Writing about Learning and Teaching

in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 3

CREATING AND CONTRIBUTING TO SCHOLARLY CONVERSATIONS THROUGH WRITING

Done well, writing SoTL [scholarship of teaching and learning] puts our work in conversation with prior scholarship and opens up portals with others to respond to our research, add to it, and continue the dialogue for years to come. (Moore 2018, 125-6)

Choosing a scholarly conversation involves two interacting decisions: the kind of scholar you want to be, and the kind of knowledge you believe is worth developing. (Huff 2008, 5)

To write is to compose—to put words together in ways that strive both to constitute and to invite particular understandings. It is, therefore, inherently expressive and communicative: it is used to capture and convey ideas, feelings, arguments, and more. In this book we are focused on writing as a process of communication to share and further develop ideas, to exchange experiences and insights, and to contribute new understandings about and suggest new practices in learning and teaching in higher education. As the subtitle of our book suggests, we think of writing about learning and teaching as creating and contributing to scholarly conversations—an ongoing dialogue, as Jessie Moore describes, that, as Anne Huff suggests, involves people and our construction of knowledge.

Communicating with Learning and Teaching Communities

The learning and teaching community in higher education is many communities. This multiplicity is evident in chapter 8 where we explore publication outlets that have distinct themes (e.g., active learning, critical pedagogies) or are organized by discipline. When we think about writing as communication, we have to consider with whom we are communicating about our practices and inquiries. Unless we come from the interdisciplinary realm of education, we likely come as scholars to learning and teaching from an academic discipline not related to pedagogy. Where we come from matters not only because it shapes our identities as writers (see chapter 4) but also because it means we have been trained in certain ways of writing as a form of scholarly communication.

Thus, for some of us, writing to communicate about learning and teaching with other scholars means unlearning disciplinary norms or stretching our thinking about written communication. For those of us who need to engage in such unlearning, this is the exciting opportunity that writing about learning and teaching offers—learning new ways of writing and communicating that reach into new and different communities of scholars as part of a wider dialogue. Regardless of our disciplinary backgrounds, writing about learning and teaching is about people either directly or indirectly. Whether you are writing about the practices of teachers, the learning of students, policies written by people, ideas shaping the practices of university communities, or the intersection of any of these or other topics we have not listed, people are involved in every aspect of learning and teaching scholarship.

First, there are the people we write about, typically students, teachers, and staff supporting the learning and teaching endeavor, including ourselves. Second, there are the people with whom we write when we collaborate and with whom we are literally in dialogue through the co-authoring process. Third, there are the fellow scholars whose work we draw and build on as we develop our scholarship in public conversation with others (through citing other people's

published work). Next, there are editors and reviewers who will inform our work and play a crucial role in determining where it is published, especially in the case of peer-reviewed writing outlets. Fifth, there are the people who will read our written work, perhaps draw and expand on it in their writing, and use it to inform their learning and teaching. These groups may overlap or be distinct.

Depending on whom you write about, with, to, and for, you will need to communicate in different ways. Perhaps you will want to demonstrate the technical use of particular learning and teaching terms specific to a niche community or engage in conversations that are more accessible to a broader group—or you may wish to complicate such dichotomies.

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations: A Metaphor for Writing

The metaphor of writing as contributing to and creating public conversations resonates with us, as we discuss in our *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* article (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019), and we are encouraged to see it deeply incorporated in a relatively new framework for information literacy (ACRL 2016).

This metaphor resonates primarily because it reminds us that writing is about people communicating with one another, either within an existing community or by creating a new one. For instance, Ronald Barnett's 1990 publication, *The Idea of Higher Education*, was an explicit attempt to create a new conversation around a new sub-discipline in the educational studies community. Gerardo Patriotta (2016, 2017), an editor for the *Journal of Management Studies*, also describes writing as a conversation through which written works are not created by authors but by other works that speak to each other—a way of thinking about writing inspired by Umberto Eco (1984). Drawing on the metaphor of being in conversation with another scholar, Patriotta (2017, 753) writes:

> Anne Huff (1998) has used the metaphor of the conversation to characterize interactions among scholars. She believes that writing for scholarly publication is about

> joining conversations within a particular field of interest in order to improve understanding of a particular phenomenon. Some conversations are well-established and easier to join, but they tend to take place within a crowded space, and thereby constrain the scope of a contribution. Newer conversations offer greater scope for contribution, but authors will need to spend more time legitimizing their chosen focus. Starting new conversations is a challenging endeavour, but if it is successful, it can lead to ground-breaking contributions.

Anne Huff's distinction between joining existing conversations and starting new ones is an important one to keep in mind when choosing to write in a particular genre for a particular purpose and to a particular audience. Legitimizing a focus, especially if it is novel or challenges established understandings, and embracing a form of writing that might not conform to traditional expectations are hard for anyone, but even more so for those striving to establish themselves as scholars. Hence the inclusion of both "creating" and "contributing to" in the subtitle of our book.

The metaphor of writing as scholarly conversation especially matters now in the era of "publish or perish." Publications are academic currency that carry symbolic and material power linked to status and hierarchy in most universities and disciplinary communities. In this drive to publish, we appreciate how easily writing for publication can become a product and outcome, a necessity for entering into the academy and securing academic positions. If we also appreciate writing as a process of being in dialogue—sometimes comfortable, sometimes difficult—with fellow scholars, then writing becomes part of being in a scholarly community (Lave and Wenger 1991) that builds connection and commitment to one another as people as well as to the practice and scholarship of learning and teaching.

Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler discuss writing journal articles as a way to be in the conversation of a particular community of practice. In a literal sense, they describe the conversation of a journal article between writers and readers.

> If the writer invites conversation through their journal article, and the reader enters that conversation through their reading, and then responds in their own piece of writing, we can begin to see how journals make possible conversation via articles. And if we understand that both the readers and writers around a journal belong to a particular discourse community, we can see how the conversation constitutes a social dialogue. We can thus think of the journal itself as an ongoing set of conversations between writers and readers in a scholarly discourse community. And if each article makes a contribution, then the conversation in the journal can be seen as a collaborative process of knowledge building. (Thomson and Kamler 2013, 57)

By characterizing writing about learning and teaching as a scholarly conversation that is about people within a given community contributing to a shared process of knowledge generation, we argue for seeing writing as a human experience through which people bring diverse perspectives to bear on the practice of learning and teaching. This approach to writing matters to us because we understand the focus of scholarship and inquiry in learning and teaching to be about pedagogies, about students, about the pedagogical relationship, about relationships between academics as teachers and their managers, and about institutional policies and priorities across educational contexts. We also recognize that not everyone has the same standing or the same voice in any given context or discourse community, and we understand that writing about this host of learning- and teaching-related phenomena carries different stakes for different people.

There Are Many Communities Having Different Conversations about Learning and Teaching

Another key factor influencing scholarly conversations about learning and teaching is culture, and many of those conversations privilege Western experiences and perspectives. As Huang Hoon Chng and Peter Looker (2013, 140) note: "The scholarship of teaching and

learning is not neutral territory. As it has been formulated so far, it decontextualizes teaching and learning from deeper cultural practices and particular socioeconomic conditions." Chng describes the sense that scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) was "an alien territory" she entered with "mixed feelings" (Chng and Looker 2013, 132). Looker reflects on the importance of acknowledging our lack of cultural awareness as we strive to ensure that writing about learning and teaching connects globally in Reflection 3.1.

Reflection 3.1

Cultural contexts of conversations and communities

If writing about learning and teaching is to be global, then writers need to recognize their current biases, or perhaps blindness. I am a white, Western-educated male scholar, and as I spend more time in South Africa combined with living in Singapore, I have come to see the "scholarship of teaching and learning" (SoTL) movement differently. I now see how deeply biased writers from Western and anglophone countries writing about teaching and learning can be. The conversations in South Africa about decolonialisation of teaching, learning, and curriculum are a very different conversation than the ones I am aware of in the North American SoTL communities. Acknowledging the influence of our culture on how we understand learning and teaching, and then situating ourselves within the global conversations is critical for truly international SoTL conversations. (See also Looker 2018.)

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The "place"—geopolitical and cultural context—in which learning and teaching unfold fundamentally shapes how we learn and affects our experience of learning (Ruitenberg 2005). Connecting with Claudia Ruitenberg's thinking about "place," Catherine Manathunga (2018, 102) argues for seeing the learning and teaching process in new ways that allow for "transgressive and messy research that moves beyond Western/Northern Enlightenment notions of knowledge

as universal, rational, secular and homogenous to include forms of knowing, being and doing that are evident in Southern/Eastern and Indigenous cultures." The scholarly conversation about learning and teaching is a global one with much to be learned by connecting across different forums for dialogue. But even in connecting across these forums, we need to be cognizant of biases and prejudices, recognize that some voices are heard as more legitimate than others, and understand that those of us who engage in these exchanges, therefore, always need to be attentive to who is speaking and who is listening, who is writing and who is reading.

Over to You

We are framing writing about learning and teaching as more than joining an ongoing conversation. It is, we argue, a means of creating as well as contributing to conversations. In making that argument, we are bringing the social and relational aspects of writing that we experience as complex human beings to the forefront, exploring writing as an act of creation and communication. Take a moment to reflect on the chapter and think though the following questions:

- How do your personal, cultural, and institutional identities inform the choices you might make about creating and communicating within a scholarly community?
- What are the taken-for-granted writing norms in your discipline? How does writing about your learning and teaching allow you to communicate in new ways?
- Who are the scholars you want to be in dialogue with?
- What is the cultural context for your learning and teaching? How does that context influence the scholarly conversation you are in, seek to contribute to, or hope to create?