**On pragmatism and poetics**

Ken Plummer

‘The only way to write is to write' - or so I have told countless students over the years, as they have sat opposite me telling me that they can't write, that they have a writing block, that the words won't come to them. I never really know if it has helped them hear some silly old Professor pontificate that the ‘only way to write is to write'. But I do explain.

Each day I get up and write some words. There is much to life - and much more than writing- so I want it done, and out of the way, so I can seize the rest of the day. Very often- most days probably - as I write my few hundred words, I have a knowing feeling that it is all rubbish. Useless. A waste of time. Yes, really rubbish. Why do I bother to put words to paper? But I continue. I must write. Nobody need ever read any of this rubbish.

But one day, some of it will take shape. Perhaps some of it will come in handy later. And I may even be surprised at what I have written. And on some days, the good days -maybe today is one of those rarer days- it will just tumble out of my mind almost pre-formed. No matter. Good days, bad days; all days are writing days.

The only way to write is to write. So I wrote this bit today, this early morning.

‘Think of the words you use and make every word matter'. I have lived now - forty years or so- reading the awful writing of much sociology and social science. Maybe it is the complexity of the ideas which require more complex narratives. Maybe it is the translations from some difficult work of the past. Maybe. More often I think it is more to do with the puffed up pretence - to make our understandings appear more scientific, deep, serious, truly profound - that we dress it all up in a language that obfuscates and obdurately masks what we see and say. We adhere to the pathetic restrictions and style sheets of journal formats or essay requirements. We turn writing into a formulaic task sheet of pretended and oh-so-serious ‘knowledge'.

Recently, since I retired from formal academic work, I have looked at - and slowly started to grasp- the point of poetry. I have never read poetry before; indeed, I have avoided it. It has its own world of pretense. But recently I have found -largely through serious illness- that the words used by social scientists are too many, too crude, take too long to say, and despite their manifest seriousness turn out often to be very shallow. They rarely cut to the quick; the heart of the matter... Instead they have no heart and tell it slow. Sociology spends as many words as it can possibly use (as many as it takes for a Ph.D., a journal article or a book) - long, complicated, incomprehensible, often neologistic words - in searching for its truth. The poet by contrast elects not to waste a syllable or sound. Think of the words you use and make every word matter. So they can throw a clear light on what you are trying to say. Get the right clear words and cut to the quick.

These are my words for today.

(I wrote this - and it has been unchanged- between 7.00 am and 7.30 am one Sunday morning when staying with friends in Florence, long before anyone else had stirred. Whether this was a good day or a bad day for me only the reader can say. But here it is).

**Ken Plummer** is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex. He writes: ‘Over the years, I have held many roles at Essex including Graduate Director and Head of Department; have supervised thirty PhD students; and have researched and written widely on sexuality (especially lesbian and gay studies, and since the late 1980's, queer studies). My main interests have always been in the development of a humanistic method and theory to help towards a better social world where there will be less socially produced suffering. My methodological concerns have been with the development of narrative, life story, symbolic interactionism and the post-modern turn. My approach is that of a critical humanist.

I have also had a long standing interest in the teaching of introductory sociology, having taught the first year at Essex for eighteen years and produced the textbook with John Macionis, [***Sociology: A Global Introduction (3rd ed 2005***](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Sociology-Introduction-John-J-Macionis/dp/013128746X/ref=sr_1_1/026-7000061-9832457?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1193744518&sr=1-1); 4th edition 2008). Written or edited around 15 books and over a hundred articles, including [***Sexual Stigma***](http://www.jstor.org/view/00943061/di973930/97p22504/0) (1975), [***The Making of the Modern Homosexual***](http://www.amazon.com/Making-Modern-Homosexual-Kenneth-Plummer/dp/0389201596) ed (1981), [***Symbolic Interactionism***](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Symbolic-Interactionism-Perspective-Method-Blumer/dp/0520056760/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1/026-7000061-9832457?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1193744836&sr=8-1) Vols 1 & 2 (1991), [***Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience***](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=VezcKGf5oOQC&dq=modern+homosexualities+fragments+of+lesbian+and+gay+experience&pg=PP1&ots=bg8CnUOmL2&sig=7w1KMB1Uok3s6FGFnujHrtsZCTM&prev=http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en&q=Modern+Homosexualities:+Fra) (1992), Chicago Sociology : Critical Assessments (1997: 4 volumes); [***Telling Sexual Stories***](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=60eU-ln-JGIC&dq=telling+sexual+stories&pg=PP1&ots=XxcVr_cfyY&sig=ayI78QE_mWQguNEwhDQ4GX3L6D8&prev=http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en&q=Telling+Sexual+Stories&meta=&sa=X&oi=print&ct=title&cad=one-book-wi) (1995), Sexualities (2002: 4 volumes), [***Documents of Life-2: An invitation to a critical humanism***](http://www.amazon.com/Documents-Life-Invitation-Critical-Humanism/dp/0761961321) (2001) and Intimate Citizenship (2003). In 1996, I set up the journal [***Sexualities***](http://sexualities.sagepub.com/) and remain its editor.'