

Writing as Talk

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Abstract

Historically, the psychotherapies have subscribed to an idea that the spoken word is the first language of psychotherapy. This idea has influenced my practice but work with Susan challenged this prejudice. We have worked together to find ways of using writing to communicate things which were not finding their way into spoken language. This paper shares some stories from our written and spoken conversations. Susan and I reflect on the place of writing in our work and talk about the experience of reading each other's writing. In this paper, I propose that writing and reading are relational practices. I suggest the reflexive movement in these activities both anticipates and shapes the responses between self and other when while reading the writings to the writer-as-listener. In preparing and presenting these writings and reflections from within and about our conversations, I hope to create some coherence with a dialogical collaborative style of working and propose writing as a form of systemic practice and systemic inquiry.

Keywords: *writing, collaborative, reflexivity, systemic therapy, social constructionism, qualitative inquiry.*

Writing is not only a means of communicating to oneself or others but it is also a form of inquiry. It fits very well with the collaborative, dialogical approach to systemic inquiry. Writing can be considered a systemic practice in that it is always relational whether in response to inner dialogue or as part of outer dialogue. Writing *from within* and *about* professional relationships is deserving of ethical consideration as other areas of systemic practice. Reflexive writing invites critical and appreciative consideration of the fluid and emergent relationship between practice and its storying process which produces 'theory'.

In this paper, I show how Susan's writing has shaped our working relationship. In addition, I have developed reflexive writing for myself and with Susan (an agreed pseudonym), a woman coming for therapy. These writing practices arose out of and in response to therapeutic practice as a form of self-reflection for 'my own' professional use. I then invited responses to my written reflections from the person with whom I had been talking, Susan. We discuss the uses of writing as a chosen language for communicating in therapy. We reflect on the processes of *writing for a listening reader* and on *reading for a listening writer* and I connect these experiences to some ideas from dialogical and collaborative theory.

Writing, talking and making relationships

Susan and I are now quite accomplished at weaving Susan's writing into our work. She writes, I read what she writes – sometimes quietly to myself but mostly aloud at her request. While Susan takes up the clipboard which has been going back and forth between us and starts to write, I wait, thinking nothing much. I'm more feeling *with* her. In this moment of waiting, I let my thoughts drift and, in my mind's eye, I see a darker room from a long time ago with Susan, frozen with anxiety, wanting to speak, but terrified by imagining the sound of what she had to say. And I would sit there, see her thinking and feel her struggle to get from feeling or memory to spoken word – but our progress was slow. For months, we sat in silence with me wondering aloud, saying reassuring things, sometimes raising difficult questions. I think I had an idea that my understanding - or hers - would facilitate talking. That didn't happen. We found another way.

One day, I noticed her looking at my clipboard. She was looking at it very intently as if she was trying to tell me something. Eventually, I thought to ask her if she would like to write what she was thinking or feeling. Susan suddenly twitched violently. It looked like she was about to leap out the chair and grab the clipboard. But she stopped herself. I pushed the clipboard across the floor to her. "Use it if you want. Ignore it if you prefer." Again Susan started as if to pick it up, hesitated and then bent down and picked it up. For a moment she looked relieved but then the frozenness returned. She looked anxiously around. I realised she did not have a pen but she could not ask

for one. This was an example of the speechless bind in which she was living: a pen would have enabled her to ask for a pen. I got her one. And then Susan transformed in front of my eyes. I saw the tension fall away. She looked relieved, animated and ready to get going. Her demeanour showed confidence and thoughtfulness. And so it came to pass that my clipboard started to travel beyond my lap and between us. She wrote, handed it to me. I read and handed it back. She wrote some more. I don't think either of us could have imagined back then that one day Susan would arrive, take something from her bag and say "I've brought you a present." Susan can be quite ironic. It wasn't for me. It was a pink clipboard for other people coming to therapy to use. My facilitation was needed even less. Now Susan used her own clipboard.

Susan started to bring writing to sessions. This offered us a framework for our conversations. She used e-mail to talk about things which would not have been possible for her to communicate *in the presence* of another whether in speech or in writing. I have learned to be careful as to which matters I broach – just because something has been communicated does not render it either a topic for speaking of or shared property. I try to find ways of asking indirectly about unnameable things and negotiate whether and how to talk about things.

Some time into our progress, I was planning a workshop for therapists and counsellors to further ways of working with people for whom speaking was not their first language. I asked Susan if she could offer some ideas for training counsellors to work with people who find it easier to write than talk. I provided some questions and what follows is Susan's response to those questions which she has been keen for me to share with my professional community.

Susan has struggled with dyslexia. Life at school was hard for her as it went undiagnosed and she lived in fear of humiliation. Her writing for this paper is produced out of courage and out of a commitment to helping others in a similar situation. She expressed a wish that I amend her grammar and spelling so readers would focus on the content of the writing and not on her dyslexia.

Writing in some respects requires more trust and openness than words...

Writing in Therapy: A Letter to my Therapist for Other Therapists to Read From 'Susan'

What's good about writing and why did I start?

Firstly – very interesting thinking about this. I think it is vital that people should feel able to communicate in whatever way [they] feel comfortable – what is worse – coming away from a session feeling completely frustrated, mad, upset, confused and pissed off because you haven't been able to express yourself, talk about what you want to talk about etc. or communicate on paper, either bullet points, essay form, or just a few words and at least feel you have achieved something, made a start. You might still feel some of the above but at least it's the first step. Before I started writing I would feel so mad and frustrated wondering how I could make you understand what was happening for me. I remember you asked me a long time ago to write down how I was feeling. Top of the list was frustration. You were very surprised and didn't expect that to be on the list and at no. 1. It is so important for me to feel I am able to talk to you and express myself. Who is to say writing is a lesser medium of communication than words. Writing in some respects requires more trust and openness than words – in writing the words cannot be erased – they are in front of you and I feel sometimes have more meaning than the spoken word. Sometimes perhaps more feeling too – poetry. Sometimes just reading poetry evokes as much or more meaning than having it read to you.

Having the opportunity to write or perhaps feel able to write has made a fundamental difference to my therapy and my development.

Why did I feel able to write?

1. Because I wanted more. I wanted to communicate with you and express myself. I didn't want to sit in silence with a thousand thoughts in my head and hope that you could guess what I was thinking.

2. Trust. Writing is so personal. Words can often be thrown away. But writing is more intimate (not sure that is the right word but meaningful perhaps). Therefore, I needed to trust you to write. I think I generally am a good judge of people and after a few sessions I knew I could trust you. I just didn't know how to think. So much of my life was locked away in a secret box and it was such a maze for me to even reach it without unlocking it. I guess in time once I began to put stuff on paper, even though it might just be about Jen's family it opened the door for me to think about myself and my life and perhaps formalise some thoughts for the sessions.

I remember when I just started writing I used to be so mad with you and myself if you didn't ask me if I brought any writing with me. Most of the time I was so pissed off when I left I ripped up the paper in pieces and threw it away, I was really mad and of course blamed you. I had to force myself if you didn't ask me to tell you I have some writing with me. Sometimes it worked sometimes it didn't. Then you asked me if I would like to be asked if I have any writing. YES that made it so much easier for me. Dyslexia stuff... Yes that is about TRUST. I wrote down in the session when you asked me the question TRUST in capitals. It is about knowing that you will not judge me, not ridicule me, not laugh at me. Maybe I needed for you to get to know me first and know that I wasn't stupid, that I am intelligent and have a lot to say. That I think was quite a difficult thing for me to cope with. I guess that is to do with personal experience, people judging me, laughing etc and because this is so important to me I didn't want that to happen. Once I had written a few times it just became easier and I wasn't worried so much about not writing something because I couldn't spell the word. I watch a programme once about people who are dyslexic/ People / or me! I feel I am quite resourceful when it comes to words and expressions. When I am e-mailing or writing for Jen I have 2/3 ways of writing the same sentence or 2/3 words which I can use which mean similar [things] all because I can't spell the word I need. Sometimes the simple words are the worst because it is harder to find different words for the one that I need.

What has worked for me in therapy?

That actually depends on how I am feeling. If I am feeling brave then more talking is important for me because I think I need a bit of a push sometimes. But I guess that comes out of you knowing me. To know when to 'hold out' and just wait for me to answer or whether to ask direct questions for a direct answer or to know whether to talk and then sit and wait for a response even if it is short.

The sensitive subjects are always going to be difficult for me to write. If I write them down there is a permanent reminder to what I have written, but if I don't write them nothing will prob. happen, silence! However, I do think as 'talking' is the norm in society for communicating it is important for me to get used to talking, just talking, anything really, then perhaps the other stuff will eventually become easier.

When you have written stuff and handed it to me for me to read ... it is odd ... not in a bad way odd but in a way that you are doing what I am doing, you are having to think how I think. In some ways that is good ... it is quite difficult to explain really. Maybe I am used to you talking and when you write it feels different. I think when it is the difficult subject areas then in some ways it feels better that way because I am not hearing what you are saying, it isn't as real. However, in some instances it is important I understand that.

What is it like bringing writing to the session?

Now fine. I feel I am able to write what I want to write even if it is just stuff unless I make a conscious effort around particular subjects. I think actually this has helped by e-mailing you. Because it is the same way of communicating and it gives me time to think, think things through, use the spell check. Before I wasn't very confident in fact quite nervous bringing writing for the sessions. Why? Spelling, writing stuff and just letting you in on my thoughts. Letting you know what I am thinking or worried about. Perhaps when I am more confident I might not worry about thinking things through.

Responses to e-mails – what works best?

Again a difficult question because it depends on how I feel, but I guess the e-mails reflect on how I feel. Sometimes I feel really quite alone with my thoughts and worries / concerns. Sometimes I just want to know that you are there. Not sitting at the lappy [laptop] awaiting an e-mail from me but just that you are around and if things got really bad I know you are there, just a bit of support really. Yes, I think it is useful sometimes to bring the e-mails or have read

the e-mails before the session because they generally reflect what has been going on for me in the weeks since I last saw you. No e-mails or lack of e-mails can mean... I feel really horrid and have just lost the will! Or I am just getting by, not thinking or I am avoiding thinking or talking to you (e-mailing) because of the subject matter.

I guess the e-mail thing is just about support, to know I am not alone and I can contact you if I want / need to. That has helped me loads. I actually feel quite cut off when the lappy or connections are not working. I guess it is my back up ... if I need to talk but can't talk I can e-mail then my head has been emptied a little. Yes I think it is important a response but I am also aware that you are very busy with stuff and I am not your only client, perhaps one of the most demanding! It helps when you respond you let me know when you are not going to be around ... not that I need to know what your weekly schedule is but sometimes / not always I feel if I write and no response then my e-mail wasn't important or the contact I want isn't there. I am not quite sure that is what I mean. I think I feel sometimes I just want to know that you are there – that sounds very needy!

Where to leave the writings?

The obvious answer is with you. You have reassured me that all are safe so that is fine for me. Sometimes / not often I feel I want them all back so I can burn them, maybe that is the panic speaking. Secondly the stuff I write is for therapy, not for Jen, not for anyone else so that is where it stays in therapy. In some respects I guess when I leave that part of my week has finished and the next day everything starts again. Obviously I still think about therapy and what was discussed and if stuff crops up with Jen I think about how to deal with stuff and relate to what has been discussed ... but I think it should stay with you. What am I going to do with it?

Reflexive Writing as Dialogue

There have been other significant learning points in our work together. I am remembering a moment during my doctoral research journey when I was writing more reflexively and experimenting with how to write inner and outer dialogue on the page. I was moved to write about a conversation Susan and I had been having. Something had happened in my reading of Susan's writing. I noticed something. So I decided to write for myself to hear and speak with the inner dialogue that was active and audible, during our conversation.

Writing 1

After a while of catching up on what had been happening since we last met, there was a rest in the conversation. I felt I had asked enough for now. I did what I have learned is a useful thing to do after the first or second silence with Susan. I asked: Have you brought anything that you have written with you? Susan bent towards her bag, unzipped a side pocket, took out some folded over sheets of paper and handed them to me. I said Thanks.

I picked up my reading glasses and put them on, cleared my throat and unfolded the papers. I read the letter aloud.

“Dear Gail....” - I read and Susan listened. Sometimes I stopped and responded to what I was reading with my own reactions, imagining what it might have been like for Susan, a question and so on. At some point I felt the tone of my reading was too reflective, too even. Something in what she had written made me want to sound more animated, more feelingful, more like the writer than a reader. I moved from being Gail the respectful recipient of a communication to being absorbed by the experiences described in the writing. During this shift, I felt an increased sense of responsibility, a sense of excitement and an increase in alertness from Susan.

Writing 2

After a while of talking about the content of what she had written there was another rest in the conversation. I chose to share some other thoughts with Susan.

I've been thinking

*recently
that I think of you
as a writer.
I used to, um,
I used to think of you as, um,
someone who struggled to talk in therapy
(and some other places)
but now I think of you as a writer
because you write so well.
It's your preferred way of communicating about some things
and you do it well.*

I thought Susan looked engaged by what I was saying so I continued.

*I remember that you want to write some letters for people close to you
for after you die
to share some important things with them about
how you feel
but I was thinking
I wonder what it would be like for you to write more
either for yourself
or to share with others
now
like a diary or a weblog
(do you know what I mean by weblog?)
I even thought
Why doesn't Susan write an autobiography?*

Susan looked puzzled-curious.

*You have had such a range of
interesting experiences,
struggles,
things that are hard to talk about
yet important.
And you have had so many thoughts reflecting on
it all.
I wondered
if that was something you would
want to do.
And if you did
who might help you with it.*

Susan raised her eyebrows for a few seconds. By this action I think she meant I am giving this some thought but basically I am surprised that you think that others would be interested and that I'd be up to it. But it's an interesting set of ideas and I will give them some thought. I quite like the idea of.... (and there my speculation runs out).

This is what was said. It wasn't written down at the time of us talking like it is here. But later on, when I was on my own, I did write it down. And as I wrote I felt her interest in what she might be feeling about the conversation we had had and how I was writing about it. Without her response, it was feeling incomplete. I sent it to Susan and I

asked her if she wanted to write back with some responses: what her thoughts and feelings were at the time and what they were on reading it all now. Susan sent back the following:¹

Writing 1

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Then: I guess I feel there is some kind of pattern with the sessions and in some ways expect you to ask have you brought any writing with you and when you may ask that therefore the anticipation of that isn't as bad (not quite the right word) as it used to be... less anxiety about you reading my thoughts, less worry about what you might think of me, less stress for me...so when you are reading out aloud my thoughts most of the time I feel ok about it.

Now: Now, when I think about the conversations I am so relieved when I have given you 'that piece of paper' even if it is just general crap...it is my thoughts for that moment in time, my focus and you will be reading what I have written. I am being heard through your voice and that feels good, really good sometimes in fact. It is quite a good feeling in an empowering way to hear someone take the time to read what you have written, to read every word (even if you can't understand my spelling, you have a good guess most of the time). I also remember vividly when I didn't write or I brought some writing with me and you didn't ask me (now if you didn't ask I will say). I felt really flat and fed up and just worthless really. That sounds a bit strong but that really is how I felt. I was so frustrated when I tried to communicate with you...I could have just cried!

I picked up my reading glasses and put them on, cleared my throat and unfolded the papers. I read the letter aloud.

"Dear Gail..." - I read and Susan listened. Sometimes I stopped and responded to what I was reading with my own reactions, imagining what it might have been like for Susan, a question and so on. At some point I felt the tone of my reading was too reflective, too even. Something in what she had written made me want to sound more animated, more feelingful, more like the writer than a reader. I moved from being Gail the respectful recipient of a communication to being absorbed by the experiences described in the writing. During this shift, I felt an increased sense of responsibility, a sense of excitement and an increase in alertness from Susan.

Then: Yes, I think that is true, although I wouldn't necessarily be aware of that. Yes, you do read with 'animation' and feeling and generally I guess I can hear you do that. It is quite odd sometimes to hear you talk about some stuff I have written because you make it so real. Perhaps because you are reading aloud it sounds so real, or perhaps it is because you are reading it. I actually feel quite relaxed when you are reading out stuff. (most of the time that is)...not sure if I look it or not...I even smile to myself sometimes. I feel the pressure is off me to talk and that I guess I just don't feel as stressed as I would if I had to try and talk. I do feel quite comfortable when you read, it is just so much easier for me.

Now: Now, on reflection sometimes I feel quite sad when you read my thoughts. Not the general stuff but my family stuff...I do feel quite upset sometimes, I guess, and just sad about how it is. You reading my thoughts, I think, would have been the only way for us to get through some stuff and I feel if that wouldn't have happened. I may still be in the room trying to speak and explain stuff to you and just feeling like I was going to explode with frustration. Yes, I think I do listen to you quite carefully. Although I think I may have only read through from start to finish the paper only once I can remember most of the words I have written and I am aware if you make a mistake (which isn't very often and only usually because I can't spell something).

Writing 2

After a while of talking about the content of what she had written there was another rest in the conversation. I chose to share some other thoughts with Susan.

*I've been thinking
recently
that I think of you
as a writer.
I used to, um,
I used to think of you as, um,
someone who struggled to talk in therapy
(and some other places)
but now I think of you as a writer
because you write so well.
It's your preferred way of communicating about some things
and you do it well.*

I thought Susan looked engaged by what I was saying so I continued.

Then: Yes, I was and it did take me a little by surprise and I think I smiled or laughed to myself. I also remember thinking that I still feel I struggle in sessions but I don't feel frustrated as I did.

*I remember that you want to write some letters for people close to you
for after you die
to share some important things with them about
how you feel*

Then: I remember feeling a bit sad about that, maybe it was the dying thing, not sure.

Now: I think it is a good idea for me to do this, although a very private thing it might be something I write with you on some parts anyway as I feel think will be really quite moving and perhaps upsetting for me to think not only about what I am writing but also the death thing...a really difficult thing to get your head round.

*but I was thinking
I wonder what it would be like for you to write more
either for yourself
or to share with others
now
like a diary or a weblog
(do you know what I mean by weblog?)
I even thought
Why doesn't Susan write an autobiography?*

Susan looked puzzled-curious.

Then: Why would anyone really want to listen to what I have written?

*You have had such a range of
interesting experiences,
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things that are hard to talk about
yet important.
And you have had so many thoughts reflecting on
it all.
I wondered
if that was something you would*

*want to do.
And if you did
who might help you with it.*

Then: Quite a few things when through my head then....perhaps a little panic about stuff that I don't want to talk about, mention...not sure really. All that stuff is a closed book for me at the moment.

Now: Why would anyone want to listen to me anyway?

Susan raised her eyebrows for a few seconds. By this action I think she meant I am giving this some thought but basically I am surprised that you think that others would be interested and that I'd be up to it. But it's an interesting set of ideas and I will give them some thought. I quite like the idea of... (and there my speculation runs out).

Then: Yes, I remember that this perhaps something to think about...a thought

Now: General –

This has been really quite interesting, although I have only really spent 10 mins on this...sometimes I feel perhaps it only needs a little time just for me to focus in and then focus out on stuff...I do find all this stuff really useful for me to think about (not really sure how)...perhaps it is me just focusing on myself again...I find it interesting though how I am, what makes me who I am and how I deal with stuff...most of the time I don't think that well really. However, I guess stuff like this lets me think about how I cope with 'life' if I am happy in how I am trying to deal with stuff and if I am not what I can try and do (with you) to change that and deal with things in a more constructive and less destructive way. Thanks Gail.

Exchange as evolutionary practice

We have created a full circle in the activities of our therapeutic conversation:

- Susan writes and hands me what she has written for me to read, to respond to and then reflect on
- now I hand Susan my writing and ask her to read it, to respond to and then reflect on

I was surprised when, in the following session, Susan commented that she hadn't realised how much I noticed about how she was feeling. She wrote that she would like me to do more of that. So now I find ways of sharing more of what I notice with her and enter into a state of *reflexive transparency* or, perhaps, *transparent reflexivity*. *I am trying to talk more how I write.*

Our talking style has changed since this exchange of writings. There is more risk-taking alongside the carefulness, more checking out alongside the spontaneity (Mason, 2005). We reflect more on our 'talking' and experiment with what feels useful at any given moment. When Susan has been too unwell to travel, we have found Skype helpful in that it enables us to see each other while supporting both spoken and written exchanges.

Susan and I have found a way of extending our conversations into new forms of what John Shotter calls *joint action* (Shotter, 1980, 2005) and what I am calling *improvisational collaborations*.

I am influenced by a postmodern systemic therapy which advocates the ethical stance of collaborative positioning (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; White, 1991). The part of the therapy which is 'me' or through 'me' at any second is open to and involved in a movement with another person or people, either present in outer dialogue or influencing of inner dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1934). 'I' am, 'we' are involved in a spontaneous elaboration, a revisiting of and a departure from what we have been doing together.

This spontaneous and emergent set of activities, jointly proposed, collaboratively negotiated, is a far cry from my early systemic training of therapists learning a method-led expertise, for example, in *how to* ask circular questions with people coming for therapy (Campbell et al., 1983; Selvini et al., 1980). As John Shotter (1989) says, "It is not so much how 'I' can use language in itself that matters, as the way in which I must take 'you' into account in my use of it" (p. 141). In such improvisational collaborations, I rarely have any idea of what I am going to do next or how I am going to do it until I am involved in a process of *anticipatory responding*.

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A concern I have in writing a paper like this is that it could be understood as advocating a method of *how to* use writing in therapy. There are uses of writing in systemic therapy (Penn, 2009; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Tarragona, 2003; White & Epston, 1990) which correspond with what Burnham calls a 'technique' or 'method' (Burnham, 1992) and which have specific uses and particular therapeutic goals. I am suggesting that reflexive writing can be used as a way of extending the therapeutic relationship and the possibilities for communicating and meaning-making arising in and between inner and outer dialogue. I am interested in the choices in what I am calling *discursive activities* (Simon, unpublished manuscript): whether to write or speak; what pace or tone to employ; whether to read in silence, partial silence or aloud; to read factually, empathically or *as if you were the writer* (Anderson, 2007) and so on. Susan and I use writing as a form of collaborative inquiry which allows our conversations and understandings to move on.

All this means that when someone acts, their activity cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity for a person's acts are inevitably 'shaped' in the course of their performance partly by the acts of the others around them, that is, each individual's action is a *joint creation*, not the product of a sole author. This is where all the seeming strangeness of the dialogical begins. (Shotter, 2011, p. 58)

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By inventing our own ways of communicating Susan and I have created opportunities for overcoming isolating and limiting effects of compulsory speech practices expected in mainstream psychotherapy. Such expectations might inadvertently reinforce or mirror a person's earlier experience of coercive and restrictive messages which enforce silence and prohibit a voicing of oppressive and damaging experiences as I think I may have been doing with Susan in the earlier days of our work. By creating alternative approaches for articulating, sharing and responding to accounts of experiences, we open up the possibility for the production of witness-able, respond-able-to accounts (Andersen, 1997; Anderson, 1997; White & Denborough, 2005). It seems that Susan's reflections about the opportunities which writing in the context of the therapy *relationship* opened up for her, illustrate John Shotter's statement:

If our ways of talking are constrained in any way - if, for instance, only certain ways of talking are considered legitimate and not others - then our understanding, and apparently our experience of ourselves, will be constrained also. (Shotter, 1989, p. 141)

So when Susan (above) says, "You reading my thoughts I think would have been the only way for us to get through some stuff and I feel if that wouldn't have happened I may still be in room trying to speak and explain stuff to you and just feel like I was going to explode with frustration," John Shotter can offer some support for Susan's experience.

I act not simply 'out of' my own plans and desires, unrestricted by the social circumstances of my performances, but in some sense also 'in to' the opportunities offered to me to act, or else my attempts to communicate will fail or be sanctioned in some way. (Shotter, 1989, p. 144)

Ken Gergen (Gergen & Gergen, 2007) has said "If you change the activities you change the language." There is a reflexive relationship between the two. One changes the other. Susan and I extend the language of therapy to include writing and treat it as valid as the spoken word. Promoting an idea of equality between them is not simply a matter of seeing both as equal or the same. Susan is clear that, for her, committing her thoughts to writing as something to be read by another has a different resonance than speaking them.

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Writing in some respects requires more trust and openness than words – in writing the words can not be erased – they are in front of you and I feel sometimes have more meaning than the spoken word. Sometimes perhaps more feeling too – poetry – sometimes just reading poetry evokes as much or more meaning than having it read to you. (Susan above)

It seems that different media and different activities allow us to find new ways of going on and introduce a shift in the balance and means of negotiating power between us. In remarking on Susan's abilities as a writer, as someone who can communicate well, there is a transformation in our relationship. The movement in our activities creates the conditions for us to foreground *mutual abilities* over *individualised struggles*. Susan finds her voice to help me see and understand what I am missing, what I am not 'getting'. By looking for an alternative set of communication strategies we experience "unique, never before encountered, 'first-time' events" (Shotter, 2011, p. 161).

At first, I had thought – and part of me still does – that I was enabling her, that I was facilitating her process. And in many ways, it is probably okay to say that is the case. I think she would agree. But that isn't the whole story. Susan has taught me a lot about writing and how human beings can co-ordinate in conversation. Our work together has been the springboard for my doctoral studies. Susan has convinced me how important writing is or can be in therapy.

A final story

One day, my office was suddenly unavailable. Instead of cancelling the appointment, I suggested we meet on the top floor of the Royal Festival Hall in London. It's a peaceful spot (when the orchestra isn't rehearsing Mahler) with a view over the Thames and people go there to work on their laptop in a serene environment. Susan enjoyed being in different surroundings. We sat at a table and for the most part, exchanged our thoughts in writing. When it was time to wind up our talk for the day, Susan wrote "It's been good to be in a place where everyone is writing." I looked up and realised we had been inhabiting another country where writing, not speaking, was the norm.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Susan originally wrote her thoughts in blue and red ink, and they are represented here as “Then” and “Now,” respectively.

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