

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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This publication extends “Writing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Articles for Peer-Reviewed Journals” by Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather (2019), originally published in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry (TLI)*, the official journal of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). Articles published in *TLI* are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license. The original article is available at <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.7.2.3>.

“Writing a draft paper” (Reflection 24.1) was originally [published as a blog post](#) and is reproduced by permission of the author, Pat Thomson.

“What makes a good critical friend?” (Reflection 26.1) was originally [published as a blog post](#) and is reproduced by permission of the author, Rebecca J. Hogue.

Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Healey, Mick | Matthews, Kelly E. | Cook-Sather, Alison
Title: Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education / Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather
Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2020] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020941985 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-04-7 | ISBN (PBK) 978-1-951414-05-4 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.aa3>
Subjects: LCSH: Academic writing handbooks, manuals, etc.; Education, Higher Research; College teaching; College teachers as authors

CHAPTER 1

ARTICULATING OUR GOALS

Origins, Audiences, and Structure

Many academics are surprised how little they know about writing and some are relieved finally to be able to admit it. (Murray 2009, 2-3)

For most academics, formal training on how to write “like a historian” or “like a biologist” begins and ends with the PhD, if it happens at all. (Sword 2012, 24)

How can a practice required of so many academics be so little understood and addressed? What are the implications of the lack of understanding and training that Rowena Murray and Helen Sword note in the quotes above for those new to the practice of academic writing, for those who have developed approaches that work for them, and for those in between?

While there may be a dearth of dialogue about writing in, about, and for the academy in general, the lack of guidance for writing about learning and teaching in particular is what inspired the three of us to compose an article entitled “Writing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Articles for Peer-Reviewed Journals” (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019). Two things happened as we drafted that piece for publication. The first is that the critical friends we asked for feedback—some of whom were established scholars with extensive publication records and some of whom were new to academic writing—expressed enthusiastic appreciation for what we included (as well as offered useful suggestions for revision). The second thing

that happened is that we realized there was so much more to say—and to learn. We decided to write this book to expand on what we addressed in that article and to build on the exchanges with colleagues it inspired.

Our goal with this book is to model and to support the creation of and contributions to scholarly conversations about learning and teaching in higher education across a wide range of genres. By “genre” we mean *the kind or form of writing* you select. For example, do you want to write an empirical research article, an opinion piece, a reflective essay, or a blog? As we discuss in **part 2** of the book, approaches to creating and contributing to such exchanges in the academic community are inextricably linked to the ongoing processes of developing identities, clarifying your values, and learning through writing—processes in which all scholars of learning and teaching (faculty, academic staff, and students) must engage.

Who We Are as Learning and Teaching Scholars

Our purpose and focus are shaped by who we are and what we value. As the co-authors of this book, we share an interest in researching learning and teaching in higher education and have participated extensively in the growing national and international interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). We have a particular interest in partnerships among students, faculty/academics, and others in learning and teaching, and we are three of the founding co-editors of the *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)*. However, our formative experiences of inquiring into learning and teaching were influenced by having worked in three different disciplinary contexts and on three different continents. Moreover, we have worked in this arena for varied lengths of time and have distinct approaches to academic writing. We acknowledge that we share a Western perspective, we all come from English-speaking countries, and we are all white, cisgender scholars, and that our cultural backgrounds and personal identities have shaped who we are as scholars and how we see the world. We include some background on our development as learning and teaching scholars in Our Perspectives 1.1.

Our Perspectives 1.1**How have you developed as a learning and teaching scholar and writer?**

Mick: I come from a disciplinary approach to teaching. After more than fifteen years researching and writing about economic geography, my first learning and teaching publication developed from a reorganization of our first-year practical classes in geography at Coventry University, UK, in the late 1980s. Shortly after, I joined the editorial board of the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. It was only after winning a National Teaching Fellowship in 2000 (through what is now known as Advance HE in the UK, which recognizes outstanding impacts on student outcomes and the teaching profession in higher education), more than a decade after my first pedagogic publication, that I began to write more generally about learning and teaching issues. I grew as a learning and teaching scholar through engagement with the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), co-editing the *International Journal for Academic Development*, and more recently becoming the inaugural senior editor of the *International Journal for Students as Partners*. Despite being the author of many publications, including several books, and being an experienced reviewer and editor, I have learned so much in preparing this book.

Kelly: I grew up as a white, middle-class tomboy from a broken home in suburban New Orleans—classic latchkey kid. My parents were not academic types although my mom was (what was then called) a secretary for thirty years in a university. Somehow (still a mystery to me) I ended up in a paid undergraduate research role in Professor Hill's lab group at Louisiana State University, where I co-authored two papers on viral interactions with neurodegenerative diseases—my first foray in academic publishing. However, lab life was not for me, and I moved into science teaching in “failing schools” in New Orleans. Then along came Hurricane Katrina in 2005. I moved to Australia with no job prospects, newly liberated from all my worldly possessions, and cured of misguided

beliefs about certainty or long-term planning. A large, comprehensive Australian research-intensive university, The University of Queensland (UQ), hired me on a contract to support students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Academic colleagues encouraged me to pursue a PhD, and the timing was right for me as UQ created a new academic role: teaching-focused staff who conducted SoTL instead of (or as well as, depending on who you asked) disciplinary research. With my skills as a teacher and curiosity about learning in university, I found myself enrolled in a PhD, mentoring teaching-focused academics and then becoming a teaching-focused academic myself in 2010. UQ offered me tremendous opportunities to engage in research and academic writing. Two kids, a PhD, and two promotions later, I—still a weak but persistent writer—continue on with my brand of relentless stubbornness to figure this writing thing out. My development as a scholar has been haphazard yet enabled by the privilege I was born into and the sponsorship of key colleagues along the way.

Alison: I spent my childhood in a large, Victorian house in San Francisco filled with books that belonged to a mother who quoted Shakespeare at dinner. That early exposure may have contributed to my choice to major in English literature at college and to teach it at high school level for a number of years. My decision to complete a PhD in education was driven in part by my own desire to keep learning and in part by my desire to pursue a career focused on creating meaningful learning experiences for others. When I assumed leadership of the secondary teacher certification program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges in the United States in 1994, my priority was to create opportunities for secondary students to inform the preparation of future teachers—and a teacher colleague and I designed a program to do just that, which continues to this day (Cook-Sather 2002; Cook-Sather and Curl 2014). In the early 2000s, I started to assume more responsibility for supporting the educational development of faculty at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, and I brought the focus of student-teacher partnership to that work, particularly as it affirmed the

experiences and perspectives of underrepresented students (Cook-Sather 2018a). The Students as Learners and Teachers program I developed became internationally known and emulated, and as I started publishing work on that program (Cook-Sather 2008, 2011), I came into contact with learning and teaching scholars and practitioners who were also interested in students' voices and roles in educational development. These multiple forms of privilege and a fairly single-minded commitment made my development as a learning and teaching scholar a fairly smooth process.

Source: Based in part on Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, 29-30)

Your perspective: What influenced your development as a learning and teaching scholar?

Since both our shared and our diverse learning and teaching identities inform our arguments, we use a collective “we” throughout most of the book but also integrate several “Our Perspectives” text boxes like the one above that include all three of our experiences and perspectives. Our intent is for our respective “voices” to surface our different experiences and views to illustrate our argument that there is no one way to write about learning and teaching or to be a “learning and teaching scholar.” For that reason and as an attempt to be, as best we can in a book format, in dialogue, we invite you—all of you—to address some of the same questions we tackle, as in the “Our Perspectives” text boxes.

We also include across the chapters stories from more than twenty colleagues, both experienced and relatively new to writing, in “Reflection” boxes. Our goal in doing so is to reveal the array of lived experiences of writing—the joys, vulnerabilities, fears, risks, surprises, and excitement that go hand-in-hand with this hard, yet rewarding, emotional and intellectual work. To create, as best we can, a sense of ongoing dialogue, we include discussion questions in the introductions to each part of the book and at the end of each chapter.

Finally, we weave into our discussion personal communications we received from critical friends in response to drafts of the book. In this we model the importance of critical friends and show the way they offered insights, based on their experiences and viewpoints, that changed our thinking and the shape of a text. Citing these personal communications also models another form of conversation among scholars that is typically invisible labor (what Sword [2017a] refers to as the generous work of being in a scholarly writing community—work that can burn people out). Conventional Western practices tell us to cite scholars in published outlets, which we do, but our integration of personal communications is our attempt to recognize people and the knowledge that they bring that moves us beyond our own, necessarily limited experiences and perspectives.

Intended Audiences and Our Terminology

How, what, when, and where students are learning are everyday discussions across campuses in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australasia. Therefore, the scholarship on such engagement needs to be broad and inclusive of a diversity of scholars. In this book we address members of several, sometimes overlapping groups:

- *academics*—members of faculty (a term commonly used in North America), academic staff (common outside of North America), instructors, lecturers, librarians (who are considered faculty in some contexts), higher education researchers, and educational developers or those in similar roles that typically involve teaching and research responsibilities;
- *professional staff*—learning designers, educational technologists, educational developers in non-academic/non-faculty positions, librarians (who are considered staff in some contexts), student services and student life staff, and non-teaching staff with essential roles to play in supporting teaching and student learning; and
- *students*—graduate students, whom we consider to be emerging practitioners within higher education, and undergraduates, who

are increasingly engaging in learning and teaching inquiry in higher education.

We anticipate that you will find the book useful if one or more of the following applies to you:

- you are knowledgeable about your disciplinary field but have had little opportunity to develop knowledge and write about higher education or engage in academic writing about learning and teaching;
- you strive to facilitate not only the work of developing teaching practices that support engaged learning but also wish to write about this work;
- you already publish about learning and teaching in higher education in your discipline and want to revise some of your established practices and expand your identities as a writer;
- you already publish about learning and teaching in higher education generally and want to review your writing practices and explore new ones;
- you want to write about learning and teaching and seek detailed guidance in navigating multiple forms of writing and conceptualizing your identity in ways that might be quite new and unfamiliar;
- you are pursuing a graduate certificate, master's, or PhD in learning and teaching;
- you are enrolled in undergraduate courses or graduate studies and are working in partnership with scholars on learning and teaching projects; or
- you are an applicant for institutional, national, or international teaching fellowship or award, or you are making a case for promotion based at least in part on the excellence of your teaching.

The diversity of roles in higher education and the different language used internationally to name such roles complicate how we talk about each other and the work in which we are engaged. For the sake of clarity and inclusion, in the rest of this book we adopt the broad term *scholar* to refer to all three groups named above

(academics, professional staff, and students). This term aims to reflect our conviction that all of you can be *learning and teaching scholars* when you investigate and communicate about learning and teaching in a scholarly way. Sometimes, for the sake of simplicity, when it comes to you publishing your work, we refer to you simply as *writers* or *authors*.

Our Approach to Writing this Book

To be transparent about our own writing process as we offer guidance on writing, we want to share something of our approach to writing this book. We started by drafting the book proposal, including brief synopses and approximate word limits for each chapter. Though we had provisional discussions with our eventual publisher, we decided not to submit the formal proposal until we had drafted about one-third of the text. This proved to be an important decision, as we revised the content and structure in our initial proposal in several ways as a result of drafting the initial chapters.

We allocated the task of writing the first draft of each chapter among the three of us based on our interests, previous experiences, and workloads. As we completed each draft, we sent it around to the others for critical comment. Sometimes we rewrote sections or added or deleted sections; in other cases, the changes were mostly minor edits or alterations to sentence construction to enhance readability. On a few occasions, one or another of us had a writing block and passed the chapter over to one of the others to complete the first draft.

As we progressed to a first draft, the realities of our different workloads and lives reshaped our plan, prompting us to reframe our approach yet again. So, while we offer frameworks and guidance for writing, we also model through “Our Perspectives” boxes the messy, lived realities of the process, whether completed alone or in collaboration, that writers navigate with differing levels of comfort, joy, excitement, and disappointment. Our existing relationships and flexibility allowed us to accept these realities even though we hold different preferences for setting deadlines and making firm plans.

What to say and how to say it best are always questions in writing. As we drafted, we found that we wanted to say more than we

had initially allowed the space for—a case of learning as we wrote! Sometimes we had to be strict with ourselves and cut whole sections, or exclude discussion of some topic areas, or simply point to other sources where readers would find the topic discussed.

We are fortunate to have extensive established networks that we drew on to find people to comment on our draft manuscript, and we were also fortunate to have worked with editors who welcomed dialogue during the composing process. In total, fourteen colleagues plus our three editors provided helpful suggestions for enhancing all or parts of the text (for a full list, see the acknowledgments). As a result of this feedback and our own reflections, we merged two chapters, split another one in two, redistributed the material from a further chapter, and added two more chapters, as well as rearranging, clarifying, adding, and deleting text within each chapter.

Structure and Organization of the Book

The above process resulted in the following structure and organization of the book. Depending on your experience with writing about learning and teaching for a scholarly audience, you might want to focus on some parts of the book and skip others entirely. In addition to the two introductory chapters that make up this part of the book, we think you will find that **chapter 11** provides a useful introduction to the eleven different genres we discuss.

Part 1 is our effort to locate ourselves as people, scholars, and writers and to locate this book as part of larger, ongoing conversations. It explains the origins, audiences, and structure of the book followed by an explanation of our scope (what we do and do not focus on in the book). Why might you want to write about learning and teaching? We answer that question as we also locate the book at the intersection of higher education research and SoTL.

Part 2 provides the conceptual framework for the book. We offer this framework to make explicit our own values as participants in various formal discussions and analyses of learning and teaching and to suggest that scholarly writing is, ideally, at once dialogic and

reflective—part both of a larger dialogue and of individual, ongoing learning. In this part of the book we argue for writing as:

- a way to create and contribute to scholarly conversations about learning and teaching,
- a method for fostering identities and clarifying values, and
- a medium for engaging in ongoing learning.

Part 3 invites you as writers to clarify your purpose and address some preliminary questions in preparation for drafting: What is motivating you to write about learning and teaching? Do you write alone or with others? How do you select an outlet to share your writing? Should you draft the title and, where relevant, an abstract or summary, before starting the substantive text? This part of the book aims to help you think about how you put your own version of the dialogue and reflective processes we discuss in part 2 into practice in your writing.

Part 4, by far the longest section of the book, provides guidelines for writing in eleven different genres (empirical research articles, theoretical and conceptual articles, literature reviews, case studies, books and edited collections, conference and workshop presentations, reflective essays, opinion pieces, stories, social media, and applications for teaching fellowships, awards, and promotions). In this part of the book we examine established practices in each of these genres, offer questions to consider as you write within each, and recommend ways in which you might both attend to existing practices and complicate or push beyond them. We offer this part of the book to both experienced and new scholars to support thinking through what is established within scholarly writing communities, what can evolve from those norms, and what might be developed anew.

Part 5 focuses on writing efficiently, effectively, and energizingly. This part of the book summarizes some of the advice about writing that can be found in general writing guides and advice for doctoral students. We offer it with the understanding that writing about learning and teaching may be a familiar, different, or new experience for differently positioned scholars. This advice therefore warrants revisiting (for some) and clarifying for the first time (for others) how to:

allot time and choose space to write; write and rewrite your draft; become an engaging writer; and develop a network of critical friends.

Part 6 focuses on the final stages of sending your writing into the public sphere to contribute to or create scholarly conversations about learning and teaching, including the processes of submitting your manuscript, responding to reviewers, and promoting your work.

The book's website (www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org/books/writing-about-learning) contains many online resources that offer activities, templates, and examples to give greater depth to selected topics in the book and engage you more actively in the writing process. Where these are provided, they are mentioned in the book. In addition, if you are reading the PDF version on screen, you may use the hyperlinks to external resources throughout the book to further support your writing.

Over to You

As a new or experienced academic, professional staff member, or student in the growing scholarly community committed to the improvement of learning and teaching in higher education, you have choices about the genres you write in, the aspects of learning and teaching you focus on, and who you are and want to be in the scholarly community—although the kind and extent of your choices will vary. Most people learn how to be an academic writer on the job, and for many it is a sink or swim experience. As Rowena Murray (2009, 1) observes, “The dominant characteristic of academic writers is their persistence.” Reflecting on twenty years of publishing, Helen Sword (2017a, 7) also captures the role of persistence in writing: “I still find academic writing to be a frustrating, exhilarating, endlessly challenging process that never seems to get any easier—but that I wouldn't give up for the world.” Our purpose in writing this book is to offer encouragement and guidance for all those who persist, whether in the context of SoTL, educational research, or as part of other discussions of learning and teaching in higher education.

As you contemplate who you are and who you want to become as a scholar of learning and teaching, consider how your choices about

genre and focus might help you persist and experience the exhilaration as well as work through the challenges that Sword notes above. We offer the following questions for you to address before reading chapter 2 to help you clarify who you hope to become as a scholar of learning and teaching:

- What is your identity—or what are your identities—as a learning and teaching scholar? What experiences do you already have of writing about learning and teaching in higher education?
- What key questions do you have about writing about learning and teaching in higher education? What areas are you most interested in developing and enhancing?
- How will you go about reading this text? Which chapters interest you most? In what order will you read them?

Each introduction and chapter in the book includes reflection and discussion questions, like the ones above. We have gathered all these questions in the online resources as well.