

Striking moments: how reflective writing can develop new ways of seeing and acting¹

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ABSTRACT:

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

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

Introduction: moments that change us

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

(Shotter in press: 60)

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

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reading and conversation to develop our thinking and practice and prepare ourselves for a joint future working opportunity.

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

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

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

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

An emerging ensemble

In summer 2007 my colleagues and I met up for two days at a farmhouse in France. There were four of us – the fifth had missed his plane and could only join

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

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

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

John

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

Theodore

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

Patricia

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

Alison

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

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

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

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

Later that afternoon, we had a second Skype call with Donald in Scotland, during which the four of us in France each read our piece out loud again, this time

without any discussion between each reading. Donald then responded, with feeling, in his melodious Scottish accent:

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

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

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

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

Donald

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

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

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

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

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

Reflections on the value of writing in organisational life

Human communication is never one-way. Always, it not only calls for response but is shaped in its very form and content by anticipated response.

(Ong 2002: 173-4)

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

My own research and practical experience have opened up for me the full potential of writing and reading. By studying a range of authors on communication

and literacy, I began to see the shortcomings of the ubiquitous ‘sender-receiver’ metaphor, which implies, for example, that documents ‘contain meaning’. This taken-for-granted way of talking about communication renders invisible the normal ambiguity and responsive nature of human interaction.

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

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

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

- *Focusing on ‘striking moments’*. The act of taking just a little time to reflect and write encourages people to notice what has struck them from a meeting, conversation or a day at work. Writing about ‘what strikes us’ can be liberating: we don’t have to stop for long to work out whether we are producing something systematic, comprehensive or knowledgeable. We simply take our experience seriously and try expressing it. Our words don’t ‘capture’

the experience, they explore it further, so we don't need to worry too much whether we are writing down the 'right' story.

- *Using writing to develop our thinking.* As we search for words to express what we recall, and elaborate on it, we cast light on impressions and experiences that might otherwise remain dim, or which we might quickly put behind us.
- *The reading aloud* of what we have written – and the listening – can enrich a conversation, allowing us to glimpse new ways of thinking, and new ways of relating to our colleagues.
- *Deepening relationships.* There is no guarantee that such an exercise will improve working relationships but in my experience the sharing of reflective writing can help people understand one another better.
- *Enabling us to 'go on together'.* The 'outcome' of a conversation or meeting does not have to be an action plan or a specific decision. Even without such tangible 'outputs', we have probably all experienced conversations that are satisfying and productive. The practice described here, of weaving informal writing and reading into a meeting, can potentially allow us to develop new ways of seeing and acting.

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

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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