

## FINDING FORM IN WRITING FOR ACTION RESEARCH

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Marshall, J. 2008. 'Finding form in writing for action research', in Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research Second Edition*, London: Sage Publications, pp 682-694.

### Aspirations

*'The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.*

*As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously.....*

(opening lines of *The Waves*, Woolf, 1992, p.3)

### *The Waves*

Is an exploration of the workings of the minds of the six named characters within the text.... The life-span of the six.... is conveyed through a series of "dramatic soliloquies", interspersed with passages of depersonalized prose which describe constantly shifting patterns of light and water passing from dawn to dusk, spring to winter, across the globe' (Flint, 1992, p.ix).

No author's comment or interpretation is offered. The novel can be read as Woolf's investigation of patterns of thought and the nature of identity (Briggs, 2005; Flint, 1992). Identity is not portrayed as information about the characters, but as

primarily constructed from within, through an individual's deployment of language' (Flint, 1992, p.x). 'All the speakers in *The Waves* have certain set phrases or habits of thinking to which they return, carrying them through life like talismans' (Flint, 1992, p.xi). 'It is through such verbal accretion, Woolf suggests, that identity establishes itself.... the image of waves, with their incessant, recurrent dips and crests, provides a far more helpful [than "stream of consciousness"] means of understanding Woolf's representation of consciousness as something which is certainly fluid, but cyclical and repetitive, rather than linear' (Flint, 1992, p.xi).

When I first read *The Waves* I was so excited. Academic writing so seldom does this for me. The form and informing motif of the novel were so congruent with its themes that I lived the latter richly, without that strong a conceptual sense of all I was exploring. Only

later did I articulate what I felt in the novel's construction and ideas, and seek out commentaries.

In this chapter I explore how form emerges and can be worked with in writing. I draw on my experiences of writing and of supporting other writers, especially graduate students doing action research. In these activities I have pursued long-term interests in issues of voice, overcoming silencing, multiple forms of knowing and finding form. I use examples from my own experience and from other people I know as I can tell the processes involved more fully.

Some features of who I am may be relevant to this chapter. For example, I tend towards introversion and working through intuition. Whilst these are not fixed preferences, they may explain my wish when writing alone to scurry away into a protected corner with a view of interesting surroundings (especially of hills and trees). Your preferences may be different. But, in my experience, for many people writing involves a movement inwards to enable their movement outwards into expression.

This chapter incorporates different forms. As I write and publicly present this material, the tone of advocacy, of making a case, keeps coming through, and so shapes the first half of the chapter. Some of my thinking about finding form finds expression as direct invitations or injunctions to the potential writer. This voice is appropriate in the Writing Workshops I run. I adopt it in the second half of the chapter, offering practices to enable writing, with illustrative stories. The analysis and processes presented imply a solo writer (perhaps in a phase of writing alone in order to present drafts to co-inquirers), but can be adapted to writing with others. Thirdly, I thread into the chapter notes *in italics* on what I learn from Virginia Woolf's writing of *The Waves*, my aspirational exemplar of the kind of congruence between form, content and thematic contribution which I am advocating here.

I have held my process open, but a more 'creative' form has not emerged for this chapter. So I feel a sense of paradox; I advocate experimentation and yet this writing is relatively conventional. This, then, is an aspirational text.

This chapter is a small addition to the burgeoning literature about writing and representation. There is a great deal happening, for example in qualitative research, as scholars work creatively beyond the crises of legitimation and representation outlined by Denzin & Lincoln (2005). Conventions of realism in writing have been fundamentally, irrevocably, challenged. I can assume, rather than argue, therefore, that there is no one objective reality to be discovered and portrayed, that there are multiple (potentially shifting) 'truths' seen from different perspectives, and that writing only, but potentially valuably, represents the constructed perspective of the author(s). I welcome experiments with diverse forms of writing which reflect the contentious, provisional, perspectival and multi-faceted nature of knowing (Eisner, 1993; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lather, Lather & Smithies, 1997); Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2003; Weil, 1996).

I do not seek to encompass all these developments here lest I lose my own intent, which is to offer a focused contribution on working with those tentative, precious moments in which form is coming into being. I shall suggest that often we need to 'listen' to what form our writing is seeking to take because this has analogic congruence, in some way, with the substantive themes we are exploring or to our relationship with them as inquirers. We can then craft the emerging form, to communicate out to the reader.

In the next section I say what I mean by form and why I think it so important as a focus of attention.

### **Notions of form**

By form, I mean the shape of the writing - its pattern, style, flow and eventual structure. While form can be distinguished notionally from content - what the text purports to be about - in practice these are inseparable. No content can appear without form of some kind. Czarniawska (1997) thinks this language potentially misleading. Talking about analyzing identity as narrative, she says 'the traditional "form and content" dichotomy unavoidably brings to mind an image of form as something external, holding the content within it ("a container")'. This makes it seem perfectly possible to analyze form regardless of content and content regardless of form' (p.47). She prefers to borrow the terminology of *material* and *device* from the Russian formalist Bakhtin (1928), because the notion of an 'outer/inner dichotomy vanishes and it is thus easier to see why one cannot be considered without the other' (p.47). There can, then, be no material without device, no device without material. Even if we seek to analyze a device, 'it simply becomes a material to be elaborated with the use of a meta-device, as it were' (p.47). In this chapter I work with Czarniawska's appropriate cautions, but continue to use the terminology of 'form', because it is widespread and because I enjoy its associations – informing, formative and so on.

All writing has form. All form communicates, something. In conventional academic scholarship, which seems alarmingly impervious to any crises of representation and legitimacy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), much form communicates a deadening and suppression of voice, depersonalization, acquiescence to norms. Well established conventions favour linear arguments, rationalized discourse, quantitative analysis (or similar principles applied to qualitative data), value neutrality and so on. Understanding is expected to confer potential control. These are political, gender-associated, issues about how knowledge is framed. And much of the resulting writing is dull, boring and poorly contextualized as a result.

To reach beyond these conventions and pay more attention to form, I draw on a distinction between digital and analogic aspects of communication (Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson (1967). In digital communication 'the relation between the name and the thing named is an arbitrarily established one' (p.61). Meaning can be conveyed with some precision within the conventions of such a language system, and it is possible to communicate negation, that something is not. 'In analogic communication, on the other hand, there is something particularly "thing-like" in what is used to express the thing'

(p.62). It is based on likeness, similarity. It includes 'virtually all non-verbal communication', including body movement, 'posture, gesture, facial expression, voice inflection, the sequence, rhythm, and cadence of the words themselves.... as well as the communicational clues unfailingly present in any *context* in which an interaction takes place' (p.62). Watzlawick et al suggest that analogic communication has its roots in more archaic periods of evolution, and is therefore of more 'general validity' (p.62).

Analogic communication is especially used to convey the nature of relationship (Bateson, 1973) and therefore signals the status of digital messages. 'It is easy to profess something verbally, but difficult to carry a lie into the realm of the analogic' (Watzlawick et al, 1967, p.63).

However much we name and frame what we think we are doing (Fisher, Rooke & Torbert, 2003), form is a meta communication, analogically 'framing' that digital attempt at clarification, which may thus be contradicted or rendered meaningless (Watzlawick et al, 1967). Analogic communication typically has a 'curiously ambiguous quality' as it 'has no qualifiers to indicate which of... discrepant meanings is implied (p.65). Digital and analogic communication complement each other, and the former is always accompanied by the latter. We can seek to translate from one to the other, but there are always irreducible differences, 'information' of some kind is always beyond translation.

I am interested in analogic aspects of writing, because form is often taken for granted or conventionalized. As writers we need to be thoughtful about analogic communication, and the ways of knowing we depict and invoke. And we cannot choose how form will be received and interpreted.

### **Advocating congruence of form and content**

I advocate a notion of 'analogic appropriateness', in which form and content are congruent in some way - when the analogic reflects the issues explored, and therefore the digital symbolic messages, in a kind of mirroring, when something is an example of itself (a concatenation of resonances as achieved in *The Waves*). Apprehending this is as much a felt experience as a cognitive understanding. For example, a piece of writing about fragmented knowing can itself be fragmented, providing a mirroring or resonance that also communicates. Then the text is 'informative' in itself, although what we experience may be partly tacit.

Finding form is partly an aesthetic matter. But it is not only about potential beauty, harmony, elegance. It is about the aesthetics of whatever needs to be, including that of ugliness, fragmentation or discord, if appropriate. Artists know this. For example Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz confront us with political and systemic conundrums and abuses of power through their pieced together, sometimes rough hewn, figures and scenes that are **crafted** to achieve that effect (see References). This is my aspiration. But sadly most action researchers are not artists. 'The greater freedom to experiment with textual form.... does not guarantee a better product' (Richardson, 2000, p.936).

Nonetheless, we need to develop the crafts of working multi-dimensionally through representation, so that all scholars question their processes of knowing and forms of representation as an artist or novelist might do.

Finding form is also an epistemological and political matter (see Chapter 27). Generating appropriate forms to express our work draws from and therefore has the potential to communicate or evoke multiple ways of knowing - intuitive, emotional, tacit, embodied knowing alongside the propositional. Sometimes content cannot be expressed until a compatible version of form is achieved.

With others (Clough, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Richardson, 2000), I advocate writing as a method of inquiry, as a formative, integrated research process rather than a later stage when what is already known is 'written up'. 'There is, in the final analysis, no difference between writing and fieldwork' (Clough, 1992, p.10).

And I see the presentation of the resulting writing as also often a continuation of inquiry, an offering to engage the reader and stimulate debate. In this we can be more or less deliberately provocative. I enjoy work in which the core issues of contention in sense-making are made available to the reader – through form as well as content, for example in devices which render interpretation problematic – to stimulate their exploration. This is a genre of third person action research (Reason and Torbert, 2001).

### ***Learning from Woolf: Working with intent***

*Woolf wanted to develop 'a new kind of play... prose yet poetry; a novel & a play' (Woolf in Briggs, 2005, p.240). This would allow and require the writing to have an abstract and compressed quality and a sense of rhythm (Flint, 1992). 'Could one not get the waves to be heard all through?' Woolf asked (Flint, 1992, p.xxi-). I think the realization of these intentions contributes significantly to how dense *The Waves* is with explicit and tacit association and potential meaning, and its sense of having emergent properties. 'Nothing in *The Waves* is simply one thing' (Dick, 2000, p.67).*

*Woolf also wanted to avoid linear form (Whitworth, 2000, associates this with her critique of patriarchy) and realism (the 'appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner' (Woolf in Whitworth, 2000, p.155). I resonate with these very contemporary intentions. And I admire and agree with Woolf for choosing to address them through radically experimenting with form.*

*These aspirations gave her criteria to judge her work. As she wrote, she could assess whether it was achieving the desired effects. On completing the first draft she said: 'I begin to see what I had in my mind' (Woolf in Briggs, 2005, p.256).*

*And she was aware that her style might challenge the reader. 'I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot... it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw the reader' Woolf in Briggs, 2005, p.257).*

## **The politics of form**

Going beyond rational, analytic conventions of writing can be risky, and therefore political.

Of course, what I say here will be of little use to you (could actively mislead) if you want to or must publish in 'mainstream' academic journals with their conventions of academic style. Then you can look to advice like that of Golden-Biddle & Locke (1997) who analyze different forms of academic storyline. They offer an interesting aid to successful journal publication for qualitative researchers, although they assert that they 'want to avoid espousing a normative "how to" guide' (p.xx). They depict writing as seeking to join in a conversation with a particular theoretical disciplinary audience. Texts need, then, to be persuasive within the conventions, including the demands for demonstrating expertise, of particular knowledge communities. Golden-Biddle & Locke's own metaphor is that of crafting storylines - the 'macrostory' of theory within which the fieldwork story is nested.

They have systematically analyzed the different storylines people use at each stage of an article. These stages are assumed to be reasonably straight-forward and usually take a linear path through gaining attention, positioning oneself in relation to existing theory (with choices of being more appreciative or more disparaging towards other people's work), and constructing a fieldwork based analysis which contextualizes the article's theoretical points. There are parallel processes in which the writer(s) characterizes themselves as storyteller, either invoking images of institutional scientist and objectivity or distinguishing themselves in atypical ways.

Work of this kind has value in making some of the implicit codes of writing explicit. Such stories may well be your preference. And it is a highly socialized, adaptive view of writing. I should aspire to this writing competence, but do not. Over many years I have been seeking not to have the richness and political aspects of my research subverted by subordinating it to dominant forms of writing, seeking not to have to 'tell it slant' (Olsen, 1977). These issues clarified for me in researching women in management, when I was developing a feminist perspective and therefore especially aware of the politics of knowing and of potential silencing (Marshall, 1984). They have tracked my steps ever since, as I have explored other topics, always wanting to pay due respect to multiple ways of knowing.

## **Working openly with form**

Here I am especially interested in those precious moments as experiences, ideas and inquiry move towards expression in writing. As this happens, form is taking shape in a mutual process through the articulation of the content. When we work with an open sense of possibility about form we are engaging in the processes of knowledge-making and can glimpse their contentiousness in action in our own self-reflective practice. Form often becomes established early in the writing process, and what shape it takes can be fateful. It can also be worked with and changed later, throughout drafting and redrafting,

if we allow. We need a double move to go beyond conventional academic storylines, one in which content and form are both radicalized.

*Learning from Woolf: Opening all to question*

*Often Woolf explores issues and then questions the ground she has just set out. In her autobiographic writing (Woolf, 2002), for example, she identifies her first memories and names one (in which waves are figural) as the base for her life. But she then ponders whether it is possible to know and write about a life with any assurance, one's own or anyone else's as a biographer or novelist. Can she/we say who the person is to whom things happen, or which memories are more important, or how to account for the extensive times of non-being which surround our 'moments of being' (p.90)? She also suggests that unless we analyze the forces of society which influence us (she later notes 'the patriarchal society of the Victorian age [which] was in full swing in [their family] drawing room' p.154), then life writing becomes 'futile' (p.92). We see Woolf's constant sense of inquiry; she cannot write autobiographically without questioning the foundations of the genre. The issues she identifies as contentious are played out in the Waves, explored and left open. Some of Woolf's questioning - about identity, writing, biography - is given to the book's characters to speak (Marcus, 2004). I admire the fluidity of meaning-making achieved.*

I have come to enjoy, but also sometimes to dread too, holding on expectantly, allowing the uncertainty, as form is arising. And I enjoy being there for other writers as this happens for them. I see this as the realm of what Heron (1992) and Heron & Reason (this volume) call *presentational knowing*, in their modelling of a radical epistemology. I am interested in the movement to *presentational knowing* which 'emerges from the encounters of experiential knowing, by intuiting significant form and process in that which is met' (Heron & Reason, this volume, **insert page**). Presentational knowing can be expressed in 'the arts' such as storytelling, music, dance and painting. And I take it also to be a mundane, continuous, moment-by-moment process, as experience takes shape or pattern and some sense of form emerges. When writing is inquiry, this boundary is always open.

I am seeking to notice presentational knowing arising, to catch it in process, before it is overtaken, discounted, devalued by conventionalized forming. And I appreciate that this process may not be fully accessible to conscious mind (Heron, 1992). In this venture I aspire to the multiple attentions of the first person action researcher (Marshall, 2001; Fisher, Rooke & Torbert, 2003).

*Learning from Woolf: Engaging in continuing self-reflection*

*Working on The Waves Woolf said 'I want to trace my own process.' (Woolf in Briggs, 2005, p.246). This is shown as a continuing preoccupation in her diaries, which I know through commentators (Briggs, 2005; Flint, 1992; Marcus, 2004) who record and analyze the complex pathway of the book's long gestation, showing Woolf's tenacity, her sense of questing exploration. 'Writing it required a long and dedicated expedition into the interior' (Briggs, 2005, p.238). Woolf thought about the novel for 3 years before*

*starting to write. She then did four revisions between July 1929 and its completion in July 1931.*

Appropriate form needs to emerge from working with the phenomena we study, it should not be imposed or turned into technique, otherwise it will lose its resonant and evocative quality and will not work analogically. There are conformist tendencies even in experimenting genres, such as a current tendency for everything to become 'narrative'. Any new development can become orthodoxy by reaching for new conventions (Clough, 1992, Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

I have a notion of emergent form, being 'grounded' in some appropriate practices of engagement with the stuff of inquiry - experience, data, issues – within a sense of the larger context or field (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2005), making it analogically appropriate to the material it expresses. It then becomes a process equivalent to that of 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). My notion of *grounded form* aligns with constructivist re-visions of grounded theory, which do 'not subscribe to the objectivist, positivist assumptions in its earlier formulations' (Charmaz, 2005, p.509), and see the entire research process as interactive. Thus questions of the nature of knowing are brought into contention. There is no one way to write the material, someone 'chooses' how to write it. What, then, might be the quality, validity, equivalents to the constant comparative method, the care of iterative coding and categorizing, theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)? I suggest that an engaged, emergent, iterative process is required to facilitate the generation of analogically appropriate form. Is it possible to account for the processes involved? Not fully, as they cannot be fully translated into digital expression. But whilst there might be limits to any account we can give, we can still strive for some account. This is a highly process based notion of quality, drawing on disciplines of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000). We can, for example, ask: How did this writing come to be like this? What quality processes did the author engage in? How did they expose them to critique?

In the second half of this chapter I offer practices for working towards grounded form, each implying quality processes we can track as we develop our writing.

### **Practices for working with arising form**

The practices for working with finding form set out below are drawn from my own writing experience and from enabling other writers. The examples show two phases of activity. There is the initial, sometimes challenging, process of catching presentational knowing arising and finding form of some kind. But this alone is seldom enough to present our work artfully to the reader. In a second phase, the writer needs to craft the emergent form with some care and skill to realize its potential in practice. Finding appropriate form provides clues about what sort of writing craft to develop. We can also explore established writing genres which have similarities, and engage in active dialogue with (rather than con-form to) their disciplines and quality processes.

Below, I address you as a writer directly. This seems somewhat presumptive – you may well not need my encouragement. But in running Writing Workshops I find this voice appropriate - speaking to the writer in each participant, the person who knows how to write what it is theirs to write - and so have replicated it here. As enablers of writers, one of our strongest interventions is to invite people to keep faith with their own process.

Writing processes are highly individual, as the accounts of novelists show. But on this edge of writing creatively for academic study I find that some practices for enabling writing are sometimes transferable. And each person needs to develop their own approach.

*Accept and seek to express what is rather than what should be*

At the core of my notion of grounded form is the suggestion that form should be congruent with content. We are therefore seeking to express ‘what is’, for us in relation to the world we are seeking to know and articulate, not as an objective reality. Finding appropriate form can give the confidence of fit with, allowance into expression of, voices that matter, one’s own and those of co-inquirers.

I often find that the ‘problem’ that obstructs writing is a key to form. ‘I cannot write that because....’ a graduate student will say. And then they proceed to articulate their perspective, with its conceptual quality, which becomes what they must write. This example illustrates too that speaking what we know can surprise us. ‘How can I know what I think till I see what I say?’ (a little girl quoted in Wallas, 1926 p.106). Also, being heard and affirmed can provide valuable encouragement.

**NOTE TO COPY EDITOR: THIS IS THE FIRST OF 7 EXAMPLES IN THE REST OF THE PAPER – SHOWN IN A DIFFERENT FONT AND INDENTED TO DISTINGUISH THEM**

I sit at the side of a seminar room only half attending to the speaker on some aspect of qualitative research methods. I have been worrying for days about how to write the logical bridge between chapters 2 and 3 of a book on women in management. Chapter 2 reviews women in management literature, which accepts male as the norm and argues women are only suitable as managers if they demonstrate their similarity to this, doubts women's career motivations and so on. (It is the early 1980s.) Chapter 3 reports where my dissatisfaction with this literature took me, my unsettling journey into feminist analysis - questioning stereotyping, meaning-making, language and more. I realize suddenly, after all my logical, conceptual trying, that there is no clear progression from Chapter 2 to Chapter 3 and that **that** is the point. I am relieved and excited. I can approach the writing differently. And the form I now have is conceptually based (it mirrors the sense-making), not a trivial, discretionary artifact. I write a few sentences reporting this insight - naming and owning ‘my changing orientation: from reform to radical feminism’ (Marshall, 1984, p.43) - with a sense of clear, direct knowing and voice. These become the opening to Chapter 3.

Now that I have the potential device I can work with it and craft it. I decide to tell my sense-making journey more explicitly as the book's conceptual storyline, as an appropriate form to lead me through theoretical and fieldwork explorations.

(Account written July 2006 in Freefall writing mode – see below - from placing myself back in that moment.)

Telling 'what is' may not be a straight-forward matter, depending on the issues of representation involved.

Riley & Phillipson (1993) wanted to depict the experiences of women managers in social services organizations in the UK. Their data, gathered through their work as trainers, was contentious. If reported directly, it could expose women, increase the vulnerability and marginality they sometimes experienced. Riley and Phillipson therefore transposed their understandings and data into an 'imagined scenario in which a group of women meet together to decide how to "help" their male Director understand what it is like to manage as a woman, a request he has made of them' (p.43). In this way they could explicitly address the politics of articulating women's experience through research, using a form analogically resonant with issues about voicing and silencing. The fictionalized women debate what motives the manager might have in asking, how much to reveal, whether they can speak for other women, what language to use and so on. They experienced 'a relief in sharing...' 'examples of the daily bruising' (p.53) which they had learnt to pretend was not happening. They devised a presentation to the management meeting to communicate their multi-layered understanding.

Repeatedly, I find that people's writing flourishes, and achieves more conceptual quality, when they engage the dilemmas they perceive by finding form that addresses rather than avoids them.

Finding form is an ongoing process, to be worked with throughout writing. Sometimes a form we have adopted early on needs to be changed radically, because we realize it is not working and another breaks through, or needs to be allowed to do so.

*Learning from Woolf: Finding appropriate form both frees and sharpens writing*  
*How the characters in The Waves could be portrayed and the nature of the impersonal interludes took shape as the writing progressed. Commentators report the exciting moments in which Woolf discovered answers to her dilemmas of form. Once each of these occurred, specifics of content could be crafted with more confidence. And she iteratively re-conceived form as detailed working brought her new insights. For example, when she finally hit upon the device of the characters speaking through soliloquies, she experienced a sense of release and could rush on to finish that draft (Briggs, 2005, p.253). In a later phase of revision she wanted to clear out irrelevances, sharpen and make 'the good phrases shine. One wave after another' (Woolf in Briggs, 2005, p. 256). As Briggs notes 'even the process of writing had begun to echo the primal rhythm of waves' ( p.256/7). We see, then, a mirroring of content, form and writing process.*

Perhaps finding form is as simple as that and there is no more to say. Yes, and no. It can be difficult to sit with the tentative uncertainty and hope that a unique articulation in its uniquely appropriate form will emerge. In the rest of this section I offer some practices for being there. They are by no means guaranteed, and this is not a comprehensive array.

### ***Employ disciplines and respect emergence***

Writing takes time. We need to learn to tolerate slow starts and uneven processes, and stick with them. If it is difficult, it is worth persisting. But if it is **very** difficult perhaps something is not right, I need to pause and pay attention to the process, for its potential to be in-forming. I often write side-notes on the writing process and arising issues as a holding device. Some notes initially seem to reflect on me as a sense-maker, some might seem quite personal. But they might become apparent as themes in the topics I am exploring or political aspects of sense-making. They might then take on a significance of their own, becoming figural in the text and giving it form.

#### ***Example of a discipline: Freefall Writing***

Just writing and seeing what came has long been an approach I followed. Learning about 'Freefall' writing - Goldberg (1986) and Turner-Vesselago (1995) who calls it 'writing without a parachute' - has added texture to this approach.

In our research community we find Freefall writing especially helpful as a simple disciplined process inviting the writer to speak in their own voice and articulate their knowing. We take practices from these two sources and apply them to writing research. The basics of Freefall are: keep the hand moving; don't cross out; don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar; don't think – write; show, don't tell – give the sensuous detail; and go where the energy is, which may be fear-ward. Both authors suggest that writing practice can be built up through doing timed exercises.

#### ***Learning from Woolf: Working between uncertainty and confidence***

*In the early stages of writing, Woolf's 'diary entries alternate between the repeated admission "I don't know", and the firm conviction that "there is something there" ' Briggs, 2005, p.249. Throughout the writing process, she questions the appropriateness of emerging structures. I admire her persistence, the combination of restless creativity, purposefulness, hard work and inquiry that I see in the accounts of her process – her willingness to take this as her task.*

#### ***Invoke the writer in you and your own direct voice, whatever shapes it takes***

Finding form requires bypassing the censors, accrediting your right to write, identifying and dismissing internalized notions of 'standards' which are inviting your conformity or subduing your voice. Freed from such expectations you may then know how to write what is yours to write. In Writing Workshops I use a range of approaches, including Freefall writing, to invite people into their competence as knowers and writers.

*Learning from Woolf: Respecting what we bring to writing.*

*The Waves echoes Woolf's first, most important, memory. 'It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach' (Woolf, 2002, p.78). Woolf brings herself and her life fully to her writing. Her reflective process appears thorough, self-engrossed but working with issues in a personal/universal sense, seemingly unashamed.*

### ***Create resonant spaces and conditions for writing***

How do you ready yourself to have the internal attentions and the external conditions to write? Woolf (1977) argued that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (p.6). This can be taken literally and metaphorically.

You can pay attention to:

How you come to writing. There is a sense of inquiry here. When are you prevaricating and need to push yourself? When are you gently moving towards writing emerging? When do apparent difficulties offer understanding about the writing?

Whether certain times of day enable, or constrain, your writing. I can often write well first thing in the morning, especially when I speak to no-one before I start. Form is often clear to me then, confident.

What kinds of writing spaces work for you.

How you work with the physicality, the embodiedness, of writing/thinking. Sometimes we need to turn away, go for a walk, do something else. And the notion of form we have been seeking comes to us.

### **NOTE TO COPY EDITOR: NEXT EXAMPLE STARTS HERE**

Michelson (2006) had to write his final thesis for the Masters in Responsibility and Business Practice. He is a banker, musician, very concerned about issues of ecological sustainability, a Brazilian living in Europe. His first draft portrayed some of the identity and issue-based tensions he experiences. But the tutors said it did not do his thinking and engagement justice. They both suggested independently that he create special circumstances to allow him to write up the project. He went to Rio de Janeiro, to the library in his grandparents' house, a positioning full of analogic resonance with the issues he was addressing. He wrote the final thesis, in only eight days, as a conversation with his departed grandfather, a kindred radical spirit, and drawing on imagery from a cartoon book from his childhood, Mafalda. He created a text which is rich, multi-layered, questioning, portraying his tensions from a more encompassing consciousness.

### ***Defend emergent form, claim author-ity***

Sometimes our emerging form does not meet with approval or later seems inappropriate, and we have to decide how vital it is to our writing, or whether it was a temporarily significant device that we can now relinquish.

I was invited to write a chapter from a feminist perspective for a *Handbook of Career Theory* (Marshall, 1989). I explored themes of being, inaction, interdependence, cyclic patterns and whole lives, drawing on notions of communion to accompany the more control and anticipation based foundations of career theory informed by agency. The editorial review process was challenging. The editors liked the content, but were concerned that the chapter sometimes had a ‘non-linear style’, especially given their North American base. They asked me to revise accordingly. I tried, but could not achieve a more linear storyline. I came to realize that as the form mirrored my argument for less linear notions of career, abandoning it could threaten the foundations and integrity of the chapter. So I sought both to explain and protect it by being explicit about how the style reflected the content, and about the reviewers’ reservations, in the introduction.

The editor in charge of my chapter still tells this story as an abiding memory of my work; some indication that it was an unusual experience for them.

In this case I claimed author-ity for my style of writing and this was accepted. Had this been a journal article, I doubt if I would have been so ‘lucky’.

Gloria Bravette (1997), a British woman of African descent was using writing as inquiry. She felt a strong imperative to write the final section of her PhD thesis in a direct voice to a composite white ‘other’ which contained people and experiences to which she had failed to respond during her life because of fear and shame. ‘I realise that I have broken my silences [about race] in defiance of you – it was the only way that I knew how to break away from the hold that you were having over me’ (p.225). She explored the challenge of claiming her right to know as ‘black, and therefore inferior’ (p.223), and the difficulties of distinguishing ‘white’ people who love humanity from racists.

Gloria wondered whether or not to explain this device to the reader, and decided to do so. Her articulate framing, accompanied by her conceptual model of ‘unleashing creative potential through the unblocking process’ (p.224), explained how necessary it was to adopt this direct, confronting voice to break the bonds that bound her, to place limits on her fear. Only then could she write the earlier sections of the thesis fully.

One choice to be worked with is when and how to read the work of others and when and how to allow one’s own voice, inquiry and accumulated sense of others’ work to come to some articulation. Especially in finding form, it is important not to swamp or stifle your

own voice, authorship, authority. And, usually, eventually, a blending and integration is appropriate.

***Value the imaginal and metaphorical as guides to form***

Catching moments of form taking shape often involves a sense of knowing beyond language. Sometimes this can be encapsulated in an image or metaphor that can then be articulated, explored and worked with.

Some years ago I studied women who had reached middle or senior level management positions and then left, contemplated leaving or been forced out of employment. I wanted to tell the stories of such women, because their behaviour seemed a mystery or was taken by some commentators as evidence that women are not tough enough for senior management jobs.

Two images that arose from the processes of sense-making provided forms that shaped the resulting book (Marshall, 1995). Both emerged, as if spontaneously, following sustained immersion in the study's material and puzzling about how to write it.

They relate to self-reflexive sense-making in political and contested terrain. They provide articulations of the warrant I had to speak from the research study, and address issues of validity in interpretive social science. Neither is unique to me. But in this project they were fitting epistemologically and therefore carried a felt sense of 'insight'.

The first image was that of 'turning things in the light' (p.7). I had worked with sixteen women in depth, hearing their experiences and writing versions of their stories which could be told publicly. The image referred to my wish to offer the potential for different interpretations of the women's experiences to be considered. Each story was like a crystal or prism, reflecting and refracting light, always offering new impressions. This affected how I wrote the stories and accompanying text.

The second image arose when I was reflecting on what warrant I had for drawing out shared and contrasting themes from the women's stories. During a Freefall writing exercise, I found myself likening the kind of sense-making I was seeking to trying to free the ends in a multi-coloured, multi-stranded tangle of wool. I realized, *inter alia*, that 'If I pull too tightly, if I interpret beyond my warrant, the wool/theme will tense and lose its texture' (p.37.). This image provided the rationale for the book's structure. Short analytic commentary pieces (for example 'Is gender at issue?' pp.98-101), were interspersed amongst the women's stories to offer conceptual threads and questions relevant to interpreting them, and to treating their interpretation as provisional, open, worthy of reflection. Happily the publisher was willing to accept a manuscript with forty two 'chapters', as long as we did not call them that.

In both cases, once the image had emerged as an articulation of the form the writing was beginning to show, I could use it more deliberately, amplify it, develop and craft that incipient way of working.

These devices allowed several dilemmas in the sense-making process, which I realized were important features of the field being explored, to be engaged with rather than controlled. They were an attempt to offer a sense of 'truth' relevant to the topic area at a process rather than content level. The book sought, then, to be a continuation of inquiry, wanting to throw the questions it raised back into lives and organizational worlds akin to those I studied.

*Learning from Woolf: Working with, developing, imagery*  
*As Woolf developed The Waves, there were significant shifts in her guiding images which she sought, embraced. Moths and the maternal instinct were early potential devices. Waves appeared too, and then replaced moths as a central motif. (Briggs, 2005; Flint, 1992; Marcus, 2004).*

### **Closing themes and questions**

In this closing section, I return to some themes considered earlier and explore their implications for action research.

If we work with a sensitivity to form, whether, how much and how to explain form are open choices. Should we show rather than tell, letting the reader make sense and experience for themselves? We are open to analogic ambiguity. Interpretation of our writing is even more than usually beyond our control. I generally favour some attempts at framing, some signposting to help the reader, and writer, through. And yet, if form is fundamental to our meaning-making, explaining it can seem like appeasement, aesthetically inappropriate, a conventionalizing, taming, move. *The Waves* was well received by friends, critics and public, who coped with what it offered.

'Un-conventional' writing forms can be demanding of the reader, who cannot scan or read to formula. Often texts have emergent, wholistic, properties which will not be understood unless engaged with fully. I cannot show you a short section of *The Waves* to illustrate all I have claimed for its qualities. As readers we may, then, need to develop an extended aesthetic, with an associated language of appreciation and critique, which goes beyond our analytic frames of understanding.

What is our writing for? If form and content are congruent, our writing can pass on more of the alive complexity of the issues explored, and more of the dilemmas and provisionality of meaning-making, to the reader. This can become an invitation or provocation, an extension into third person inquiry.

What I am advocating here is obviously politically risky for academic scholars given the, increasing, conformity and surveillance of many mainstream disciplines. And yet, experimentation is rife. Perhaps we can re-vise tolerances applied to writing. If,

however, academic writing wants to stay dull, boring and poorly contextualized, what choices can we generate?

How can we judge quality in the realms of analogic congruence and grounded form?

Criteria can include writing that:

- evokes the experiences, themes and issues of the inquiry for the reader;
- communicates conceptually through the congruence of content and form;
- accounts for the writer's process, and its resonances with form and content;
- renders the sense-making appropriately contentious, in ways which illuminate the issues explored; and
- provokes readers' engagement and debate.

Finding form is a profoundly conceptual matter, and we need to work actively with it. Exploring the qualities our writing aspires to, perhaps through imagery, can guide how we craft our work. This will include finding devices for showing the provisionality of knowing, as Woolf did, as aspects of what we offer.

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