

## **“Physician, heal thyself”: What we can learn from our own writing advice**

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O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp, / Expose thyself to feel  
what wretches feel...(Shakespeare, 1992, p. 183, 3.4.32–34)

### **Introduction: freeing myself to write**

Is writing cure or curse (Derrida, 1981)? In the academy, more and more writing is demanded of us; this goes for staff and students alike (Hoskin, 1993). It is something of a curse. And for we Learning Advisors, though scholarship in the traditional sense of keeping up with research in our discipline (the “scholarship of application”) might be devalued by our managers, researching and writing about our teaching (the “scholarship of teaching”) is on the increase and increasingly endorsed by them (Boyer, 1990, p. 16).

However, although we teach strategic reading and writing strategies to enable our students to take control of the writing process and to practise their various literacies, we are often loath to take our own medicine, to reflect on our writing practice (Hillocks, 1995) – despite embracing reflective practice in our teaching (Schön, 1987). Here I briefly reflect on how I hope to learn from the advice that I give students about writing to become more productive as a writer; how I hope to cure my writing ills, or, to put it more loftily, how I can take care of my writing self (Foucault, 1988).

For me, becoming productive as a scholarly writer is not about whether or not my “research environment” is productive (Bland & Ruffin, 1992), though this is where much of the scholarship on productivity has focussed (see Dundar & Lewis, 1998; Ramsden, 1994). But, in large part, my research environment – how “research-conducive” my institution might be (Bland & Ruffin, 1992, p. 385) – is out of my control. Nor, for me, is becoming productive really about freedom from teaching or other pressures (Boice & Jones, 1984; see Marsh & Hattie, 2002), what might be called a negative freedom (Berlin, 1969). We Learning Advisors, like other academics, tend to put teaching first; we treat it, along with service to committees, as what we must do, and schedule everything else around it.

Thus, for me, becoming productive as a scholarly writer is about freeing myself to write: what might be called a positive freedom (Berlin, 1969). I am, I think, my own worst enemy when it comes to writing, and I’m sure this is the case with most

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academics, though they might not care, or dare, to admit it (see Cameron, Nairn & Higgins (2009); Hartley & Knapper, 1984; Sword, 2010). If I am to write well, or, at least, better (if not “differently” [Sword, 2009, p. 320]), the easiest place to start is with me.

Freeing myself to write, then, involves two tasks:

1. to learn to manage my time better to allow time for writing, to free up time to write; and
2. to learn not to be too careful too early in the writing process to allow writing to do its work.

For the first task, it is Robert Boice’s (1997) four steps to productivity that I look to; for the second, it is Peter Elbow’s (2010) strategies to structure free writing. In the spirit of writing as a method of inquiry, as “a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (Richardson, 1987, p. 923), in what follows I reflect on what these highly productive scholars can teach us about scholarly productivity.

Because I know that once I start writing I never have trouble doing it, I must allow myself to write and to free write. If this sounds like self-help talk, in a sense it is. I want to make “Physician, heal thyself!” my maxim – and it is perhaps one that other scholarly writers might also make their own.

## Writing time

If we wait for the moment when everything – absolutely everything – is ready, we shall never begin. (Turgenev, 1920, p. 6)

Boice’s monograph *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing* (1990) sums up his many articles on scholarly productivity; that text is itself summarised in his essay “Strategies for Enhancing Scholarly Productivity” (1997). His first question for scholars is this: why don’t we write?

### *Why don’t we write?*

According to Boice (1997), we scholars don’t write for both institutional and individual reasons. The institutional reasons are three. First, our “usual intellectual styles” get in the way: until graduate level, we are asked to focus on “mastering facts and principles”, rather than writing skills or productivity, so we are not trained to do it (p. 19). Secondly, our learnt “elitism” makes us snobbish and scrupulous (p. 20). That is to say, published writers say that too many people are already publishing, and that unpublished writers have nothing to say; unpublished writers say that writing must be new – and easy. Thirdly, “our surroundings,” that is, our workplace and workload, are allowed to “determine our productivity” (p. 20). This last reason is the one most of us admit.

More importantly, we don't write for individual reasons: due to "maladaptive habits of thinking about and practising writing" (Boice, 1997, p. 21). We think that we are too busy (teaching) to write, so we binge, busy ourselves overly and overrate writing, "making writing [our] highest priority" (p. 23). In fact, writing does not require large blocks of uninterrupted time, and writers are more productive when they make writing "a modest, realistic priority" (p. 23). I know that I write most often in binges in the face of externally imposed deadlines (a classic extrinsic motivation), which is the case with most of my academic work, including this essay. However, I write most freely when I write out of interest or for enjoyment (an intrinsic motivation), which is the case with my blogging and only occasionally the case with my academic work.

So how can we break these "maladaptive habits of thinking about and practicing writing" (p. 21)? Or, that is to say, how can we write?

### *How can we write?*

Boice (1997) suggests that to free up time to write we "force daily writing sessions regardless of [the] writers' readiness and motivation" (p. 23) – but offer a reward on completion, a carrot-and-stick strategy that he calls "contingency management" (Boice, 1983), a term that he takes from cognitive behavioural therapy.

He advocates four steps to productivity. In short, we must establish:

1. momentum by free-writing at the start of a session – and learning to leave holes in manuscripts;
2. a regimen of writing regularly on work days, preferably in the morning when we're fresh, and without interruption, preferably at our "sacred writing desk" (1997, p. 24);
3. comfort by stretching and/or moving every hour, monitoring our tongue position (we are tense when our tongue is against the roof of the mouth, so we should drop it) and avoiding negative self-talk; and
4. social skills as a writer, that is, seek the support of 'sponsors' and their advice on our writing and teaching.

Interestingly, the steps spell out "MaRaCaS," a useful mnemonic (see Higbee, 1979): momentum, a regimen, comfort and social skills.



In summary, then, for Boice (1997),

[T]he habits that make the differences between productivity and unproductivity . . . consist . . . of 1) writing before feeling ready, at first in spontaneous fashion; 2) writing in brief, daily sessions amid busy workdays; 3) finding comfort in writing via exercises in relaxation and positive thinking; and 4) making writing more public and publicly orientated. (p. 32)

Some of this I do already. I write as I read, so as to get writing underway. I carry around my laptop and an iPod in case inspiration strikes: the iPod is great to record myself talking about an idea that I don't want to evaporate when I can't pull out my laptop. I blog ideas-in-progress and then assemble them into pieces of writing. Relax, finding comfort in writing, I do not. (I do need to monitor my tongue position: it is not something I would ever have thought of before.) Nor do I write in writing groups – Silvia talks about “agraphia groups” (2007, p. 50), groups for ‘uncomfortable’ writers. And more importantly, I don't write as regularly – or “brief[ly]” – as I would like (Boice, 1997, p. 32). My “proximal goal” is to establish a writing regimen, though whether to write on waking or on first getting to work, or to keep free an hour each morning I have not yet decided; my “distal goal,” to plan a writing programme a year or more ahead – because, at this point, I write reactively rather than proactively (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p. 587).

Part one of my intervention, then, is to try Boice's method to learn to manage my time better to allow time for writing.

## **Really writing**

I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man. (Joyce, 1966, p. 297)

When it comes to my second task, of learning not to be too careful too early in the writing process to allow writing to do its work, Peter Elbow, who popularised “free writing” in *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), is the past master. Essentially, free writing is writing without editing, an exercise in “‘automatic writing’ ” (Elbow, 1973, p. 3), or to recall Boice (1990), “writing before feeling ready, at first in spontaneous

fashion” (p. 32). The problem, for Elbow, is that “editing goes on at the same time as producing” (1973, p. 5). He elaborates in “The Need for Care: Easy Speaking Onto the Page Is Never Enough”:

The problem is unrelenting care – the feeling that you can never relax your skeptical scrutiny. Most of us, if we want to write productively, need some relief from vigilance, some time for no care in putting down words – so we don’t choke off the rich supply that is actually available to all of us. Most of us benefit from learning to write down words and ideas before knowing whether they are acceptable or good. (Elbow, 2010, p. 3)

Thus, because, as Elbow puts it in *Writing Without Teachers*, “almost everyone interposes a massive and complicated series of editings between the time the words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come . . . off the pencil or typewriter [or computer!] onto the page,” free writing allows us to not edit both “spelling and grammar” and “unacceptable thoughts and feelings” as we write; it allows us to produce (1973, p. 5). We simply write on a topic without stopping for, say, ten or twenty minutes, or 200 to 300 words; then, we do it again . . . and again.

But once we have produced something that looks promising, what are we to do with it? We need to structure it or to find the structure in it. Elbow (2010) offers two ways for writers to structure free writing, to allow them to meld “careless mental speaking and careful mental writing” (p. 1), or free writing and rewriting. They are “collage form” and “the skeleton process” (p. 3).

### *Collage form*

To structure our free writing, we can use what Elbow (2010) calls “collage form”:

[A]fter you have done a lot of freely and carelessly generated writing, you can just pick out the passages you like best, do minimal revising or editing, and put them together in whatever order strikes you as intuitively interesting or fruitful. (p. 4)

This process works well even for formal writing because, as he puts it,

[It] helps reassure you that there is actually good stuff in all the chaos you produced. It helps you clear away all the distracting mess and see the good bits. (p. 4)

We can then easily cut and paste the bits into different orders, “pleasing or compelling or interesting” – and, if we wish, fill in the gaps and supply an introduction and conclusion (p. 4).



This kind of “Franken-writing” (my mnemonic is Frankenstein’s monster) can thus enable us to try out different narrative structures. I already do this, in a sense, when I piece together my writing from blog posts.

However, sometimes we want to find the structure hidden in our work. This requires that we use a different process.

### *The skeleton process*

To find the structure hidden in our writing, we can use what Elbow (2010) calls “the skeleton process.”

“Skeleton-writing” proceeds as follows.

1. “Look for any passage that somehow feels pertinent. [. . .] For each important passage, create a tiny summary germ sentence” (p. 5). These are our bones.
2. “[M]ark . . . the ones that feel important or central. Then look through these marked ones and figure out your main idea. [. . .] If you can, write out this implied main idea in a . . . germ sentence” too (p. 6). (This is the spine, perhaps – though Elbow doesn’t call it this).
3. “Start by looking at the germ sentences that seem most important. Looking at them together, try to figure out a sequence . . . for these main points.” Now we have a skeleton, “a good sequence of sentences where each point follows the previous one naturally and where the whole sequence is going somewhere and has a felt shape – like a good story” (p. 7).
4. Flesh out the essay into a draft (a body, perhaps).

Bones, spine, skeleton and body together make an essay (my mnemonic is a dancing skeleton).



This process also works as a strategy to revise a draft, or even a completed piece of writing. But, at bottom, as Elbow puts it,

[T]he skeleton process is a method for clarifying thinking – a way to harness critical detachment – which is just what’s needed for giving feedback to yourself. (p. 7)

In essence, collage form and the skeleton process are great ways to get perspective on our own writing and to get our story straight, so to speak (they can also be used collaboratively, of course). They are “disciplined ways to use care” (p. 7), that is to say, they enable “substantive revising” (p. 8).

Part two of my intervention, then: try Elbow’s method to learn not to be too careful too early in the writing process to allow writing to do its work.

### **Conclusion: “Physician, heal thyself”**

Thus, because I know that once I start writing I never have trouble doing it, freeing myself to write involves two tasks: to learn to manage my time better and to learn not to be too careful too early in the writing process. To do so is to exercise my positive freedom (Berlin, 1969). It is to free myself to write and thus to heal myself – or, at least, my writing self. If the two steps of my intervention in my writing practice do not resonate with other Learning Advisors, I hope at least that my maxim “Physician, heal thyself!” is one that other Learning Advisors might make their own as scholarly writers. To take our own medicine in this way, to reflect on and “experiment” with our writing practice (Hillocks, 1995, pp. 32–37), is at the very least to put ourselves in the place of our students and, hopefully, to feel better about our, and our students’, “wretched” writing.

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