**Shopping, conferences and reflecting**

(Phil Race)

“Oh dear” you might be thinking. “What’s all this about me writing *reflections?”.* “I have enough trouble writing a shopping list – and then I go and leave it at home, and can’t remember half the things that were on it when I get to the shop”. “And what’s all this stuff about us all being expected to be *reflective practitioners,* then?”. “What does one of these look like, and which planet do they come from?”. “And what’s this special kind of writing that’s called *reflective* writing?”

Nowadays, however, you’re likely to have more than pen and paper to capture reflections at a conference session – or anywhere else for that matter. Most people have a laptop, iPad or tablet open while sitting in a conference session, and a phone which can take pictures easily – for example to capture a slide with something on it you want to remember or think more about. But won’t whoever is running the session mind fingers on keyboards or the odd phone raised to take a picture? I love it – if someone is doing something with the content of a session I’m running, that’s far better than nothing. It they’re taking a photo of one of my slides that’s good news – it’s either a good slide (useful feedback) or a really bad slide (even more useful feedback!). Even better if they’re Tweeting to the conference hastag – with luck I can get the feel of how the session is going down while running it – and in any case I can survey the Tweets afterwards and learn more about what people liked or hated.

If you’re into Twitter, you can tweet all the way through a session. There’s usually a conference hashtag, so you can see everything everybody else is tweeting about, and reflect on their thoughts compared to yours. More than once when I was attending a boring session, several members of the audience had an enjoyable and deep Twitter conversation about matters arising from the session, and what we thought was interesting. Admittedly, one can miss useful points from the session while thinking of something else, but the net gain is usually substantial.

A conference is a very special occasion. If you’re a teacher, every time you sit in someone else’s session you can pick up ideas that work well, which you can adapt for your own contexts. And every time you see something that just doesn’t work, you can resolve ‘mustn’t do this myself’. Where else can you watch the presenters at the same time as looking at the effects what they do have on other people in the audience, as well as on you?

Back to shopping lists. Actually, actively composing a reflection on a conference session can be a bit like writing a shopping list. What do you *want* from the shop? What do you really *need* from the shop? This can be on the back of an envelope, a post-it or two, or we now use those little pads they give away in hotel bedrooms – just the right size. Failing that, the list is now more likely on the phone.

And then in the shop, when we actually remember to take the list with us, don’t we tick things off until we’ve got all that we wanted and needed? And while we’re in the shop, don’t we sometimes see things on the shelves that we didn’t have on our list, and put them in the trolley anyway, especially when they’re ‘buy one and get one free only this week’? And sometimes we didn’t need them, and didn’t even want them until we saw them. And all this happens at a selection of conference sessions – things you want, things you need, things you didn’t know you wanted, things you didn’t know you needed, and things you certainly don’t want.

Well, now, what you’re reading now is actually just a reflection – it’s me reflecting on shopping lists and conferences, so far. It’s not stuffy academic writing – neither are shopping lists. Shopping lists have a purpose – so can reflections.

When you’re at a conference, you’ll be going to lots of things, and joining in. Sometimes you’ll sit and listen. Sometimes you’ll talk to other people. Sometimes you’ll laugh. Sometimes you’ll think “what on earth are they on about now?”. Sometimes you’ll think “I wish I could be more like her”. Sometimes you’ll think “who does he think he is?”. Sometimes you’ll think “that’s something I can do myself”. Sometimes you’ll think “I can use that”. Sometimes you’ll be really bored, and wander off into thoughts entirely of your own, and have a brilliant idea which will change your whole life. That’s life. The only person who can really waste your time is *you,* not that boring conference presenter. You’re still in charge of your brain, your thoughts, your second-thoughts, your ideas, your plans.

That’s where lists come in. If we don’t jot down a few words or images about an idea we’ve got, or one we can adapt to our own purposes, the ideas just tend to evaporate away. A day later, it’s all gone. We can’t remember what we laughed at, what we agreed with, what we argued with, what annoyed us, and what we thought of everyone else around us. That’s why it’s worth capturing reflections, there and then, all the way through the conference – and indeed all the way through life in general. It saves us forgetting things. It saves us from losing good ideas. It saves us from just sitting there getting bored sometimes. Capturing those reflections saves us getting that ‘I must try to remember that’ headache we’ve all had. We can jot down or type or text a few words. Some people are good at drawing pictures. In Australia, one participant in one of my four-hour workshops gave me a lovely sketch drawing of me that she’d done during the session, with one word written on it ‘thanks’. She said she’d got a lot out of the session, and that drawing this while listening to me had helped her to think about what she would change in her own practice. The picture is framed on my wall now.

Jotting down reflections is actually quite close to making shopping lists. It’s about putting down just enough in words (or pictures) to remind us of what we were thinking at the time, not least what we were *learning* at the time. Included in the agenda for reflections are questions such as ‘what do I *want* from this session?’ and ‘what might I *need* from this session?’ and ‘what is surprising me about this session?’.

In other words, a good way into composing reflections is to jot down some *questions* – and then our draft answers to our questions. I’ve mentioned three possible questions already. You will think of your own questions, but let me start you off with a few to get you going. But first, you can reflect at any time – the choice is entirely yours.

Some reflections you can make *before* even going to a session. Many reflections you can capture *during* the session – so make sure you have a pen or pencil with you, and something to write on – for example the back of any bit of paper with conference details on it, or a phone, tablet or laptop. Other reflections you can conjure up *after* the session – even weeks later, using your earlier thoughts as triggers for your thinking. The thing is to capture them, rather than let them evaporate away.

Here are twenty questions just for a kick-off.

1. What do I *want* from this session?
2. What might I *need* from this session?
3. Do I agree with what’s being said?
4. What do I agree with most?
5. What can I use myself from what I’m thinking now?
6. What do I disagree with?
7. Why do I disagree with it?
8. What do I think of the people running the session?
9. Would I buy a second-hand fridge from them?
10. What’s the best thing so far about this session?
11. What do I hate about this session so far?
12. How relevant is this session to my life?
13. Am I being inspired in this session?
14. What new thoughts have come into my head so far in this session?
15. What on earth does he mean by (metacognitive processing)? (You put in the jargon bit that is getting your goat).
16. What’s that joke I’d like to remember and try out on other folk?
17. “Ahaaa” – now I see what such-and-such is about.
18. Is this session as good as the last one was?
19. What was the best thing altogether about the session I enjoyed most?
20. What must I remember to put on my shopping list?

But those were just *my* questions – *yours* will be even better – more relevant to *you.*

By now, I hope you’ll agree that there’s nothing magic about capturing reflections. It’s not about academic writing. Grammar doesn’t matter. Spelling doesn’t matter. The legibility of your writing doesn’t matter, as long as *you* can make head or tail of it later. Reflections are private to you – at least at first. You can of course start off with your *private* reflections, and string some of them together into a piece of writing you’re happy to let other people read. But only if you want to.

The important things are:

1. A week or month later, when you look at your jottings, or pictures or tweets, you’ll be able to recall useful things about your thoughts during the sessions.
2. You minimise the risk of a really bright idea of yours just evaporating away.
3. It gives you something interesting to do *during* the sessions – helps you stay awake sometimes!

Sometimes, capturing reflections is a way of exercising one’s brain. And there’s no point exercising your brain then losing it all again. That’s where your reflections come in. ‘Reflecting’ is about thinking. Composing your reflections is about *capturing* your thoughts – the brilliant ones alongside the silly ones (which are often, of course, fun). Only you can capture your reflections. No-one can do it for you. You wouldn’t want it any other way. Over to you….