

Action Research Seminar

“Writing in Your Own Voice”

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I started the seminar with a task that asked the group to punctuate this sentence: “Woman without her man is nothing.” As there were many feminist women in attendance, the sentence was quickly punctuated, Woman; without her, man is nothing.

I have been known to say that the mechanics of language are the least important aspect of writing, and I still say that. Although, I have just shown that punctuation can change the meaning and the intent of what the writer has to say. However, it is a greater concern that mechanics—punctuation, grammar, spelling and so on—not stop writing from happening.

I have also been known to say that a good editor can fix written work, and that the creator of the writing needs to worry about content more than form. However, I have recently had an example of a graduate student who turned her work over to an editor who completely removed her “voice”—what she wanted to say—in a way that was emotionally poignant and crucially appropriate to the subject matter of which she spoke.

I will not stop giving the advice I have given about mechanics or the editing process, but I will temper it with the reality that one must be diligent about being heard. As someone once said, “No one can express your ideas as well as you can.” So, even the best editor is only good if she/he leaves your voice clearly heard.

We, at WISR, accept and legitimate, validate and honor your subjective voice. We expect that you write, not to show you’re right but to show that you have a legitimate position. The knowledge you bring to the subject of discussion is valuable and comes from a variety of sources; some of which you might not even be aware of. Knowledge comes from life experience, from interactions with co-workers, from media (both mainstream and alternative), and recently, from the internet and beyond.

Writing is...

The preservation of thought

By simply writing down ideas, and not trusting memory, one can record what is to be said and how it would be best stated. Once recorded, ideas can be read and finessed to make your point exactly the way you wish to make it.

The way to record field notes, ethnographies, theories, and concepts

Everyone finds their own way to reflect on their ethnographic experience in the field. What comes out of interviews may be more than words, or may be words that are expressed in ways different from your experience. Writing about your field experience while recording field notes, enriches the content and results of your action research. It is also important to record notes before they get “cold.”

The clarification of thought

Thoughts are often unfinished or not clearly stated. Once written, thoughts can be read for clarity, rearranged to provide an inviting flow of ideas and sequenced in ways that the reader can follow easily.

The encouragement of communication with others

Your thoughts spark thoughts in others. I often read someone else's work to get inspiration for my own writing. Once our thoughts are written down, others can respond to what we've said, in cooperative and synergistic ways.

The format for dissemination

In order for our work, which is the proof of our knowledge—often experiential and unique—to be used collaboratively, it must be in written form. Having your writing published is reinforcing in many ways. However, even if the work is not formally published, it can still add to the body of knowledge of social change.

The content that adds to society's body of knowledge

Action Research is one of the ways to give voice to the marginalized part of our society, which is often overlooked. Although writing has been used as a standard by which to judge society's level of civilization, I am not suggesting that any of us have to prove our self worth by becoming expert writers. I am, however, suggesting that we use writing to add to what is being said about the segments of our society left out of, and misrepresented in, the "body of knowledge" that is incomplete without us.

The proof of what one learns

For WISR, your writing is the organized and thoughtful product of your knowledge building. Most universities require written work. The difference here is that WISR wants to hear your thoughts and your theories, along with information you've gathered through action research, synthesized with readings and other information gathering activities.

The validation of personal knowledge

Once something is committed to paper in written form, it can be read and responded to. Readers give much needed validation of our knowledge-building process.

The commitment to paper – ideas, values, philosophy

I hear that some people really enjoy the process of writing. Personally, I tend to procrastinate and struggle to meet deadlines when I have a writing project. I don't find writing easy. One of the things I think needs to be changed about writing is the choice to write in ways that are comfortable and expressive. Others do judge our writing, and indirectly we are judged too. When expressing ideas and values, one is taking a chance on being rejected. Using certain terms that are value laden allows others to categorize us in sometimes inappropriate and erroneous ways. It is a commitment, and not an easy process.

In order to maintain the integrity of your message, you must write in your own voice. So, what is one's own voice? It is the voice that allows you to express your own values, philosophies, social theories, cultural experience, political position and passions and more. Both John and I have experienced reading a paper without the name of the writer and knowing exactly who wrote the paper. That is to say that if you truly write in your own voice, your signature might not even need to be there for readers to know your writing. (But it is a good idea to put your name on your writing, to own your writing.) Therefore, what you write must be something you are willing to own and even be proud of.

Before I go further, I need to blast all those elementary and secondary teachers of English who blocked your writing growth rather than having expanded it. I have seen students express that the red pen on their papers made them think that the teacher had made the student's writing bleed. Their souls might have bled from the attack on their sincere attempt to put their thoughts down on paper. Yes, a teacher's responsibility is to "correct" writing, but that correction of mechanics must be separated from the content and from the expression of thought. Although there must be a standard form that allows us some universal ability to read on another's work, the learning of that standard can, and should, be done during another part of the learning process.

When I was teaching young writers in fifth grade classroom, I set up editing centers. A small group of learners would work with me to become experts in some area of written mechanics—spelling, punctuation, syntax and so on. The other children would take their work to the experts for editing. Eventually, all children were experts in all areas, and writing mechanics were checked in a non-threatening way. Writing that was put on display, or sent home, or sent out of the classroom, was considered "published." All writing had to be edited before it could be published.

Unfortunately, all of us did not receive such an unthreatening approach, nor even a clear understanding of the mechanics of writing. Nor were we taught how to find our voice and express ourselves. Therefore, it may be hard to trust our voice, our style, our emotional self, our values, our intellect, and more.

This little blurb does not express all the information and inspiration of the Action Research Seminar. You are only hearing my voice. The richness of the other voices is missing. But, I have recorded some of the ideas from the seminar. As I said, write it down!