Changing gear

written by Jeremy Huggett | 16/01/2015

There's an interesting project run out of Durham and Newcastle Universities by Bob Simpson and Robin Humphrey, **Writing Across Boundaries**, which started off as a series of workshops to look at challenges faced by researchers writing a thesis employing qualitative data but has broadened out somewhat thereafter. Simpson and Humphrey suggest that in recent years

> "there has been acceleration in the way researchers progress from one kind of writing to another – doctoral thesis to articles to monograph to more accessible forms of dissemination. The pressure to do in couple of years what an earlier generation might have done in a couple of decades has a variety of external drivers. These mostly come down to funding and the competition for scarce resources on the one hand, and the demonstration of public accountability on the other."

To what extent is this acceleration also a function of technological change? The Writing Across Boundaries project has included an invitation to established scholars to reflect on the process of writing, and a number of them reflect on the impact (or otherwise) of technological changes. For example, Tim Ingold – a name familiar to archaeologists – writes 'In defence of handwriting' and suggests that using a word processor facilitates the process of copy and paste:

> "As copying *is* thinking, to short-cut copying is to short-cut thought itself. By its nature, thinking twists and turns, drifts and meanders. A hunter who followed a bee-line from a point of departure to a predetermined destination would never catch prey. To hunt you have to be alert for clues and ready to follow trails wherever they may lead. Thoughtful writers need to be good hunters."

In the same series, Alan Macfarlane talks of the way that the slowness of writing with a pen allows the mind to focus so that all of one's attention goes into the ideas, whereas the machine draws attention away from the writing itself and results in "too little thought and too much effort".

One immediate reaction to this is that this is a generational thing – anyone born into the digital world might look askance at some of these claims. I certainly remember writing drafts of papers longhand and took several years to adjust to the practice of writing using a word processor. It's an ongoing process – my random bits of paper and endless bookmarks are only just being replaced through the revelation that is Evernote … Maybe you need to have experienced this shift to appreciate some of what Ingold, Macfarland and others are writing about.

But is there more to this than nostalgia and old fogeyism? For example, it might be argued that we're in the midst of a similar shift today, although this time it is data rather than writing which is

being transformed. This time the acceleration is not so much in modes of writing but in terms of access and availability of data. Where once we created a computerised dataset by manually digitising information from library monographs, from card catalogues in archives, etc., we're becoming increasingly accustomed to data arriving on our screens as a consequence of some apposite search terms and the push of a couple of buttons. If the shift in writing technologies from pen to computer brings with it a change of approach to writing itself, what does the change in its availability and accessibility do to our relationship with data? If our hunt for data is straight-lined, the effort reduced, is there a risk of 'too little thought' as a consequence? Or is this no more than a reactionary claim that the perception of significance or value is related to the amount of blood, sweat and tears entailed in its creation?

References

Simpson, B. and Humphreys, R. 2013 'Writing Across Boundaries: An opportunity for researchers to reflect on the process and anxiety of academic writing', *The Impact of Social Sciences*, October 29th 2013, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/10/29/writing-across-boundaries/

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