Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales from the Field

Edited by Dianne Conrad

Cover image: Thom Milkovic, 'Vintage Words' (2017), https://unsplash.com/photos/FTNGfpYCpGM

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

3. On Being Written

Jon Dron

Why I Write

Almost (but not quite) exactly like Didion (1976), "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear." It is certainly true that I do not know what I think or, to a large extent, even what I feel before I write it down. However, my writing is not simply a mirror reflecting some otherwise invisible inner me. My writing is an active participant in my cognition, an extension of my mind rather than an expression of what it contains. Partly, this is simply a result of the act of assembling words. As Richard Powers put it, "I write the way you might arrange flowers. Not every try works, but each one launches another. Every constraint, even dullness, frees up new design" (Kramer, 2006). But it is more than that. As I will later discuss in this chapter, it is the mill, as well as the grist — an active agent in my thinking and a partner — that does some of the thinking for me. It is what connects my mind with yours: a means to create a cognitive space that we may both inhabit together for a little while, separated by time and space. The sense that you are making of what you are reading now is not, however, the same as the sense that I was making when I wrote it. We see the same words from different points of view. You are reading my words from the front; I am writing them from behind. We share the same text much as sailboats share the same ocean, each of us travelling from different starting points to different destinations, blown by the same winds and tides, rocked by the same waves, but experiencing very different journeys. I would love to know about your journey but, first, let me tell you a little about my own.

How I Write

Occasionally, I know my destination before I begin to write. In fact, I sometimes start by writing the conclusion. Often, though, I have no destination in mind at all. I just have an idea for a title, or a phrase that I find appealing (such as "On being written") and I go where its wind blows me. The result of that kind of process is what you are reading now. However I start, whether I know the destination or not, I seldom if ever have more than the slightest idea about how I am going to get there. The course I steer to my destination is very dependent on wind and tide, and I may make long circuitous tacks along the way. There will be obstacles and shallows to avoid, interesting coves to explore, other boats to consider, all of which may make me change course. Now and then, an unintentional gybe thwacks me over the head and my course changes completely before I even notice. I may end up dropping anchor somewhere else. Sometimes, I am completely becalmed, sometimes the waves engulf me. Occasionally I do not even leave the marina.

As the voyage progresses, from the flotsam of words left in my wake I become a *bricoleur*, skimming the froth to salvage pieces that fit together, capturing and keeping harmonious patterns in the chaotic whorls and eddies, occasionally stirring them around to see what new patterns they make. Once a piece of writing begins to take form, it starts to coalesce into a floating island of words alongside which I moor my boat and inhabit for a while, shuffling words around until it feels like a comfortable, coherent place to live. And, sometimes, when it is done, I send it off to drift on the ocean currents in the hope that someone else will find it. For this brief moment, you have stepped onto one of those islands. I hope that you can stay a while. Enough of the sailing metaphors. They can only take me so far.

I am more of an *un*writer than a writer. I usually write a few thousand words each day, in emails, in academic writing, blogs, reviews, feedback that I write for my students, and so on; but I generally unwrite most of them before anyone else ever sees them. To a significant extent, I am the editor, much more than I am the author of my writing, and the editing almost always takes much longer than the production of the words themselves. The words you are reading now are survivors of several massacres: many pages were born and died in the process.

It can be very painful to get rid of words that please me. Some words that I particularly love may enter cold storage in my notes app so that they might one day get another chance to live in the society of others, but most vanish without ceremony. Even the survivors are in peril. There are currently 1,353 unsent emails in the drafts folder of my work account alone, and hundreds in my other accounts. Though I have probably published no more than 150 academic papers, the "papers" folder on my computer right now contains 1122 items, not including many more versions of them that are contained in subfolders. I do not know how many draft blog posts exist on my main blogging site, but it is at least as many as the hundreds you can see. The memory I was born with (or maybe the parts that are left after the ravages I have wrought upon it) is poor, so I am a hoarder of words, even of those that displease me. As regards those that have never left my computer, sometimes I just lost interest. Sometimes I was afraid of offending people. Sometimes I realized I was wrong. Sometimes I found myself in a dead-end, trapped by my own words. Sometimes I discovered that someone else had already said what I had to say, usually much better than I. These were not wasted words, though. Until I wrote them, I did not know what they would say. Every word I wrote contributed to who I am, now, writing this. Every now and then I trawl through them in search of something worthy of further effort. However, only very rarely do I make use of what I find. This is partly because, if the ideas were good, then the chances are that I already used them again in a different work and, if they were bad, there would be no point. Perhaps the biggest reason that I rarely continue to write long-abandoned work is that the writing changed me. It would be a strange partnership between who I was then and who I have become now. It would feel oddly inauthentic to be presenting that person's words as my own (and I would not be able to discuss any disagreements with my co-author).

I do sometimes reread the works that make it out into the open, perhaps years or even decades after I wrote them. When I do, it feels like reading someone else's work. There is much in my old writings that I know that I knew, but I no longer know; some values that I held but no longer hold; and much that I know now that negates what I once knew. Some of it I truly enjoy — it is like rediscovering an old friend — but much of it is truly embarrassing. For instance, I recently re-read my master's

dissertation from over thirty years ago on multimedia and education that professed a belief in learning styles, among many other terrible faux pas. But, for all that has changed in my knowledge, understanding and beliefs, it is also sobering, and perhaps a little reassuring, to see how much has stayed the same. Back in 1992 — five years before becoming a full-time educator (and with no intention of ever becoming one), ten years before my PhD defence, fifteen years before my first book — the problems I grappled with remain my preoccupations now and have since formed an unbroken line of themes in all my work. The desire to support learner autonomy, the belief that institutions can be antithetical to learning, my attempts to understand education as a complex system, my search for ways to understand and build technologies so that they can liberate or empower learners, the glimmerings of an abiding interest in motivation, and much, much more are as strongly present in this embarrassingly naïve dissertation as they are in my work today.

Despite my constant regurgitation of half-forgotten ideas and values, when I am writing something new, I usually believe that I am having insights that I am sharing for the very first time. And, in a very important way, I am. Re-use is a feature, I think, not a bug. In all probability, there is not a single word in this book that was written here for the first time. There is without a doubt a significant overlap between the words used by all the authors in each of this book's chapters. Perhaps some of us cited the same sources. But we have all put those words together differently, in combinations that have never once been seen in the whole of human history. What is true for words is as true for ideas that are not only replicated and reassembled but that mutate and evolve in the process. Original thinking, for me, is not an endless succession of novel discoveries or insights; but a constant cycle of renewal, reformulation, reconnection, and reframing in light of what I already know. My writing mines the maddeningly entangled, richly layered web of connected concepts and images in my mind. It pulls strands from the unconscious depths of my memory and sets them before me to become something different every time... the same thread but woven into a different cloth. Each time I write, my writing rewrites me.

Technologies of Writing

Early in my academic career, I observed that full professors (far more than the rest of us) always seemed to carry notebooks with them to events like meetings, seminars, workshops and lectures, in which they constantly scribbled. At first, I assumed that they were recording notes on whatever event they were attending, much as we recommend that our students should do in lectures or when reading, but that was only partially true. In fact, now that I am a full professor myself, I know that they were usually noting down their *responses* to the event, and/or inspirations deriving from it (well, sometimes they were just writing shopping lists: writing serves many purposes). I regret that I have never kept a diary but, for many years, inspired by professors and long before I become one myself, I carried a pocket-sized Moleskine notebook with me at all times. I never wrote more than notes, or sketches, or small *aides-memoires* in them: the constraints of the small format made anything else impractical. They were prosthetic medium-term memories and planning tools, not records that I meant to keep. But I did keep a few, and I am glad of it. I still have some of them stashed away in a box, and they make fascinating reading, snapshots of another me, not a diary, not a finished work, but a work in progress.

For the best part of two decades, though, nearly all my notes have been electronic. Although they lack some of the immediacy and flexibility of expression of their paper brethren, electronic notes (with some provisos and precautions) do not get lost, burned, or stolen. They are dated, searchable, taggable, reorganizable, and reusable. Copying and pasting is seamless. Notes can be any size, from the title of a book I mean to read to the best part of a book I mean to write. Maybe best of all, I can read almost any note I've written for at least the last decade, on many devices, including on one that fits in my pocket that I carry with me most of the time. Too much of what I write is imprisoned on the machine on which I wrote it: not so my notes. Though Moleskine notebooks are small, I would need a suitcase to carry an equivalent number of paper notes, and I would never be able to find anything I was looking for. At first, in the early to mid-2000s, I used note-taking apps like Evernote or OneNote, which were very functional; but their proprietary formats caused endless headaches when I moved to a different kind of device, wanted to move my notes elsewhere, or failed

to pay their subscription fees. Some, like Apple Notes, started out openly but morphed into cloud-based apps that rendered them useless to me because they were impermanent, locked into their parent applications. Some simply vanished when their cloud providers abandoned them, moved on, or went bust. I usually had backups, but some notes are, quite unnecessarily, lost forever. For some years I have therefore been using Joplin (https://joplinapp.org/), an open source notes app that allows me to keep my notes on my own server (or any standards-supporting server, as well as some cloud services), to access them from almost any digital device, and to export them to anything else. Behind the WYSIWYG facades, notes are formatted using MarkDown, an open text formatting standard that can be read by countless other apps, and (even in its raw form) without much difficulty by human beings. No one and nothing are ever going to take it or my notes away from me again, unless I do something really stupid, a solar flare destroys all the many devices on which they are stored, or I forget the passwords I used to encrypt their contents. Though Joplin lacks some of the bells and whistles of commercial equivalents, I miss very few of them apart from the means to sketch with a stylus on a tablet or phone, but I can paste in the results of an app that does allow that, so it is not a terrible loss.

Joplin is the epitome of a low-threshold app, a soft, single-purpose, unassuming technology that, precisely because of its simplicity, allows it to become anything I want it to be, and that can be assembled with others to become almost anything. Most writing applications have clear ideas about how the writer will use them: they harden parts of the writing process, from setting margins to structuring a document with headings to inserting citations. In so doing, they take control of some of the writing process. Sometimes that is useful — I have enjoyed using Scrivener, for example, because it is designed for the creation of long manuscripts and provides many tools to assist that process, from outlining tools to virtual corkboards. Such applications harden chores so that we do not have to do them but, in the process, they make us a part of their own orchestration, as much as we make them part of ours. Joplin, on the other hand, has very little innate shape: like all the best soft technologies, it is largely composed of gaps to be filled, in any way I choose to fill them. It serves a great many purposes, from mundane shopping lists and marking to capturing ideas and whole passages that will later appear in a publication

of some kind. For instance, one of my favourite folders is labelled "soft-hard stuff," reflecting the fact that it started out as notes and snippets for my long-gestating book, *How Education Works* (Dron, in press), and associated papers (Dron, 2022). However, it has since evolved to be a repository of ideas, pithy sentences that occur to me in the middle of the night or in the shower; things to read, quotations, and so on that are all in some way connected (because they spring from the same source). I can tag the notes so that they can be reorganized in any way that makes sense to me: the folders are just labels, not containers; they are boundaries, not barriers. These ways of organization are my own, not those of the software developers. You could not reconstruct my book or my papers out of this, but you could certainly write a new one. I expect to do so.

My notes in Joplin are an extension of my own mind, not the minds of its creators, and it evolves with me, learning with me as I learn through it. This speaks to the same phenomenon that underpins all the words we write and say. Language is a difficult technology to learn, and writing is possibly even harder but, once mastered, it can express almost anything; it is a very soft technology that contains almost nothing but gaps to fill, with whatever we choose to fill them with, and it can be made a part of almost limitless other assemblies, from promises to poetry. However, it is not all empty space. Each word anchors countless other words and concepts. Metaphors abound, not just reflecting ideas but creating them, fuelling and engendering thoughts, not transcribing them (Hofstadter & Sander, 2013). We think, primarily, in metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and each metaphor opens up new adjacent possibles for us to explore. Often, we make new metaphors from those contained (look, a metaphor!) in the language itself. As Melville (1850) wrote, "The trillionth part has not yet been said; and all that has been said, but multiplies the avenues to what remains to be said." In common with most of our technologies, and perhaps the apogee of them, writing is a partner to cognition, not a slave to it. Although our sentences may be unique, the words we write are, on the whole, not our own. We had to learn them, and so we participate in the collective intelligence of our forebears: their metaphors become the building blocks and active progenitors of our own cognition, and of what we write. They are grist for the mill, but they are also components of the mill itself (Paul, 2021).

Other People

No one writes alone: we weave and re-weave the words and thoughts of others, stretching across countless generations, that provide us with scaffolding on which we create, as well as most of the raw material for our creations. Similarly, the words that we send out into the ether are not transmissions of our thoughts, but threads to be woven into parts of the cloth that makes up the minds of others.

Most of the time, authors see none of the effects of their writing on others, but we get glimpses here and there. The process of publishing an academic paper is, in essence, not far removed from blogging, where replies mostly take the form of peer reviews, and (once published) papers referring back to it. The conversation is, however, usually tediously slow, and far more intermittent than that of any other social medium. Responses from peer reviewers can be very rich and helpful but, as well as being slow, they tend to be anonymous and are only rarely the start of a genuine conversation. The interesting conversations tend to begin when works are cited. I therefore have Google Scholar alerts set up to email me when my work is cited, and I avidly read papers that do so. Rarely, I will return the favour. Once in a while, I come across authors who have done more than just skim my work — those who incorporate my ideas into their own, who argue against them, or who build upon them. These I cherish. Similarly, I appreciate reviews and summaries that tell me how successful or unsuccessful I have been in conveying whatever my writing and I hoped to convey. However, more often than not, my name just appears in a long list of citations, the complex, interconnected ideas in my work reduced to a single concept or label, devoid of nuance, context, or meaning. It does my ego little good to see what becomes of all my hard work, but this is exactly as it should be. I do want my words to matter but, even when they do not, even when they are misunderstood, even when they are reduced to a reference, they have become part of something bigger. Perhaps they are triggers that spawn contrary thoughts, different connections, and dissimilar meanings; perhaps they were the result of a keyword search and the reader got no further than the abstract: no matter. When they leave my computer, they have their own lives to lead, new minds to become entangled with; and that is good. It is personally gratifying to know that, here and there,

my writing and I have helped to shape the ideas of another person, but it is just as valuable to be a catalyst, or a barely discernible flavour in a completely different recipe that someone else creates.

For more meaningful and engaging conversations, I prefer to blog and to share my posts through other social media like Twitter or LinkedIn. This is where real academic conversations can begin (often right away, not weeks or months later), where my thoughts can be subject to scrutiny and critique to which I can easily respond, and where I can learn about what I think from others. Blogs can be really useful in more prosaic ways, too. Though I am sure that my published research is a contributory factor, I have often been invited to give keynotes based largely on my blogs alone, and sometimes to submit papers to journals based on their contents. In fact, recently and for the first time ever, I pre-published a finished orphan paper on my blog and, within days, had two offers to publish it in reputable, peer-reviewed, open journals. It is a lot easier to let the journals find you than to try to fit what you think their demands will be. Obviously, this strategy would only work for open content and in open journals, but those are usually the only ones in which I would seek to publish my writing anyway. Predatory journals that prevent others from seeing the work unless they pay a fee, or that charge authors for the privilege of allowing their work to be open, seem to me to be the antithesis of the purpose of academia. The fundamental goal of academia, and thus of academics such as me, is to create more knowledge in the world, whether it is passing on the wisdom of oneself or others, creating something new or, more usefully, engaging with others to create knowledge together.

I am a sporadic but enthusiastic blogger. I started blogging in the late 1990s when I figured that, because I was building and studying the social software, I ought to walk the talk. In keeping with my belief that conversation matters more than broadcasting one's ideas, almost all that I shared back then were commentaries on things that I found on the Web, from papers to electronic and, of course, the blogs of other people. Most were brief but, over the years, the average length has grown, and I have increasingly used them to share my more original ideas. Nowadays, I mostly treat blogs in much the same way as I treat keynotes: they are a less academic way of sharing ideas that are either fully formed and on which I have published extensively; or they are half-formed and

to which I want a reaction. Whereas I have seldom given a keynote to more than a few hundred people, and my formal writing (including my books, journal papers, book chapters like this, and conference publications) rarely reaches more than a few thousand readers (usually, not even that), my blogs are sometimes read thousands of times and, occasionally, by tens of thousands of people. A handful have received over 100,000 views. This seems to me to be a good use of my time. I often put as much effort, passion, and time into them as I put into my academic writing. Apart from anything else, it helps me to hone my craft (as any writer will tell you, the only way to become a writer is to keep writing) and, knowing that they will persist for much longer and potentially be read by more people makes me try a little harder. Some are just ephemeral comments that I expect to be forgotten, simply drops in a greater flow. Some that I hope will be noticed are hardly read at all. Some are sleepers, zombie posts that will spark comments a decade or more from when they are written. That's fine: it is all part of the process of being written by my writing and, just perhaps, they may connect with an idea in one of their handfuls of readers, who will in turn pass on their own discoveries, in a cascade that may work its way back to me in months or years ahead.

We are all part of a connected web, a kind of global brain (Bloom, 2000). An individual neuron in a physical brain has no concept of the whole in which it plays a part, but that whole would not exist in quite the same way without it. So, too, with writing. The signals that pass between reader and writer, between you and I, contribute to change in both of us, however small or large it may be. You will read these words and, most likely (unless you have an eidetic memory), forget all, or nearly all of them. That is inevitable. But something within you will be different because we cannot help but learn from everything we do. Words — our own or the words of others — change us.

Shaping our Lives

Words are tools, places to dwell, and active partners in our cognition. This speaks to the most pervasive and underlying theme informing most of my academic work for the past twenty-five years, and where I wish to end this chapter: that we shape our dwellings and afterwards our dwellings shape our lives (Churchill, 1943), and that we shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us (McLuhan, 1994, p. xxi).[1] This recursive dynamic is the basis of all complex systems in which the parts exist both for and by means of the whole (Kauffman, 2022) — an organism and its cells, a university and its students, or a chapter and its words. The collective intelligence of our cultures and societies is what makes our individual intelligence possible, and it, in turn, is only made possible by our individual intelligence. Writing is a good part of what makes this happen as both an active product and its producer. It is — or should be — a non-rival good that loses nothing and gains much through replication, and its persistence allows us to not only stand on the shoulders of giants but on those of myriad ancestors and contemporaries, whatever their shapes and sizes.

What is written is not just a reflection of a mind but a part of it (Clark, 2008). Through writing (and other technologies), our minds are expanded, becoming extensions of us as well as extending into the minds of others, sometimes including those who will come after us. I hope to still be alive when you read this but, if I am not, a part of me will still exist. The collective mind that results from this intermingling is not a static entity: its very essence is movement and change. We do not become words when we read them, just as we do not become bread when we eat it. In reading these words, you are making what I have written into something I probably never imagined; making it yours, digesting and transforming it to become a small part of you, if only as fuel to sustain you for an instant on your journey. This is not an act of transmission but of re-creation and reinterpretation. In all the things we do, learn, and make, we are participants in a glorious emergent tapestry that transcends while it encompasses us all. Those of us who are lucky enough to write for a living are mostly only spinning strands for others

---

1   Usually attributed to Marshall McLuhan but in fact borrowed from his friend, John Culkin (Culkin, 1967).

to weave, not cloths to admire. Individually, what most of us write rarely has much effect on anything, but it is not nothing. It is part of what makes us — as individuals and as a species — smart (Norman, 1993). This is what makes us more than we are. This is what lets us reach up for the furthest stars and allows us to stare far into the depths our souls.

Writing for me, is both a cognitive and emotional prosthesis, something that helps to form my identity as much as it emerges from it. I am the maker and the made, the writer and the written. Sitting at my desk, writing this now, I cannot know what has become of this little floating island of words that you are reading today. Maybe it has found its way into your home, perhaps it is sitting in a library, or on a computer somewhere in the cloud. Maybe it has become patterns of ink on a piece of paper, maybe you are hearing it read to you by a robot, maybe it is a collection of electromagnetic dots on a screen. However it is reaching you, I hope that you have found something within it that has resonated; that something within you, however small, however contrary to my intent or however trivial, has changed. And I hope that you will go on to share your writing with me, or at least with someone else. All writers pay it forward, giving back what they make out of what they have taken, passing on what they have transformed so that it may in turn be transformed by others. This is how we grow and learn as individuals, as cultures, as societies, and as humankind. It is hard to imagine a more worthwhile purpose than to be a part of that.

References

Bloom, H. (2000). *Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind*. Wiley.

Churchill, W. (1943). HC Deb 28 October 1943 Vol 393 c403. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/oct/28/house-of-commons-rebuilding

Clark, A. (2008). *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*. Oxford University Press. 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195333213.001.0001

Culkin, J. M. (1967, March). A schoolman's guide to Marshall McLuhan. *The Saturday Review*, 51–53, 70–72. http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1967mar18-00051

Didion, J. (1976). Why I write. *The New York Times Book Review 5*, 98–99.

Dron, J. (2022). Educational technology: What it is and how it works. *AI & SOCIETY, 37*(1), 155–66. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-021-01195-z

Dron, J. (2023). *How Education Works: Teaching, technology, and technique*. AU Press.

Hofstadter, D., & Sander, E. (2013). *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*. Basic Books.

Kauffman, S. (2022). Autogen is a Kantian Whole in the Non-Entailed World. *Biosemiotics*, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12304-021-09466-4

Kramer, M. J. (2006). *Richard Powers: Each Try Launches Another*. https://www.npr.org/2006/11/20/6515434/richard-powers-each-try-launches-another

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live by* (Kindle ed.). Chicago.

McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*. MIT Press.

Melville, H. (1850). Hawthorne and His Mosses. https://web.archive.org/web/20230529184538/https://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Melville_Hawthorne.pdf

Norman, D. A. (1993). *Things that Make Us Smart: Defending human attributes in the age of the machine*. Perseus Publishing.

Paul, A. M. (2021). *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain*. HarperCollins.