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 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.oa3
Subjects: LCSH: Academic writing handbooks, manuals, etc.; Education, Higher Research; College teaching; College teachers as authors

CHAPTER 16

TELLING A BIGGER STORY

Books and Edited Collections

> *The real point about writing books is that, like mountains, they are there. Some of us cannot resist the challenge; but it's hardly rational behaviour. (Albert 2000, 14)*

As the title of this chapter suggests, a book or an edited collection can tell a bigger story than any of the other genres we explore. That is not only because books and edited volumes are longer. It is also because the conceptualization and review processes are different, and a book project can create a new conversation often containing a greater number and diversity of voices, which is more challenging to accomplish in the other genres. Whether a book deepens and extends an established conversation or creates a new one, it requires substantial time and sustained energy, as is emphasized in our opening quote and as is confirmed by Paul Weller (2007, 389), who notes that it "can be a daunting, exhausting, but ultimately exhilarating experience." This chapter covers both books and edited collections. Both are important forms of writing, but they call on different skills and make different demands on authors and editors.

There is plenty of advice on writing academic books (e.g., Black et al. 1998; Germano 2016; Haynes 2010; Luey 2011; Porter 2010). Here we begin by discussing what distinguishes writing books about learning and teaching from writing in other genres. We then examine the changing publication landscape and how this change affects choosing a publisher for a book on learning and teaching. Next, we

elaborate on how and when to prepare and submit the book proposal. Finally, we include a section discussing some of the issues involved in editing a collection of articles or chapters on learning and teaching.

Books as a Writing Genre

We note above that writing a book is a major way of creating and contributing to conversations, as is writing in the other genres we discuss in this volume. Books about learning and teaching, however, differ from the other genres in three main ways.

First, they are much longer and typically take more time—both to write and to be published—than the other forms of writing. In terms of length, 80,000–100,000 words is common for mainstream publishers, though educational professional associations, such as SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association) and Advance HE (previously HE Academy) in the UK and HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society for Australasia), publish shorter guides and publications, typically 10,000–35,000 words. This means that the topic needs to be large enough to sustain, or offer multiple angles on, an argument and keep the interest of the reader, but not so large that the book loses coherence. It also means that a book project will commonly stretch over 2–3 years, perhaps less when you have co-authors—although, as we have discussed, co-authoring can also sometimes prolong writing projects (see chapter 7). The necessity of this sustained engagement is worth considering alongside all your other commitments.

Secondly, criteria and processes for evaluating books differ from those of other genres. In comparison to empirical research and theoretical or conceptual articles in journals in particular, where the key criteria for acceptance is a particular notion of the quality of the scholarship and the contribution to the academic literature, with books, much more emphasis is placed on the audience and what will be of interest to potential readers. Furthermore, for journal publications, the key gatekeepers are the editors and the reviewers, who are normally educational scholars. With books, although reviewers are still asked their opinion, the commissioning editor (who advises

the publishing house on what books to publish) and the publisher's editorial board or a senior manager (who decide on whether to offer a contract) have a key role in deciding on the commercial viability of the project. They are rarely educational scholars. Hence, as Gary Smailes (2010) notes, "It's your job to convince publishers that your book has what it takes to make it in the marketplace that that publisher specialises in." Where books are part of a series, you will also have to convince the academic editor that your book will make a scholarly contribution to the literature.

Thirdly, where you are in your career trajectory is a consideration, given that books about learning and teaching carry different degrees of respectability across disciplines. Most academics who consider writing a book about learning and teaching will only undertake it after they have gained experience writing in many other genres, although there are exceptions (such as Chanelle Wilson, a scholar early in her career with whom Alison co-edited the book *Building Courage, Confidence, and Capacity in Learning and Teaching through Student-Faculty Partnership*). Some may also have written and edited books in another discipline before they become interested in writing about learning and teaching, as is the case with Mick. If you are considering writing a book about learning and teaching, it is important to find out, first, whether your discipline values such a focus and, second, whether it values books less or more than, or as much as, other forms of publication.

One of the consequences of the first two of these differences is that there are relatively few discipline-based books about learning and teaching in higher education, as is revealed by a perusal of the list of references in *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Disciplinary Approaches to Educational Enquiry* (Cleaver, Lintern, and McLinden 2018). One exception is in the field of medical education where the size of the market supports several texts (e.g., Swanwick, Forrest, and O'Brien 2018). Most writing about learning and teaching in specific disciplines appears in discipline-based journals or as chapters of edited volumes, or as discipline-specific examples illustrating

broader arguments in general learning and teaching journals. Therefore, your book will need to appeal to a multi-disciplinary readership.

Some books about learning and teaching are texts aimed mainly at faculty, staff, and graduates new to teaching and supporting learning, some of whom may be undertaking a certificate course in learning and teaching (e.g., Hunt and Chalmers 2013; Race 2014). The majority, however, are aimed at new and experienced faculty and staff, and sometimes campus leaders and students as well, interested in topics within higher education (e.g., Hay 2011; Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone 2011). A few are monographs aimed primarily at other higher education researchers (e.g., Fanghanel 2011). Some books are only available in hardback and e-book formats and are reliant on library sales (e.g., many of the higher education books published by Springer). A small but growing number of publishers are focusing on the e-book market, and some, including the publisher of this text, are making PDF versions of some or all their books available on open access platforms (e.g., Fung 2017). Other publishers may make your book open access on the payment of a fee (e.g., Gleason 2018). A small number of authors are experimenting with self-publication (e.g., Roberts 2018). Examples of authored and edited books from a range of publishers are shown in the online resource, "Selected Books about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education."

The Changing Publication Landscape and Choosing a Publisher

Change characterizes the publishing industry. Although in recent years there have been several takeovers and mergers among some of the large commercial publishers, in the same period many new smaller publishers have emerged, who are, as Anthony Haynes (2010, 27) describes, taking advantage of "the development of faster, smarter, less expensive technology" and providing "a burgeoning of opportunity for academic authors." He goes on to suggest that "we already live in a golden age for academic authorship—and it is possible that there is a platinum age to come."

From time to time publishers also move into and out of particular markets. For example, a few years ago Routledge took over Kogan Page's higher education list and the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) moved its series from the Open University Press to Routledge. Hence, it is quite possible that you may obtain a contract with one publisher, but your book will end up being published by a different one. Even more common is that staff move on and your editor changes during the publication process.

There are relatively few publishers of learning and teaching in higher education books, most of whom are commercial publishers or university presses, so it should not take too long to produce a short list of potential publishers who have an active list of related books, though you may need to search harder for some of the new publishers. Scanning the reference list of recently published learning and teaching articles and books should give you a start. Some of the larger publishers have series, sometimes associated with professional associations, which may mean that some or all the royalties go to the association. Once you have a short list of potential publishers and have examined the details of recent books that they have published, you might try talking to recently published authors about their experiences. Alternatively, or in addition, you could seek the advice of colleagues who have experience writing books. This should help finalize your short list and decide the order in which you will approach the publishers, or help you choose several to approach at the same time.

In the case of our book, in September 2018 we examined the web pages of the principal publishers of learning and teaching books in higher education to decide if they would be a good fit for the book we had in mind. As a result, we had expression-of-interest conversations with the Routledge SEDA Series editor, who was enthusiastic about the idea, and Advance HE (previously the HE Academy), with whom Mick has published several open access texts previously. However, Advance HE had only just recently been formed from a merger of three organizations and had not yet decided on their publication strategy. Hence, at that stage, our plan was to work on a proposal to send to Routledge. We also sought the advice of two colleagues, one

in the UK, Sally Brown, and one in the US, Peter Felten, who had each published several books on learning and teaching and had been critical friends for our *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* (*TLI*) article. Peter mentioned that Elon University was launching an open access books initiative through the Center for Engaged Learning.

After reading their prospectus and participating in a Skype conversation with him and Jessie Moore, the series editors, we decided that we would prepare a proposal to submit to them. There were two key factors in our decision. First, the book would be available as an open access publication at no charge to readers (or to us). This was attractive as it meant the book would reach a much wider audience than with publishers selling the book, and this benefit far outweighed the fact that we would receive no royalties and a significant part of the marketing of the book would be down to us. Secondly, there was the enthusiasm for the book idea from the series editors, both highly respected authors in learning and teaching, whom we knew well and had worked with previously. Unlike at large publishers, the senior managers, commissioning editors, and series editors at Elon are the same people, and we felt we could talk to them as experts in the field. If they had not also been our publishers, they would have been two of the people we would have approached as critical friends to request they comment on our draft text.

Writing a Successful Book Proposal

Most publishers have their own proposal form that you should use. Based on a perusal of several of these, we list below the kind of questions that need to be addressed:

- *Title*—How can you best capture and communicate the subject matter of your book in a few words? Consider including a subtitle to clarify the focus and give more words for search engines to discover your book.
- *Overview*—What question will your book answer? What are the distinctive features of your book? What is the main argument you are making? How does the book move existing scholarship

forward? State all of this succinctly, in a few highly accessible words.

- *Purpose, scope, and motivation*—What is the aim and scope of the book? Why do you want to write it? How did the idea originate?
- *Fit*—How does the book fit with the publisher's existing list and, where relevant, a particular series?
- *Markets*—Who are the potential audiences? Why would they want to read the book? What needs does it meet? What benefits will it provide to readers? What is the core and ancillary readership? What interest will there be internationally?
- *Need*—Why does a book need to be written on this topic? What comparable and competing texts are there (you should list the author, date, title, publisher, length, and price of each)? Can the market support another book? How does your book differ (i.e., does it fill a gap in the literature)?
- *Length*—What is the expected length of the book in words? How many figures and illustrations will it contain?
- *Contents*—What is the structure of your book? Present a contents page including preliminary and end material, and section and chapter titles. For each chapter, add a brief summary and approximate number of words.
- *Authors' names and qualifications*—Why are you the right person or people to write this book? Give a brief biography or CV, including affiliations, qualifications, main publications, awards, and other relevant achievements.
- *Delivery date*—When do you expect to submit the manuscript, given either as an actual date or a number of months after signature of contract?
- *Reviewers*—Who would you recommend as potential reviewers of your proposal?

In her *Chronicle of Higher Education* column, Rachel Toor provides some useful advice that we reproduce in Reflection 16.1.

Reflection 16.1

Preparing an academic book proposal

"When writers start telling me what they're working on and I feel my eyes start to glaze over, I ask how they got interested in the topic. That shifts the conversation from an information dump (on me) to the story of whatever fired them up in the first place. . . .

"Remember, the book proposal is an act of seduction. The overview is your chance to get personal with the editor and make her want you. This is where you connect the prose with the passion, and yes, even for academic books, or maybe, especially for academic books, there *has* to be passion."

"A good book proposal will take you—and the reader—back to that initial flush of enthusiasm, even if it means recalling the pain of when that big old beast bit off a chunk of your leg. If you can remember what originally incited your interest, and narrate that story, you can draw someone in. . . ." (Toor 2013)

Rachel Toor is an associate professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University's writing program in Spokane, US. She writes a monthly column for The Chronicle of Higher Education.

The advice on when to submit a proposal varies. Some suggest doing it before you start writing the manuscript, as you may obtain some useful guidance on content, structure, and style of writing (Salter 2018). Others suggest leaving it until you have a draft of all or most of the book, as the nature of your book may change during the writing process and you will normally only have one attempt to pitch your idea to a publisher (Knox 2018). This could prove to be a high-risk strategy as extensive rewriting may be needed. Even if you send in the proposal early, it is unlikely, unless you are a well-known author, that you will be offered a contract until you can provide at least some sample chapters, and in some cases the entire manuscript.

It is acceptable to submit your proposal to more than one publisher at the same time as long as you tell them that you are doing that, you

ensure each proposal is sent to an appropriate editor, and you tailor your argument directly to the interests of each publisher. However, by taking this approach there is a danger that, if there is a major flaw in the proposal, you miss the opportunity to address it before sending the proposal to another publisher. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the rejection rate for book proposals in higher education is quite high, so you need to ensure that you produce a polished, well-argued, detailed, and well-written case. As with other genres, ask one or two critical friends to look over your proposal before submission.

In our case, we prepared a proposal in December 2018 after our initial conversation with the publisher, but we decided not to submit it until March 2019, by which time we had an initial draft of around a third of the text and had rethought some of the contents and structure of the book. We signed a contract in April; completed the first draft in June; sent it out to our critical friends for review; spent August and September revising and responding to reviewers' comments; and finally submitted the completed manuscript at the end of October, just over a year from our first discussions of the project. If we take into account the time writing our *TLI* article (where we formulated many of our arguments as well as our approach to writing about writing), it was closer to twenty-one months. From submission of the draft manuscript to publication took a further eight months.

Preparing a book proposal should help you to clarify the focus of your manuscript, but you may start to write your manuscript before you submit a proposal to a publisher. The Guiding Questions below might help you in the planning process, and they are also available in an easy-to-download format as an online resource. The emphasis in these questions is on the process of planning the manuscript rather than what questions should be answered in the text. Hence examples from published books are not given.

Guiding Questions for Planning an Academic Book*

1. What is the "bigger story" that you want to tell with this book? How can you capture it in a way that engages editors and reviewers?
2. How will you select a publisher to approach? What criteria might you identify to help you choose?
3. How much of the book will you draft before approaching a publisher?
4. How will you decide on the contents so that you achieve a balance between depth and breadth that will be of interest to your intended readership, thereby providing appropriate coverage of your topic within the publisher's word limit?
5. How will you ensure that you build a convincing argument through the text and are not diverted down interesting but distracting side-tracks?
6. If you are co-authoring the book, what process will you use to draft, revise, and edit the manuscript?
7. What kind of schedule or set of deadlines will you generate for drafting and revising, bearing in mind your other commitments over the several months or years the project can extend?
8. Which critical friends will you approach, and at what stages of drafting and revising, to obtain feedback on both content and style prior to submission of the manuscript?

* *As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience.*

If the book is successful, you may be invited to write a second edition. In theory this should be considerably easier to do than writing the first edition, and for some it may involve primarily updating and covering some additional topics. However, for others it may mean a complete rewrite, as Mark Corrigan (2019a) found when writing the second edition of *Social Media for Academics* (Corrigan 2019b).

Editing a Learning and Teaching Collection

Some of what we have said about writing a book about learning and teaching also applies to editing one. But there are also significant differences, as William Germano (2016, 117) reminds us: "Writing a book may be hard and lonely, but editing a collection is very public labor." In assessing proposals for edited volumes, publishers are looking for answers to the 4Cs—coherence, contribution, coverage, and contributors (Brennan 2016). Nevertheless, despite the demand for coherence and cross-referencing, the potential to sell individual chapters is attractive to some publishers. In comparison to special issues of journals, edited volumes are usually "much more integrated, cross-referenced, and *intentional*" (Chapnick and Kukucha 2016a). This is well illustrated in *Enhancing Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Lea 2015), where each chapter interweaves insightful commentary with case studies, practical examples, and opinion pieces, as well as debate pieces and "Dear Lecturer" comments from students. A good book editor will "carefully move, delete, rewrite and generally improve the text to ensure a consistency of approach and emphasis throughout" (Weller 2007, 397).

Editing a book can help develop your connections, enable you to contribute to the field, and enhance your profile (Thomson 2013b), though some discourage pre-tenured faculty from undertaking the task (Chapnick and Kukucha 2016b) because of the time and energy involved and because edited volumes tend to be valued less in reviews for promotion. In the UK an edited book may be submitted to the national Research Excellence Framework, but not an edited special issue of a journal. However, for contributors to an edited volume, an article in a special issue of a journal counts more than a chapter in an edited book.

Before deciding whether to propose an edited volume to a publisher for the first time, Emma Brennan (2016), editorial director and senior commissioning editor at Manchester University Press, suggests:

> The first question a prospective volume editor should ask themselves is whether they can do (and want to do) what commissioning editors do all the time:
> - persuade busy people to spend time writing for your volume
> - keep them to a strict timescale
> - impose specific house style guidelines
> - critique, edit and even cut the work of friends, colleagues and senior figures in your field.

When commenting on this chapter, Ronald Barnett (personal correspondence, August 28, 2019) noted:

> Excellent advice—but the phrase "herding cats" comes to mind. One has to be very specific and keep on repeating oneself and even then, many contributors just won't follow the script. I would stress the timescale. Work out all the stages involved and then double it. And even then, there will be one or two who just keep one hanging on . . . and one has to decide whether to say "thank you but we have had to move on . . ." It can be immensely frustrating.

It isn't always difficult and frustrating, though. Alison and her colleague, Chanelle Wilson, found the contributors to their edited collection responsive and responsible, and the full manuscript went to the publisher within the month that it was due.

There is plenty of other advice on editing books and special issues of journals available in the sources cited in this chapter (e.g., Muller 2012; Palgrave Macmillan n.d.; Thomson 2013c), not least of which is keeping in close contact with your book publisher or journal editor about significant changes as the collection develops from what was proposed, particularly in contents and length—advice that also applies to book authors.

The Guiding Questions below may help you in planning an edited collection of learning and teaching articles (and are also

available in the online resources). The emphasis of the questions is on the planning process.

Guiding Questions for Planning an Edited Collection of Chapters or Articles*

1. What is the "bigger story" that you want to tell with this edited collection? How can you capture it in a way that engages editors and reviewers?
2. Would an edited collection benefit your career at this time given the context in which you work?
3. Is the collection best published as an edited book or a special issue of a journal? Will you invite contributors or put out a call for proposals?
4. How will you select a publisher or journal to approach? What criteria might you identify to help you choose?
5. Will you invite contributors to draft their chapters/articles before or after you approach a publisher or journal editor with a proposal?
6. What kind of schedule or set of deadlines will you generate for drafting and revising. Keep in mind your own commitments over the several months or years the project can extend, and keep in mind that not all contributors will make all the deadlines you specify.
7. What process will you set up for authors to have the opportunity to respond to and review one another's chapters/articles?
8. How will you balance offering constructive and supportive feedback to contributors with striving to create a coherent collection?

**As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience.*

A few experienced authors progress from editing single books to editing a book series. Pat Thomson (2019c) argues that a good series

has "an identity. It stands for, and has, a particular point of view on a field. So in its own distinctive way, editing a book series is another way to contribute to the wider scholarly conversation."

Over to You

Writing a book or editing a collection is a significant enterprise and not one to be undertaken lightly. However, the bigger canvas and the different review process provided by this genre make it conducive to creating and contributing to scholarly conversations in more ambitious ways. Questions to ask about writing books and edited collections include:

- What big ideas are you passionate about for writing a book or editing a collection on learning and teaching in higher education?
- Which of our Guiding Questions will help you begin your book manuscript or prepare your book proposal?
- If you are considering putting together an edited book collection, how do you address the 4Cs—coherence, contribution, coverage, and contributors?