

“Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment” - Rumi

Concept Note:

Writing Ourselves; Righting Ourselves

The idea

Many years ago, soon after I set up *Communicating Simply* in 1998, I dreamed of working with women activists to help tell their stories. To some extent I did this – not just with women, but with various groups of people over the years.

Initially, the idea behind *Black Woman Writing* was to offer an opportunity to women activists – women involved in their communities and who rarely get acknowledgement – to share their stories while developing valuable writing skills and exploring their personal development. The result would be a publication of the women’s stories.

Since then, I’ve gone on to write and support organisations to write histories, publications, reflections and newsletters. I’ve also worked with people to write their own stories.

Black Woman Writing is no longer about women only, but it is about people (mainly black and brown people) telling their stories, whether organisational or personal. The process of writing can be deeply healing, particularly if done in a reflective way. *Writing Ourselves; Righting Ourselves* is a process that can be deeply transformative, both internally (in the way we show up for ourselves) as well as externally (in our confidence to tell the stories that need to be told).

Champing at the bit

I am fortunate to have grown my political teeth amongst some amazing activists and committed comrades. Many of them continue to work in organisations, creating change in deep and meaningful ways. Some of them struggle with documenting their journeys or those of their organisations. Others have a lot to say but don’t have the time, support or experience to write. Others yet are so focused on trying to create change, writing seems like a luxury, an indulgence.

Yet their stories and reflections are important – for others potentially, and for themselves certainly. Writing is healing, and the processes I wish to share are as much about that inner journey as about the outward product.

How the process is envisaged

1. 2-3 face-to-face retreats to surface and write stories in a step-by-step process over 4 months.
2. Mentoring and support (ongoing over the 4 months).
3. Input by authors and other professionals.
4. Peer teaming and feedback.
5. Simply writing sessions (online).

Outcomes for participants

While the key output is a *professionally edited and designed publication*, there are several other benefits to participants:

The politics of writing – breaking down and building up: Inherent in the writing process is the blockages and the hesitance to write. In organisations this can show up as “bad” reports; or reports that show little about what is going on in the field; or procrastination in writing; or “hatred” of writing. Sometimes this is because many must write in a second language - but even first language speakers of English can and often do struggle with writing.

This is about confronting and naming the critic that has told us (particularly black and brown people) and continues to do so, that we are not good enough, that voice that says, “who are you to”, and at a practical level the voice (and outside expectation) that tells us that a good report needs to look a certain way (and to my mind often stripping of the essence of a person’s experience and the experiences of those they are working with).

But this process is about more than writing reports. In a way, it is a challenge to conventional report writing in that it suggests that the essence of a person’s experience and making meaning of what is happening “in the field” is far more important than writing to a particular language or outcome. Furthermore, that stories with heart often can show with more clarity, vividness and meaning the change that is taking place. And also, that there are many ways of documenting experiences, not all written. *Building the confidence to write is an important component of this process.*

Surfacing the stories: In addition to breaking down beliefs about writing and who we are, the process encourages participants to get in touch with themselves and connects self-reflection and awareness with the stories that need to be told now. While the outcome may not (or may) be an organisational piece, the process will help participants see how they can connect themselves at an intuitive and feeling level with the stories that need to be told and surfaced. Importantly, the tools learnt will help participants to apply this learning to any other documenting endeavour.

Writing tools: Participants will learn simple tools to make their writing process more manageable. The first of these is *free writing in a journal*. This is a powerful tool that helps participants remember their knowledge and experiences. It puts them in touch with their true thoughts and memories. *Brainstorming and reflecting* give participants the chance to think about what it is they need and want to say from a higher, freer level. This could include *artwork, creating collages* and allowing a broad plan to emerge. The process will involve thinking about one’s *audience and purpose* and help participants to think through these with the use of tools and exercises. Participants will *plan their pieces* and later in the process, simple writing tools will be shared including the *broad structure of a piece of writing* (Introduction, Body, Conclusion) with each of these fleshed out; input on some of the common errors people make and the constant reminder that simple does not mean bad; that simple can be beautiful. Throughout the process, participants will share what is emerging and receive feedback from the facilitator and peers as they build on their piece of writing using the tools that are shared and that they apply in the face-to-face sessions.

Mentoring and support: Outside of the workshop processes, participants will be given individual support, allowing for specific feedback and for them to develop their stories.

Write Drunk, Edit Sober: Ernest Hemingway is famous for having said this. An important principle shared from the outset is that participants should NOT try to write perfectly at the beginning or should let go of

the notion of perfection. This is a sure-fire way to block their ideas and experiences and hinder what intuitively needs to emerge.

However, while participants cannot be expected to professionally edit their own writing, they will be encouraged to polish their work and given the tools to do so. They will learn these through the personal feedback they receive as well as in inputs around some of the most common errors people (and they) make and that can be an easy fix.

An important principle they will be reminded throughout is that *editing is left to the end*. Also, that one should not be expected to edit one's own final piece of writing – make it as beautiful and clean as you can but leave the final editing for someone else.

Other forms of documenting: Two forms of documenting are so much more accessible now – audio and visual documenting using smartphones. The process will include input on using these with practical tools around creating a story, interviewing techniques, specific things to think about when creating audio or audio-visual documents and overcoming fear of the camera or working around it. Here too, the focus will be on the practical.

A final product: The final product will be a collection of participants' stories that will be *professionally edited, designed and published* – a reminder that while the stories will be simple, they and the final product will be beautiful – something they and their organisations can proudly share.

A few final thoughts

This process can work for *mixed groups*, i.e. from different organisations and it is often preferable (but not necessary) that the first writing be allowed to come from what emerges from the process rather than from predetermined organisational outcomes. This allows freedom for people to make the connections from their realities and their writing as well as to use the tools in as un-onerous a fashion as possible. These tools are transferrable, and participants will be able to use them for other documenting (written or otherwise) and even planning processes.

The process can also work for one organisation needing to create a publication that shares their story, or wishing to jointly reflect on and write up their history, or annual report, or to help colleagues document and share lessons learnt from a process, project or event. Even in such a case, the organisation and team would be asked to come to the process without having decided what it is they will write about (specifically). Often what emerges in a process such as this can surprise and be much more meaningful given that it allows for deep reflection before decision-making. In the case of an organisation, the team can work together to surface what the product might look and feel like.

A final product

The final writings of the participants will be published in a book, the title of which would be agreed on by participants in consultation with the funding organisation. Selfful Soul/Communicating Simply will co-publish the publication with the funder/organisation. The final product will be professionally edited and designed and allow for input from the funding agency and/or a team selected by the participants.

If this is something your organisation is keen to explore, please contact me and we can talk about tailor-made options for you.