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4P. Reflections on writing with others: The use of metaphors to describe and develop writing relationships

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the advantages of writing with others and suggest metaphors to describe different writing relationships. We discuss our own writing relationships and find that our metaphors to describe them are different due, for example, to cultural differences. There are no necessarily 'good' or 'bad' ways of working (or metaphors that represent these), as whatever works is appropriate. On the other hand working relationships need to develop and change over time as our writing skills improve and our co-writing relationship matures. Using metaphors can help us understand new ways of working. In writing this paper we used metaphors to help us both guide the process and understand what is most appropriate for us in different circumstances and reflect on how this has changed over time.

Keywords

Metaphors, Writing, Reflecting, Culture, and Working Relationships.

1. Introduction

Looking at the publications listings of our leading researchers not only do we see evidence of excellence in publications but we also see evidence of joint authorship (or otherwise). Researching and writing alone is the preference for some and has advantages, for example, the possibility of working independently and gaining all the credit for their efforts. The single author is free to write what he likes, when he likes and publish where he wishes. He does not have to fit in with someone else's timetable, mood swings, slow responses, misunderstandings and so on. Further, the single author gets all the credit for the publication. There is no ambiguity about whose work this actually represents. Indeed some appointments, promotion and tenure boards favour people who have mainly single authored papers. There is no problem of being too

associated with another writer (who may be regarded as the leading figure, perhaps unfairly, in the relationship).

But researching and writing alone has also many disadvantages, and include potential problems of loneliness and the levels of self-discipline required. The cliché of a writer alone in his study not making any progress has elements of truth. There is no co-writer who might help through the bad times and to give inspiration at times when he has 'writer's block'. The single author struggles on his own. Further, writing requires self-discipline. Not everyone can be organised and disciplined enough to write effectively for seven hours a day or make use of that hour free between lectures for writing. There are so many distractions in the life of an academic that writing sometimes does not get the priority it deserves. Again, there is no co-author to remind you that you made him promises and therefore progress on your own might be very slow and hard.

And researching and writing with others has many advantages, for example, there are gains to be made reflecting the dictum 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts', people have different attributes and therefore there are gains to be made from incorporating those, there is someone else to motivate you, and far from being a lonely experience, working with others can be fun and lead to long-term friendships.

Again, it is a cliché, but so often true that two can achieve together more than two authors separately. Even in your speciality, comment and criticisms by co-authors can reveal areas for improvement. Further, having two people with different expertise and experiences can add much to the final publication. It could make the difference between a rejected paper because of obvious omissions, to give one example, and a paper which is returned from the editor as a revise and resubmit. People are different, some of us are motivators, others ideas people, and yet others starters or finishers (Myers et al., 1985). We all have specific talents and we may need others to fill in on those areas where we are neither very good nor comfortable with. Some tasks and steps of the writing process will be easy for some, difficult for others. Again, by working with another researcher with complementary rather than similar talents, the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts.

Although you will still need self-discipline, the fact that you feel that you have a responsibility to the other author pushes you into getting down to writing. For many, it is easier to keep promises to others than promises to oneself. Self-motivation is harder to maintain. A reminder from a colleague can spur you on when needed. On the other hand, if necessary, you can make progress when your partner is unproductive (and vice versa). Further, it is unlikely the valuable potential advantages of friendship and fun can be gained from working on your own (unless you really are a narcissist!). However, working with someone else can make research emotionally as well as intellectually enjoyable (though sometimes it can be stressful as well).

Although there are problems in writing relationships as we will see, it would seem that the above advantages are seen by the information systems academic community to outweigh the disadvantages. According to Oh et al. (2006) the proportion of co-authored IS articles in the four journals analyzed had doubled from 40% in 1978 to over 80% in 2002. Both Acedo et al. (2006)

and Laband & Tollison (2000) argue that co-authorship enhances the quality of work and increases the probability that a paper gets accepted.

The writing partnership may be formed with a new colleague (either by you joining an established team or someone joining you), a visitor on a term's sabbatical who wishes to make use of the opportunity to work with you, or someone you met at a conference who was interested in your work. How will the writing relationship turn out?

In this paper we assume that readers wish to research and write with others for at least part of their work. We therefore discuss potential difficulties and ways forward, through the use of metaphors. We also assume a partnership based on two people though the same arguments apply to larger groups, indeed the potential problems (and rewards) can be multiplied in those situations. We also concentrate here on co-writing, though many of the points made can be applied to joint research more generally.

2. Metaphors for co-writing

Morgan (1986) discusses metaphors for organizations as a whole but Baskerville & Russo (2005) propose eleven metaphors for the student-supervisor relationship in doctoral studies. These 11 metaphors can also apply to researching and writing partnerships. We assume that the goal (or one of the goals) of the partnership is to produce a satisfactory project and project report for the research sponsors or a conference or journal paper. However, we use the term 'paper' to represent any of the desired outputs. The original metaphors of Baskerville and Russo are:

- *Project*, where one partner plans the process towards producing a satisfactory paper on time for the other partner, who acts as the customer.
- *Process*, where one partner is seen as a coach who trains the other into being a good researcher and writer.
- *Magic*, where one partner is shown by the other how to do the 'trick' of producing a good paper.
- *Journey*, where one partner guides the other across a 'mountain range' of difficulties towards producing a paper accepted by the referees.
- *Child-Parent*, where the two partners do not have the similar status but one partner learns from the other to eventually become an 'adult' himself, demonstrated through achieving the goal of an accepted paper.
- *Pupil-Teacher*, like the child-parent relationship, the two protagonists have an unequal status, but here they are more distant than in the child-parent relationship.
- *Survival Test*, where one partner is largely left on his own by the other who discovers from the outside, unlike the journey, whether the junior partner passes the series of tests and produces a paper that is accepted by a journal.
- *Apprenticeship*, where one partner learns 'on the job' from the other who is on hand at most times to correct mistakes, so that eventually the former can produce the paper which is largely his 'masterpiece'.
- *Servitude*, where one partner is expected to do much of the tedious work.

- *Adventure*, where the partners together avoid the traps that they face on the way towards achieving the goal of an accepted paper.
- *Marriage*, where the two partners are very close in their relationship of equals.

All but the adventure and marriage metaphors represent relationships that are unequal. In this case there ought to be some recognition of this greater input, such as the author list being in order of greatest contributions, rather than in alphabetical sequence. Sometimes there is a footnote to the paper suggesting the different contributions of the authors (and sometimes equal contributions). Very often an unequal status and contribution is reflected in writing relationships that start as a supervisor-doctoral student one and carry on the same basis even when the student becomes a professor himself. But it is difficult to change the relationship – old habits die hard. A similar unequal metaphor might result when one partner is more senior to the other (for example, a full professor writing with an assistant professor). However, if a relationship based on inequality works and the two protagonists are comfortable with it, then they may not wish to change. In which case, however, the secondary author might well consider other writing partnerships alongside this one which are based more on an equal footing.

Considering the two metaphors where the relationships are based on equality, the adventure metaphor would seem to be a good basis on which to form the writing partnership. On the other hand, it requires openness and flexibility and a willingness to share the good and bad parts of the adventure. Later on we share our individual reflections on the adventure of writing together, though as you will see, we do not all associate our writing relationship with the adventure metaphor.

Some might argue that the marriage metaphor is somewhat too stifling for a working relationship and in any case might end up as a somewhat messy ‘divorce’. On the other hand, many long-term writing partnerships do resemble some characteristics of a successful marriage.

Avison et al. (2013) add other metaphors to the supervisor-PhD student relationship which might also apply to co-writers. These are:

- *Dance*, where the two are normally together in harmony (but sometimes one or the other steps on their partner’s foot) with the dance sometimes being very energetic and exciting at times (somewhat like a tango) but at other times, disappointingly, more like a ‘slow waltz’.
- *Cold war*, where the protagonists are hardly speaking to each other, the hoped for friendship and fun being long gone, even if it ever existed.
- *War*, often started by petty jealousies in an unequal writing relationship but developing much further into a destructive relationship.

Kendall & Kendall (1993) suggest additional metaphors relating to information systems practice such as a game, organism, society, machine, family, zoo and jungle. Some of these might apply to publishing more generally. Thus colleagues might argue that ‘it is a jungle out there’ and you need to be strong and determined to get published. Top performers might be seen as publishing ‘machines’. Others might argue that ‘you need to understand the rules of the game’ to get published. Thus Venkatesh (2011), a very successful author himself in information systems, provides a guide to success.

Surprisingly, some long-term writing relationships do suffer a long-term war as the partners originally associated with an excellent early contribution continue to work together producing further papers and books because it is expedient to do so from a career perspective if not a personal one (for either partner). The dance metaphor is particularly interesting (and perhaps more realistic) as it suggests that sometimes the writing partnership is very positive, productive and happy, and at other times much less so. It also suggests that a successful writing partnership requires hard work, discipline and dedication.

As we have argued, some unequal writing partnerships are very successful and happy. Such relationships fit in well with the personalities of the participants. But metaphors based on an equal partnership, such as the adventure or marriage, are more likely to be successful in the long term. A common aim, therefore, is to change an unequal partnership, such as that occurring between a PhD supervisor and his student, to one based on equality. The process of changing such well-established relationships can be difficult and sometimes impossible as the dye is set. Some real-life marriages have the same problem. In this case both partners need to be firm and assertive without being aggressive (which will normally harm the relationship) and adapt a long-standing relationship to the new situation.

A different sort of problem occurs when the co-authors see their relationship differently, that is, they have different metaphors for the relationship. In describing the student-supervisor relationship, Avison et al. (2013) call these situations ‘mixed metaphors’. For example, if one partner sees the relationship as a parent-child one and the other sees it as an adventure, then the first might be waiting for instructions whilst the second thinks giving orders would be an anathema to the relationship as he sees it. Similarly, if one sees the relationship as an apprenticeship and the other a survival test, then one will be waiting for guidance whilst the other will not seem to show any interest. Many such ‘mixed metaphors’ will not lead to a very successful writing partnership.

In all these cases the two protagonists need to discuss the relationship – ways of working, ways of communicating, frequency of communicating – in general they need to agree what each expects of the other. Maybe they could discuss this in terms of metaphors and agree on a single metaphor, rather than a mixed metaphor, and also agree how that might work out. On the other hand, if there is a genuine mismatch and an agreed metaphor cannot be achieved, it might be better to decide not to work together and seek other writing partners.

3. Comments on *our* relationships

At this point, Author 1 asked the other four authors to comment on their writing relationship with him, drawing attention to any applicable metaphors. They had Author 1’s sketch as a guide but each was asked to send theirs to Author 1 alone so that each sketch was produced independently. Once these were all in we discussed the whole piece with Skype calls and email correspondence. We discuss that phase in the final discussion and conclusion section.

Author 1: Happily we agreed to put the author names in alphabetical sequence! This and an earlier paper formed part of an elective for the PhD program called ‘Developing Papers’ in

which we agreed to write papers both together as a whole (five authors) and in several one-to-one partnerships (myself as PhD supervisor writing with individual PhD students). In so doing, we hoped to explore the joys and difficulties of writing. The metaphor for this has from my perception been somewhat akin to an apprenticeship, where I have guided my junior colleagues into producing the paper with me. The exception has been my relationship with the third author who was a PhD student under my supervision, but has been an assistant professor for three years. We write together more than ever, however, we have been struggling with trying to put our writing relationship on a more equal footing. Indeed I would still see our writing relationship as more akin to the journey metaphor than to an adventure metaphor. Looking outside of this particular co-authorship, I have had one long-standing writing partnership (akin to an adventure metaphor, maybe even a marriage one – we are certainly good friends) but that started as such when we were university colleagues and therefore was well established on an equal basis. Other partnerships have been less successful in the long run, ending in a ‘divorce’, maybe due to a clash of egos or we simply ‘drifted apart’ as some marriages do.

Author 2: In Indian culture the role of an advisor is considered similar to that of a ‘guru’ and thus, the role is particularly important and even sacred in many ways. The advisor has a high status and is sometimes ranked as more important than one’s parents. Clearly I had many adjustments to make and now that I am two and a half years into the PhD I can reflect on the many changes in my writing relationship with my supervisor which can be perceived through different metaphors. Initially, our writing relationship was more akin to the process metaphor, and my supervisor guided and advised me on the various aspects of researching and writing. I see my professor as far more experienced and skilled than I am. Therefore it was necessary to acknowledge this unequal status and adopt an approach which is to learn and improve. Later on, as I progressed during the PhD studies, the metaphor changed to an apprenticeship one as I was learning by doing and my supervisor provided regular feedback with the aim of producing a conference paper early on. Recently, as I entered the candidacy stage, I view our writing relationship as inching closer to the journey metaphor. This present paper is one of two papers which are the result of joint work with two other IS PhD students and two academics working in collaboration. We sent rough drafts to each other to get feedback and developed the papers step-by-step. At the outset, our writing relationship might be best described by the apprenticeship metaphor. However, as we inched closer towards the final stage, it appeared more like the journey. Thus, I see writing relationships changing over time and the appropriate metaphors describing this changing as well. I see it important that the partners discuss their writing relationship at the beginning and at regular intervals.

Author 3: I have been working with Author 1 since 2007. This is by far the strongest (and the longest) working relationship I have had even though I have had considerable professional experience as an ERP consultant. As for any long-term relationship, it has evolved over-time and is still evolving. At first, during the very first steps of the PhD program, we were more into an ‘apprenticeship’ relationship since I was clearly learning ‘the job’ from him. But after a year or two, it evolved toward a ‘journey’ metaphor that seemed to satisfy both of us. Since my PhD defense in 2011, our relationship has changed. I left the institution, from which I hold my PhD, to work as Assistant Professor for another French business school. It gave me an opportunity to work with other scholars, and initiate new research projects and writing partnerships. I then had the confidence to lead a project with others, and to ‘fly on my own’. However, it did not stop us

to continue working together to get my PhD papers accepted in top-tier journals. In the meantime, we have also developed new research projects together. In my opinion, we are getting more and more efficient and effective, and we are now clearly benefiting from this long-term relationship. Interestingly, we are now switching from one position to another in terms of the writing task, depending on the research project. For some projects, he is acting as first author asking me to react/comment/criticize early drafts of manuscripts, or even asking me for some guidance (for example about organization theories or ERP practice). Even if we now aim to work on an equal basis, we have to acknowledge our differences in terms of skills, strengths and weaknesses. I think that I am a good fieldwork researcher, skilled at getting access to rich qualitative accounts (to some extent coming from my previous experience as practitioner). Author 1 is much more experienced than I about using these datasets to lead to good research papers. Thus, we share complementary skills. Even though I consider author 1 to be a friend as well as colleague, I clearly owe him a permanent respect for his achievements to the community but also for my own PhD supervision. Therefore, switching from a 'journey' to an 'adventure' metaphor is a long-term process. Further, I do not see this as a binary switch from one metaphor to another. It is much more evolving as a continuum as I gain confidence and experience. Finally, I think that efficient author relationships can only be possible if people really like to work together. This is clearly the case with author 1, since we have moved far beyond the obligations of a supervisor and a supervisee relationship. It is therefore also essential to share the same values and code of ethics with long-term co-authors.

Author 4: I am in the second year of the taught part of my PhD studies. My doctoral program includes several research apprenticeship modules (RAMs) which usually consist of a small project with the aim of producing a joint paper. This might result from one or two RAMs and some follow-up work. Students are expected to work with different members of academic staff on these RAMs and I have found working with different experienced co-authors particularly interesting. The working relationships have been very different. Writing with different people I am experiencing at first hand working within different metaphorical frameworks, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. Reflecting on my own experiences so far, I realize it is not obvious which way of working – which metaphor if you like – might be the best one for me. I am presently writing with author 1 (my supervisor) and also a professor in organizational theory. Although their approaches are very different, I see potential advantages in merging aspects of the two, indeed I see synergies in the topics as well as the ways of working. Of course, some ways of working are incompatible, but this is not always the case.

Author 5: Arriving from a third world country to a first world one 18 months ago, there was the double task of making sense of a new and very different personal and professional world. It may not surprise you therefore that I use the parent-child metaphor to describe the first few months. The initial days were like being a baby grappling with a new world. During the first year of the two year taught course, the child became a teenager learning the language of this new PhD world. My first attempts at writing were not good and I received much criticism (as a teenager does). I had joint supervisors with expertise in the two domains with which I was interested in researching. Both seemed to be critical at this time. But now having had two conference papers accepted I feel more like a young adult and I am gaining in confidence, taking criticisms as positive as I try to improve my research. I see the relationship with my supervisors transformed

from a parent-child to a master-apprentice now but I see this as only a step towards a metaphor representing a relationship based on equality.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Following the production of the five reflections above, we had several meetings to discuss the points raised by everyone. As a summary of this group discussion, we came up with a number of findings that are discussed below. It suggests several takeaways (or recommendations) based on this exploratory (and self-reflective) study:

1. *Different Metaphors*: It is noticeable that each of the four colleagues writing with Author 1 had different metaphors to describe their particular relationship. Authors 3 and 4 are also writing with other academics and see the experiences differently than that with Author 1. This suggests that writers need to be flexible as they work with co-writers. This is challenging but also makes the writing experiences interesting and many enjoy the variety of working relationships. On the other hand Author 1 needs to be seen to be fair and even-handed even though the appropriate ways of co-writing might be different at any given time for each co-author.
2. *Metaphors change over time*: It is clear that over time (for example, during the period of a PhD program), the appropriate metaphor describing the writing relationship changes. Author 2 discusses changing from a process to an apprenticeship one, inching closer to a journey; Author 3 from apprentice to journey through to adventure; and author 5 from parent-child to master-apprentice. Indeed Authors 1 and 3's accounts of their relationship are not altogether in step, suggesting that they have different perceptions at any given time as the relationship changes. Further, these changes occur more as a continuum than as a jump from one to another at a particular time. Again, this suggests that writers need to be flexible as they work with co-writers, indeed the same co-writers, and be prepared for and adjust to changing relationships.
3. *Cultural implications*: Authors 2 and 5 discuss their preconceptions from their cultural perspectives about their role as PhD students and these are very different than what is expected in a western academic environment. The use of metaphors can help to show what is expected and develop those attributes necessary to become effective contributors in co-writing projects.
4. *Do 'Whatever Works' (Allen, 2009)*: Individual metaphors should not be seen as 'good' or 'bad' but appropriate or not appropriate for an efficient and effective writing relationship at a particular time. Further, as Author 3 suggests, different metaphors might be appropriate for different writing projects between co-authors at the same time, where each is playing a different role in each of the writing projects. This would suggest that the way of working together needs to be made explicit for each writing project and not simply the writing relationship more generally.

During this group discussion following the production of the five reflections above, we also discussed together limitations of this research:

1. *Limitations of metaphors*: As Goldman (1994, p622) argues "the standard for these metaphors is utility and focus, not comprehensive explanation". Metaphors might help to reveal ways of effective working or potential ways of changing working relationships in a general sense but no metaphor can represent the complexity and richness of real-life relationships.

2. *Limited dataset:* This paper represents only an exploratory study and there are clear limitations in the dataset used. There are only five participants and four are either PhD students or a colleague of the fifth (Author 1). It would be difficult politically if any of these four used a metaphor which was particularly critical of Author 1; and conversely Author 1 has not discussed his reactions to the four metaphors publicly as that would not be appropriate. It would be interesting to expand the research to other writing partnerships and analyse, for example, writing relationships that broke down, as well as expand the dataset more generally.
3. *Assumptions made:* We have made several assumptions. For example, people may have different perceptions about what is implied in a particular metaphor and interpret them differently, particularly when cultural differences are taken into account. To give one example, the adventure and journey metaphors can easily be confused, whereas in our description the first suggests an equal relationship whereas there is a leader in the second. We have also assumed that co-writers do reflect on their relationship and how they might make their writing relationships more effective.

We also discussed this writing project in regard to our previous related writing project (Avison et al., 2013). This one has been much more directed by Author 1. One colleague used the metaphor of Author 1 holding a conductor's baton. Author 1 framed the paper and set clear tasks and directed the process akin to a conductor-orchestra metaphor or a teacher-student one. On the other hand the first paper was created over a longer term and in workshops where the paper was completed in a way much more like an adventure. Again, neither metaphor should be seen as 'good' or 'bad' and both proved appropriate at that time and, further, neither paper would have been produced without the active participation and contribution of all five authors. The different experiences also gave guidance to us on different ways to develop papers.

Writing relationships can last a long time and the first 'metaphor' established can be the basis for your writing partnership, so it is important to agree early on what works for you both, in order to avoid an unsatisfactory relationship. Too often we make assumptions about our expectations and through the use of metaphors we might be able to eke out what would be the best way to develop the writing partnership. With research relationships that start as a supervisor-PhD student, it is necessary to re-discuss the relationship once the student has their PhD and joins the rank of professor himself. But it is useful to discuss the working relationship almost at every meeting and be willing to adapt it. We hope that using these metaphors provides a useful way to characterize the relationship and a way, by discussing alternative 'metaphors', to change the relationship into an even more productive one. The gains of co-writing, as we discussed at the beginning, make this task worthwhile.

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