The Effect of Conflicting Goals on Writing
A Case Study

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It is proposed that a major source of writing difficulties arises from a conflict between the goals of expression and presentation. This leads to problems in both generating and revising prose. A case study is presented in which the effect of this conflict is illustrated and some exercises designed to alleviate the problem are described. The effectiveness of these exercises is discussed and related to aspects of self presentation in writing.

1 The source of writing difficulties

Why does written thought so often appear impoverished in comparison with the reflective thought which prompted its creation? Here is one writer's description of the problem and the way he overcame it (Winograd, 1980, p. 209).

> In its earliest drafts, this paper was a structured argument, presenting a comprehensive view of cognitive science, criticizing prevailing approaches to the study of language and thought and advocating a new way of looking at things. Although I strongly believed in the approach it outlined, somehow it didn't have the conviction on paper that it had in my own reflection. After some discouraging attempts at reorganizing and rewriting, I realised that there was a *mismatch between the nature of what I wanted to say and the form in which I was trying to say it* . . . . I found myself wanting *to describe a path rather than justify its destination, finding that in the flow, the ideas came across more clearly*. (my emphasis)

In this paper I shall claim that this conflict between form and content is the major source of writing difficulty and that it arises because of the way people go about writing.

Writing can conceal thought because of the relative ease with which we transform our experience. Ideas are not essential forms, they occur in the process of achieving goals—as our goals change so do the contents of our thought. Writing, because it involves goals over and above those of reflective thought, necessarily transforms our ideas. The surprising feature of this transformation is not that it takes place, but that it so often has a detrimental rather than a beneficial effect on reflective thought. Fluent and effective writing depends on reconciling topic and goal; is, in Winograd's terms, matching content to form.

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How do topic and goal become dissociated in the first place? Writing involves a variety of goals, not all of which are directly related to the topic. It is the way these goals are achieved that governs whether this dissociation occurs. Let me outline three types of goal in writing. First, and most obviously, there is expression per se, the formulation of ideas in words. Second, there is coherence; the ideas must be structured to show their relative importance and interrelationships. Finally, writing fulfills a variety of social functions; it illuminates, persuades, impresses, etc. Above all, it presents an image of the writer, be it scientific and detached, or personal and impassioned. Now obviously the way a person expresses himself can be more or less coherent, and more or less impassioned; the distinction is between whether he sets out to be so, or becomes so in the process of expression—only in the first case can he be said to have a goal. The goal of expression places no constraints on the form of the final product; whereas the goals of coherence and self-presentation do. This means that when the latter goals govern the form in which ideas are expressed, there is the possibility that the ideas will be distorted. The writer's thoughts will be governed by the need to be coherent and the image he has of himself in the particular social context rather than by the topic alone. He will not say what he thinks, but what he thinks he thinks, or, even more confusing, what he thinks he ought to think.

This idea, that writing is disrupted by a conflict between expression and presentation has been proposed by Wason (1970) and Elbow (1971) (see also Wason, this journal). From their experience with their own and others' writing they suggest conflict can be removed by separating the two processes. In Wason's words, his first draft consists of an "uncritical exteriorization of thought," while later drafts consist of a critical rewriting. Form emerges from what has been expressed rather than being imposed on the process of expression. This separation of goals enables the writer to express himself more fluently and alleviates the anxiety engendered by their conflict. Furthermore, this mode of writing leads to the generation of novel ideas, so that, not only do "the ideas come across more clearly . . . in the flow" as Winograd found, but new ideas emerge in the course of writing. The gradual development of intention ensures that goal and topic are united.

I will return to this idea that novel trains of thought are stimulated in the course of writing. But now, let me add the proviso that the extent of the conflict presumably depends on the familiarity of the ideas the writer is expressing, and that there may well be other ways of overcoming it. However, when ideas are in the process of development, their form will be uncertain, and imposing form on expression will lead to conflicting trains of thought. By contrast, when the goals of expression and presentation are separated, then form will emerge from content and conflict will be avoided. Writing, rather than impoverishing ideas, will make them more purposive. I want now to present a case study in which I have explored the effects of these contrasting methods on a writer's performance.

The writer in question, whom I have given the *nom de plume* of Carolyn, was writing her doctoral thesis. Ironically it was concerned with the way in which postgraduates cope with the demands of a Ph.D.—indeed, one of her findings was of how widespread her own difficulties with writing were among other postgraduates. In her case, these difficulties were of two kinds; she found it very difficult to start writing at all and then to keep going; secondly, both she and her supervisor found the final product disjointed and lacking in conviction.

The study took the following form. I tried to discover her intentions and ideas through our discussions and her writing. I then suggested ways of writing which might alleviate the conflict in goals which I thought responsible for her problems.

In order to present this I have summarized two conceptions of her research—from before and after "therapy." I shall call these the Institutional Conception and the Private Conception (hereafter IC and PC respectively). I shall suggest that IC, designed to achieve a set of extrinsic goals (i.e., those she deemed appropriate for a Ph.D. thesis) distorted her own ideas about the topic and led to incoherent prose. I shall then describe the course of therapy and show how this led to the emergence of PC, designed to achieve a set of intrinsic goals (i.e., those appropriate to her topic) which had a beneficial effect on her writing and thinking. Finally I shall discuss the features of the therapy responsible for the change in the way she thought and wrote.

2 The Institutional Conception

The following summary, constructed from our discussions (unquoted) and extracts (in quotes) of her writing, shows Carolyn's initial conception of her research. I shall try to show that her goal was to present her ideas according to a stereotyped and institutionally acceptable form. This form led to a particular way of writing and thinking which resulted in unsatisfactory prose and obscured her ideas.

A variety of people, including academic supervisors and journalists, have expressed dissatisfaction with the results of the Ph.D. training. Areas of concern have been: supervision, writing the thesis, and the concept of originality. There is, however, no systematic information on the factors involved in doing research. The present work has been based on the assumption that "the aim of the training is to produce an autonomous research worker." "The passive learning model of receiving knowledge and information is not appropriate to the study of the process of doing a Ph.D." The literature on creativity and problem solving is relevant because the "Ph.D. degree is awarded for an original contribution to knowledge." The most suitable method of "establishing some basic data and concepts for further investigation and development" is one involving "a longitudinal, idiographic approach." Repertory grids are ideal for providing such information, especially since they allow us to enter the world of the subject. . . .

"In order to begin to understand the processes involved in changing the new postgraduate into an autonomous research worker in three years, a case study approach was used that incorporated the theories and methods of personal construct psychology. Some of the questions that have been asked are:

1. *What is the role of the supervisors in the development of self-confidence by their students?*
2. *How do postgraduates impose structure and plan their work?*
3. *Why is writing the thesis so difficult and what is the role of writing in the research itself?*
4. *In what ways do the postgraduates' perceptions of what they are doing change as they progress through their course?"*

This conception was designed to accommodate her readers' hypothetical demands, rather than express her own ideas about the topic. It can be seen as her response to four questions: Why?, Other Research?, Method?, and Framework? The way she answered these questions was governed by the threatening nature of her relationship to her readers, who would after all be her examiners. This combination of stereotyped outline and socially derived anxiety governed the form in which she expressed her thought. Thus, to Why?, she cited examples of others' concern, relying on external authority rather than her own formulation of the problem and presenting herself as a mere collector of information about a previously unexplored topic. To Other Research?, she provided a brief review of some work on learning, problem-solving, and creativity, despite her own opinion that it was irrelevant and her sketchy knowledge of the area. She felt, in fact, that there was little relevant literature, but rather than admit this or find out more, she chose to try to cobble some together. She was also very anxious about the scientific status of her methods, so her Method was justified in vague terms as necessary in "long-term," "in-depth," "idiographic" research. Finally the Framework was presented as a list of four questions which appeared as if from nowhere, without any discussion as to why these questions should be more important than any others.

Carolyn, rather than pursuing a train of thought, was trying to manufacture one which would satisfy her readers. This meant she had great difficulty in expressing herself at all; her writing, lacking any natural momentum, was continually postponed or interrupted. Over and above the inhibiting effect these goals had on her expression, they also showed themselves in a variety of features of the final product. More importantly, her misrepresentation of herself led to a particular framework for the problem which prevented the development of her thought. I want now to consider the effect of IC on these latter two aspects—her prose and her thought.

The effect of I C on her prose.

First, her prose lacked coherence because of a lack of specificity in her impressions of her readers. They seemed to require certain topics to be included, but these topics weren't related to one another, so that the links between them were weak. For example, she described some "studies of research" with little comment, then said, "These findings are very similar to those of psychologists working in the area of problem-solving and creativity." This was followed by a brief summary of some results of some research in creativity. Finally, she concluded that "The literature on creativity overlaps that on problem-solving as both are concerned with originality. They are relevant to the study of postgraduates learning to do research because the Ph.D. degree is awarded for making an original contribution to knowledge." These straws were made to appear bricks by her use of vague authoritative sounding phrases such as "the autonomous researcher," "a longitudinal, idiographic approach," and "the passive learning model of receiving knowledge and information is not appropriate to the study of the process of doing a Ph.D."

Her conception of what was required meant, not only that topics were spuriously linked, but that the content of these passages was superfluous. For example, "The Ph.D. degree usually takes three years from inception to completion, so that the process involved in getting from start to finish will be well stretched out. The changed perception of an activity after it has been completed is probably due to what occurs during the process of getting from the anticipated (or prospective) to the retrospective stage." This expansion and repetition of redundant information contrasted with the extreme compression of her own ideas. The amount she wrote about a topic seemed to be related to the extent to which it conformed to her plan rather than its intrinsic interest. Thus "Personal construct theory was first introduced by Kelly as a result of his experiences in supervising postgraduate students" received no further comment. Presumably this did not conform to the themes of a "poverty of information" or the need for "idiographic methods in exploratory research".

Carolyn's attempt to conform to her readers' demands led to a poorly interrelated plan consisting of isolated topics. In order to make this plan appear coherent unimportant points were elaborated, stereotyped pieces of jargon were introduced, and potentially important topics were either compressed or ignored. Her writing lacked conviction because she imposed an inappropriate form on the expression of her thought.

The effect of I C on her thought

Apart from making it difficult for Carolyn to write about her ideas, I C had a detrimental influence on her thought. It prevented her from developing her ideas about the topic and confused and inhibited the ideas she already had. It led to a particular way of looking at the problem which conformed to her theme. Since this lacked coherence the problem appeared as four isolated questions, the contents of which were derived from "areas of concern." This framework then biassed the way she interpreted the results of her data. Thus she summarized the results of interviews of students and their supervisors as shown in Table I.

TABLE I.

"When a supervisor provides a student with the clear guidance and well structured situation that he requires, the contented student takes until almost the end of his degree course to become an autonomous researcher. Conversely when a student has to organize his own work and understand learning as an active seeking out of information rather than a receiving of knowledge from his supervisor, then autonomy develops from that experience by about halfway through his course, if he does not drop out."

The three pages of which Table I is a summary consisted of similar assertions, without any evidence of their grounds or discussion of their import. To conform to her presentation of herself as a "collector of information," the interviews were reduced to bald statements of fact. Aspects which she obviously considered important, such as autonomy (the phrase "autonomous researcher" recurred throughout the piece), were left unexplained and unexplored. The framework which had developed from I C was effectively a barrier to any further interpretation of her results.

In this section I have tried to show the pernicious effect of I C on Carolyn's writing and thinking. Much of this argument has rested on the implication that she could do better under other circumstances. In the next section I shall describe the procedures I recommended to help alleviate the problem and shall show how these led to the emergence of a private conception which did indeed have a more beneficial effect on her writing and thinking.

3 Therapeutic procedures: (a) Telling a story

I attributed the source of Carolyn's problem to her attempt to impose an inappropriate form on the expression of her ideas. The therapeutic procedures were designed to help her exteriorize her thought in the manner advocated in the introduction. I hoped that she could then use this representation of her ideas as a means of developing a form which was compatible with the topic.

Initially I suggested that she write about the interviews, letting her progress be governed by her thoughts as they came to mind. She found, however, that she was unable to produce anything other than a disconnected series of notes (on reflection this was hardly surprising given the vague nature of the instructions). Accordingly I suggested she describe the course of the relationship between one student and his supervisor in the form of a story — beginning at the beginning and allowing "events to take their course." This was designed to overcome the anxiety, which the totally unstructured task had stimulated, by providing a minimal amount of organization to narrow the range of the topic. I hoped that the

task would be open-ended enough to allow her to pursue any interesting ideas that occurred, but would be sufficiently organized to prevent the need for spurious links and jargon.

She completed this task in a day, producing a five-page profile, effortlessly by comparison with her previous tortuous attempts. One of the people who read the result complimented her on her unaffected language and the concision with which she described events. The piece still read, however, as a matter-of-fact description of the relationship; its continuity stemmed from the natural succession of events rather than from the interpretation she had given them. Thus, although the story format had enabled her to write fluently and clearly, it had not led to the emergence of new ideas. I said earlier that I C resulted in the expansion of superfluities and the compression of her own ideas — this task removed the superfluities but without a corresponding expansion of her own ideas. Carolyn, however, was enthusiastic about the ease with which she had produced the profile and decided to write up the other student/supervisor relationships in the same way. These were again clearly and fluently expressed but lacking in interpretation. This form appeared to be compatible with the expression of her ideas, but too stereotyped to allow their further development. The next exercise was designed to bring about the development of her ideas.

(b) Revision: A conflict between reading and writing

The idea that the conflict between goals can be alleviated by a series of drafts depends on the writer's ability to read and revise his own work. I had hoped that Carolyn would be able to use revision as a means of introducing more interpretation into her discussion of the interviews. I asked her to rewrite the profile, introducing her own interpretation of events; the revised versions were, however, almost unchanged except for a few alterations of grammar and order. This inability to revise was one of the most prevalent of her difficulties, and the most disheartening for the idea that separation of goals might alleviate the conflict.

Initially I suspected that her method of revision was responsible; she tended to read through her prose, altering passages as she read and was extremely reluctant to introduce completely new passages. Two factors could have been at work here. First, focusing on her prose, sentence by sentence, might have overwhelmed her with detail, and prevented her from extracting the overall theme. Second, alterations and introductions might have threatened the coherence of the complete passage. Both of these would have occurred because she was fixated by the presence of her words before her. I therefore suggested she read through the profile, put it aside and write a summary of it, noting the most important points. She could then use the summary as a basis for rewriting. When she rewrote, however, it remained virtually identical to the original.

On reading her summary the reason for this failure became apparent. Earlier she had made an outline of the topics relevant to her results which was based on I C. The summary corresponded to this

outline and ignored other equally important points mentioned in the profile. In other words, her reading of her own prose as well as her earlier writing was governed by I C. The most peculiar aspect of this was that when she rewrote the profile the points ignored in the summary were included once again. So the first draft of the profile was governed by the story format and included different material to I C. The summary of this profile conformed to I C, but the rewrite of the profile included the points ignored in the summary.

This suggested to me that she was unaware of her own interpretation of events — I C was imposed on her thought by default. The story form, while it enabled her to organize her prose more coherently than I C, didn't provide her with an alternative interpretation. One way out of this impasse might be through a different method of revision. This would involve forcing the summary to relate to the contents of the profile rather than her expectations. First, she would have to write a sentence summarizing each paragraph of the profile; secondly, she would have to use this summary to write a completely new profile. Revision would be governed by what she had actually said rather than by what she thought she had said. Unfortunately I was unable to test this idea with her.

The kernel of this idea — that an artificial procedure might force the abandonment of I C — guided my final attempt at therapy.

(c) A sense of threat

Carolyn appeared to lack a conceptual framework for her research. This lack of organization led to a sense of threat whenever she contemplated writing. She tried to overcome this by manufacturing a form to impose on her expression — I C. This inhibited the expression of her ideas, led to the inclusion of irrelevant material, and resulted in a lack of conviction in her prose. The story format, while it helped her to write more fluently, was too stereotyped so that her point of view remained descriptive. The problem was to enable her to write fluently, but without providing a stereotyped framework. Two things she mentioned in our discussions suggested a solution. First, the process of writing lessened her anxiety; once she got going she worried less about the goals of presentation. Usually she paused frequently and her anxiety would reappear. Second, the main function of the story format was that its familiarity lessened the need to pause; it enabled her to keep going. So, the solution lay in enabling her to maintain momentum without also providing a form which would inhibit the development of her thought. Accordingly I suggested she should write about the development of her research from her initial pilot study, and that she should write a set number of pages (we agreed upon seven) without stopping or attending to the quality of what was produced. This was designed to force her artificially to keep writing about the disorganized area which was the source of her anxiety. I hoped that this would enable her to write about the theoretical background to her research without being anxious and without imposing

either I C or the story format. With any luck this would lead to the development of form and allow her to interpret her results more appropriately.

This was a dramatic success; P C (summarized below) emerged in the course of her writing. In the next section I shall compare the goals associated with P C with those of I C, and show the effect on her writing and thinking.

4 Her Private Conception

In this case her goal was to maintain momentum. This led her to try to interrelate her ideas serially, rather than make them conform to some externally imposed form. This had a beneficial effect on both her prose and thought.

Interest in problem solving behaviour has shifted from the processes involved in reaching a solution to a specified problem, to those involved in the formulation of problems. In a pilot study subjects had been asked to formulate interpretations of an ambiguous problem and to estimate the amount of time they had taken to achieve a solution. (The estimate of duration was used as an index of the amount of cognitive organization that had occurred.) This had shown that subjects who knew "they were going to receive" no feedback "about their progress . . . took significantly longer to begin . . . than subjects who" received feedback. These subjects also overestimated the time it took to complete the task.

"This had led to the study of doing research." The Ph.D. required and indeed encouraged the formulation of new problems. The extended time period would make it easier to examine the changing organization of a person's thought and his ability to estimate the time required for aspects of the research. The questions associated with the pilot study and the methods used to investigate them in the context of the Ph.D. were as follows:

1. *How differently is the problem perceived after having completed it to the time when it was first presented? (grids)*
2. *How accurately can people assess their own progress? (record sheets)*
3. *What is the effect of feedback on the progress towards solution? (supervision)*
4. *How helpful are intermediary goals and a grasp of the overall structure of the work to successful completion? (planning)*

Whereas the topics included in I C formed an isolated group related only by their common relationship to the reader's demands, the topics included in P C were closely related to one another. The ideas were related internally rather than to a preformed external plan; P C's plan was internally generated. Thus, the original problem was described, followed by its method of investigation, and its results were discussed. The similarity between the pilot study and the processes involved in the Ph.D. was shown. Where time estimation was used as an index of cognitive organisation in the pilot study, repertory grids were used in the Ph.D. research. This pursuit of a sequential train of thought culminated in the framework represented by the four questions and a novel relationship

between feedback and supervision was expressed. The final framework was closely integrated both internally and with what had gone before. Her goals rather than conforming with a particular stereotype, were now designed to establish interrelationships among a succession of ideas.

Compare the summary of the results of the interviews about supervision in Table II with that expressed under the influence of I C in Table I.

TABLE II

"It is the supervisor that the student looks to for feedback and information, and differences in supervisory style result in differences in the postgraduate's behaviour, just as the feedback and no feedback conditions of the pilot study resulted in different behaviour between the groups of subjects.

The length of time it takes a postgraduate to become an autonomous researcher is determined by the kind of supervision he receives, even though he is continually receiving feedback from the results of his work. The important thing here is whether or not he is able to interpret for himself these results or whether he relies upon his supervisor to do so."

Here "autonomy" is defined as the ability to interpret the feedback from one's actions unaided. The relationship between student and supervisor is shown to be crucial for the developing ability to use feedback to further the solution to problems. Previously this had been presented merely as one more fact which had been collected. P C not only culminated in a more integrated train of thought than I C but enabled her to interpret her results in a more fruitful way. Both the framework and the interpretation of the student/supervisor relationship occurred to Carolyn in the process of writing.

Where before, her own ideas had been compressed and redundant information had been expanded and "jargonized," this time her own ideas had developed and the "excess weight" had been eliminated. Where jargon (unexplained specialized terms) was used, it was as a kind of shorthand rather than as a hopeful means of evasion. Thus under problem-solving she had written, "Psychologists working in this area have noted such characteristics as trial and error, mental set (Luchins), and functional fixedness (Duncker) which may delay or inhibit eventual solution. Other characteristics which may facilitate the outcome are such things as insight (Kohler) and structural combination (Maier)." This served as a note to herself to investigate these areas further rather than as a means of accommodating the hypothetical desire of her readers for some reference to the literature. In contrast to I C the amount she wrote about a topic depended on its intrinsic interest rather than some external plan.

Not the least of the benefits of this exercise was that for the first time she had found writing enjoyable, even exciting. The maintenance of momentum had at the same time alleviated her anxiety by allowing

her to "decenter" from the social context, and stimulated the development of her own ideas.

5 Therapy: success or failure?

Carolyn's initial difficulties stemmed from the inappropriate form she had imposed on the expression of her thought. I tried to overcome this by encouraging her to focus on expressing herself without worrying about coherence or self-presentation. Initially her anxiety prevented this; she was unable to write without imposing some form, either I C or the story format, neither of which led to the development of her thought. The imposition of a deadline, however, forced her to write continuously which prevented her from referring to an external outline and led to the development of an integrated conceptual framework. Two factors were influential in this development. First, once she had begun, the task rapidly became easier; writing itself helped to alleviate her anxiety. Second, as she continued she found that a theme began to develop; she discovered (or created) structure in her thought where none was originally apparent. Although she had been aware of some of the elements of this framework before, it was only in the course of writing that she saw their interrelationships. One way of investigating this further would be to examine the relationship between the rate or rhythm of expression and the evolution of ideas. The crucial difference between the two methods of drafting I discussed in the introduction appears to be that; when goals are separated, momentum is maintained, whereas when they are combined it is inhibited.

This part of the therapy was highly successful; Carolyn now enjoyed her writing and had developed a conceptual framework with which to interpret events. Unfortunately, this is not the whole story, despite her acknowledgement of the success of the final exercise, the framework of four questions in P C was crossed out and rejected as too personal. Furthermore, the introduction to the thesis is based on I C; indeed, I have used extracts from it in constructing the summary of I C since it contains some of the clearest examples of her problems. This is reminiscent of the reimposition of I C which occurred during the revision exercise (see section 3(b)). In both cases she has been unable to use an initial exteriorization of thought as a basis for presenting her ideas to her readers. It may be that the initial focus on expression per se, while apparently so beneficial, merely postpones the problem without solving it. It might still be overcome if an effective method of revision could be found, or perhaps all that is needed is some moral support to enable her to have the courage of her convictions. Unfortunately she has taken a job elsewhere and the therapy has been discontinued. A tantalizing development has been her decision to rewrite the introduction using P C. Whether this works remains to be seen. At present her difficulty in revision remains an untackled obstacle.

Conflicting goals in writing reflect a more fundamental conflict between private and public thought. The separation of goals enabled Carolyn to express her private thoughts to herself, but failed when it

came to presenting these in public. An alternative approach might be based upon a reconciliation of goals, fusing the private and public self. This would involve manipulating the social relationship between writer and reader; the writer might pretend her reader was someone of similar knowledge but less authority than in reality, or she might adopt the role of someone with more authority. This would be designed to prevent conflicting trains of thought by unifying the disparate goals. Whatever the procedure, the fundamental idea would be to engender a fluent train of thought, rather than to manufacture one to conform to an externally derived plan.

Carolyn is not alone in her difficulties; they seem to be widespread among postgraduates. It remains unclear what the eventual outcome might have been if therapy had continued (or indeed might still be if she carries out her intention of rewriting). However, the case study did suggest two hypotheses about the relationship between writing and thought: rhythm or momentum plays an important role in the evolution of thought, and writing, while often inducing anxiety, can also alleviate it.

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