Freefall writing

Process it supports:
Reflective inquiry

Time required:
15 minutes minimum

Number of participants:
An individual exercise that can also be effectively run in pairs or small groups

Equipment needed:
A pen and paper

By writing freely you can get close to your actual (rather than edited) thought processes and so open a route to reflection and inquiry.

Freefall writing for just 5 minutes is a great way of getting close to your actual (rather than edited) thought processes. Natalie Goldberg, one of the pioneers of the approach says:

'The aim is to burn through to first thoughts, to the place where energy is unobstructed by social politeness or the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel. It's a great opportunity to capture the oddities of your mind. Explore the rugged edge of thought. Like grating a carrot, give the paper the colourful coleslaw of your consciousness.'

By exploring what you've written, you can then move towards reflective inquiry. Alone, or with others, you can look at your writing and start to inquire into where your energy and 'learning edges' might lie.

Practice Instructions

- **Keep the hand moving:** don't think, just write. Don't pause to reread what you have just written. That's stalling and trying to get control of what you are saying.
- **Don't cross out:** that is editing as you write. Even if you write something you didn't mean to write, leave it in.
- **Forget about spelling, punctuation, and grammar:** don't even care about staying within margins and lines on the page.
- **Go 'fearward':** if something comes up in your writing that is scary or naked, dive right into it. Go where the energy is, even if this isn't comfortable.
- **Give all the sensuous detail:** recreate the experience or image, place yourself in it to know it more fully.

'Freefall writing is a flight of liberation via an act of sabotage on the controlling mind. It is a space safe enough to allow life's web to re-weave itself, all by herself.'

Nick, Action researcher in a 3rd sector funding body

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'When I first experienced Freefall writing it felt stilted and unfinished until I began to notice, in what emerged, insights my internal censor had suppressed. Today this wilder, more integrated way of knowing is an essential part of my daily practice.'

Dave, Action researcher, professional learning

Facilitation Guide

Planning

- Decide what the purpose of this exercise is for you and this group.
- Think about how, if at all, you will guide the writing. Will you use a feeder line or just invite the group to work with whatever comes up for them?
- Choose a feeder line that encourages rich description and that helps the writer dive into experience rather than conceptualisation.

Tip: Feeders to start freefall writing

- A distant memory (e.g. 'a sound heard in childhood')
- A recent experience (e.g. 'when I reflect on that day now I….')
- A reaction to a topic (e.g. 'say the words xyz to me and I….')
- A dive into the present experience ('right here, right now, I…')

Facilitating

- Invite group to form small groups to work together.
- Explain purpose of exercise and the practice instructions.
- Set a time for the writing. About 5 or 10 minutes is fine.
- Start the exercise with your chosen prompt if using or invite participants to simply start wherever they would like.
- When finished invite participants to explore what they have written (see reflection guide). Groups may wish to read out their writing or simply talk about what doing the exercise has raised for them.

Reflection guide

Having written freefall, take a look at what you have written.

- What, if anything, came out in your writing that surprised you?
- How easy or challenging did you find it?
- Where might it suggest your energy lies?
- If there were a question to be drawn from this writing what would it be?

Ideas for further practice:

Daily journaling – why not make freefall writing a discipline by writing daily in your journal or after key meetings and then using the reflection guide to explore your writing in a structured way?

References

Goldberg, Natalie 1986 *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*; Shambhala: Boston.
Turner-Vesselago, Barbara 2013 *Writing Without a Parachute: The Art of Freefall.* Vala Publishing Co-operative. Bristol.

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