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Writing up/writing down: making sense through sensory engagement

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Writing up/writing down: making sense through sensory engagement

Writing up research can be formulaic and conventional, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. We rely on certain formulae and conventions to clarify meanings, to create a common set of practices about how best to communicate knowledge. For example, it is considered good manners for many pieces of writing to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Generally we use paragraphs to separate ideas. These, too, have a beginning, middle and end structure.

It is important to understand the formal conventions of writing up research, but I'm more interested here in the writing down that happens before the writing up. By writing down, I mean the reflection of our thinking that can be achieved through writing. Writing anything! When the material of your work is a seething mass threatening to swamp you, try to tame it by reducing your engagement to the level of the word. What are the key words that you know make the meaning here? Collect them. Arrange them. Do they go in a list? In tables, charts, or other diagrams that illustrate relationships? Post-it notes, white-board markers in several colours, floor-filing... In my experience, if I can engage my hands, eyes, and whole body in the activity, sense follows.

Visualisation tactics like these can be used to build phrase fragments. The phrase fragments can arrive when we step away from the activity we were immersed in, and we might be tempted to dismiss them as irrelevant, or to assume they will reappear in an orderly fashion when we are sitting, primed and prepped, at a word processor. But this isn't always the case, and I've learned to attend to those insights at the moment they arrive. Make writing down your research insights a habit, so that you accumulate a tidy collection of fragments. These fragments can be combined and recombined, and this synthesising process helps to identify patterns latent in the ideas. Or, perhaps, the process reveals ideas latent in the patterns.

The building-from-fragments tactic can be inverted: try cutting up chunks of text. Research projects will accumulate all kinds of descriptive statements over their life span, representing the trajectory of your thoughts. As such, they are full of good material, even if it is dated and contains stuff you now want to throw away. Try breaking such a piece of text into its components; whole sentences if they're good, single key words if that's all that is worth saving. I recommend paper and scissors for this – see the previous point about engaging all of your senses. Now these components can be subject to arranging and rearranging.

Such creative practices as those I've described will help you to clarify your thoughts and sketch out a plan for writing up the research. If writing down has been accomplished, writing up can be relatively easily achieved by following the standard conventions. Depending on your discipline, writing up research from a good plan is almost like filling in a form. Form is your friend! Use it to aid your thinking. But if all else fails, consider not writing at all. Forget everything else I wrote. Just stop and go to bed. Night school. Marvellous things are happening inside you, solutions being sought to problems encountered in the writing process so far.