Writing Process After Reading Bakhtin: From Theorized Plots to Unfinalizable "Living" Events

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Abstract

This article focuses on the process of writing where the purpose is to explore how it is possible to write a research account that is inviting and "alive" so that, in reading, novelty unfolds. The account includes an illustration of how I struggled with writing and eventually found a way forward in reading Bakhtin's work on the polyphonic novel. Inspiration from this genre opened up a kind of "listening writing": an embodied and prospective form of writing that questions the traditional role of plot, because it calls for a letting go of predesigned structures. Instead, it suggests a writing driven by the interplay of voices, curiosity, and openness to the next possible word. The article contributes to the discussion on how writing matters and, in particular, how "unfinalizable" writing practices, in which the author tries not to be the final mediator of meaning, can enrich organization studies.

Keywords

qualitative research, philosophy of science, organization theory

> [T]he word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.
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> Bakhtin, 1984, p. 166

How can I write about the lived experience from the field in such a way that the "livingness" comes through in the text? That is the main question addressed here. I felt a growing need to write about writing when I wrestled with how to compose a field account for publication after 1½ years of fieldwork. The study I had been engaged in was a collaborative inquiry of dialogic meaning-making during ownership succession in a family business. This study was rooted in a process ontology, which meant that I valued heterogeneity, multiplicity, and novelty as the family's succession process was explored (Chia, 1999).

In practical terms, the process orientation referred to an evolving way of engaging with the research participants in which the methods used (such as participation in meetings, interviews, and coauthoring of texts) emerged as a response to the events that were unfolding in the succession process. After 18 months of close interaction, during which I experienced the family's succession process from "within"—oftentimes in emotionally intense, once-occurring "living events" (Bakhtin, 1986)—I had extensive material to make use of in writing. However, I found it difficult to do justice to the dialogic nature of the material when I tried to follow the expected format for publications, and I felt uneasy because

my "research products did not reflect the messiness of human experience" that I had faced in the field (Cole, 2013, p. 53). I felt, as expressed by Grey and Sinclair (2006), a need to "write differently."

This article is based on my experience of struggling with how to write about the lived experience in the field without making it a static and "dead" retrospective representation. I finally found a way forward in reading Bakhtin's (1984) work on a genre that he metaphorically calls the "polyphonic novel." Bakhtin (1984) suggests the polyphonic novel is a literary form that is inconclusive and emergent, as it demands continuation and no final word. Furthermore, this genre breaks from realist and monologic writing in that it allows the characters to develop their own voices, independently of each other and the writer (Belova, King, & Sliwa, 2008). In this way, the polyphonic novel allows for a multitude of unmerged voices, which changes the relationship between the writer and those written about, as well as the relation between the text and the reader.

With inspiration from the genre of the polyphonic novel, the purpose of the article is to explore the possibility of writing a research account grounded in relationality and flow that

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is inviting and "alive" in such a way that, in reading, novelty unfolds. To that end, in the next section, I will discuss some of the problems with current academic writing practices and thereafter further introduce the genre of the polyphonic novel. That is followed with an illustration of the struggles I faced in writing, and how the metaphor of the polyphonic novel opened up a way forward in this tussle. The illustration is thought of in terms of what Richardson (1997) calls a "writing story"—a text about the writing process—rather than a text about the final product. Thus, this article is not in itself written as a representation of a polyphonic text, but as an attempt to show how my writing unfolded, and what I found useful in learning more about this literary genre. Following this illustration, I next elaborate on a form of "listening writing" that I found useful. This represents an embodied and prospective way of writing that is driven by the interplay of voices in the field, curiosity, and openness to the next possible word. In closing, I discuss some of the tensions and possibilities in using more "unfinalizable" (Bakhtin, 1986) writing practices in academic writing where the author tries not to be the final mediator of meaning. The overreaching aim is to illustrate something that is still quite unusual in organization studies: an account of how writing grows and develops over time, and how this journey matters in itself (Colyar, 2008). For the reason that most writing, at the point that we encounter it, takes the form of a revised and sanitized text, I hope this approach will stimulate new questions in relation to how we write about the lived experience in organizations.

To Let Go of the Main Point

When Helen Sword (2012) analyzed academic texts across disciplines, she found that the current standard involved a monotonic repertoire—an intellectual conformity—consisting of impersonal, abstract prose in which human agency is erased. It has also been noted that the traditional academic genre builds on scientific writing practices in which the text is supposed to end up as a stabilized, unambiguous, and coherent account (Richardson, 1997). Furthermore, the use of taxonomies, hierarchies, and elaborate structures to illustrate the findings of a study is part of the academic language (Chia, 1999). In this way, "an essentially fluid and complex reality is sliced and curtailed into pieces for analytical convenience, in order to be put together again as the 'total reality'" (Hernes & Weik, 2007, pp. 75-76).

Because I had been socialized into this kind of text work, my driving idea when I started to write, after 1½ years of fieldwork for my PhD thesis, was to create an account in which I could lay out my arguments convincingly and point toward "fixed" things. I suppose my assumption was that if I could achieve this successfully, the reader might *get the point* and *understand what I meant*. As I took it for granted that the contribution of the text was something I had to be clear

about, to offer these findings to the reader, I chased the focal point of the study. In short, I wanted to make a contribution by offering an insight of some kind.

After sometime, I became hesitant regarding this focus on a stabilized, one-voiced text with a clear contribution. When I wrote the fieldwork illustrations of the unique and once-occurring events that had taken place in the field, I recognized how the dialogic material became dead and static. In this writing, something else was created that did not characterize the "living" quality of the study. Adhering to postrepresentational thinking (Chia, 2000), which means that I was aware that my text could not mirror some single, factual reality taking place in the field, my main concern was not so much how I could correctly convey that which had taken place in the specific moment at which I met with the research participants. Rather, my concern was how the text could retain the fluidity, ambiguity, and flow of the many voices I had encountered in the field. How could I write in such a way that the reader would get a feel for this dialogic flow?

For sometime now, an increased awareness that fieldwork is messy and unpredictable has led to developments of processual research methods. In this respect, Law's (2004) work, in which he emphasizes that "[p]erhaps we need to rethink our ideas about clarity and rigour, and find ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight," (p. 3) has been influential. Likewise, Cunliffe's (2002) elaboration on language as ontology, and social poetics as a form of research practice in which "meaning is created as language plays through us, as words, sounds, rhythm, and gestures evoke verbal and emotional responses," (p. 129) highlights the instability of knowledge and the embodied and momentary nature of fieldwork. Furthermore, Shotter's (2006b) suggestion that researchers should be *with* people in the field, rather than doing distant studies *about* things, illustrates how research can be a lived and living process in which the next possible step is to be set in-between the people involved. However, the implications for writing—and especially how our writing develops and grows as we write—still need more attention.

The problem with the current academic genre is that it creates what Pullen and Rhodes (2008) refer to as "hygienic texts," which are "washed" for the purpose of creating order and "a cleaning up of the other" (p. 247). This is why fieldwork accounts have a tendency to become linear and sanitized, and lead to a "fixing" of the social phenomena under study (Cole, 2013; Donnelly, Gabriel, & Özkanzanc-Pan, 2013). To me, it felt as if I was falling on the finish line by attempting to squeeze the material into such a format. I therefore searched for ways of writing that would allow me to refuse "the hubris of generalizations," and, furthermore, that "provokes thinking rather than provides answers" (Rhodes, 2009, p. 667).

With my attention drawn to these matters, I read Steyaert's (1995) doctoral dissertation, which is published in the form

of seven related, albeit separate, books. This format reminds us that academic writing does not necessarily need to be a nailing down of *the* main point since this format, in itself, reinforces the plurality and fragmentation prevalent in organizational life. Following this reading, I realized that the idea of a predefined contribution as an insight to be served by the author and received by the reader needed to be challenged. This led me to inquire into different forms of writing, where I found Bakhtin's work on the polyphonic novel to be particularly valuable.

The Genre of the Polyphonic Novel

With regard to how the academic genre can be enriched, scholars have drawn attention to the novel, and how different kinds of novels, for different purposes, can contribute to organization studies writing (i.e., Land & Sliwa, 2009). Czarniawska (2009) suggests that reading novels can teach us about different genres and plots, which might help us to see our field material in new ways. Similarly, Sliwa and Cairns (2007) note that novel reading "enables and supports creative discussion of the lived experiences of individuals in contemporary society" (p. 323). The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) work on the polyphonic novel has been appreciated by organization scholars, because it prevents the creation of closed texts that finalize meaning. It can thereby "represent a useful alternative to the traditional positivist discourse" (Belova et al., 2008, p. 494).

Bakhtin analyzed different forms of literary genres. In reading Dostoevsky, he found a special kind of novel in the sense that it is structured polyphonically, which means that the voices of the characters are written to speak for themselves through allowing a "*freedom for others' point of view to reveal themselves* without any finalizing evaluations from the author" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 69, emphasis in original). Although Bakhtin never explicitly defines "polyphony," probably because that, in itself, would be a contradiction in terms of his understanding of this notion, it is acknowledged that he values this literary form for its capacity to create dialogue between voices; that is, between those written about, the reader, and the writer (Morson & Emerson, 1990).

A Writing of the Other—A Multiplicity of Simultaneous Unmerged Voices

A core attribute of the polyphonic novel is that it represents others as independent and unmerged voices, each of which has equal rights and their "own" world. That is why the voices of those written about cannot be contained within a single consciousness—a single voice—as in more mono-logic texts. As expressed by Bakhtin (1984), characters must be "*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*" (p. 7, emphasis in

original). This means that even when people agree, they do so from different outlooks; this is why genuinely shared voices can rarely be heard. The emphasis on people's own voices is of significance for creating a "living" text in which people are characterized as human beings of flesh and blood. In terms of academic writing, this means that scholars need to think of how it is possible to not *finalize* the others written about; that is, we should stay away from having "the last word about who the character is and what the character can become" (Frank, 2005, p. 966).

An Active Reader

The dialogic nature of the polyphonic novel, in which there is an attempt to create a continuous interplay between unmerged voices, not only refers to the voices of the characters but also refers to the reader-to-be. If the writer does not stand above the others about whom he or she has written, it enables the creation of a more dialogic text that invites the reader to engage in this dialogic interplay. This is a significant dimension of the polyphonic novel, because it is not designed to turn readers into "analyzers of character, action and circumstance, but into dialogic partners of the characters and the author" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 24).

A Repositioning of the Writer

How, then, is it possible to go about writing such a multi-voiced text? The departure point is a questioning of the traditional role of plot in writing. In the polyphonic novel, the author has to let go of the preconceived structural plan, because living dialogues cannot be shaped beforehand, but have to unfold moment to moment in the dialogic interplay. That is why the writer has to stay away from the

> stenographer's report of a finished dialogue, from which the author has already withdrawn and over which he is now located as in some higher decision-making position: that would have turned an authentic dialogue into an objectivized and finalized *image of a dialogue*. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 63, emphasis in original)

Letting go of the predesigned plot and instead following the dialogue from within is what makes this work an "unfinished whole" that contends closure and instead opens itself up for a multitude of meanings (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 63).

This approach to writing has been criticized for creating an absent author without voice. However, Bakhtin (1984) is clear to emphasize that the writer has to be active and express her own ideas and values in the polyphonic text: "The issue here is not an absence of, but a *radical change in, the author's position*" (p. 67, emphasis in original). From this position, the writer can actively participate in two main ways: first, through setting up a world in which many different voices enter into dialogue; and second, by being part of this

dialogue herself. Importantly, in this dialogue, the writer tries to remain open to surprise, since the polyphonic novel is directed toward the unspoken "new word" and the "author does not block its path with his own one-sided and monosemantic seriousness" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 166).

The Process of Writing—An Illustration

Although I am by no means suggesting that the research account I wrote became a role model for a more "living" and multivoiced text, I did find the metaphor of the polyphonic novel inspirational, because it helped me question some of the taken-for-granted norms about academic writing, and it offered alternative ways to move forward. An illustration of how I struggled in writing, and how the metaphor of the polyphonic novel eventually guided me, is included below. First, however, a few more words about the study.

A Collaborative Field Study

The study was my PhD research project and was carried out as a collaborative inquiry with Brunnsala Coffee, a family business facing ownership and management succession (Helin, 2011).[1] The company is a 9th-generation family business and there was a strong wish in the family for the business to be handed down to the 10th generation of family members. At the time of the research, none of the cousins in the 10th generation were employed in the business nor were they involved in any other significant way. For this reason, the family decided to initiate what they called "cousin meetings" in which they could discuss who should take over and how to make that happen. These meetings formed the backbone of the study. I had the chance to participate from the family's first meeting and throughout the following 18 months, which offered excellent opportunities to follow and experience how the family's meeting conversations unfolded over time.

The notion of "withness-thinking" guided the study from the start (Shotter, 2006b). When Shotter (2006b) describes withness-thinking in relation to studying organizational life, he writes that it "occurs in those reflective interactions that involve our coming into living, interactive contact with an other's living being, with their utterances, with their bodily expressions, with their words, their 'works'" (p. 600). This form of engaged research can be contrasted with "aboutness-thinking," a research approach in which the aim is to conduct a study about something or someone who is considered from a distant outside position.

Withness-thinking departs from an intersubjective stance (Cunliffe, 2011), and for me, it represented an emerging way of engaging in the field where our ways of working together were not preplanned but rather unfolded as a response to that which happened during the succession process. Following from this way of working, a combination of methods was used, such as participating in their six cousin meetings during the study period, being part of planning activities and company tours with family members, conducting interviews, and coauthoring texts. Apart from these formal field study activities, I also came to value the telephone small talk, text messages, and dinner and lunch conversations, which greatly facilitated my understanding of how the succession process unfolded over time.

Engaging with the family members in this way contributed to the development of rich material as a resource of which I could make use in my writing of the field study account. However, I was struggling with how the dynamic and emotionally intense encounters that characterized the family's succession work could be felt by the potential reader.

Next, I will share a description of how I went about writing the account. As noted before, writing about writing is difficult because "[w]riting is complex, individual and, ironically, hard to document" (Colyar, 2008, p. 432), and our training primarily focuses on the creation of a final product, rather than on learning how writing in itself can be a creative process of exploring (Richardson, 1997). Yet, the account below is my way of making sense, in retrospect, of how the process unfolded, and the important turning points in this work.

First Writing Phase: The Logic of Key Issues

About a week after the last cousin meeting, I spent the autumn semester at a university in the United States. I had decided that this would be the time to write the field study account. Once settled in, I went through all my fieldwork material. I collected the interview accounts, the meeting agendas the family had sent out prior to the meetings, the meeting minutes, my field notes and transcriptions from the meetings, as well as email conversations and notes from phone calls. I then organized everything into chronological order.

I also started to categorize the material according to the initial idea of how I wanted to organize the account, namely, to write about key issues addressed during the meetings. There were some issues that the family members often returned to in the conversations, and I therefore felt that these issues were of great importance to them. After poring over the material, I identified four issues that seemed to be of special significance to the family members: (a) Who am I to take over? (b) How can we create new possibilities within established relationships? (c) How can we relate to potential conflicts in a constructive way? (d) What do I want to do in my life? Having identified these four key issues, I decided which field material to draw on, as well as theoretical notions that could be useful for creating an understanding of these issues. For an overview, please see Figure 1.

I remember how important it felt to start my analysis from the family's own work on their succession, and the issues that were of significance to them, rather than starting from a theoretical framework in the writing of the account. Nevertheless,

Key issue	Field study material	Theoretical notion
1: Who am I to take over?	From August 2008 to January 2009, including work with individual interviews, a planning meeting, cousin meeting 2 and 3.	Dialogic self, emphasizing the relational, fragmented elements of identity work.
2: How can we create new possibilities within established relationships?	Cousin meeting 4, March 2009.	Listening into, emphasizing the importance of active listening for the creation of 'dialogic moments.'
3. How can we relate to potential conflicts in a constructive way?	Illustrations from the field study at large.	Double-voiced utterances, emphasizing how people re-use each other's words in conversations.
4. What do I want to do in my life?	Mostly from the second round of interviews during summer 2009 as well as cousin meeting 7 in August 2009.	Management as practical authorship, emphasizing how managers can help to make sense of the many voices in an organization and thereby create flow and belonging, as well as persuade each other to talk and act in suitable ways.

Figure 1. Key issues—An overview, from an early draft of my PhD manuscript.

after intensive work according to this logic, I failed to put the text together in a satisfying way. The text felt fragmented and it was difficult to make sense of how the key issues related to each other and to the succession process at large.

My visit in the United States came to an end, and I was disappointed I had not managed to finalize the account. I was also stressed about what to do next. I could see all of the potentiality in the material, but did not know how to put it together.

Second Writing Phase: The Logic of Dialogic Elements

Back home, I thought I had seen the light when it struck me that the departure point in the writing should not be the key issues after all. This would have led to a logic of content, and I wanted to write a process-oriented account. I therefore realized I had to change focus and instead write about how the conversations unfolded between people. Strengthened by this insight, I revisited the fieldwork material, and this time looked more specifically for an understanding of how the family conversations unfolded. This led to an inquiry of what I called

"dialogic elements," which I labeled "authoring the dialogic self," "listening in the dialogic moment," and "wayfinding in the relational landscape." In working according to this logic, I looked for illustrations from the conversations that could represent the different dialogic elements I had created. As I read through the field transcripts and noted episodes in which, for instance, listening had been significant, I took these passages and put them under the label "listening in the dialogic moment." In this way, I worked through the material and gathered excerpts under the respective headings.

Although I was satisfied because the dialogic elements in themselves seemed promising, I soon noted how the search for these elements once again ruined understanding of the succession process at large. I therefore ceased to work in this way without having finalized anything. I felt that if I continued along this path, it would produce an account that was rich in detail, and could potentially say something interesting about listening, the dialogic self, and other such things, but it would at the same time have been a decontextualized account in which it would have been difficult to understand the "big picture" of the study, or what Bakhtin (1984) refers to as the "open wholeness."

In hindsight, as I write about this, I can see that one of the reasons for the decontextualized feeling was the use of a structure containing separate elements. This structure made it difficult to convey a feeling for how one conversation related to another, and how one dialogic moment unfolded into the next. This did not come through, because the text ended up being too scattered with different elements that had no clear relationships.

Thus, both the first and the second phases of writing suffered from what Bakhtin (1986) calls "theoreticism," which means understanding events in terms of set rules, constructs, and so on. The problem with theoreticism is that it confines social worlds into closed structures, and therefore falls short of recognizing the "eventness of the event" or the "living" character of becoming (Bakhtin, 1986).

In writing about writing, Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2005) discuss the problem of starting analysis work via activities of analytic induction, such as making comparisons, coding, sorting, and categorizing data. According to them, this way of working is to be caught in positivist working practices; in such a stepwise procedure, writing is supposed to be "a tracing of thought already thought, as a transparent reflection of the known and the real—writing as representation, as repetition" instead of approaching writing as a mode of exploration in itself (p. 967).

Third Writing Phase: Inspiration From the Polyphonic Novel

Ten months had passed since I had started to work on the account. I recognized that the previous attempts had led to a monologization of the dialogic material, and I had to rethink my working approach once again. It was at this point that I reread Bakhtin's (1984) work on Dostoevsky, which helped me to find a new way forward. In particular, Bakhtin's (1984) discussion of plot, in which he emphasizes the importance of writing without a specific destination in mind, was inspirational. In this way of writing, the writer positions herself from within the flow of the dialogue to sense how it unfolds. Hence, the writer tries not to plan the text in a traditional sense, or shape the text beforehand, because, from this approach, "[p]lot is no longer the sequence characters are ordered to follow, but the result of what they happen to say" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 247). I had read this text before, but this time, it spoke to me more directly and I started to rewrite the account again.

From a writing of the known to a writing of the not-yet-uttered. It was an "*aha*" moment for me to read about this way of thinking about plot. It made me realize that in the previous attempts, when I had searched for key issues or dialogic elements, I had distanced myself as if I wrote from an outside, "higher" position. From this position, I had written *about* the conversations rather than from *within* them when I had

imposed a predesigned structure on that which was being explored. Furthermore, by using these cutting and pasting procedures, I had written about the already known: the key issues or dialogic elements for which I was searching.

To move away from that mode of writing, I had to reconnect with the spontaneous and engaged mood of exploring I had felt in the fieldwork. To that end, it was a need to move beyond the idea of writing as a way of putting together my arguments of the already known and, instead, continue inquiring into that which was yet to come.

This focus on that which was yet to come—that which was not-yet-uttered—resonated with how the family approached their succession work. When talking about their succession, they often used the metaphor of crystallization. For instance, Judith, the mother of three of the cousins, said,

> These are really tough issues [the succession]. But I am happy the cousins are so positive about seeing each other and talking about it. In so doing, I think it will crystallize. It always does.

The crystallization metaphor was also used when they talked about how they would move further in their succession process. When I asked Stefan (one of the cousins) what topics would be useful for them to address in their upcoming cousin meetings, he said,

> I cannot put that into words. It has to crystallize. I listen to the others, I don't know now yet what's best to talk about. But we have to be honest with each other. And listen to each other so that everyone can say what they have on their minds. And when everyone is saying what he or she would like to say, then I hope we will find out.

The genre of the polyphonic novel, with its focus on the next possible word, resonated with the crystallization process as the family members talked about it. Strengthened by this insight, I returned to the conversations in the cousin meetings and decided to let the conversations in themselves (not some key issues or dialogic elements) guide me.

To that end, I started to write about one meeting at a time, and let the voices in the meetings lead the way. Thus, this time I tried to let the research participants "speak for themselves." Of course, this did not mean that I as the writer could totally withdraw (how would that be possible?), but my role changed as I primarily initiated the conversations in the text. Thereafter, the interplay between the voices from the field (including my own) became the "motor," or the driving force, in the writing.

To notice the unexpected and surprising turning points. In thinking about how the conversations could become the "motor" in the account, I reread Bakhtin's (1986) plea for a focus on utterances in the unfolding, instead of separate words or statements. To understand communication, Bakhtin (1986) argues, we must start in the utterances because these are the
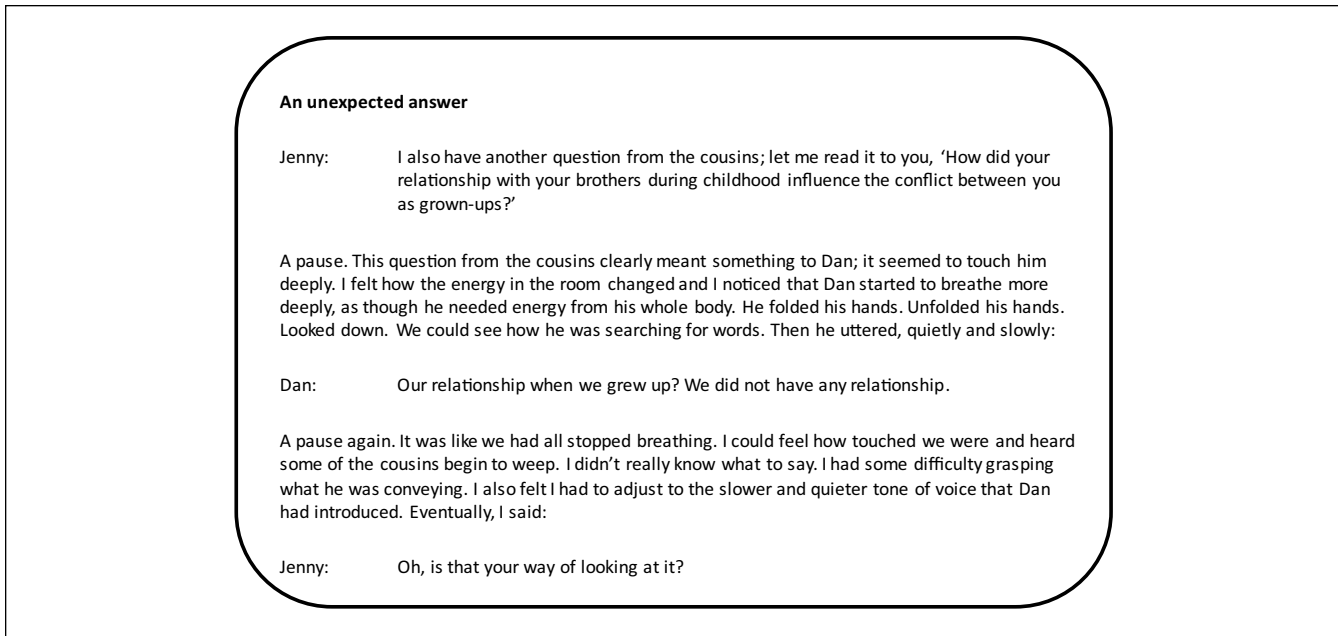
An unexpected answer

Jenny: I also have another question from the cousins; let me read it to you, 'How did your relationship with your brothers during childhood influence the conflict between you as grown-ups?'

A pause. This question from the cousins clearly meant something to Dan; it seemed to touch him deeply. I felt how the energy in the room changed and I noticed that Dan started to breathe more deeply, as though he needed energy from his whole body. He folded his hands. Unfolded his hands. Looked down. We could see how he was searching for words. Then he uttered, quietly and slowly:

Dan: Our relationship when we grew up? We did not have any relationship.

A pause again. It was like we had all stopped breathing. I could feel how touched we were and heard some of the cousins begin to weep. I didn't really know what to say. I had some difficulty grasping what he was conveying. I also felt I had to adjust to the slower and quieter tone of voice that Dan had introduced. Eventually, I said:

Jenny: Oh, is that your way of looking at it?

Figure 2. An unexpected turning point in the conversation, from the final version of my PhD manuscript.

basic building blocks in our conversations. In fact, he continues, learning to speak means learning how to construct utterances, because that is how we engage in conversations, rather than using individual sentences or words.

So, what is an utterance? It can be a word, a sentence or a long text; it can actually be silence. It can be spoken or written. The utterance is bounded by the "change of speaking subjects, that is, a change of speakers" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 71). This means that when someone utters something, it is in response to previous utterances.

As utterances are bound by social interplay instead of grammatical laws (as in the case of the sentence), they have the unique feature of taking in the relational and contextual dimensions where an utterance does not necessarily have a single coherent meaning; rather, it continues to develop new meanings from the "contact between the word and the concrete reality" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 87). However, it is not enough for us to consider individual utterances since utterances cannot be isolated; they always proceed from other utterances, just as they expect other utterances to respond. Hence, when we say something, this is in response to what others have said before us, just as we expect a response to follow. This is why no utterance can be said to be the first, nor the last, but rather is situated within a chain.

In focusing on the utterance chains and how they emerged in the meetings, I noticed that it was not enough to return to the transcriptions I had made; I had to listen to the recordings from the meetings again. This proved to be the best way to write from within the conversations. However, I did not return to the audio files because I wanted to create a "true" account of what actually happened in the dialogic moment[2];

I did so because I wanted to tune into the emotional undertones in the conversations. In this regard, the transcriptions were already too decontextualized.

As I encountered the fieldwork anew through listening, and wrote without knowing where the text would take me when I no longer searched for keywords, themes, and so on, I became more attentive to that which was surprising and contradictory in the conversations. It was also possible to identify the importance of these surprising and unexpected utterances within the dialogic flow, since they often became significant turning points in the conversations that the research participants returned to over and over again.

One such turning point occurred in a meeting in which the cousins had invited their uncle Dan to talk about a long-standing conflict he had with his brothers (the cousins' fathers). The conflict worried the cousins very much and they had prepared questions for Dan. The exchange below (Figure 2) took place when I asked him one of these questions.

All of us knew that Dan's relationship with his brothers was complicated, but we had no idea he would respond in this way. Being more attentive to these unexpected utterances and the responses that arose from them—in this case, intense feelings beyond words—made it possible to write about the disruptions, the inconsistencies, and the ambiguity that was often significant to how the dialogic flow unfolded.

To write the inexpressible. Listening to the files and noticing the dialogic flow opened up a way to write about that which was not uttered: those important things that were felt, but difficult to put into words. In Figure 2, for instance, it was
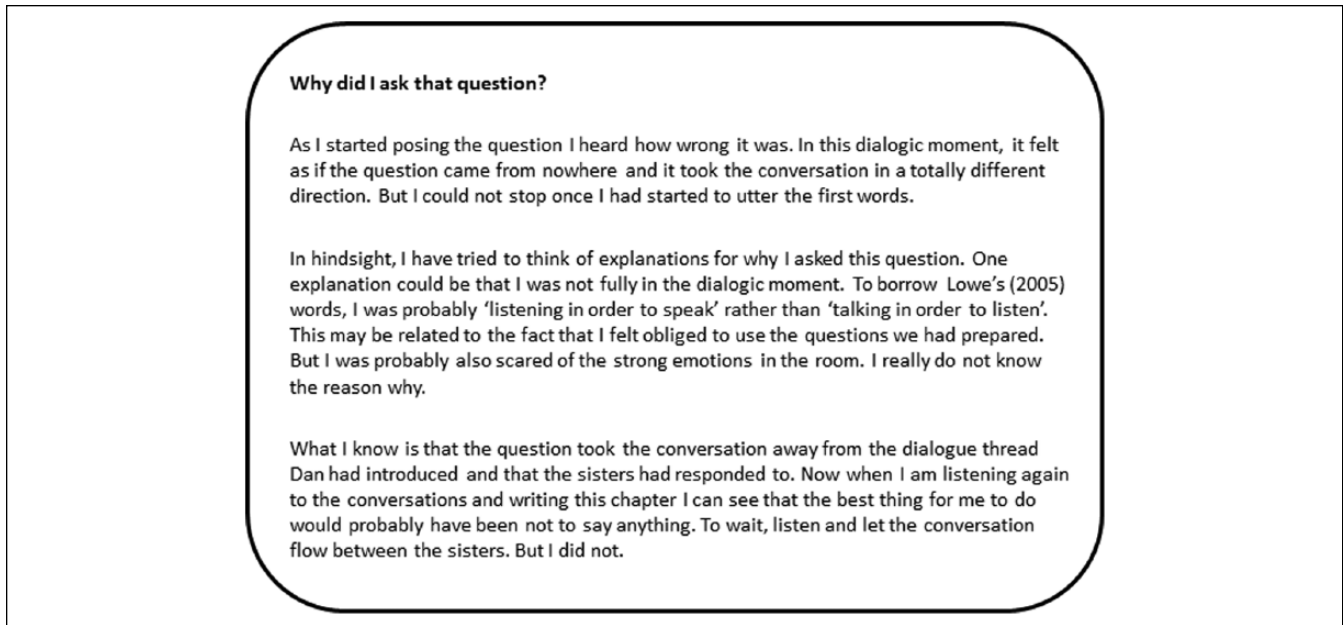
> **Why did I ask that question?**
>
> As I started posing the question I heard how wrong it was. In this dialogic moment, it felt as if the question came from nowhere and it took the conversation in a totally different direction. But I could not stop once I had started to utter the first words.
>
> In hindsight, I have tried to think of explanations for why I asked this question. One explanation could be that I was not fully in the dialogic moment. To borrow Lowe's (2005) words, I was probably 'listening in order to speak' rather than 'talking in order to listen'. This may be related to the fact that I felt obliged to use the questions we had prepared. But I was probably also scared of the strong emotions in the room. I really do not know the reason why.
>
> What I know is that the question took the conversation away from the dialogue thread Dan had introduced and that the sisters had responded to. Now when I am listening again to the conversations and writing this chapter I can see that the best thing for me to do would probably have been not to say anything. To wait, listen and let the conversation flow between the sisters. But I did not.

Figure 3. Bringing in sensed "data," from the final version of my PhD manuscript.

not only what Dan said but also the auxiliary aspects that made this a special moment for us: the pauses, how he moved his body, and the quietness were significant in terms of how we experienced this moment together. Listening to the files made me more aware of the embodied nature of the meetings and how I could try writing about it. I would like to emphasize that writing about these things was an attempt, because how could I possibly write about the embodied experienced moments filled with uncertainty, multiplicity, and contradiction, where every effort to write about it would be a fixing and a nailing down of that which already had ceased to exist—that which escaped the possibilities of language?

Listening to the files was important in this attempt. In listening, I noticed how the material become richer as it allowed me to travel back to the meetings and remember what had happened. This aroused feelings and thoughts in the moment of listening, which enabled making use of another kind of data: the sensed, fleeting data I could not get from the field notes or transcriptions, but from revisiting the lived experience of the meetings through listening. Hence, it became more of a bodily experience of feeling my way forward in writing, which enabled me to include my own reactions from the field in the text. One such example can be found in Figure 3 below. Here, I had posed a question in a meeting that did not land well, and in the text, I wrote about my feelings and thoughts of what this question did to the conversation in the meeting.

According to Bakhtin (1984), the position of the writer changes in the polyphonic novel, and here I used this new position to write about that which was not articulated but was nevertheless important for getting a better understanding of how the dialogic event unfolded.

To open up to unmerged voices. One aspect of metaphorically drawing on the polyphonic novel that I found not only intriguing, but also challenging, was to stay away from the habit of merging voices into one-voiced accounts. The search for sameness and patterns, rather than that which is particular and unique, is so ingrained in organization studies writing that it is difficult to avoid (Chia, 1999). Bakhtin's work was helpful in this respect. He stresses the need to uncover the singular instead of the similar, and when he describes Dostoevsky's novels, he emphasizes that they consist of "[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7).

Figure 4 contains the first paragraph of an interview account consisting of different voices as expressed by Josefine (one of the cousins). This text had been developed over time, from when we first met for one-to-one interviews, to when we coauthored their interview accounts to share between the cousins. In this particular excerpt, Josefine's comments from reading her own account are included using Microsoft Word's comment function. In this way, we are able to hear not only her voice but also her reflexive comments on her own words which illustrate how "one perspective can be voiced by many persons, and one person can house several perspectives" (Linell, 2009, p. 117).

This is one example of how this writing opened up a multitude of voices. The aim of Figure 4 is to illustrate how
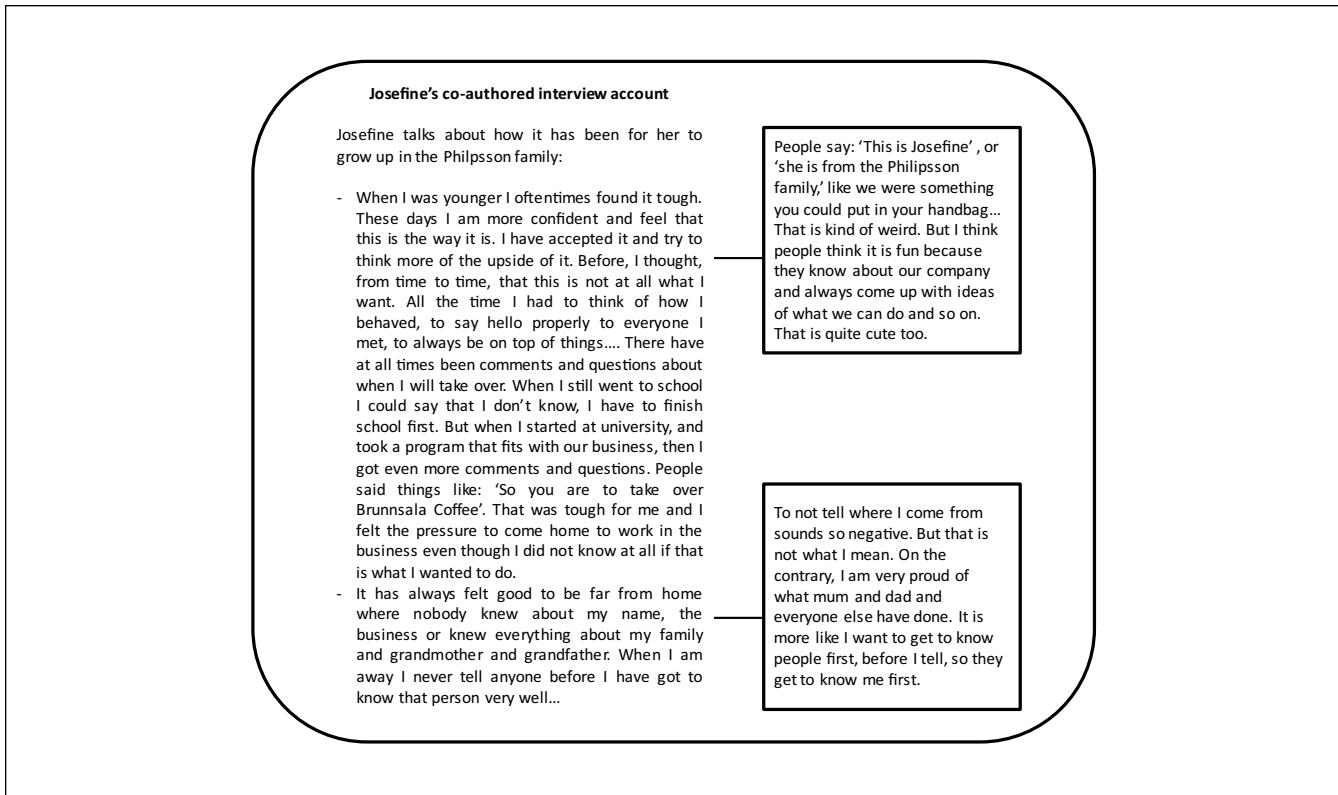
Figure 4. An illustration of unmerged voices, from the final version of my PhD manuscript.

Josefine's different voices came through in the text; she did not become a one-voiced character.

What to make present—What to make absent. Although I had found a new approach to writing, which helped me to see new things in the material as well other ways to go about writing, it still did not reveal to me what, in these myriad utterances, to bring into the account and what to leave out. As noted by Law (2004), "[w]hat is brought to presence—or manifest absence—is always limited, always potentially contestable. How it might be crafted is endlessly uncertain, endlessly revisable" (p. 85). In this case, because I had left the structure of the theorized plot, there was a need for something else to guide my decisions on what to include in the text.

In the end, I decided to label the account "One year of cousin meetings"; I decided to write about one meeting at a time as they had unfolded chronologically because that proved to be the best way to follow the conversations from within and to get an understanding of how the succession process emerged over time. Thus, the cousin meetings became the organizing structure for the text. Returning to a specific meeting, I listened to the audio file from the meeting and asked myself a twofold question: What can the utterance chains in this particular meeting teach me about the family meeting, and what can this family meeting teach me about the utterance chains? In this way, every meeting discussed a specific aspect of

dialogue during meetings such as addressivity, responsivity, and listening. In one of the meetings, for instance, I thought it was possible to hear/see/feel how addressivity (which, in short, means that we are always addressing someone in our utterances) made a difference in that particular meeting. I therefore focused on how addressivity made a difference when I wrote about that meeting. In another meeting, listening really made a difference, and therefore, that became the key aspect of that particular meeting. In this way of working, much was left out. At the same time, I found this useful for creating a text that was detailed enough to understand how the family's succession process unfolded over time.

Writing Relationships

Concurring with Rhodes (2009), academic writing is here understood as a triadic relationship, or a "dialogic relation between the self, others written about and the others to whom the text is addressed" (p. 659). Inspiration from the genre of the polyphonic novel significantly influenced this triadic relationship in the writing of the account. Although I had no intention of writing a novel in a literal sense, learning more about the genre facilitated a different way of relating to the material, another way of thinking about what to include and what to leave out, and ideas for how to organize the text. It also influenced my own positioning and voice in the writing.

The means by which to address those written about is an issue that has gained much interest in current discussions about reflexivity as a response to postrepresentational thinking, and the need to question the researcher's authority in how to represent organizational realities (i.e., Cunliffe, 2003). One of the contributions of the polyphonic novel is the call for care and consideration when writing about others, so that their "otherness" and "unfinalizabilty" do not get lost. From this viewpoint, I felt my voice had already taken over too much in the transcriptions, and it had thereby taken away the uniqueness of people's own voices and ways of relating to each other. Interestingly, Bakhtin uses the notion of "transcription" for understanding processes of monologization, and he addresses the risk of transcribing away the "eventness" of the event so that "everything about it that makes it particular, unfinalizable, and open to multiple unforeseen possibilities" gets lost (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 236).

To overcome this, I eventually found a working approach that I think of as a "listening writing," in which I listened to the words, and the worlds, of the conversations I wrote about. Within the approach, I was "listening softly" (Helin, Hernes, Hjort, & Holt, 2014, p. 13) to the dialogic interplay and tried to write from "within" the conversations. Thus, this involves a "letting go" in the writing in the sense that I did not preplan how the account would unfold. At the same time, it is not an inactive way of writing; on the contrary, it is a fully engaged approach in which I had to actively listen and passionately connect to that which, and to those who, I was writing about, to make that kind of writing possible. To be fully engaged in the writing seems to be of importance because "[a]n event can be described only participatively" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 32) and "[o]nce-occurrent uniqueness or singularity cannot be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 13).

Furthermore, listening writing is a prospective writing—a writing in which I listened to the not-yet-uttered (Helin, 2013)—in comparison with a retrospective writing of the already known, in which I presupposed a particular structure and searched for specific themes, claims, and voices in the field. To do this, I listened to that which touched me. Such a listening became possible thanks to the "switch from thinking about language in terms of how *patterns of already spoken words* might be interpreted by us as to their meaning, to thinking about the spontaneous, bodily effects on us of *words in their speaking*" (Shotter, 2008, p. 505, emphasis in original).

The prospective dimension of listening writing is also related to the active view of the potential reader, which is an issue that has received less attention in current discussions about reflexivity. The polyphonic novel is a genre characterized by what Bakhtin (1984) refers to as "unfinalizable," which means that the text should not be too finished, or closed, because meaning-making in reading is not a process of decoding an already finalized message. Rather, as "[m]eaning does not reside within a text" and no texts "can ever speak for themselves," understanding is an active process carried out by readers in their interaction with the text (Rhodes, 2000, p. 24). In this active view on reading, "meaning is understood as something still in the process of creation, something still bending toward the future, as opposed to that which is already completed" (Holquist, 2002, p. 24). This is why the meaning of a polyphonic novel is neither a property of the text nor fully in the hands of the reader, but produced in the process of reading. Consequently, meaning in a polyphonic novel cannot be set or final, and it calls for a form of writing in which there is no conclusion, in a traditional sense, to be offered to the reader (Morson & Emerson, 1990). Because I had struggled in the beginning, when I was searching for the main point of my study, this insight that I did not have to nail down a particular conclusion was a wonderful relief.

"Unfinalizable" Writing Practices: Tensions and Possibilities

If I were to summarize, in just one sentence, what I found most fulfilling in learning about the polyphonic novel, it would be how this genre made me reconnect with the engaged and spontaneous mode I had felt during the fieldwork, and how that helped me appreciate the process of writing. As noted by Colyar (2008), "Writing puts on its trousers one leg at a time, but we rarely see it in stages of undress. Instead, writing is imagined as a mechanical activity used to document what we already know" (p. 424).

However, when we approach writing not only as a means toward the final product, but as a valuable process in itself, it raises several questions about how to proceed. In closing, three such questions that have been salient in the writing of this article will be addressed. Although I do not see a need to resolve these questions or to come up with the best possible answer to them, I hope that future discussions of them, as well as alternative ways to explore them, could enrich organization studies writing.

First, how can we deal with the tension between opening and closing forces in writing? The writing of this article was triggered by a feeling of unease at how scholarly writing procedures closed the "living" quality of the subject I wrote about. Furthermore, the tension between opening and closing forces, or a tension between "newness" versus "sameness," permeated the writing throughout. The problem I faced with institutionalized writing practices is related to the fact that they encourage a type of writing that builds on "monologue, authorial privilege, realist presentation forms and universal knowledge" claims (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008, p. 243). I found that these procedures erased the "livingness" in the material and created a text that "pretends to be the ultimate word" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). I therefore began searching for alternatives that could allow for another writer positioning, other kinds of knowledge claims, and ways of writing that would acknowledge that the organizational world is unpredictable,

messy, and in continuous movement—that it never "is" in a fixed way (Helin et al., 2014).

Against this background, the polyphonic novel is interesting in terms of how it brings in "opening" forces by emphasizing a way of writing that does not limit the meaning of the text to the intention of the writer, but rather strives toward a multitude of possible meanings.

And yet, is not some kind of stabilizing the whole point of writing when there is something we want to articulate, a meaning we would like to share with others? In my case, I had experienced some intriguing dialogues and I wanted to offer a feeling of this dynamic interplay to the potential reader. In that sense, there was "something" particular that I wanted to put forward.

Perhaps, then, what seems to be of importance is to acknowledge the tension between opening and closing forces, and try to be aware of what these forces do to our text work. This makes me wonder what other genres could possibly inspire us to unsettle some of the dimensions we normally fix in writing. At the same time, what other genres could possibly finalize dimensions that we otherwise tend to leave open?

Second, if we are searching for writing practices that move beyond the idea of writing as a retrospective representation, what might such prospective writing practices look like? Writing with inspiration from the polyphonic novel does not involve a telling of how something is or has been at a specific point in time. Rather, it is writing that emphasizes curiosity, unpredictability, and readiness toward the next possible word. Due to the unfinalizable nature of such an account, in which the writer attempts to stay away from being the final mediator of meaning by letting the many voices from the field be sensed in the text, it "opens a door for an experience to be had by the reader" (Grey & Sinclair, 2006, p. 452). Thus, writing from such an outlook can be understood as prospective; that is, writing as a production of potentiality. This potentiality is created by the author together with the voices from the field, although it is the readers who can ultimately make the "livingness" come through (Davies, 2004).

From this way of looking at writing, the text can be regarded as an offering of potentialities and, in writing, the academic writer needs to ponder how the text opens up to readers-to-be. In doing so, she must ask herself where the text may take the reader in reading; that is, how the text can "stretch out" (Fletcher, 2007) and invite the reader to "think beyond" (Nayak, 2008).

Consequently, our writing cannot only be concerned with what to say, we also have to think about how we can make the reader move in the moment of reading. Thus, it represents a shift in thinking, from being concerned with "the extra knowledge or information that one is left with after reading a text to a concern with what can happen *during* one's reading of a text" (Shotter, 2006a, p. 190, emphasis added). Perhaps, then, there is a need to complement current practices of reflexivity with their attention on retrospective textual strategies in which the researchers focus on how "to present their work reflexively" with a more prospective reflexivity that embraces the reader-to-be (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008, p. 481). Perhaps there is also a need to be more aware of what we are inviting the reader to. In short, what can such prospective reflexive practices look like, and what would they entail?

In closing, I would like to more directly draw attention to ourselves in our writing because if the role of the writer is not to convincingly tell how something has been, but to offer potentiality through our text work, what does this mean for the writer? In other words, if we are to express ourselves in other ways in which clarity, rigor, and coherence are no longer the ultimate aim (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008), where can we find inspiration and knowledge to write differently?

What I experienced here was the importance of finding ways of writing in which I was not only rushing through toward the final version of the text, but rather using writing practices with which I could fully engage because I was in a mode that felt enriching. I have come to think of it as a form of writing in which we are not simply drawing on, or *using*, our field material, but rather as a writing where we continue to *delve into* organizational-life worlds in our text work. This makes me wonder that if we think of genres as overlapping and in continuous movement, what alternative genres could facilitate a way of working in which we would like to stay *in* writing; where we can try out different alternatives and feel curiosity for how the work unfolds? That is probably where academic writing—as an offering of potentialities—will take us to places we would never even imagine as being possible for us to visit.

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Notes

1. The company name, as well as all other names, has been changed due to reasons of confidentiality.
2. See, for instance, Rhodes's (2000) article in which he questions the practice of searching for a single reality; a true representation of what is actually happening in organizational-life worlds.

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