



Questioning the writing we do

Viviane Sergi

review of

Pullen, A., J. Helin and N. Harding (eds.) (2020) *Writing differently. Dialogues in critical management studies*, vol. 4. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited. (HB, pp vii + 240, ISBN 978-1-83867-338-3)

You should be writing, as the joke goes. When we come across this joke, our minds immediately jump to our texts, very much in the plural. Texts in progress, texts not materialized yet, texts in limbo, overdue texts, texts we wish we had time to nurture, texts we dread, texts we wish we had not committed on delivering during the summer. For some, this joke echoes vague or poignant feelings of guilt, arouses various anxieties, small and big, or simply makes them laugh in recognition. But for me, this joke is a lasso. It grabs and brings forth all the texts that surround me, authored in solo or co-authored, my texts in the past, present and future. But as I am quickly, almost brutally reminded of these texts, I am also simultaneously thrown in a completely different direction: that of the writing itself – the form, the content, the voice. I look at that these four words, *you should be writing*, contemplate all of the texts that float around me, and ask back, *yes but what, why, how?* This question arises in relation to the writing itself. The doing *and* the form. The form as the reflection of the process. The form as integral to the ideas I want to propose. The form, alas also as too often imposed on us. Imposed, really? If an academic meme can raise that many questions (at least

in me), imagine what a book on this very topic can do. This is exactly what is at the heart of *Writing differently*, a book composed of thirteen chapters that each explores what these two words that make up its title may mean, in a variety of ways.

Writing differently is the latest publication in a trail of workshops, conference activities, articles, book chapters and special issues¹ on this very topic that have multiplied in recent years. All of these opportunities have aimed at a double task: discussing writing as it takes place in our field (loosely defined as management and organization studies), and opening spaces to experiment with writing. The book should not be seen as the culmination of this growing interrogation of our writing, but rather as another step in exposing what else can be done with writing on research, both in the sense of objects of inquiry and practice of doing research, especially qualitative and critical studies. The book, taken as a whole, is resolutely into demonstrating, performing its title: the chapters show possibilities right on the page, rather than solely discussing what could or should be done in, through or with writing. Each of the chapters proceeds in a rather independent fashion; the book hence multiplies voices, angles, explorations.

Readers expecting either an analysis of the issues with current dominant or traditional forms and formats of academic writing, a series of practices to develop or suggestions to apply as remedies to these issues or even a manifesto for writing in ‘unconventional’ ways will be disappointed: this is not what *Writing differently* is... at least, on the surface. These topics are present in the book, but not always as the focal point of each chapter. In this sense, this book will appeal first to those who are looking for examples of what

¹ For special issues, see *Management Learning*, 50(1) (2019) and *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28(2) (2021).

writing differently may look and feel like. This is the great strength of this book: the variety of forms, formats and approaches captured in its pages.

Fragment 0. A choice

Here would be the place where I may be expected to delve into each chapter. A traditional review of a collection of chapters may call for a closer inspection of what each proposes. Given the wide variety of what these chapters present, I fear that this would partially miss the main message of the book. But at the same time, a glimpse of what lives between the covers of this book must be offered. Because reading this book elicited reflections that went in many directions, I played with the fragment as the mode of writing for this review. I include some of these fragments alongside my main, more linear text. What the book calls into question is broader than its actual content and working with fragments allowed me to allude to questions and reflections that arose as I was reading it. Maybe this approach will be unsatisfactory to some readers. After all, a fragment is a piece that presupposes a totality that is only partially evoked; parts (one? many?) remain absent through the presence of the fragment. But Writing Differently nourished my thinking about writing in so many ways that I needed to find a form that would let me share some of these reflections and questions, as testament to the potential of this book.

Writing differently, the book, only scratches the surface of writing differently, the topic – and this is both by choice and to be expected. When one begins to think about writing, its place in what we do, both institutionally and personally, many paths of reflection reveal themselves. For me, reading this book was an active process, as it engaged me on two levels at the same time. First, each and every chapter grabbed my attention, for various reasons: its form, its style or what the author(s) expressed, discussed. For many of these chapters, I did not know what to expect when I started my reading of them; this, in itself, is already an effect different from the ones that more conventional academic texts generate. This curiosity kept me reading with a different attention, one that was not

Fragment 1. One way of overviewing the book

Offering vignettes of experiences, embodied, felt, lived. Building knowledge from stories. Playing with fonts and where words appear on the page. Celebrating and exploiting the margins. Creating a play. Exposing the dialogue, through time and space or as it happened, live. Choosing the poem. Choosing the poem to expose oneself. Taking the risk of exposing one's difficult, even traumatizing, experiences. One's doubts about one's work. One's place while doing fieldwork. One's place in academia. Annotating a text. Including photos, drawing, emojis. Leaving crossed out sections of text that would otherwise have disappeared. Taking on the hard work of reflexivity. Experimenting. Totally decentering the author. Asking, directly or indirectly, questions to readers. Challenging the status quo. Reflecting on writing differently, performing writing differently or doing both. Presenting possibilities, leaving the reader make up her mind: what else could I do in/with writing? Do I only want to write differently? Do I feel that we need to do so? And what is "writing differently", in the first place and in the end? Not offering any form of unilateral, programmatic, or closed answers, but hoping (maybe; my interpretation), to spark something –

primarily considering the problematization, the methodological approach and the contributions of the chapter – as I would in other, more traditionally formatted pieces of research.

Instead, I became attentive to what the author(s) wanted to achieve through writing, through writing in a way that created space for different concerns. Ask yourself: how many times do you pay attention to writing, when you are scrolling through a text (and admit it, you do, at times, read academic texts like the web: browsing, scrolling, glancing)? My guess would be that considering writing is not central in most of the time we spend reading. It's only when I come across a piece that is particularly well written, one in which I hear a voice, when I feel the touch of a personal style that I realize just how rare these elements – while integral to writing in so many other forms – are in most of our pieces. Becoming more attentive to form, format and voice/style was a welcome effect of this book, which in turn stimulated in a vivid way my thinking about writing, forms, styles, norms and conventions, reasons why we write, etc. Prompting this reflection is, in my opinion, an important effect of this book.

Fragment 2. You will react

Reading Writing differently did not leave me unaffected. How unusual? is this reaction? Much of the writing we do and read in our field may be stimulating on the level of ideas, but does it affect us? And should an academic text elicit reactions other than intellectual stimulation? This is a vaster question than it appears. When I say that progressing through the chapters affected me, I do not mean in a one-note way: there is no dominant emotion or reaction that resonated from chapter to chapter. This reflects a parti pris of this book: that it is about the diversity of doing writing differently. In this sense, the chapters can be seen as experiments – and we all know that experimenting is an uncertain adventure. Encountering experimentation generates reactions – a whole spectrum of reactions. Hence, pick up the book and observe your reactions as you read the chapters: they will tell you a few things about how you conceive the writing we do as part of our academic lives. Whatever your reactions, this is already in itself a good starting point to reinvigorate (or simply invigorate?) thinking about how we write, why we do so and even what we write about.

Combined, these two effects – becoming attentive and opening up reflection – may be one of the main key takeaways one could get from reading this book in its entirety. Of course, each chapter has something to offer in terms of content and ideas, but I prefer to highlight the *effet d'ensemble* of the reunion of these chapters. Considering them one by one may indeed lead to an impression of dispersion, as these chapters, not tied by a detailed introduction to them, vary greatly in what their authors aimed to achieve: here a discussion

of a topic, there an experimentation with an uncommon form in our field, here a reflection in a more personal, confessional tone, etc.

All this diversity leads back to the book's title, which begs the question: what is writing differently? Such a title, with everything resting on its choice of adverb, implies positioning beside something else, not necessarily *against* but minimally *in distinction*. At first sight, the chapters seem to say that it is both about form/format (diverging

from the traditional template we find in journal articles) and content (including elements that are usually not included or even considered). Form is an easy aspect to grasp; what is usually excluded from our texts and hence discarded, devalued, relegated to 'outside' the realm of 'real research' and 'true knowledge' is a trickier issue. Many chapters ponder the question of what is left aside, when we write 'not differently', and attempt at including back different dimensions – emotions and feelings, memories, questions of identity, embodied

experiences, struggles and discomforts, uncertainties. In some chapters, this reflection is combined to forms (such as dialogues) or genres (such as poems) that remain rare occurrences in our field. All of the chapters are, undeniably, the fruit of writing. But I suspect that a number of potential readers from our field would ask the question of how we should consider these texts – are they *scientific*? While unsurprising, this question does not seem to me as the key issue – it may even be seen as part of the problem, given that such adjective is loaded with exclusions. *Writing differently* is, obviously, about doing things

Fragment 3. Which one is it?

Conventional? Standardized? Formulaic? Boring?
Disembodied? Wooden? Smoothened? Ordered? Jargony?
Without a personal voice, a personal style, a personal touch?

The nature of the beast (that from which the chapters in the book distinguish themselves) is at best evoked in Writing differently. But do we still need to engage in such identification, given that a number of texts have already discussed the issues with conventional academic writing (see, among others, Sinclair and Grey, 2006, Colyar, 2009, Sword, 2012)? Is this that simple, writing conventionally vs. writing differently? Isn't this just as much of an artificial, problematic binary, missing nuances and variety inside so-called categories?

Should we simply just do away with the label 'writing differently' and engage, fully, in writing – and do so in a much less charted way, less encumbered by expected structures and templates? If so, we should not forget to encourage and support each other in such endeavours, and value this work. If change can be fostered by writing differently, it needs to go beyond individual practice and to be amplified through what we do in our various roles: as researchers, teachers, supervisors, reviewers and editors.

differently – and our ‘things’, in our small world, are thinking, reflecting, researching, communicating, connecting and, hopefully, affecting and sparking transformation.

As Beavan et al. (2021) argue, in their editorial to one of the recent special issues devoted to writing, opting for unconventional forms of writing, especially influenced by critical and feminist theories and practices, can lead to texts that combine the personal with the political and the theoretical. Indeed, a feminist influence runs deeply behind many of the efforts in *Writing differently* from what appears as ‘the norm’, acknowledging more or less directly that such endeavours aim at not only dismantling the orthodoxy in our conception of writing, but specifically at criticizing the masculine orthodoxy – where the scientific, associated to the rational and the masculine, remain placed in a superior position to the unscientific, tied to the emotional and the feminine. Whether or not they pursue directly such a project, the chapters in *Writing differently* all combine, beyond choices in forms and genres, personal, political and aesthetical considerations in what they write about, or how they write about it. Again, combining these realms is offered as an alternative (and a rich one, I may say), one that reintegrate and put in relation dimensions that have been minimized or left out in the genres commonly practiced in our field.

Fragment 4. Tapping into the mundane

A key, underlying theme in many of the chapters in *Writing differently* is the mundane. Mundane experiences, mundane interactions, mundane occurrences: the richness of the mundane is not only revealed, but exploited, in a positive sense. Far from being a space devoid of insights, the mundane appears as a site that allows to explore these connections between the personal, the political, the aesthetical. Thus celebrated – instead of being scorned – the mundane offers readers a clear possibility in terms of where to begin, to write differently – and one that is within every researcher's reach. The mundane is where we, human beings, face questions and struggle, in our practices; it is also where life is lived, where experience unfolds. There is, of course, no single approach for playing with writing differently. But for the reader who is tempted to experiment with or wants to resist conventional forms of writing, anchoring oneself in the mundane may represent a generative starting point.

But is the real issue behind the impulse of writing differently one of writing, or one of researching? The moment that question entered my mind, early in my reading of the chapters, it never left me, and it popped up regularly as I progressed into the book. All authors in this book do qualitative research, often tinted by critical approaches. Is the core debate about writing, about

onto-epistemo-methodological positionings or about institutional norms that preserve a certain status quo? These aspects are in fact intertwined, and this may be the fundamental issue with which we, who are concerned with what we do in/with writing have to contend and may even struggle. I do not choose the verb *struggle* carelessly. I believe that several of us are, to various degree, torn when we come to writing. Torn between the desire to write in a way that feels free/freer, but is nonetheless rigorous, attend to the complexities of the phenomena that we explore, highlight issues that are important or urgent and push forward novel ideas – and the pressure to fit with certain formats, to adhere to certain codes. How each of us resolves this tension, situated at the nexus of writing, positioning and institutional norms, may hence be the open-ended question that we are always facing, each time we engage in the kind(s) of writing we do as researchers. This question is closer to a dilemma that cannot be solved once and for all. There is also no single way to tackle this tension. Yet, the issue of what we are producing, and may be reproducing, with our texts, always lingers – and in a sense, it might be a blessing. Such open-endedness reminds us that choices do exist – and may be generative. The pages of *Writing differently* evoke this tension, at times directly and at others, in a less explicit way; and its various chapters give illustrations of what can blossom when researchers attend to this tension by experimenting, both with ways of doing research *and* writing.

I was at first slightly puzzled by the structure of the book. *Writing differently* has a brief introduction (musings of the three editors on writing and their process with this book) and no concluding chapter, where the editors, or other authors, would have reflected back on the assemblage of these various contributions. This might have been consciously chosen by the editors, or not; nonetheless, noticing this absence felt for me like an unfortunate omission. With so many questions, possibilities and issues arising from the twelve chapters, why no final words on what we, both as individual writers and as field, could gain from paying attention to how we write, from exploring and experimenting with forms and styles, from questioning so-called standards and templates, and from truly devoting energy to writing in ways that are engaging or personal? Such a chapter could have brought together – not in an exhaustive but rather in an opening way – the different threads proposed by each chapter. Without ending on a programmatic (as reminded my Pullen in

the introduction, this would be normative, and writing differently is antithetical to such normativization), a concluding chapter could nonetheless have brought a touch of closure to the collection of chapters.

But the more I thought about the book and the questions it poses, the more I came to realize that such a concluding chapter – again, an expectation – may not be that necessary for the reader who approaches the book not to ‘get’ ideas to cite (what I may call a *catching* approach to reading) but to be stimulated (*inspiring* approach to reading). I don’t know about you, reader of this book

Fragment 5. Constituting

When we look at our texts – both individually and in our various corners of our field – no one can deny that there is a dominating genre. Amplifying Sinclair and Grey (2006), what do our texts constitute, when we consider their performativity and organizing effects? Who is performed when we write – a detached, objective, neutral researcher? How do our texts organize us, given that our academic world is marked by norms and by hierarchies of worth, which in turn generate inclusion or exclusion of persons and various inequalities (in access, in status, in positions)? Could writing differently perform a different academia (cf. Ulmer, 2017)?

What would be published if we all published pieces that deeply mattered to us and to the humans populating our main object, organizations?

What if writing differently, as an attempt, as an exploration, as work, was also a mark of empathy for our readers, a trace that we thought of them as embodied and feeling human beings and not only as disincarnated brains? What if we wrote in a way that hoped to keep our readers alive as they read our texts? What would such texts make of us, as researchers, as writers, as readers, as citizens, as human beings?

review, but I know that I have come across a good text, whatever its form and format, when reading it prompts me to write. *Good* in this sense can refer to various aspects of a text: its style, its form, its ideas, etc. *Writing differently* did that to me, recurrently. I read through the book in bouts, during long winter months, first thing in the morning, with a big mug of coffee by my side. Most of the time, my reading time turned into writing time. Was this writing productive, did it make it into this book review, will it be useful for other texts?

Answers to these questions do not matter; what matters is to engage in the act, in the practice of writing with attention, with an open mind, with curiosity. This is why I consider that the sum of the chapters that make up *Writing differently* is greater than its parts. Beyond the content, ideas and arguments developed with sensitivity and honesty by all of the authors, this book can help one position herself with regards to academic writing in

general, her own writing and her writing practices. I consider this potential for triggering individual reflection one of the main contributions of this book.

In the end, *Writing differently* can be read as a freeing demonstration that any form, any format, any approach, any tone, any style is possible because writing is, inherently, about creating – and in our field, in our research, about creating meaning and meaningfulness, for us and for others, in academia, in organizations, in society. This highlights the fact that writing differently goes beyond writing *stricto sensu*, as it may be understood as a reconfiguration, a difference in orientation and in prioritization. Indirectly, the book also illustrates that the materials we may use to write and to generate insights may be more varied than we usually think. This reveals that almost anything – materials, forms and genres – can be used when it comes to our writing. Should it? *Writing differently* does not answer these questions; in fact, it does not even bother with them – and this is the whole point. It is rather another fundamental question that floats between the pages of *Writing differently* that of what could stem from the inclusion and recognition of a broader range of possibilities in our academic texts. The chapters in *Writing differently* take on the challenge of exploring this question and, each in their manner, raise it for us to ponder. Given that we, as academics and researchers, are people for whom writing is crucial to what we do and even to who we are, to be challenged head-on to consider this question appears to me as an important outcome of this book.

references

- Beavan, K., B. Borgström, J. Helin and C. Rhodes (2021) 'Changing writing/writing for change', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28, 449-455.
- Colyar, J. (2009) 'Becoming writing, becoming writers', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(2): 421-436.
- Grey, C. and A. Sinclair (2006) 'Writing differently', *Organization*, 13(3): 443-453.
- Sword, H. (2012) *Stylish academic writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ulmer, J. B. (2017) 'Writing slow ontology', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(3): 201-211.

the author

Viviane Sergi is Associate Professor in Management in the Department of management at ESG UQAM in Montréal, Canada. Her research interests include process thinking, performativity, project organizing, the transformation of work and leadership. Her recent studies have explored how communication is constitutive of organizational phenomena, such as new work practices, strategy and leadership. She also has a keen interest for methodological issues related to qualitative research and for the practice of academic writing.

Email: sergi.viviane@uqam.ca