

# On not being clear: a response to Burnard

Gary Rolfe

## On going too far

It seems that I have gone too far. That, at least, is the 'humble opinion' of Professor Burnard (1999). In my paper 'Writing Ourselves' (Rolfe 1997), I attempted to discuss a function of writing other than the descriptive and the analytic. This third function was the synthetic, the act of constructing knowledge through the very act of writing, such that 'not until we had written this down did we quite know what we knew' (Van Manen 1990). In order to distinguish this third function, which I saw as qualitatively different from the other two, I referred to it in italics as *writing*, and dared to suggest that it might be seen as a form of research. I also explored the post-structuralist notion of the objectification of the text, the idea that texts are open to multiple readings and that when we later return to our own texts, we do so with a fresh pair of eyes as a reader rather than as the writer. As Virginia Woolf (1978) observed, the self who writes is different from the self who later reads what is written.

Closs & Draper (1998) made several objections to the stance I had taken, and I felt that a response was required. Having asserted my belief that texts are open to multiple readings, however, I felt that all I could offer was another reading, both of my original paper and of Closs & Draper's response (Rolfe 1999). Burnard has condemned this approach as 'an affectation and a dishonest one at that'. I should, he claims, 'cut the pretension of writing about [my] own work in the third person', and yet, had I attempted (as Burnard urges me to) to 'put them right' on the 'true' meaning of my paper, I would be open to the charge of hypocrisy. Having sided with the post-structuralist claim that authors have no privileged authority in interpreting their own

writing, I felt that the only honest approach to defending my paper from attack was to respond as a third person, and I gave a full justification in my response of why I chose to take this course of action. Whether or not Burnard agrees with this stance, he should at least respect it as a logical response from a post-structuralist position. How can he say, then, that it is a pretension, since the real pretension would be in putting aside my own stated position and responding in the traditional way. However, given Burnard's insistence that I write in the first person, I feel compelled now to offer a more traditional authorial response; to play him at his own language game.

## On the postmodern menace

I detect, however, that his real bugbear is not with the use of third person commentary, but with the perceived threat of postmodernism and its (tenuous) links with relativism. Burnard writes that 'it evades me, for the moment, how Rolfe can claim, on the one hand, not to be certain about meanings and yet, on the other, dismiss the point about his being relativist'. In other words, he cannot understand how I can be open to multiple interpretations of a text and yet not accept a relativist standpoint. Perhaps I can enlighten him. It is widely and erroneously assumed that postmodernism entails a belief in relativism. However, many postmodernists are willing to accept the existence of a real and objective truth; it is just that they are suspicious of most of our attempts to gain access to it. As Rorty (1989) pointed out, 'To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth'. Some truths (and therefore

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some facts) are self-evident: it is a fact that I am sitting here in my office writing this paper. Few postmodernists would wish to dispute the evidence of direct observation, but would, nevertheless, maintain 'an incredulity towards grand narratives' (Lyotard 1984) such as the claim of science to offer a privileged access to facts and to the truth. Burnard's observation that 'in Rolfe's world of shifting meanings and lack of absolutes, he can still find the odd fact', therefore, displays a lack of understanding of the postmodern position, and rather misses the point.

### On the meaning of words

But let us consider some of Burnard's objections in more detail. Firstly, he claims that my assertion that Closs and Draper's definition of research is 'at odds with much current thinking' is somehow not allowed from a post-structuralist stance, and that I stated that their definition is 'wrong'. Of course, I never used the word 'wrong', nor did I mean to imply it. The point I was making was that Closs and Draper accused me of using the term research in 'an unusual way', but that *their* definition was itself rather unusual, in so far as it was a departure from the norm of current thinking. I did not say that it was 'wrong', nor was I complaining about it: I was merely pointing out that their criticism of my definition of research applied equally to their own. However, while they saw such 'departures from the norm' as a dangerous thing, I was welcoming them.

### On speaking clearly

Secondly, Burnard suggests that I am opposed to Closs and Draper's assertion that there is 'a need within nursing for us to speak clearly to one another', whereas once again I never disputed that claim. What is in dispute is the means by which such clarity is to be achieved. Closs and Draper thought that clarity can only come about by narrowing down the meanings of words such as 'research' and 'knowledge', and, indeed, their main objection to my paper was that I used these terms in a rather cavalier fashion. My point was that, if we wish to communicate beyond the narrow confines of our own particular specialism, then such parochial narrowing of meaning is actually counter-productive, since each specialism would tend to narrow their definitions

down in different ways, making clear communication between them all but impossible. This applies just as much to communication between nurse academics and nurse practitioners as it does to communication between nurses and (say) doctors, and as Burnard quite rightly points out, 'if we want our ideas translated into practical action then we need to write about them in ways that practitioners and others will understand'. This is precisely my point, which is why, in my original paper, I advocated that words such as 'knowledge' and 'research' should be used in their wider sense beyond Closs and Draper's self-confessed narrow 'core features of academic life'. My suggestion was that, through *writing*, practitioners are carrying out a form of research (in its wider sense) that can generate knowledge that has little to do with traditional academic life, and my plea was that this knowledge should be taken seriously. Closs and Draper were unsure whether it should even be graced with the titles 'research' and 'knowledge'.

### On communication

Thirdly, like me, Burnard claims that one of the functions of writing is to communicate. Unlike me, he sees it as the *only* function, arguing that: 'We must write, surely, to *communicate*? If not then, for what is it and who is it that we write' (although I am not entirely sure that these two sentences are a good example of writing as communication). Of course one of the functions of writing is communication, but it is rather naïve to suggest that it is the *only* function. In answer to his question, we sometimes write for ourselves, we sometimes write for others but with no intention of ever letting them see our writing, and sometimes, as I said in my paper, we just *write*. In this latter case, it is the process of *writing* rather than the content that is important. We *write* in order simply to get it out rather than to communicate an idea or an emotion. We write in order to learn rather than to teach.

### On Wittgenstein and what can be said

Which brings me to Burnard's next point, that 'Let us, at least consider, writing with clarity' (sic). Interestingly, he cites Wittgenstein in support of this plea, and the quotation: 'what can

be said at all can be said clearly: and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent' (Wittgenstein 1922) represents the essence of Wittgenstein's early philosophy, which he was later to renounce. In fact, following the publication of the book in which this quotation can be found, he took his own advice and abandoned philosophy for many years to become a school teacher.

When he returned, a decade later, it was with the distinctly postmodern philosophy for which he is best known, and which is in direct opposition to Burnard's position. He argued that words and texts have multiple meanings that can only be deciphered by consulting the rules of the local 'language game' that the speaker and writer is playing. Thus: 'let the use of words teach you their meaning' (Wittgenstein 1972). It is not the words themselves that contain meaning, but the way they are used within language. A word does not have an essential and unambiguous meaning that can be communicated to another person without distortion. The meaning of the word *shifts* according to its use. The idea that the meaning in my head can be unambiguously translated into words, which can then be unambiguously communicated to another person, and those words can then unambiguously be translated back into my original meaning in the head of the other person seems to me (and to Wittgenstein) naïve to say the least. We may believe that we are communicating clearly, but we cannot assume that our writing will be read in the way that we intended.

### On ideas and the business of nursing

Finally, Burnard makes a plea that writers should have 'at least one foot on solid ground at any given time', and that ideas and notions are all very interesting, but they should not stand in the way of getting the beds made, the research grants in, and the teaching done. I find this statement rather sad and reactionary. Is Burnard suggesting that nurses and lecturers do not need ideas and notions; that they get in the way of the 'real' business of nursing, that of making the beds or doing the teaching? Surely not, since when I typed his name into CINAHL, it came up with 180 papers published since 1982. Surely there

must be an idea or at least a notion in there somewhere? I would not dispute the suggestion that writing a paper every month for 17 years (not to mention numerous books) might get in the way of making the beds and doing the teaching, but surely the ideas and notions contained in them can only help? Unless, of course, you hold the view that nurses should primarily be concerned with doing rather than with thinking, which I do not believe for a minute is Burnard's position, and neither is it mine (after all, we both have books to sell).

### On not being clear

So, back to clarity. 'We must write, surely, to communicate' says Burnard, and 'clarity in communication is *essential* from a practical point of view'. Therefore, we must write clearly so that 'practitioners and others will understand'. I have no argument whatsoever with the idea that clear communication has a role to play in published writing, but to state that *all* published writing must strive for clarity, and that what cannot be said clearly should not be said at all is, in my opinion, both narrow-minded and patriarchal. It suggests firstly that writing is a one-way communication between someone who knows (usually the academic or researcher) and someone who does not (usually, as Burnard pointed out above, the practitioner). Secondly, it suggests that there is a single meaning to the message that must be communicated unambiguously to the reader in a way that will clearly be understood. Finally, the suggestion is that readers are unable to ascribe meaning to complex messages, that the meaning must be contained in the message itself rather than brought to it by the reader of that message.

Certainly, clear and unambiguous statements have their place, and are what Barthes (1977) referred to as 'readerly' texts, that is, as texts that are read for the message placed in them by the author. But he also described 'writerly' texts that are written in such a way that the meaning is deliberately ambiguous, so that the reader has to construct her own meaning. From Burnard's point of view, these are unclear texts, and should be suppressed (what cannot be said clearly, should not be said at all).

Writerly texts are not published in order to communicate the ideas of the writer, but to

inspire any reader to think for herself, and, as such, they have an important role to play in any academic discipline, and particularly in practical ones such as nursing. Perhaps (contrary to what Burnard says) we *should* sometimes attempt to alienate people by our writing. My paper certainly appears to have alienated Burnard, but it has at least sparked some debate and set us both thinking.

The importance of writerly texts is that they are open to deconstructive reading that, in turn, leads to more texts; a process that Derrida (1976) referred to as supplementarity. When faced with a perfectly written, perfectly communicated readerly text, all we can do is agree or disagree with the content, and any resulting debate is usually sterile and short-lived. In contrast, a writerly text invites interpretation, discussion and (sometimes) heated argument. But more importantly, it invites more texts, more ideas, more original thought, which is often only loosely related to the paper which sparked it. Burnard might see this as a distraction from the real business of making the beds and teaching, but I would claim that advances in practice and teaching are achieved as much by disputation as by agreement and as much by ambiguity as by clarity. As the sociologist Clifford Geertz (1973)

wrote, 'progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other'. Long may it be so.

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