Chapter 7[1]
Writing in organizational life: how a technology simultaneously forms and is formed by human interaction

Alison Donaldson

- In what sense are we conditioned by the technology of writing?
- Ripple effects of writing and print
- The value of literacy
- How is writing used in organizational life today?
- How a report turned out not to be the whole story – a narrative
- What is writing exactly?
- New writing technologies

One day I received a phone call from someone I knew (X) who occupies a senior position at a large UK health charity. She described to me a range of ways in which the charity was creating and funding a number of groups or 'communities' – of doctors, nurses and patients – with the ultimate objective of improving patient care. Each of these communities would meet regularly to share experiences and spread new ideas. These community-cultivating initiatives, X went on to explain, were a central part of the organization's 'medical strategy', and what she was now looking for was help in evaluating this strategy. Over the next few months we continued the conversation, involving a number of other people, exploring how this could be done. It soon became clear that what X had in mind was 'evaluation for learning' rather than 'evaluation for judgment', so we decided to drop the term 'evaluation' and adopt instead the phrase 'framework for learning'. I recall at some point probing to find out what 'learning framework' meant in concrete terms right now for the people in the room. X elaborated by saying that what they needed was 'a common language' so they could both understand what had been achieved and explain it clearly to other people. As we worked together over the subsequent months, the abstract concept 'learning framework' continued to evolve and take on specific meanings in each particular conversation.

My doctoral research had made me aware that abstract terms such as 'strategy' and 'framework' are characteristics of 'text-formed speech common in societies that have absorbed writing, writing technologies and literate ways of thinking. I am not criticizing X or her colleagues for using such terms (most educated people talk in text-formed speech at times). Rather, for me this story illustrates, first, the prevalence of writing-conditioned ways of thinking and talking in organizational life today; and second, the way in which we find ourselves needing to 'particularize' generalized concepts and reifications fostered by writing, in order to go on together.

---

[1] Published in Stacey, R. (2005): *Experiencing emergence in organizations: local interaction and the emergence of global pattern.* London: Routledge

There was an interesting further twist to this story: in a later conversation, X pointed out that she had used the term ‘strategy’ in order to gain acceptance of her plans from her Executive Board. It seems this was the kind of language they could relate to and take seriously. Yet many of the normal doctors, nurses and mangers involved with the charity did not understand what ‘the medical strategy’ meant in practice. So, over and over again, X had to explain and illustrate the abstract term to these people.

In Chapters 2 and 6 of this volume, Ralph Stacey, drawing on George Herbert Mead’s thinking, refers to “social objects”, which are “generalized tendencies, common to large numbers of people, to act in similar ways in similar situations”. The examples he gives for organizational life include organizations themselves (as collective identities).

As Stacey points out, social objects often emerge from the way we use technologies. Writing and printing, for example, paved the way for the emergence of social phenomena like bureaucracy, regulation, management by targets, armies of people sitting in front of computer screens all day, as well as widespread tendencies to use email for exchanges of information and opinion, and PowerPoint for presentations.

Further, we often employ the tools of writing to codify generalized tendencies or collective habits. The Ten Commandments was one of the earliest attempts. Written constitutions and statute books are further examples. More contemporary, organizational examples include vision and mission statements and strategic plans. Thus, writing technologies (writing, print and computers) have allowed us to fix words on paper, *as if* we were fixing the very patterns of behavior themselves.

But writing and print have gone even further, as I will argue in this chapter. There is considerable evidence that these technologies have fostered generalized, abstract forms of thinking. Terms like “strategy” and “culture” can seem very real in our imagination, despite Stacey’s reminder (see Chapter 2) that “The general is only to be found in the experience of the particular – it has no existence outside of it”. Indeed, people brought up in a literate society can conduct conversations about abstract, generalized concepts such as strategies and frameworks without necessarily referring to the particular interactions in which these generalizations become meaningful.

In what sense are we conditioned by the technology of writing?

As Norbert Elias (referring to transport) stated, a new technology can be understood as "an unplanned process", which may set in train a transformation that "reacts in turn upon the society which has produced it" (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998: 223, citing Elias, *Technization and Civilization*). Most people would recognize printing and computing as technologies, but it can also be argued that writing itself is a technology.

In his last extended work, *The Symbol Theory*, in which Elias explores the evolution and development of human communication, he devotes little attention specifically to writing (or reading), except to describe it as sound symbols in voiceless form, or as a way of replacing sound patterns with vision patterns (Elias 1991: 104). For him, the development of "learned language" (as opposed to the inborn language of animals) was the big breakthrough: "The human form of communication by means of a learned language represents a unique evolutionary innovation" (Elias, 1991: 50).

While this makes sense, many have argued that the development of writing and printing has been as transformative as the development of human languages. There was a flurry of publications in the early 1960s illuminating the role of writing in society by studying societies that did not have this particular technology. Eric Havelock, in his book *The Muse Learns to Write*, dates the "modern discovery of orality" to around 1963:

> Within the span of twelve months or less, from some time in 1962 to the spring of 1963, in three different countries – France, Britain, and the United States – there issued from the printing presses five publications by five authors who at the time when they wrote could not have been aware of any mutual relationship. The works in question were 'La Pensee Sauvage' (Levi-Strauss), 'The consequences of literacy' (Goody and Watt, an extended article), 'The Gutenberg Galaxy' (McLuhan), 'Animal Species and Evolution' (Mayr), and 'Preface to Plato' (Havelock, 1986: 25).

What these scholars were asking was: "What has it meant for societies and their cultures in the past to discard oral means of communication in favor of literate ones of various sorts?" and "What precisely is the relationship between the spoken word of today (or yesterday) and the written text?" (Havelock, 1986: 24).

Nearly 20 years later, in 1982, Walter J Ong published *Orality and Literacy*, a brilliant survey of the history of scholarship in this field. His work indicates that the technologies of writing and print have been essential ingredients in the development of modern society and science, and they have also introduced certain biases into the ways in which humans relate to one another. He argued that, growing up in a literate society, we are blind to the subtle influences of writing and printing on our way of life. I draw especially on the revised version of this classic, which appeared in 2002.

Before discussing Ong’s work, it is worth noting that technological developments such as writing, print and computing do not represent static or complete phenomena, but rather "unfinished processes" (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998: 226-7, citing Elias, *Technization and Civilization*). The twentieth century saw the introduction of a whole range of new communication media – radio, telephony, film, television, computers – and we can only begin to make sense of the ripples

that all this is sending through the patterns of human interaction (I touch on this again at the end of this chapter). First, however, let's start at the beginning – the invention of writing.

Ripple effects of writing and print

> Writing… initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist. (Ong, 2002: 81)

Walter J Ong traces the way in which literacy emerged out of orality (Ong 2002: 76): "Writing…, the technology which has shaped and powered the intellectual activity of modern man, was a very late development in human history… The first script, or true writing, that we know, was developed among the Sumerians in Mesopotamia only around the year 3500 BC." (ibid: 82-3). Ong warns that "Fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like, that is, a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing", where no-one has ever "looked up" anything (ibid: 31). He goes on to demonstrate that "more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness." (Ong 2002*:* 77).

In the *Phaedrus,* Plato (427?- 347 BC) has his teacher, Socrates (469?-399 BC), who was mostly non-literate (Abram 1996: 109), say that writing is "inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can only be in the mind" (Ong 2002: 78). Over the last two thousand years, similarly strong objections have been voiced about the later technologies of printing (generally dated back to the invention of alphabetic letterpress print in fifteenth century Europe) and computers.

So, what effect have writing and print had on the patterns of human relating? Drawing on Ong, Elias, and other authors, below I pull together some influences of literacy and printing under six themes.

Theme 1: abstract and logical

> Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. (Ong 2002: 43).

Abstract thinking is of course possible in spoken language. For example, the term "tree" refers to a concept which is not any particular tree. George Herbert Mead calls such concepts "universals" and even states that "thinking takes place in universals." (Mead 1934: 88). Elias too notes that language has made abstraction, or "synthesis" as he calls it, possible. However, there are levels of synthesis (Elias 1991: 45) or degrees of abstraction (Ong 2002: 49), and writing has enabled humans to perform elaborate abstract thinking. While Elias does not attribute the capacity for high levels of abstraction to literacy, Ong does identify such a link.

There is considerable literature, he points out, indicating that oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational contexts, anchored in the human lifeworld. For example, in A J Luria's work *Cognitive development: its cultural and social foundations,* Luria's Russian illiterate (oral) subjects never dealt with abstract circles, but instead called them plate, sieve, bucket, watch or moon (Ong 2002: 50).

Persons who have interiorized writing, in contrast, "organize, to varying degrees, even their oral expression in thought patterns and verbal patterns that they would not know of unless they could write" (Ong 2002: 56). Luria's work suggested that "an oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or … articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought" (Ong 2002: 54-5).

Formal logic, in particular, was the invention of Greek culture "after it had interiorized the technology of alphabetic writing" (Ong 2002: 52). Luria's oral subjects appeared not to operate with formal deductive procedures at all and seemed to find such procedures uninteresting. For example, when presented with the syllogism: *In the far north, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the far north and there is always snow there. What color are the bears?,* a typical response was "I don't know. I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others… Each locality has its own animals." (ibid: 52).

The language of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century is "rich in confused and confusing symbols of synthesis at a very high level" (Elias 1991: 45). In organizational life today, not only do we refer to invisible, intangible concepts such as "culture", but once they are written down, they can be read by somebody who has never met us and may have no direct experience of the culture in question.

David Abram, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, argues specifically that writing has been a major factor in distancing humans from the "more than human world". Around Plato's lifetime (c. 400 BC), Greece was at the threshold between oral and written culture. It was in this period, Abram suggests, that the "sensuous, mimetic, profoundly embodied style of consciousness proper to orality gave way to the more detached abstract mode of thinking engendered by alphabetic literacy" (Abram 1996: 109). For example, prior to the spread of writing, "ethical qualities like 'virtue', 'justice', and 'temperance' were thoroughly entwined with the specific situations in which those qualities were exhibited." (ibid: 110). As soon as such concepts were recorded in writing, they acquired an autonomy and permanence hitherto unknown. They were "promoted to a new realm independent of the flux of ordinary experience" (ibid: 111). Abstraction became a way of thinking and speaking as well as writing, maintains Abram. This ability to deal with abstract concepts has contributed enormously to scientific and technological progress. Large and complex organizations would be impossible without written

communication. Indeed, the Collins Concise Dictionary reveals that the origin of the French word "bureau" was a type of cloth used for covering desks. A desk is a writing surface, reflecting strong links between the written word and the evolution of large bureaucracies.

More than two thousand years after Plato, our ability to interact with our own signs in abstraction from our earthly surroundings has "blossomed into a vast cognitive realm, a horizonless expanse of virtual interactions" (Abram 1996: 265). We inhabit a "global field of information". But, as we sit at our computers "we do not notice that the chorus of frogs by the nearby stream has dwindled, this year, to a solitary voice, and that the song sparrows no longer return to the trees" (ibid: 266).

Leonard Shlain is another author who addresses the shadow sides of writing (Shlain 1998). He traces the history of writing from the cuneiform signs used in ancient Mesopotamia and hieroglyphs in ancient Egypt, through the invention of the phonetic alphabet (probably by ancient Semites in the Sinai peninsula), and its subsequent spread (via Phoenician traders) to the ancient Greeks and western civilization as a whole. The phonetic alphabet (used today by so many languages, including English and other European ones) was a revolutionary invention, using a mere 26 symbols (give or take a few) to represent visually the whole range of sounds emitted in human speech, and enabling societies to “elevate the written word at the expense of the image” (Shlain 1998: 7). The phonetic alphabet, Shlain goes on to argue, has fostered abstract, left-brained ways of thinking (he is a brain surgeon as well as an author), and it was used to help establish all three patriarchal, monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Indeed, writing with abstract symbols (letters) spread from the Middle East outwards at a time when the many goddess images of the ancient world were vanishing. Tellingly, the first two of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses, according to the Bible, addressed monotheism and image respectively: 1. “I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me”; and 2. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Shlain 1998: 82, citing Exodus from the Old Testament).

> Each monotheistic religion features an imageless Father deity whose authority shines through His revealed Word, sanctified in its written form. Conceiving of a deity who has no concrete image prepares the way for the kind of abstract thinking that inevitably leads to law codes, dualistic philosophy, and objective science, the signature triad of Western culture. (Shlain 1998: 7)

Theme 2: precise and sparse

Writing also fosters precision. There is more than one reason for this. First, the reader is usually absent when we write, so we have to work harder to make

ourselves understood: "To make yourself clear without gesture, without facial expression, without intonation, without a real hearer, you have to foresee circumspectly all possible meanings a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation, and you have to make your language work so as to come clear all by itself, with no existential context." (Ong 2002: 103). Second, writing, unlike speaking, allows us to change or erase what we have just written before the reader sees it. Today, with word processing, this is more true than ever.

Elias too points to precision, again attributing this capacity to human language in general, not writing. One of the most pronounced advantages of human language over animal communication, he writes, is the "relatively high precision of the information communicated from person to person" (Elias 1991: 93). I would add that this is even more true of writing, which gives the author time to work out exactly what he or she wants to write, with added precision through grammar, punctuation, order, layout, and so on. This remains true even if the precision is lost on the reader, who always interprets or makes sense in his or her own way.

Similarly, writing and editing are conducive to what Ong calls "sparse linearity" (using "linear" in the sense of non-discursive). Text can afford to be sparse because the reader can always go back to retrieve context and retrace the train of thought. In a primary oral culture – where an oral utterance "has vanished as soon as it is uttered" (Ong 2002: 39) – redundancy is common, offering the listener an opportunity to catch something next time round.

Theme 3: distanced and introspective

Human language, writes Elias, creates a "comparatively high capacity for distancing oneself from one's own momentary situation. One can speak of the moon even if it is not visible, or a small herd of buffaloes not yet in sight" (Elias 1991: 54). Similarly, "Language has its origins in the face-to-face situation, but can be readily detached from it." (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 52). Literacy, I would add, facilitates distance even more. "Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity', in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing" (Ong 2002: 45). When we write we are taking time, at a temporal distance, to reflect on past (or future) events. Literature as an art depends on "the human ability to imagine things which do not exist, events which do not occur and to communicate about them by means of appropriate symbols" (Elias 1991: 72).

On a simple level, writing and reading are usually solitary activities. It is easy to see this in organizations today: in meetings, for example, when people are required to read a handout or a text slide on a screen, "the unity of the group vanishes as each person enters into his or her private lifeworld" (Ong 2002: 68). Ong was describing a school class, but his words fit the organizational context perfectly. In my own experience, the solitary nature of writing has been both a pleasure and a frustration.

Theme 4: visible and quantifiable

Writing initiated a shift from "hearing dominance" to "sight dominance". This was a profound change. "… sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permanence', by the time I get to the '-nence', the 'perma-' is gone" (Ong 2002: 31-2). In contrast, while vision can register motion, it can also register immobility. Indeed it even favors immobility (ibid).

Print continued the trend from sound to vision. "Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events… words tend rather to be assimilated to things, 'out there' on a flat surface." (ibid: 32-3). Print technology, agrees Lanham, encourages the Platonic view that there is "a 'reality' which is somehow or another really out there" (Lanham 1993: 214). This may in turn have contributed to the sense of meaning having an existence outside of any specific interaction.

Maps are a particularly interesting example of the shift to visual associated with printing. "Only after print and the extensive experience with maps that print implemented would human beings, when they thought about the cosmos or universe or 'world', think primarily of something laid out before their eyes, as in a modern printed atlas" (Ong 2002: 72). Many habits of today's organizational life – such as organization charts, analytical frameworks and systems thinking – can be thought of as extensions of this map perspective.

Some of the earliest forms of writing preserved were lists, tables and accounts – all visual items, whereas orality "knows no lists or charts or figures." (Ong 2002: 97). Today, with word processing and PowerPoint presentations, we see a burgeoning of lists, bullet points, tables, charts and statistics. Again, these can be thought of as continuing a trend first made possible by writing and reinforced by printing. Calendars (and thus precise knowledge of date) are a further example.

Arguably all these visual forms born of writing and print, and intensified by computing, foster the emphasis in today's organizations on performance measurement and management.

Ong’s argument that alphabetic writing marked a shift from the auditory to the visual may appear to contradict Shlain’s view that writing elevated the written word over image. But on closer inspection there is no real contradiction: the images Ong was talking about were precisely the 26 abstract symbols of the alphabet, not images of gods or goddesses or anything else.

Theme 5: recorded, fixed and repeatable

> Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space. (Ong 2002: 119).

This shift from sound to visual has many consequences. Take words: oral cultures have no dictionaries, so the meaning of each word is controlled by "the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now" (Ong 2002: 46). "Word meanings come continually out of the present, though past meanings of course have shaped the present meaning in many and varied ways, no longer recognized." (Ong 2002: 47). Print, on the other hand, "encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized." (Ong 2002: 129). A printed text can also be reproduced: "The message of … typography is primarily that of repeatability." (McLuhan 1964: 173).

The shift from oral to visual, and especially the impact of printing, is captured well by Dean Walker, paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan (Walker 1968: 70):

> Western man's emphasis on the visual, especially after the invention of printing, changed him completely... Before print, communicating involved him in living relationships with other people. Even in manuscript culture, writings were normally read slowly and laboriously aloud. But the invention of the printed, reproducible book let man into a new private world. Quietly and alone he could absorb the book's contents. His earlier communal consciousness and participation was replaced by a feeling of privacy, withdrawal, self-containment. Concepts such as freedom began to build. He put his faith into detached analytical knowledge.

Moreover, the "fixity" of documents (Brown & Duguid 2000) and repeatability of print seem to have influenced how we remember. Oral cultures had their own ways of remembering. For example, Homer's poetry (now thought by most scholars to have been created hundreds of years before it was written down) was full of verbal formulae arranged in a metrical way:

> In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration. (Ong 2002: 23)

Thus, poems and history were retold over and over and remained enduring yet flexible. Sometimes melody helped the poet, and many traditional stories featured memorable larger-than-life characters.

Plato pointed to a link between writing and memory in the *Phaedrus.* The Egyptian king Thamus refuses the gift of writing offered to him by the god Thoth, commenting:

> If men learn [writing], it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. (Abram 1997: 113)

Even at the end of the twentieth century, the Aboriginal Australians evidently used their "Dreaming" songs as an *auditory* memory tool to enable them to recall viable routes through harsh terrain, while the landscape itself provided a *visual* mnemonic for remembering the stories (Abram 1997: 175).

In organizations nowadays people rely on note-taking and written records to spare themselves the effort of remembering. This reliance on the written word – something fixed and repeatable – may be partly responsible for the taken-for-granted way of describing memory as a store from which we retrieve things called memories. It is then only a small step to asserting that our minds have a limited capacity for receiving and storing information, as some writers have claimed (Shannon & Weaver 1949; Miller 1956; Minto 1987).

Theme 6: prone to abstract categorization

Luria's research suggested that categorical thinking is characteristic of literate peoples, whereas his non-literates thought in situational patterns. They were convinced that categorical thinking was "not important, uninteresting, trivializing" (Ong 2002, page 52):

> Subjects were presented with drawings of four objects… and were asked to group together those that were similar or could be placed in one group or designated by one word. One series consisted of drawings of the objects hammer, saw, log, hatchet. Illiterate subjects consistently thought of the group not in categorical terms (three tools, the log not a tool) but in terms of practical situations – 'situational thinking'… If you are a workman with tools and see a log, you think of applying the tool to it, not of keeping the tool away from what it was made for – in some weird intellectual game. A 25-year-old illiterate peasant: 'They're all alike. The saw will saw the log and the hatchet will chop it into small pieces. If one of these has to go, I'd throw out the hatchet. It doesn't do as good a job as a saw'. (Ong, 2002, page 51).

Thus, writing particularly seems to favor abstract, analytical classification. While spoken language itself encourages us to classify or distinguish simply by naming, the ability to write our categories down and then return to them again and again has fostered abstract classification and given our categories an appearance of permanence.

The value of literacy

Ong describes writing as "artificial" (i.e. created by humans), but is careful to add that this is not to condemn it but to praise it. "Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, it is utterly invaluable" (Ong 2002: 81).

It is worth distinguishing between two broad uses of writing: over the ages it has been used as a tool for organizing, on the one hand, but also as a method for reflection, learning – and of course literature.

A tool for organizing

“Writing was born of the urge to get organized. There's evidence to suggest that it evolved first as a memory aid, primarily for record-keeping and accounting purposes"(Poor 1992: 87), states one of the many books on how to write effectively in the corporate world. The reason why writing is such an effective tool for these purposes really boils down to one word: "list".

> Comparative studies of literate and nonliterate societies … show that although narratives exist in both oral and literate cultures, three forms of text became possible only due to the existence of script: tables, lists, and recipes. (Czarniawska 1998: 8)

It is safe to predict that writing will always continue to have many functions: some will be concerned with auditing, recording, planning, contracting, measuring and other transactions. But writing, if used intelligently, can act as a tool for learning in organizational life.

Facilitating reflection and learning

The value of literacy for learning rests on a range of characteristics. As we have seen, writing enables the author to develop precise and elaborate abstract thinking, essential to much of modern knowledge. Also, writing enables us to make our thinking visible and thus available for further reflection and interaction. It also allows us to “capture” stories and accounts that might otherwise be transient, overcoming some of the limitations of time and space. All these features increase our ability to share our thinking even with those we will never meet. Without any doubt, literacy has been indispensable in helping humans share knowledge and pass on learning from one generation to another.

Ong pointed out that the advantages of written over spoken communication have paradoxical consequences:

> The deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being

> resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers. (Ong 2002: 80).

While Elias claims this knowledge-transmitting benefit for human language *per se* (Elias 1991: 36), I would argue that not just language, but writing and print (and now computers and the internet) have made and will continue to make a huge contribution to learning, including inter-generational learning. Although knowledge defined as a relational process cannot be stored (Stacey 2001), human beings can use stored symbols, in the form of books, web sites, audiotapes, videotapes and other artifacts, both to learn – which can be defined as developing new patterns of thinking – and to stimulate learning (to educate).

When we write we don't just offer our thinking to the reader. We also develop our own thinking. Writing not only forces us to articulate and organize our thoughts, it also facilitates further reflection. Abram points out that, when we started writing down symbols (using the phonetic alphabet in the case of ancient Greek, English and other European languages), we were able to "capture" our words in visible and fixed form, and this allowed us to see – and thus reflect on – our words in a way that was not possible before. "The scribe, or author, could now begin to dialogue with his own visible inscriptions, viewing and responding to his own words even as he wrote them down." (Abram 1996: 107).

There is a striking parallel with Mead's thinking. Mead argued that the vocal symbol, i.e. spoken language, enabled us to develop self-conscious thinking. When we speak, we can hear what we say. This enables us to respond to our own gestures as we speak, which in turn enables us to think or reflect – i.e. to conduct a continuous silent conversation or role play. Abram's observation similarly makes clear that, when humans started to write, we became able to enter a dialogue with our own written words. This makes writing and reading exceptionally complex and rich processes. We can even enter into dialogue with the words of Plato and Aristotle, who lived more than two thousand years ago. In short, writing is not only a way of recording, listing, accounting and measuring. It can also be used to stimulate learning and sense making.

How is writing used in organizational life today?

As I have reflected on the way in which we use writing in organizational life today, I have become convinced that most people use it to control, plan and organize. Others view it primarily as a difficult chore. Few seem to use it fully for learning.

In my experience of organizations today, written communication often distances people from one another. Just as Abram argues that the world of letters, numbers and texts has contributed to the eclipsing of *nature* (ibid: 123), I would argue that, in today's large organizations, the written word with its spin-offs (presentations,

databases, analytical categories, measurement systems, etcetera) distracts people from local, bodily human interaction in the living present.

An incident that occurred during my doctoral research laid bare the distancing potential of writing technology: a woman in an organization where I was working was struggling with a database that was supposed to record and systematize the staff appraisal process. Yet about two yards from her desk sat another woman at her own computer, who had told me earlier how de-motivating she had found the appraisal meeting with her manager. This seemed a sad example of the focus on documents or tools taking people's time and attention away from talking directly about their experience.

Also striking was an article that appeared in the Financial Times on 16 April 2003 headed "Whitehall 'fails to use' research costing £1.4bn a year". A report by the National Audit Office (an independent body that scrutinizes public spending in the UK) had revealed problems in ensuring that, once government-funded research was done, policymakers were made aware of it and then used it. "There are few knowledge transfer mechanisms in place to ensure effective communication and dissemination," said the NAO report. To me, this problem seemed likely to be a symptom of the over-reliance on written reports as a tool for changing behavior. The quotation also raises questions about how abstract generalized terms such as "knowledge-transfer mechanisms" or "dissemination" might be particularized or put into practice.

I would like to offer a number of further examples of how our use of writing privileges certain forms of participation.

Writing privileges planning over improvisation and engagement

I was helping a major UK insurance company plan how to communicate some IT changes within the organization, which included several thousand employees. I was struck by the sheer amount of time (about four weeks) it took to draw up a "communication strategy", which involved going through every "stakeholder group" we could think of and asking ourselves how they would be affected by the changes, what their perspective might be, how we could involve them, and so on. I recall walking towards the office one day thinking what a military-like procedure this seemed, and yet I had to admit to myself that it was probably indispensable in such a large organization. We had to write the information down in order to be more sure of including every group that mattered. And the process of articulating and discussing the needs of the stakeholder groups forced the team to give them some thought. Yet I couldn't help noticing at the same time that the climate was very inhospitable, full of secrecy, distrust and personal criticism, with everyone apparently glued to a computer screen, and nowhere to go for a proper conversation (except the local café outside the building).

In the same organization, there was a project team member who seemed to spend all his time updating a project plan. Every time he saw me he would ask me if I had any new “milestones” he could enter into his computer. Again, I found myself wondering if this was a good use of his time. On one occasion, out of this person's earshot, I heard a colleague humorously cursing all the documentation of procedures he was required to do for the same project.

If writing encourages planning, this can be at the expense of improvisation (by which I do not mean “muddling through” but being present and ready to act into each human encounter). As musical improviser, Derek Bailey, writes:

> … improvisation embraces, even celebrates, music's essentially ephemeral nature. For many of the people involved in it, one of the enduring attractions of improvisation is its momentary existence: the absence of a residual document. (Bailey, 1992)

Writing privileges structured meetings over free-flowing conversations

Some time ago, I co-hosted a day of collaborative inquiry with a group of colleagues at my house. The invitation was to explore structure and improvisation in conversation. Instead of sending round an agenda, we simply emailed a selection of potentially interested people, posing a question that we hoped might spark their interest. Ironically and not surprisingly, a discussion immediately arose about whether and how we should "organize" a day devoted to improvisation and structure. I realized that one option would be to write an agenda for the day, indicating what we would talk about when, which "exercises" we might do, and so on. Instead we continued the pre-conversation, by phone and email, which helped to develop themes that later influenced what we talked about on the day. In the end, the only written "agenda" that was necessary was to co-ordinate, and perhaps allay anxiety, in the form of an email confirming the date, starting time and directions to my house.

With this experience in mind, I was struck by some of Ong’s words (distinguishing between the “primary orality” of societies that have never used writing and the “secondary orality” that we are experiencing today thanks to telephone, television and multimedia computers). The new, electronic media, he wrote, foster "a new, self-consciously informal style" (Ong 2002: 133) where:

> "primary orality promotes spontaneity because the analytic reflectiveness implemented by writing is unavailable, secondary orality promotes spontaneity because through analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing. We plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous." (Ong 2002: 134).

Thus, for me the preparation for this day of inquiry was an exercise in thinking carefully about how best to use the written word as a form of preparation. Given

that a written agenda seemed inappropriate, but we did want a pre-conversation, we had a choice between email and telephone. An inclusive exchange was most feasible by email (which could be sent to everyone in the group, and didn't need scheduling like, say, a teleconference), though I also continued one-to-one phone calls with some members of the group. Email even made it easy to keep involving two people who were interested in the topic but could not make it on the day. I copied them into the continuing email conversation, and for some time they continued to contribute. The email exchanges also generated suggestions about further people, not known to me or my co-host, who were interested in participating. One person who did not participate actively in the email conversation decided – after I had asked her on the phone what she thought of it – to circulate a note saying that she preferred first to meet people face-to-face.

My doctoral study with the University of Hertfordshire provided another example of how a relatively unstructured, free-flowing meeting could produce “results”. When my “learning set” (i.e. supervision group) met, we usually spent two whole days together without any written agenda, though of course the need to make progress with our thesis-writing gave us some focus. On the first morning we often just continued the conversation from breakfast for a good hour before anybody attempted to steer us towards the "business". Our supervisor also expressed a wish to avoid mechanical turn-taking – e.g. by going through each person's draft paper strictly in turn and for a set length of time. Accordingly, we followed the interest and energy of the participants, while staying conscious that everybody needed sufficient time to talk in depth about their work. The comparison between learning set and normal organizational meetings made me more aware of the anxiety about structure and results that so many of my clients express. As my own anxiety about structure or productivity in meetings subsided, I sensed that I was freeing myself from the need for plans that my own writing and print bias had fostered in me.

Writing privileges abstract categorization over direct experience

The habit of abstract categorization can be seen in the many tools and "frameworks" circulating in the organizational world. Examples include two-by-two matrices, the McKinsey "7 S" framework (for analyzing organizations), as well as psychological tools such as learning styles and personality types. While I would argue that this categorizing habit has been fostered by writing, this is not the only reason why people persist with it. For example, I have heard consultants from the big consulting firms say they need analytical frameworks so that inexperienced consultants "know what to do" when dealing with senior executives.

At a recent conference on storytelling in organizations I was a little disappointed to discover that the two days were mainly devoted to platform speeches in which the expert on storytelling would tell us that there are X main forms of organizational story, or that a narrative must contain Y key elements. Harvard Business Review articles typically tell the reader there are three (or five or seven) key steps needed to solve any particular problem. For example, in the May 2004

issue, Steve Denning, writing about storytelling in organizations, distinguished seven types of organizational stories, recommending that leaders and managers use the appropriate narrative to achieve the results they are after.

These tools, classifications and golden rules focus our attention on certain aspects of our experience. In the case of Myers Briggs, we focus on whether somebody is an ENTJ or an ISFP, rather than noticing how their difference is manifest now in our current interaction. The tools may create a scientific impression (the Myers Briggs indicator was developed from some of Jung's thinking) and give people a license to talk about personal differences in an apparently objective way. However, they can distract us from noticing what is occurring between people in the moment, observing, for example, non-verbal communication, and also the way in which we mutually constrain ourselves in what we say.

Additionally, I believe there is a more insidious effect of all these tools, frameworks and step-by-step techniques. They encourage us to think we can only understand or manage a situation if we have the right model or framework. We do not trust ourselves simply to talk, listen and pay attention to our experience. Just engaging with people in ordinary conversation, noticing what a complex process this actually is, is not considered sufficient. (I write with feeling on this because it has taken me years to recognize how I have felt disempowered by all the techniques I was not familiar with.)

Writing privileges propositional over narrative forms of communication

Once, after my colleague and I had started working for the health charity mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we were waiting to interview someone in the organization as part of our "learning framework" project. I recall that I was eager to invite this person to give us her account of working with the medical strategy, whereas my colleague was more keen to use the interview to identify "recipes" for the future. My thinking was that general principles and recipes represent a writing-conditioned approach – nothing wrong with that in itself. However, the potential drawback is that, first, the past is not necessarily a guide to the future and, second, some people resist recipes about how they should behave. Narrative on the other hand leaves listeners or readers more room to make sense in diverse ways. And by asking an interviewee for specific stories and examples, one creates an opportunity to explore with them the particular interactions out of which generalized lessons emerge. After some discussion, my colleague and I agreed that we would look to develop a combination of story and recipe, in the expectation that this would allow us to cater for a range of needs.

When looking at human language, it is helpful to distinguish between abstract form (e.g. generalizations, principles, theories, propositions) and narrative form (in the sense of stories connecting specific past, present or even future events in order to make sense of them). In organizational writing and business books today, the propositional (often prescriptive) form is dominant. Undoubtedly

abstract/propositional writing has its place – for example, in order to reach a “point of view” (however temporary and subject to further evolution) we have to abstract and thus decontextualize.

On the other hand, narrative has many qualities that are absent in abstract forms of communication. It can retain context, history and non-linearity, and can arguably therefore better reflect "the unavoidable complexities of concrete human experience" (Toulmin 1990: 201). This makes it particularly suited to “teaching” situations, since human learning is contextual. A narrative can also "resonate" for the reader, meaning that readers tend to recognize patterns and connections from their own past experience, and often to learn from the comparison. This quality of narrative rests strongly on the way humans think in patterns of association and can compare one pattern with another – hence our quick grasp of analogy and metaphor. And narrative allows people to select, fill in meaning and draw their own lessons, and to make sense of what they read or hear. It doesn't impose a single moral or answer on the listener/reader, but leaves them freedom to associate and connect and conclude.

There is overwhelming evidence that narrative is a natural and very old form in human thinking and communication. Very young children can understand complex matters presented as stories when their powers of comprehending general concepts are almost non-existent . We experience the events in our life as connected and occurring over time, we dream in stories, we spend huge amounts of time devouring stories in the form of films, novels, television, etc., and we tell each other stories (i.e. give accounts) every day at work and at home and in the local shops. Research has also shown that oral societies use narrative to remember, as in the case of the Aboriginal Australians, mentioned earlier.

Writing privileges written record over memory and conversation

I have come to think that the practice of recording and "capturing" the "outputs" of a conversation on a flipchart or in a meeting note has less value than commonly supposed.

Flipcharts are a useful informal medium, which we can use, for example, to explain something that is otherwise highly conceptual and difficult to grasp. The conventional wisdom seems to be that taking notes in a meeting in this way helps focus participants' attention, reassures them that their points are being heard and registered, and appeals to those with visual learning styles. All of these arguments have some merit. However, I have recently become acutely aware of just how distracting the flipchart habit, so common in organizational meetings, can be, and how it diverts energy away from the direct face-to-face interaction. Besides, bullet points recorded on flip charts and dutifully typed up invariably seem lifeless after the heat has gone out of them. The context has changed and the transient meaning that emerged in the meeting has become elusive.

I recall how one manager, responsible for buildings and facilities in a large organization, was running a meeting in which he was supposed to be collecting suggestions from staff. Every time somebody made a suggestion, he made a note on a pad on the table in front of him, saying "I'll take that away". In effect, he gave himself a lengthy to-do list which he would never act upon.

In a contrasting example, once I worked with a group of six 60-something about-to-retire executive coaches, who had been asked by their younger colleagues to share some of their knowledge or wisdom before leaving the firm for good. As a writer and consultant, it would have been easy for me to suggest interviewing each of the six "wise men" and writing case studies to be put on a database for colleagues to consult. That's not what we did. I was aware of the risk that few people would read written accounts, and I was eager to explore face-to-face storytelling as a form of "knowledge sharing". So what we agreed was that initially I would conduct conversations with each of the six coaches to draw out stories from their lives and work. In two cases I invited in another of their colleagues, to give him an opportunity to participate and listen – otherwise there was a danger that only two people (the coach and me) would learn anything.

One of the most striking aspects of this process was how easy it was to get some of the men to tell colorful coaching stories, but how hard it was with the others, who seemed to feel compelled to abstract key principles from their experience. I encouraged the stories, with all the context, humor and personality that can get lost when you abstract. We ended up with 24 written stories, based on the conversations. Two members of the group later added these stories to a database of coaching tools and techniques, with a handy index allowing someone with a particular coaching issue to find both a technique and a relevant story.

However, we also got together face-to-face as a group, at which point we agreed that the most important lesson we had learnt was the value of taking time to have these kinds of learning/storytelling conversations. They resolved next to "do an Alison" and conduct similar conversations with their younger colleagues, but this time with a twist: they invited their colleagues to tell the stories themselves. They also took a half-day slot at a conference of the whole firm to share their experience of storytelling with their colleagues, and to urge them to make it an organizational habit.

Temptation to focus on the tools of communication rather than human relationships

When we focus our attention on reports, plans, presentations, databases and other “tools of communication” (Stacey 2001), we risk losing sight of the quality (or poverty) of our working relationships. In the following narrative I explore a situation where a report was the immediate focus of attention, but turned out to be just part of a far more complex relational picture or process.

How a report turned out not to be the whole story – a narrative

I was asked by a client, director of communications for a major international company, if I could help her new deputy write a report for the Chief Executive (CEO). I went along for an initial conversation with the deputy, whom I will call Jo. She felt that, despite many years of experience in PR and press relations, she was ill-equipped with the skills needed to create what she referred to as a "business report".

I remember at one point asking Jo what "business report" meant to her and she said she associated it with something worthy, loaded with detail, based on financial certainty, probably with graphs and an appendix of some kind.

It transpired that this particular report was to be about the organization's internal marketing services (e.g. events, market research) – a topic that was not part of her normal area of work. When I asked her why the CEO had nonetheless asked her to write it, she quoted him as saying "it doesn't matter if everyone ends up hating Jo".

By now she was clearly feeling guilty about the fact that, although she had done a good deal of research, she had not yet produced a draft. The CEO had asked for it some months ago and recently enquired about its progress. Jo talked about the CEO being, in Myers Briggs terms, an "ISTP", whereas she was an "ENTP". This way of classifying a human being, so popular in organizations, didn't seem to help her much in deciding what to do next. I already had some acquaintance with the CEO and had the impression he was not the easiest person to please. I also discovered later that Jo's boss was concerned about Jo's relationship with the CEO.

So already I could see that the task of coaching Jo in how to present information in a report was only a part of the whole story. It seemed to me that the relationships between Jo, the CEO and the rest of the organization were far more significant.

Right now, however, it made sense for us to focus on what Jo could do next. She told me she wanted to spend part of the approaching weekend gathering her initial thoughts, so she could present them to the CEO the following week and get his reactions. She wanted to send me the report once she had written it, but I suggested she and I meet at the beginning of the week, so she could bounce her thoughts off me before approaching the CEO. In other words, I was suggesting we view the process of writing as just that – a process, in which she formulates something, gauges reactions, then takes the next step – rather than planning the entire report on her own in advance.

So Jo and I met again the following week, as I had suggested, to talk through her initial thoughts. As we sat together in the canteen, she showed me her preliminary draft, which followed the common, rather dull headings of purpose, methodology, findings, and recommendations. I suggested what I thought would be a better

structure, which she adopted readily. Essentially, her next draft retained the introductory text about the purpose of the review and the number of people involved, and then launched into five main themes – which were all suggestions to the CEO about what the organization might do next in this area. My sense was that the CEO would appreciate seeing straightaway some ideas about where he might focus his attention. The methodology would sit best at the end of the report where he could refer to it if he wanted.

During my conversations with Jo, I found myself interested not just in the task of writing a report but also in the relationship difficulties she was having. The report we had been asked to work on became just one strand in a complex weave of relationships, motives and meanings – the "whole story". Sadly – despite Jo's feeling that her meeting with the CEO went well – I heard from her boss shortly afterwards that the CEO's opinion had not changed for the better. Jo had been hired because she was thought to have the skills for the job, but had then found herself in a relationship context in which she could not succeed. This illustrates for me how both the skill of writing and the meaning of a report are highly dependent on the relationships and interactions around the text.

What is writing exactly?

We have seen in this chapter much evidence that those of us who live in literate societies are conditioned by writing technologies. Above all, writing has fostered elaborate abstract, generalized ways of thinking and even speaking, and it has privileged certain habits in organizational life. In order to understand more fully the way we use writing technologies in organizations today, it helps to reflect on what actually happens when we write. What goes on in the writer's mind? How does the reader respond? What, if anything, passes between them? What and where is meaning?

Sending and receiving messages

When people talk about communication in organizational life, they almost always use sender-receiver terminology. A "sender" sends a "message" to a "receiver". (The root of the word "message" is the Latin *mittere*, to send.) And, depending on the quality of the communication channel and the amount of "noise", the message either arrives intact or with something missing. Thus we say things like "they didn't get the message", or "the statement contained bad news", or -we talk about "information flows".

Metaphors tend to stimulate a range of associations in people's minds, sometimes referred to as "entailments" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). If we examine the entailments of the sender-receiver metaphor, we discover that it focuses our attention on some aspects of communication while overlooking others. It leads us to think (consciously or unconsciously) of ideas (or meaning) as objects, communication as sending, and words and documents (and even human beings) as

containers, conduits or channels. Thus, we talk about capturing, transferring and stealing ideas; and we view documents as having "content". The metaphor locates meaning in the word or the document.

The implicit comparison is with a postal service, telegraphy, telecommunication, radio transmission, or possibly computer code. It is worth looking at what is really being compared. For example: a postal service delivers something physical – a letter or a parcel – which is supposed to remain intact during its transport and delivery; a radio transmission is a technical process, whose quality can be improved in various ways, such as making the signal stronger or louder. This does not do justice to the complexity of human communication.

If those are some of the entailments of the sender-receiver metaphor, what does it play down or distract our attention away from? *Ambiguity*, for one, has no place in sender-receiver language. Either the message arrives or it doesn't. If it becomes scrambled, it is the fault of the sender, or noise, or a poor communication channel, or misinterpretation by the receiver.

Long before today's computers were invented, humans were physically sending written messages to one another. Ong argues convincingly, as we have seen, that we are conditioned by literacy or writing (he calls it "chirographic conditioning"). He also gives this as the reason for our willingness to live with what he calls the "media model of communication" (Ong 2002: 173). He points out that literate cultures regard speech as informational rather than performance-oriented (unlike oral societies). Further, "the written text appears *prima facie* to be a one-way informational street, for no real recipient (reader, hearer) is present when the texts come into being." (ibid: 174).

Legacy of information theory

It is instructive to review a seminal work associated with this way of thinking: Shannon & Weaver's *Mathematical Theory of communication* (Shannon & Weaver 1949). Of the two essays in the book, Shannon's solely addressed the "engineering problem" encountered in fields such as telegraphy, telephony, radio and television, stating that: "The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point" (ibid: 31). He noted that "frequently the messages have *meaning*", but concluded that the "semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem" (ibid: 31).

Weaver, in his essay, however, went as far as to argue that the mathematical theory of communication is helpful in considering *both* the technical and the semantic problem. He suggested making "minor additions" to the model, which consisted mainly of adding new boxes labeled "semantic receiver" and "semantic noise" (ibid: 26), and made only fleeting mention of the "influence of context" on meaning (ibid: 28). Weaver also used the technical observations as a direct

analogy for human communication. For example, technically, when one tries to crowd too much over a channel, error increases and fidelity decreases. He then extrapolates, saying "if you overcrowd the capacity of the audience you force a general and inescapable error and confusion" (ibid: 27).

Information theory is of course essentially about information. But what is information? The word comes from the Latin *informare:* to give form to. Typically, information consists of visual forms (e.g. words) that we create and point to, and which *evoke* meaning. In reality, the only "thing" normally transferred by a text is some black marks on a white page.

Shannon & Weaver's work was much influenced by the relatively recent invention of telephone, television and the birth of computing. Having read the theory after my acquaintance with the writings of Stacey, Mead and others, I realized just how important it is to think about human communication as involving interdependent beings with unique histories, feelings and self-consciousness. A critical reading of Shannon & Weaver's work made it clear that, while there is a legitimate field of communication theory concerned with the technical transmission of symbols, human communication is *not* a matter of engineering.

A complex responsive processes perspective

If meaning is not a "thing" and is not located in the word or text, what is it? I will explore this question with the help of a number of writers (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000; Stacey 2001; Mead 1934; Shotter 1997), who offer alternative but complementary ways of thinking about this subject. ¶
¶
Stacey and colleagues suggest we focus on *conversation* as "the central activity of organizing" (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000: 132). Stacey applies the term "communication tools" to the documents or written artifacts so often used in conversations in organizations, including reports, plans, agendas, slide presentations, databases and intranets. He suggests that we focus less on the tools themselves and instead pay attention to how they are used (Stacey 2001). Put another way, it makes sense to view written communication as part of the "complex responsive processes of human relating" or as part of the "organizational conversation". The intention to write a document always emerges out of a web of previous conversations; and once a piece of writing has been created it may be used to stimulate further dialogue and change.

Such a "process view" of writing takes into account that any utterance *is a link in an ongoing chain* or web of responsive relating. As Shotter puts it, "… just as the effect produced by poking a stick into a stream of water depends upon the whole character of the flow of water at the time – with different effects depending upon the power (or lack of it) already in the stream's flow – so for us, the effect of our words depends upon where in the stream or communication they occur" (Shotter 1993: 54-5). One major implication is that it is important to distinguish *writing as*

a process from the *artifacts* it produces. Yet many people apparently continue to think of meaning as contained within documents and other tools of communication.

Writing – a silent conversational process

The way in which Stacey and colleagues understand communication is strongly influenced by the thinking of George Herbert Mead. Mead sees meaning as arising from within the social act of gesture and response and he describes mind as an internalized conversation with the generalized other. (See Chapter 2 above.)

If we apply Mead's theory to writing, what do we learn? When I first came across Mead's thinking, I thought of a document as a form of gesture which would stimulate some kind of response. However, the more closely I studied *Mind, self and society* (Mead 1934), the more I came to think of writing itself as a conversational process: the writer while writing conducts a silent conversation – with some combination of the generalized other and the specific reader(s). As this conversation moves along, the imagined responses act back on the writer, who may change what he or she was intending to write. Eventually, the writer finishes writing and may send the text to someone, at which point the reader's response becomes real. This actual response then continues to change the meaning of the writer's gestures. In other words, the meaning of a text is not fixed.

Nearly everything that Mead writes about communication is as true for written communication as it is for spoken. The act of writing is part of a social act, usually preceded and followed by spoken communication. Writing employs "significant symbols", that is, the writer is aware of the meaning of what he or she is writing. This meaning does not lie in the text but moves constantly in the light of both the reader's response (imagined and real) and the writer's own response while writing. Nonetheless, the meaning also has a certain degree of stability, if we accept that a significant symbol arouses a similar response in all members of a community.

Ong's account of communication echoes Mead's:

> 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… Some recipient must be present, or there can be no text produced: so, isolated from real persons, the writer conjures up a fictional person or persons. The writer's audience is always a fiction… The fictionalizing of readers is what makes writing so difficult. (Ong 2002: 173-4).

One factor that particularly sets writing apart from talking is the delayed response of the reader. If the reader is absent physically while we are writing, we can only adjust to their *assumed* or *imagined* attitudes. This is the fictionalizing of the reader that Ong refers to. A related advantage of writing is that it offers us an

opportunity to "take our time" – organizing, testing and finally selecting our gestures. As Mead points out, without delayed reaction, no conscious or intelligent control over behavior could be exercised (Mead 1934: 99). Writing could be described as one form of delayed reaction.

When we are writing, the thoughts that appear on the page are probably just a fraction of our thinking, which Norbert Elias describes as the "rush of telescoped reasoning" (Elias 1991: 69). It is not surprising that "… people have difficulties in translating the rush of telescoped reasoning into the step-by-step language required for communication" (ibid).

Looked at from the reader's point of view, when a person starts reading, the words enter and disturb his or her own silent conversation. A conversation with an email, report or book can alter our patterns of thinking. This is learning.

The written text has traditionally been constrained by an absence of visual, auditory and other cues, yet even a black-and-white text can stimulate the imagination to such an extent that the images and connections created by the reader seem positively colorful and vibrant.

Other authors offer explanations that are consistent with Mead and Ong. Elias, for example, writes: "The meaning of an action for the actor is codetermined by the meaning it may have for others." (Elias 1991: 49). John Shotter portrays meaning as a fluid feature of human communication, rather than a thing. He writes that humans involved in joint action are "not so much acting 'out of' any of their own inner plans, or scripts, or suchlike, as 'into' a situation or circumstance already partially shaped by previous talk-intertwined activities of others" (Shotter 1997: 5). What is so special about joint action is "that its overall outcome is not up to any of the individuals concerned in it; it is entirely novel; its outcomes are as if they have 'come out of the blue'." (ibid). Bakhtin also emphasizes the 'out-of-the-blue' nature of meaning: "An utterance… always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable…" (Bakhtin 1986, pages 119-20).

It follows that meaning is fleeting and ephemeral. It cannot be sent and received, nor can it be "delivered intact". At best, it makes sense to *act as if* we could formulate and "convey messages" to another person.

In summary, it is useful to view writing as theoretically similar to talking, even though it has some important qualities and biases of its own, as we saw earlier in this chapter. Moreover, once we grasp the complex, conversational nature of both writing and reading, and the way in which they can alter patterns of thinking, we can better appreciate the power of writing as a tool for learning and "knowledge sharing".

New writing technologies

We have seen in this chapter that writing and print have been strong forces in the evolution of society. What then can we begin to discern about the newer, electronic writing technologies associated with computers? This is not the place to discuss whether writing standards are loosening, internet fraud is growing, or personal security is threatened by electronic records. Instead I would just like to make some final observations relevant to the arguments of this chapter.

Co-existence of print and newer media

Ong suggests that the new medium reinforces the old, in that computers are actually producing more documents, not fewer. The "electronic transformation of verbal expression has … deepened the commitment of the word to space initiated by writing and intensified by print". At the same time, however, it has also, together with telephone, radio, television, tape recording, CDs, DVDs, etc., brought us into "a new age of secondary orality" (Ong 2002: 133). Whereas societies characterized by primary orality have never encountered or used writing, our present society is "based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the [electronic] equipment and for its use as well" (Ong 2002: 134).

Similarly, Lanham argues:

> [The] shift from print to the computer does not mean the end of literacy. What will be lost is not literacy itself, but the literacy of print, for electronic technology offers us a new kind of book and new ways to write and read. (Lanham 1993: 213, citing Jay David Bolter 1991: "Writing space: the computer, hypertext, and the history of writing")

The pendulum may be swinging away from the static, monochrome structures of print towards more fluid, multi-sensory patterns. We are witnessing a revolution in terms of the use of image and sound, with millions of people now able to create, distribute and manipulate digital pictures and sounds. Whereas many reports and books in the past have consisted largely of black-and-white symbols, technology is now re-introducing other sensory experiences.

In short, we may indeed be moving out of the age of print or the "Gutenberg era" (McLuhan 1964: 95), but this does not mean abandoning literacy in favor of orality. In any case it makes little sense to view orality and literacy as polarities; they co-exist in today's organizations and society.

Further distance between people?

Finally, one of the arguments in this chapter has been that the way we use the technologies of writing and print frequently alienates us from one another. It is therefore worth asking what influence the newer forms of writing might be having.

I have pointed to one occasion where a performance management database seemed to divert attention away from the quality of work conversations, and over and over again I have seen people use PowerPoint presentations come between people. There are also frequent examples of people emailing a colleague who is sitting a few yards away. But on the other hand, there are equally common examples of people using the internet successfully to find other people with similar interests, regardless of physical location – after all, an email can be anything from cold and impersonal to warm and intimate. It seems that, as one would expect, there are multiple and contrasting influences.

Nonetheless, on balance I am inclined to support Ong in his view that computers are reinforcing many of the patterns and biases that began with literacy and print. I am thinking primarily of the tendency to use elaborate abstract language and thus distance ourselves from our momentary situation, but I am also mindful of the current widespread use in the public sector of written targets and measurement. The one thing that is clear is that, like all "social objects", the global patterns of behavior fostered by writing, print, and electronic media will continue to emerge out of – and act back on – millions of particular human interactions.

References

Abram, David (1996): *The spell of the sensuous.* New York: Vintage Books.

Bailey, Derek (1992): *Improvisation – its nature and practice in music.* London: The British Library National Sound Archive.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1986): *Speech genres and other essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Berger, Peter, & Luckmann, Thomas (1966): *The social construction of reality – a treatise on the sociology of knowledge.* London: Penguin Books.

Brown, John Seely, & Duguid, Paul (2000): *The social life of information.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Czarniawska, Barbara (1998): *A narrative approach to organization studies.* Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Elias, Norbert (1991): *The symbol theory.* London: Sage Publications. Paperback 1995.
Goudsblom, Johan; Mennell, Stephen (1998): *The Norbert Elias reader.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Havelock, Eric (1986): *The muse learns to write.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Lanham, Richard (1993): *The electronic word – democracy, technology and the arts.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Larkin & Larkin (1994): *Communicating change – winning employee support for new business goals.* New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

McLuhan, Marshall (1964): *Understanding media.* London and New York: Routledge (published in Routledge Classics 2001).

Mead, George Herbert (1934): *Mind, self & society – from the standpoint of a social behaviorist.* Edited by Charles W Morris. Paperback edition 1967. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Miller, George A. (1956): *The magical number seven, plus or minus two – some limits on our capacity for processing information.* Harvard: The Psychological Review, Vol. 63, No. 2, March 1956.

Minto, Barbara (1987): *The pyramid principle: logic in writing and thinking.* London: 1991 edition. BCA by arrangement with Pitman Publishing Ltd.

Ong, Walter J Ong (2002): O*rality and literacy.* London and New York: Routledge (first published 1982 by Methuen & Co).

Poor, Edith (1992): *The executive writer – a guide to managing words, ideas, & people*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.

Shannon, Claude E., & Weaver, Warren: *The mathematical theory of communication (1949).* Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Shlain, Leonard (1998): *The alphabet versus the goddess – the conflict between word and image.* London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press.

Shotter, John (1993): *Conversational realities – constructing life through language.* London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Shotter, John (1997): *The social construction of our inner lives* (Journal of Constructivist Psychology)

Stacey, Ralph (2001): *Complex responsive processes in organizations – learning and knowledge creation.* London & New York: Routledge (page numbers refer to typescript version).

Stacey, Ralph; Griffin, Douglas; and Shaw, Patricia (2000): *Complexity and management – fad or radical challenge to systems thinking?* Typescript version. University of Hertfordshire.

Toulmin, Stephen (1990): *Cosmopolis – the hidden agenda of modernity.* Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.

Walker, Dean (1968): *Executives who want this man's insights will get them only on his own terms.* (Chapter 4 of *McLuhan hot and cool.* Gerald Emanuel Stearn, Editor.) Harmondsworth, England. Penguin Books.

Whyte, David (1997): *The heart aroused – poetry and the preservation of the soul at work.* London: The Industrial Society.