individually. Then they could read out what they had written."*

*(Alison Donaldson, handwritten note<sup>1</sup>)*

---

<sup>1</sup> I tend to write by hand in a small notebook that I carry around with me, although in this case my 'journal' was just a scrap of paper.

I was imagining that, as we listened to the board members reading out their brief accounts of how they articulate the company's strategic intent, we would immediately get a sense of the similarities and differences amongst them. It might also avoid what Irene and I both feared: that they would otherwise want to start by showing us a strategy presentation.

Irene and I continued to talk, and eventually a moment arrived when I felt ready to offer to send her a note of what had emerged from our conversation. After the phone call, I emailed her stating what I saw as the overall intention of the strategy discussion and offering a rough 'order of the day'. I concluded by saying 'I hope this helps get the conversation started' (referring to her next conversation with our main contact on the board).

### **Initial reflections on this experience**

For me, the first thing that this example highlights is how writing often emerges most easily and effectively from a conversation. I could have responded to my colleague by writing a note, rather than prolonging our conversation. Instead, I suggested we talk about the strategy meeting straight away, even though I sensed Irene had anticipated just a quick phone call.

What I did may at first sight seem like 'just common sense', but common sense so often eludes us in the midst of organisational life, with all its habits and rituals. What I think I was doing was 'noticing'. I was noticing, for example, that my internal response was 'I don't know what shape the day should take without exploring what has happened over the past three months since we last saw the board', and then acting on it.

I am deliberately taking time to reflect on the experience because I find, the more I do so, the more I discover and the more I find myself able to 'articulate my own practice'. As someone who has spent a lifetime writing for a living, in recent years I have come to recognise the immense value of 'just talking'. If you allow a bit more time than is usual in today's pressured workplace – for example, by giving yourself and your colleagues 'permission' to go over what has happened so far – it is amazing how easily some 'next moves' become apparent. It is also striking how much energy and inspiration such a conversation can generate. (Not all conversations, I hear you say, and I agree...)

Note finally that the email I wrote following my phone call was intended *not* as the 'last word' on the subject of the board meeting, but as a stimulus for another conversation.

### **Using writing to reflect jointly on what has happened**

To add yet another reflective layer to this story, it is worth highlighting that I used writing (journaling) to record and explore this episode. When Irene and I next met, in a café on London's South Bank, I read my scribbled notes out loud to her. This stimulated a further, more reflective conversation, revealing new insights: for example, it prompted Irene to say that she appreciated the way I had 'seized the moment', even though she had initially felt weary at the thought of prolonging our phone call that Friday afternoon; it also crystallised for me the importance of acknowledging a feeling of 'not knowing'; and finally, it moved me to make another slight change to the way I set out our proposed 'order of the day'. Following our café conversation, Irene forwarded the revised note to the relevant board member, who responded by saying he was satisfied with our suggestions.

Even that was not the end of the story. After Irene had seen the first draft of this article, we spoke about it on the phone. Below are some of the striking words she used to explain her own initial concerns about the board meeting:

*"My gut reaction was 'it'll be PowerPoint – shitloads of slides'. If they started with a presentation, sitting round the boardroom table, there would be little opportunity for reflection and conversation... " (Irene Roele)*

*She then offered some deeper reflections:*

*"I keep thinking of our conversation about the board meeting. It's been very anchoring. I've been having conversations with a number of companies and I've found myself thinking 'it's alright, this is useful, it's iterative' – by which I mean you go back over 'what did we say?' and that process helps sifting, filtering, coming up with new ideas and a shared understanding of what's needed. For me, it's about letting go – don't feel you're wasting time by talking." (Irene Roele)*

### **Testing my narrative with other colleagues**

I also sent my draft article to two further colleagues before it was finished, and their responses helped me to uncover aspects of my story that I was too close to see.

First, my co-editor on this anthology on 'writing futures', Bob Mackenzie, read my first draft and said he would be interested to know a bit more about what 'lessons' are being learned, and about how this relates to 'writing futures'. I recall my sinking feeling as I realised I needed to do more work on the article. I even suspected at first that Bob may have 'failed to see the point'. But his comments must have stirred a sense in me that the piece was unfinished and there was more to explore, because my next move was to show the draft to another close colleague, Theodore Taptiklis. Theodore sent me two emails in response, including the following paragraphs, worth quoting in full, as his thoughts were expressed so well and made a real difference to my writing:

#### **Email no.1 from Theodore Taptiklis**

What is tugging away at me here as I read your piece is something to do with the importance of 'unfinishedness' as fundamental to real collaboration. You mention this in passing but I wonder if you [might] make a little more of it.

... I am reminded of the enormous pressure of the background assumption that when we write it should be a self-contained, complete utterance, preferably with structure, beginning, middle and end. Same for the PowerPoint presentations. What a risk it seems to be to be half-baked, tentative, hesitant and (as you often are) self-correcting/editing! And yet, how invitational.

There is also, I think, a much bigger dimension to the same idea. That is the importance of articulating the beginning of something (a small noticing, an observation, but a real experience) without getting to an analysis, a conclusion, or, god forbid, an opinion! The further one advances down the conventional path of trying to demonstrate confidence and mastery, the less one invites real connection with others.

#### **Email no.2 from Theodore Taptiklis**

I think your piece is really about recontextualising the act of and purpose of writing. So it's quite a big idea, and you are only in a position to supply glimpses of possibilities. I think you are developing your earlier 'social life of a document' notion. Except that you are now embedding the writing within the reflection and the conversation. So the 'document' becomes somehow less visible but more influential at the same time.

I suppose that I share Bob's sense that the piece is still a bit underdone. But I'm not convinced it's about telling 'the rest of the story' so much as delving more deeply into what you have already written. How is conversation-entwined writing really different from the familiar stuff? And how does it influence the nature of the conversation? Can you draw inferences from the examples you have set out? Not to predict the future, but perhaps to point towards differences in attitude and conduct that are engendered? (And ultimately, more effective/productive collaboration?)

As I look at what my colleagues Irene, Bob and Theodore said and wrote after reading my draft, I am struck again by how useful narrative writing can be if one is prepared to do it collaboratively and iteratively. (It would have been so easy to get stuck in a less collaborative mode – e.g. circulating my draft only to Irene and asking her to agree to her name being mentioned.) I find myself increasingly interested in writing unfinished accounts and inviting others to reflect on them with me. By doing so, inevitably we risk feeling disappointed or defensive about their responses. I find one way to handle these feelings is to notice and accept them and then move on.

### **The story continues**

You may well be asking what then happened at the strategy meeting mentioned earlier. Recall that I wanted to test or witness just how 'coherent' or cohesive the board members really were around the emerging strategy. At an opportune moment, therefore, I gave each of them a large (A5) post-it note and invited them to write about how they had found themselves articulating the emerging strategic intent to people they encountered. The outcome of this exercise was both surprising and not surprising at the same time. As they read out what they had written, it became apparent that each person was preoccupied with a particular aspect of strategy that most affected their part of the business (finance, PR, HR, etc.). This prompted one member (the HR director), after a slight delay, to make a heartfelt request that members of the team do more to support one another.

Notice again that, in giving each person a post-it note, I was using writing for its particular qualities: it allowed each individual to express something before seeing what others had written; it also made it possible for each one to read out loud what they had written, correcting it as they did so, if they wished. I am pretty certain that it was the collective listening to these eight diverse accounts that helped the HR director to urge mutual support.

### **The future: opportunities to use writing in collaborative ways**

It now strikes me that this story has embedded in it many possibilities for the future of writing. My overriding wish is that people will become more aware of the different qualities of writing and conversation. One is not better than the other – they are just different. Indeed, I would go further than that – what I am trying to show is that, if writing and conversation are thoughtfully intertwined, human communication can become more fruitful and more inspiring.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity for the future is that people might use writing in more inviting, collaborative ways. This could mean, for example, thinking more carefully about when it is appropriate to produce a tidy, finished piece of writing (which will continue to have its place), and when it makes sense to write in a more spontaneous, inviting way. We might see more emails adopting a conversational form (many do already), but also start to see fewer emails substituting for conversations.

My colleague Theodore asked how conversation-entwined writing differs from much of the writing we encounter in organisations today. In my experience, it means taking more risks – e.g. being willing to send out a draft before it feels complete and finished. When I am writing in this way, I am conscious of wanting and anticipating a response, hoping that this will reveal perspectives that I hadn't dreamt of, that the person receiving it may add new colours to the tapestry of our connected thinking.

On some occasions, this approach to writing has caused upsets. A spontaneous email, intended as a conversational move, may look 'unprofessional' to readers schooled in the notion that being professional means 'knowing the answers'. And because I often view email as conversational, I am more inclined to send one out as my personal response to something, without first consulting colleagues to agree a 'consistent' point of view.

Perhaps more idealistically, I hope that, if people used writing and conversation in the creative, collaborative ways I am pointing to, they might spend less time on – or lose their appetite for – some of the ghastly writing habits we see in organisational life today. Imagine, for example, a world in which people use PowerPoint presentations to stimulate dialogue rather than kill it off. (Many of us have already come to the conclusion that PowerPoint is best used for images and photos.) Or imagine a time when people realise that dull and turgid meeting notes do not inspire action. In my view, we need to think of different, more creative ways of keeping momentum going from one meeting or conversation to the next.

Given what I have said so far, it will be no surprise that I view email, blogging, text messages and online chat as potential opportunities for people to practise writing in more collaborative, improvisational, conversational ways. In short, I welcome a future in which people use writing more thoughtfully. And this goes for all forms of organisational writing, old and new.

### **Acknowledgements**

A big thank you to Irene Roele, Bob MacKenzie and Theodore Taptiklis for their willingness to get entwined in conversation about this piece of writing.

### **Suggestions for further reading**

Donaldson, A. (2008). "Striking moments – how reflective writing can develop new ways of seeing and acting", *Organisations and People* vol.15, no. 1, pp: 22-27. This article provides an earlier example of experimenting with reflective, collaborative writing. Contact [alidonaldson@gmail.com](mailto:alidonaldson@gmail.com) for a pre-publication copy.

Donaldson, A. (2005): *Writing in organizational life: how a technology simultaneously forms and is formed by human interaction*. In Stacey, R. (2005): [\*Experiencing emergence in organizations\*](#). London: Routledge. In this chapter, I re-explored some of the thinking from my doctoral thesis – in particular, I pointed to certain organisational habits that are privileged by writing, such as planning, structured meetings, and abstract categorisation.

Ong, Walter J. (2002). [\*Orality and literacy\*](#). London: Routledge. (First published 1982 by Methuen & Co.) This classic book opened my eyes to how people who have grown up in a literate society can only with difficulty imagine what it would be like to live without writing and reading.

Shaw, Patricia (2002). [\*Changing conversations in organizations – a complexity approach to change\*](#), London: Routledge. Patricia Shaw's thinking and behaviour have helped to change the way I think about conversation, improvisation and writing.

Shotter, J. (in press). *Getting It: witness-thinking and the dialogical... in practice*. Cresswell, NJ: Hampton Press. See <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/> . John Shotter



takes great care to articulate what actually goes on in conversation, emphasising among other things its responsive, bodily nature.

Taptiklis, T. (2009). "Writing that connects", *Organisations & People*, vol. 16, no.2. This article (from the present anthology on 'writing futures') relates how Theodore Taptiklis has become interested in 'writing that speaks from personal experience in the workplace'.

*Alison Donaldson's has been an independent consultant for 20 years. Her earlier working life included spells with organisations as varied as McKinsey & Company, Which? magazine, and the International Institute of Management in Berlin. In 2003 she was awarded a Doctor of Management in Organisational Change. Today she is part of a small network of experienced consultants known as "a working alliance", who are helping people sharpen their leadership and influencing skills by noticing how change emerges in conversation.*

[alidonaldson@gmail.com](mailto:alidonaldson@gmail.com)