Writing about Learning and Teaching

in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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EXTENDING THE CONVENTIONAL WRITING GENRES

Naming and Clarifying

Rules are merely tendencies, not truths, and genre borders only as real as our imaginations small. (Vuong 2019, 245)

We need to imagine new genres for sharing insights that are much broader than our current models for publishing. We need to develop much more interplay between product and process. (Bernstein and Bass 2005, 43)

There are many taken-for-granted assumptions about research, writing, and publications. In this chapter we stretch thinking about what publishable scholarship about learning and teaching is and can be. We invite you, as Ocean Vuong suggests above, to enlarge your imagination, and in particular, as Dan Bernstein and Randy Bass argue, to develop different ways to share insights into learning and teaching. Naming the different genres and arguing for their legitimacy supports you, we hope, in writing in different ways depending on who you are and who you want to become, as well as on what conversations you want to contribute to or create. We define what we mean by "genre," note the possibilities and risks of writing in "unconventional" genres, describe key features and formats of the eleven genres on which we focus, and provide some preliminary guidelines for writing in different genres.

What Do We Mean by "Writing Genre"?

As we noted in chapter 1, by "writing genre" we mean *the kind or form of writing* you select. There are many forms in which to write about learning and teaching. For example, writing a research article that draws on data gathered through a research design is a commonly accepted writing genre in many academic disciplines, including in learning and teaching. But it is only one of several genres for communicating about learning and teaching; other possible genres include theoretical and conceptual articles, literature reviews, case studies, books and edited volumes, conference and workshop presentations, reflective essays, opinion pieces, stories, social media, and teaching fellowship, award, and promotion applications. We acknowledge that our use of the word genre blurs the lines between a *type* of writing (e.g., literature review) and the *forum* for writing (e.g., refereed journal, chapter, or blog post). This is intentional, given that *how we write* intersects with *where we write* and *to whom we write* in ways that are hard to separate.

We are also aware that there are other terms for different writing genres. For instance, in some of the health care professions, there exists a genre called "reflective practice case studies." These are clinical case studies generated through reflective practice intended to support healthcare professionals in re-examining care challenges and opportunities through a form of writing that combines research and reflective practice. This is an excellent example of the kind of genre-blurring practice for which we argue in this book. Another example would be the term "essay." One scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) journal defines this genre in contrast to research articles:

> Essays on such topics as how SoTL can directly improve student learning outcomes; how SoTL has transformed an academic community/culture; the connections between SoTL and other forms of scholarship; how best to integrate SoTL into higher education; the problems and benefits of international collaboration in doing SoTL and applying the results to college teaching (classroom, online, or in combination). (*International Journal for*

the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, "Policies – Areas of Submission")

In our terms these could include a mixture of case studies, opinion pieces, reflective essays, stories, and theoretical and conceptual articles. (For other takes on "essays" see Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching (CELT); Academy of Management Learning & Education Editorial Team 2018.)

These examples throw into relief the challenges of categorizing and naming different genres, as we have done, for purposes of discussion and practice. Rather than see this as problematic, we suggest that it is part of an ongoing process of rethinking and revising our ways of engaging, analyzing, and sharing understandings.

The Possibilities and Risks of Writing in Unconventional Genres

Our goal in identifying eleven writing genres is to think both within and beyond the conventional to capture, understand, and communicate the complexity of learning and teaching in higher education in different ways. Working with—and breaking with—what is generally done and accepted offers us space to reflect on our assumptions about writing and publishing scholarship on learning and teaching and invite more voices to be a part of the conversations about higher education. At the same time, it carries risks.

Making space is, to our minds, about expanding possibilities. Rather than labeling what is conventional or unconventional by way of ranking or imposing an evaluative metric on writing genres, our goal is to make space for multiple and diverse forms of writing. Your beliefs about accepted forms of writing will vary according to your disciplinary backgrounds, cultural contexts, and personal and political commitments, so what is conventional to one person might be alternative to another. Yahlnaaw's reflection captures the complexity of naming conventions and the potential perils we face when we make assumptions about what is conventional in the context of learning and teaching research methodologies (Reflection 11.1).

Reflection 11.1

The experience of different presentation genres

Jah! Xaaydaga 'las!Yahlnaaw han.nuu dii kiiGa ga. HlGaagilda Xaayda Gwaii sda.uu hll iigiing. Hey! Wonderful People! My name is Yahlnaaw. I am from Skidegate, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia. Last year I was invited to be a part of conference workshop on different methods to do teaching and learning research or inquiry. It was an exciting opportunity for me; and I valued being included as a student in the workshop. In our planning process, I was quickly placed in a familiar context when working with scholars experienced in Western ways of knowing and being. For me, storytelling is an accepted form of knowledge creation. My workshop co-facilitators discussed storytelling as "alternative" and "innovative." I explained, from my standpoint, that storytelling is not alternative. Colonial knowledges came to this land after Indigenous knowledges. Thus, if anything is alternative, it's colonial knowledges because they came after. What is considered accepted or alternative is not factual, it is subjective and shaped by your social location in society. Thus, for me, talking about people as data is alternative.

Yahlnaaw is a graduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, Canada.

Reviewers also make assumptions based on what they consider conventional. As an author, if you choose to write in a genre that is outside of the conventional in your context, or in a given journal, you are taking a risk. While recognition of the legitimacy of different genres is growing in some learning and teaching publications, a recent experience of Kelly's highlights a challenge of pushing genre boundaries. She submitted an essay to *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. As mentioned above, it publishes research articles and essays, yet her essay was reviewed against criteria for an empirical research article. While one reviewer acknowledged that the review criteria were problematic and recommended that the essay be accepted, the second reviewer recommended rejection

with these comments: "There is no clear methodology. The empirical material that was provided is very poor. It is not enough to support any argument. There are no clear conclusions." The editor decided major revisions were required and the essay would be sent back to the reviewers for another round of reviews. In responding to the second reviewer, Kelly wrote:

> Yes, from an empirical research article framework your assessment (to reject) makes sense. However, my deliberate intention was to contribute an essay drawing on my reflections of my experiences and published research (including some of my own work). Thus, I ask that you rethink your comments based on the value of submitting different genres to advance SoTL, which draws on recent arguments from international SoTL scholars including Nancy Chick, Gary Poole, Peter Felten, Kathleen McKinney, Karen Manarin, and Alison Cook-Sather.

The essay was accepted following the second round of reviews (Matthews 2019a), yet the process was frustrating, even though Kelly had the experience, peer support networks, and agency to persist (see chapters 26 and 28). As Ronald Barnett (personal communication, July 28, 2019) suggests: "It is incumbent upon authors, especially those who submit papers that are on the fringes of a journal's editorial range, to make it crystal clear at the outset of a paper what it is and what it is not. Sometimes, as Marx said, we have to educate our masters."

Yahlnaaw's reflection and Kelly's story illustrate the importance of openness to multiple writing genres and valuing each in its own right. To this end, we think that naming genres explicitly and clarifying the distinctions and overlaps among them can encourage writers, editors, and reviewers to embrace a diversity of submissions. We are arguing against the creation of a hierarchy that privileges one genre over another. Yet, it will take a collective of brave writers and reviewers to challenge conventional (Western) wisdom and resist the convenience of writing only in dominant genres. It will also involve each of us

questioning our own assumptions about writing genres and what counts as publishable work to move this agenda forward.

In making this case, we are by no means diminishing established genres, such as empirical research articles or case studies of practices in Western contexts or storytelling in First Nations contexts. These genres enrich knowledge of learning and teaching in their own ways. Instead, we are arguing for additional ways of contributing knowledge to the growing scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education. We recognize that this values-based stance might come into conflict with the pressure many universities put on writers to embrace particular genres and publish in outlets that "count more" in metrics of rankings and ratings (see chapter 8). We also recognize that each of you will have your own views on the genres and how they intersect with cultural and institutional priorities. Depending on where you are in your career and in what context you are writing, you will need to make decisions that take these metrics and other variables into account. We hope, however, that external criteria will be only one determinant of your choice of genre and outlet and that your own values and scholarly commitments will be an equal driver (see also chapters 4 and 6).

It is also not our intention to draw hard and fast lines between genres and suggest that they constitute discrete, pure categories. Many learning and teaching scholars use a combination of genres. Mick makes that point when he notes that many of his publications are a mixture of conceptual material and literature reviews, often with the inclusion of some mini-case studies (Our Perspectives 13.1). Readers may well find that they also write in genres that do not neatly map to one of the eleven genres we have selected to discuss. For instance, you may write a short piece for a publication such as *HERDSA Connect, Educational Developments,* or *The Conversation,* or you may publish a study guide for students (e.g., Healey and Hill 2019) or a research report required from a funding body or a policy document for your university senate, as Kelly recently did (Matthews, Garratt, and Macdonald 2018). Such publications may include aspects of theoretical and conceptual articles, case studies, opinion pieces,

reflective essays, stories, and other genres, and you may find some of the questions we include in our frameworks for these genres helpful in preparing your pieces.

The selected genres we outline in the book overlap in both helpful and confusing ways. In naming these genres we are attempting to clarify the ways in which they differ, each serving a unique purpose and together constituting a rich body of scholarship.

Key Features and Formats of the Genres

The genres we name overlap and do not include every form of academic writing. For example, we chose not to examine dissertations and theses because a large literature already exists on this genre (Aitchison, Kamler, and Lee 2010; Kamler and Thomson 2014; Thomson and Kamler 2016). We also excluded book reviews, classroom notes or curriculum materials, pragmatic how-to-guides, grant proposals, and other genres of writing about learning and teaching, largely because of space constraints. Below we present the key features of the eleven writing genres we discuss—features that apply to academic writing generally and that you will therefore want to consider when writing about learning and teaching. As we have already noted, all are often, or could be, integrated with other genres. For example, case studies often have elements of empirical research articles, empirical research articles can assert an opinion, and so on. A summary table, "The Functions, Appearances, and Publishing Locations of the Eleven Genres," is available in the online resources.

Empirical Research Articles

What the genre typically does: Gathers and uses observable data (e.g., from interviews, surveys, document analyses, reflections, and narratives) to offer evidence to support a particular aim or question.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Research articles in the natural and social sciences include an introduction, a literature review, sections on methods, findings, discussion, and implications, plus a conclusion. The humanities have different format variations. Research articles are typically published in journals, book chapters, and books.

Theoretical and Conceptual Articles

What the genre typically does: Draws on literature and theories (without presenting new data) to provoke, deepen, or expand thinking about a particular concept or practice.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Theoretical and conceptual articles typically describe the method or approach guiding the writer's process but otherwise do not follow a prescribed set of headings typical of data–driven research articles. They are usually published in journals, as book chapters, or as books.

Literature Reviews

What the genre typically does: Synthesizes what is known and reveals what else we can learn about a topic by reviewing existing research.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Freestanding literature reviews tend to be organized around a guiding question with an introduction and methods, findings, and discussion sections. They are commonly published as journal articles, book chapters, or research reports.

Case Studies

What the genre typically does: Delves deeply into, and provides rich descriptions of, specific examples of successful learning and teaching practices, often within a single course, program, or institution, with the goal of influencing others to enhance their practices.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Case studies are usually organized around a "rich description" of a learning and teaching practice or context and include an introduction, discussion of the case study, and implications for other scholars. Some journals publish case studies, blogs are a common platform for case studies, and case studies might also be included in award or fellowship applications.

Books and Edited Collections

What the genre typically does: Provides an opportunity to go into more depth and breadth about a topic or theme. Edited collections

bring together people working in the same field—or different fields—to explore the topic from various perspectives.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Books may involve a mixture of review, conceptual thinking, empirical data, and reflection. Learning and teaching books are published by a limited number of commercial and university presses. Several new publishers are entering the open access market. Special issues of journals share several characteristics with edited collections.

Presentations

What the genre typically does: Communicates your research and stimulates conversations with colleagues in real time.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Presentation formats vary widely and include conference papers, workshops, panel discussions, and posters. Posting slides online following a presentation is a common practice.

Reflective Essays

What the genre typically does: Shares lived experiences of the messy, unfinished, personal, and relational work of learning and teaching and offers analyses of the resulting insights.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Reflective essays are written in the first person and present insights rather than empirical findings or arguments while describing the learning and teaching practice. They are typically published in journals that explicitly name this genre or via blogs.

Opinion Pieces

What the genre typically does: Asserts a value judgement about learning and teaching that draws directly on the writer's experience and informed perspective.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Opinion pieces tend to be short (usually less than 1,000 words), written in the first person, and focused on a single point with no conventions for headings or sub-headings. Blogs are a common forum for opinion pieces, and some journals also publish this genre.

Stories

What the genre typically does: Presents a lived experience in context with the goal of sharing its relevance and importance.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Stories include information about the context, what happened, who was involved, where it happened, and what happened in a narrative flow and are unlikely to have headings at all. Award and fellowship applications typically include a story, and book chapters and blogs are also common venues for publishing stories.

Social Media

What the genre typically does: Enables fast self-publication and quickly raises awareness of your work. Social media can accommodate any writing genre, although stories, case studies, reflective essays, and opinion pieces tend to be more common than publishing a research article, for example.

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: Social media by definition means to publish online, enabling rapid self-publishing that bypasses peer review. It is emerging as an important genre for scholars that allows online interaction through platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and many more. And publishing on social media can look vastly different from written text because you can design the layout and use images creatively.

Teaching Award, Fellowship, and Promotion Applications

**What the genre typically does*:* Makes the case and provides evidence that you meet the award, fellowship, or promotion criteria, based, at least in part, on the excellence of your teaching (i.e., evidence of your impact of enhancing student outcomes), support of learning (i.e., evidence of supporting colleagues and influencing support for student learning) and leadership (i.e., evidence of effective leadership of learning and teaching).

What the genre typically looks like and where it is published: In contrast to the other genres, these applications are usually private. Some involve completing highly structured forms, while others emphasize critical reflection and discussion of the impact of activities

and experiences structured under a few broad headings. These applications typically go to a committee or panel for assessment.

As we note above, the distinctions between the eleven genres are not hard and fast. We offer these general descriptions to help you decide which genre might be most conducive to any given learning and teaching experience, perspective, or finding you want to share and the identity you want to develop as a learning and teaching scholar. Moreover, as we noted in chapter 1, we extend the term "writing" to include making oral presentations, such as at a conference or in a workshop, because these typically involve working with text and are often a precursor to a publication, summarize existing publications, or present material from a recent publication. We also recognize that not all the genres we discuss are "published," such as most applications for teaching awards, fellowships, and promotions. Yet these genres constitute common and important ways in which scholars engage in conversations about learning and teaching in higher education.

In presenting the genres above we do not wish to reify stereotypes or conventional norms. Because so many of our critical friends and reviewers for our *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* article (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019) wanted clearer descriptions of the boundaries among genres, we have attempted to capture these in the list above. However, we encourage a blurring of boundaries within and between genres. As Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot (2020, 233) state in their edited book on student-staff partnerships, "Alternative genres are appropriate and sometimes necessary for sharing the realities of partnership work." In the chapters that follow we point out overlaps between, for example, case studies and empirical research articles, and between reflective essays, opinion pieces, and stories. Another example of blurring boundaries is that we see reflection as a valid form of knowledge generation (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019); so empirical research articles could, to our mind, draw on first-person reflections and never use the word "data." Under the umbrella of "first person" we include autobiographical and self-referential work as well as auto-ethnography, all of which include personal examples.

Yet, as Kelly's story above illustrates, we have some way to go in blurring genre boundaries and thinking beyond Western conventions of research and knowledge creation in learning and teaching, a reality also clarified in the reflections by Yahlnaaw (Reflection 11.1) and Peter Looker (Reflection 3.1).

Guidelines for Writing in Different Genres

In the chapters that follow we present flexible guidelines in the form of open questions to help you frame your writing, and in part 5 we link steps in writing to the different genres. The guidelines are not intended to be perfect or prescriptive but rather to offer steps for getting started by presenting questions for consideration. Our expectation is that you will employ these guidelines creatively, in ways that make sense for you. Not every question has to be answered, or in the order displayed, and, depending on the piece you want to write, we suspect you will think of other questions that should be answered in your publication. All three of us have found these guidelines to be helpful to workshop participants to gain perspectives on their experiences, plan what they want to include, establish the flow of the publication, and find a focus. Figure 11.1 offers a *potential* process for writing for publication—from selecting your genre to submitting your finished piece—using our guidelines. However, we encourage you to reorder, add, remove, or repeat parts of the process as is appropriate for your context, your identity as a writer, and the conversations you want to join and create. Indeed, you may consider producing your own framework of questions for your task, in which case, please share them with us by sending us an email.

Over to You

We argue here for embracing a wide variety of writing genres that enable you to join in and create conversations about learning and teaching in higher education. While we acknowledge that there are overlaps among the genres, we contend that each should be valued in its own right. Questions to ask about working within and extending the conventional writing genres include:

Figure 11.1: Using the guiding questions to write for publication

PLAN

1. Decide on a genre

2. Identify 1-3 potential journals

3. Select relevant guiding questions
   a. write brief answers
   b. arrange your answers into a logical narrative
   c. assign word count to each question

4. Draft a timeline for you and your co-authors

WRITE

5. Draft an abstract that articulates your argument

6. Draft main text

7. Re-order sections, refine, revise, and copy edit

8. Select specific journal and format to their guidelines

GET FEEDBACK

9. Invite feedback from critical friends

10. Revise again

SUBMIT

Source: Based on Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, 35)

- What are your preferred writing genres and why?
- How might other writing genres enable you to communicate about your learning and teaching in important ways?
- Which of the processes in Figure 11.1 work for you and in what order?