

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org

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

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTING ON MOTIVATIONS

Clarifying Your Identity as a Learning and Teaching Scholar

For me, the purpose of writing was first to secure a faculty position, then tenure, and then promotion. After that was accomplished, I engaged in writing projects to clarify ideas, explore areas, and contribute to the profession. (Rocco 2011, 4)

In the last twenty years, educators who have dared to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism or class elitism have created a pedagogy of hope. (hooks 2003, xiv)

Motivations for writing are as various as the scholars driven by them. They can be informed by practical needs (getting a job), passionate interests (clarifying ideas, exploring new areas), and personal and political commitments (combating systems of domination). They can change over time, across contexts and circumstances, and depend on your identities. Those of us who write about learning and teaching in higher education have the opportunity to affect learning and teaching practices, making the work we do, as well as the ways we write about it, uniquely animating. Lori Breslow and her colleagues (2004, 84) suggest that, “One of the key ways in which to engage colleagues in their development as critical and reflective teachers . . . is . . . to stimulate their intellectual curiosity.” If, as they contend, “the asking of questions is at the heart of intellectual curiosity and engaging staff

in the scholarship of teaching and learning” (Breslow et al. 2004, 84), we would also suggest that motivation, while sometimes of necessity practical, can also be a kind of life force—what bell hooks (2003, x) describes as a “sense of organic necessity that often drives me to passionate writing.” The statements offered by Tonette Rocco, bell hooks, and Lori Breslow and colleagues may or may not resemble your own reasons for writing, but they throw into relief the importance of considering your motivations (Black et al. 1998).

The Nature of Motivations

In a discussion of various dimensions of writing development at different ages, Charles Bazerman and colleagues (2017, 352) note the growing body of research on “psychological processes, social situations, motivations, and self-perceptions of writers.” They offer eight principles that constitute what they call “taking the long view of writing development.” Most relevant to our discussion are the following five: writing can develop across the lifespan as part of changing contexts; writing development is complex because writing is complex; writing development is variable—there is no single path and no single endpoint; writers develop in relation to the changing social needs, opportunities, resources, and technologies of their time and place; and writing and other forms of development have reciprocal and mutually supporting relationships. We urge you to keep these in mind as you consider your motivations for writing about learning and teaching.

Like the motivations of the scholars quoted in the opening section of this chapter, our own motivations to write about learning and teaching have varied across our circumstances and over time, as reflected in our different experiences (Our Perspectives 6.1).

Our Perspectives 6.1

What were our motivations to start writing about learning and teaching and how have they shifted over time?

Alison: I have always been motivated to write about what effectively supports engaged learning for both students and teachers and to do so in ways that are fun for me as a writer and accessible to readers. This motivation, focused on both content and process, has remained consistent regardless of publication purpose and venue, including writing to meet requirements for tenure and promotion, writing to share ideas and practices, writing to explore and discover, and writing to combat systems of domination. I am motivated to write about what I care about, and letting passion and commitment drive my writing projects is part of what has allowed me to be so prolific. As the pedagogical partnership approach that I developed has gained recognition, I have used that recognition to make space for and offer support to others who want to engage in dialogue about and pursue such work. I have been motivated to offer not only inspiration and insights from research but also practical guidance for how to support both prospective and practicing teachers in reflecting on, affirming, and further refining learning and teaching in dialogue and collaboration with students, particularly those who have been underserved and often harmed by higher education.

Kelly: At this stage in my career, in response to the question, “Why write about learning and teaching?”, I initially thought: because I have something I want to say about teaching and learning (and clearly an identity that gives me confidence to say it). For the purposes of this book and the thread of creating and contributing to scholarly conversation, I would say: I want to engage in a scholarly conversation about learning and teaching with like-minded peers. In doing so, I am reflecting on practice and becoming a better teacher while also becoming a better writer, which is generally important in the academy. At the start of my career, I would have 100% agreed about the importance of “the external drivers” and

answered the questions with: I *need* to publish to gain credibility within the academy in a university that values scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) through publication. I *need* to publish in my role as an early-career academic in a centralized teaching and learning unit. I *need* to publish so I can influence my colleagues and impact teaching practices because my colleagues value publications. My motivation has shifted toward the intrinsic yet is balanced with extrinsic drivers.

Mick: When I began writing about my teaching in the late 1980s, my main motivation was to share with my geography colleagues the initiatives and experiences that appeared to enhance the quality of learning of our students. Hence, it was very much embedded in the practice of teaching, and the main genres I pursued were papers and posters for conferences and empirical research articles and case studies published in journals. As I became more experienced, my focus shifted more toward review papers and reports summarizing interesting practices in geography in higher education from around the world, but then shifted after 10–15 years toward higher education generally, regardless of discipline. However, my motivation continued to be an interest in trying to enhance the quality of student learning. This is not to argue that the motivation was purely intrinsic or altruistic, as these drivers were reinforced by peer-recognition and success in attracting grants and awards, to the extent that in 2010, I was able to become an independent higher education consultant and researcher.

Your perspective: What are your motivations to write about learning and teaching and have they shifted over time?

Your motivations for engaging in writing about learning and teaching will be influenced by larger questions of why write about learning and teaching, as we discussed in [chapter 2](#), and will also be closely related to your identities as a person and a professional and your identity—or identities—as a learning and teaching scholar, as discussed in [chapter 4](#). Many SoTL scholars have as a primary

motivation to enhance the quality of student learning through inquiry. As we argued in [chapter 2](#), this may, or may not, mean engaging in higher education research, as there are many different ways of creating and contributing to conversations about learning and teaching (Fanghanel 2013; Trigwell and Shale 2004). Some of these may be local institution-based exchanges, while others may involve going public in wider national and international outlets (Ashwin and Trigwell 2004; Geertsema 2016).

Joelle Fanghanel (2013, 63) points out that: “The aim in SoTL is not to publish but to uncover the complexity of academic practice through reflection and engagement with relevant partners (colleagues, students) and to draw lessons that are subjected to debate and contradiction. Change emerges from inquiry.” Writing and making presentations about learning and teaching are key ways of going public, but they are the means to an end not the end in itself. Based on your context, your position, and your identity as a learning and teaching scholar, you will need to decide for yourself what motivations for writing to embrace. Remember Pat Hutchings’ reflection from [chapter 2](#) in which she described the way writing can bring thinking to life.

Reflecting on Your Motivations

Reflecting on your motivations can make required writing joyful and fulfilling; allow you to clarify for yourself particular questions about learning and teaching; facilitate your contributions to evolving and new conversations about learning and teaching; and bring you into dialogue with colleagues that both capture and generate insights.

Making Required Writing Joyful and Fulfilling

In many higher education contexts, writing for publication is required for review, promotion, and job-seeking. Much of this work is expected to be disciplinary. More than a decade ago Paul Witman and Laurie Richlin (2007) found that SoTL had achieved varying levels of acceptance across the disciplines. Offering a recent example from the field of art history that suggests these conditions persist in some fields at least, Denise Baxter and Kelly Donohue-Wallace (2016) cautioned those on the job market and those not yet tenured to “assess

cautiously whether engaging in this type of research puts them in a position” to be hired or promoted because “some institutions will embrace it, but some will not.”

What kind of writing is expected or accepted in your discipline given where you are in your trajectory as a scholar is an important consideration as you assess what might motivate you to write. If you are an academic in a traditional discipline, does your discipline in general (and in the context in which you work, or hope to work) value writing about learning and teaching in higher education? If publication is required or expected in your role, have you published enough in the required/expected forms of writing, whether discipline focused or teaching-and-learning focused, that you can invest time in writing for the first time or in new ways about learning and teaching? If you are a graduate or an undergraduate student, would such writing be beneficial to you as you navigate academia?

If you conclude that writing about learning and teaching would be valued or beneficial, ask yourself what could make that writing most joyful and fulfilling. If you enjoy and feel good about what you are writing, it will contribute to sustaining you, as well as be more appealing to others. Some scholars, like Alison, experience writing to be a joy. But if that is not your experience, remind yourself, as we noted in [chapter 2](#), to evoke Helen Sword’s (2012, 159) terms as inspiration: “passion, commitment, pleasure, playfulness, humor, elegance, lyricism, originality, imagination, creativity, and undisciplined thinking.” Also try to remind yourself that if you embrace writing and let it follow or lead your thinking, “suddenly everything becomes more interesting, more connected, ideas get sparked” (Hutchings, personal communication, June 11, 2019). In short, remind yourself, as we argue in [chapter 2](#), that writing can capture and convey what makes us human, what makes us connected, what keeps us alive—and, as bell hooks (2003) notes, what is of necessity.

If you experience writing as hard work, you may need to seek joy and fulfilment in acknowledging that work. Kelly, commenting on a draft of this chapter, observed that:

While I appreciate the talk of writing as joyful and awesome, I never felt that when I started academic writing because I was never a strong writer, so that discourse (typically espoused by friends in writing disciplines) left me feeling more sure I was not a writer (because I was not enjoying it). For me, the acknowledgment that writing is hard work and that we get better through practice, and even playing with writing, spoke to me.

External factors may also affect motivations, both positively and negatively, and finding joy and fulfilment in managing those may require yet a different mindset and approach. Kelly commented above (in *Our Perspectives* 6.1) how institutional policies were an important factor motivating her to publish as an early-career academic. In contrast, Alison labors under similar institutional policies but has focused on writing about what excites her and what feels important, and she has managed both to stay true to her commitments and to meet external requirements.

Writing for Yourself to Clarify Particular Questions about Learning and Teaching

As we discuss in [chapter 5](#), William Zinnser (1988) made the argument that writing can be understood as a form of thinking and that by writing through your thoughts you clarify them. You can use writing to learn to work through fear, if you have it, or to give yourself permission to dwell, explore, ponder, imagine, and experiment.

When you prepare to produce a version of your writing for others to read, ensure that you shift from your own exploration for an audience of yourself to a consideration of how you might represent key insights from that exploration for an external audience (see [chapters 8, 23, 24, and 25](#)). In [chapter 18](#) on reflective essays, we suggest that informal, first-person accounts that focus on analyses of lived experiences and illuminate the day-to-day practicalities of the work of learning and teaching in higher education might be particularly well suited to writing for yourself to clarify particular questions about that work—a particularly generative “manner of inquiry,” as one student

author asserted (quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 19). Considering the benefits to readers of reflective writing to clarify thinking and practice, one faculty member suggests that such writing “tends to let readers in on the writer’s experiences and thinking/feeling in a way that’s invitational, inclusive” (quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 21).

Finding Inspiration to Contribute to Evolving and New Conversations about Learning and Teaching

Whether you are required by external expectations, inspired by an internal drive, or moved by an intersection of the personal and the political, consider how you might generate or harness inspiration to contribute to established and evolving conversations about learning and teaching or create new ones. We suggest in [chapter 8](#) that choosing an outlet for your work is about choosing whom you want to be in dialogue with. An important dimension of that decision is identifying what you can contribute to an existing discussion or why you might start a new one. Do you have a unique experience based on your position or perspective? Do you have a strong opinion that might help the field expand and further develop? Do you have data that can inform evolving theories? Do you have a case study that illustrates or contradicts some of the continuing conversations? [Part 4](#) of this book can help you decide what genre makes most sense for any given piece of your work. But before you think about genre, think about motivation.

For instance, Natasha Daviduke (2018) made an important contribution to the debate on whether undergraduate students who participate in pedagogical partnerships focused on classroom practices need to have disciplinary knowledge. Based on her own experience and her analysis of it, she argued that, rather than being a deficit, as many fear, a student partner who is not in the discipline of the faculty partner can be a benefit. In her words, “My disciplinary differences with my partners made for rich, supportive, and innovative collaborations and exciting educational insights” (156).

Students and faculty alike often doubt that their contributions will be significant, but keep in mind Lee Shulman’s (1993, 6) argument that the status of teaching depends on shifting it from private to “community property” (see also [chapter 22](#)). Something you might think is obvious, insignificant, or irrelevant might be the very thing that can change the way people think. It is also important to acknowledge and address the de-motivating forces some people experience, as Preeti Vayada suggests in Reflection 6.1.

Reflection 6.1

Considering de-motivating forces

As important as the motivations for writing mentioned here are, discussion of de-motivating forces is equally important as it resonates with the scholar who wants to write but is unable to do so. Reasons can be numerous, including writing anxiety, limited understanding of writing and the publication process, and coming from a non-Anglophonic background. However, from my personal experience as an early writer, I found that professional support and encouragement are immensely helpful. So, whenever Kelly says, “Don’t underestimate your contributions,” it not only feels good but also provides a strong motivating dose to introspect one’s strengths.

Preeti Vayada is a PhD student at The University of Queensland, Australia.

Letting Dialogue with Colleagues Increase and Help Direct Your Motivation

Is your image of writing that of the solitary person toiling away in the ivory tower, local public library, or noisy café? While allotting time and choosing space for yourself to write is a topic we take up in [chapter 23](#), engaging in dialogue about learning and teaching in higher education with scholars can inspire you and help you find the motivation to write. In [chapter 26](#) we discuss the importance of seeking feedback from critical friends before you submit a piece

for publication. Equally important, though, is the dialogue with critical friends and thought partners as you are seeking motivation for beginning or continuing to write.

Sometimes you might have an idea that seems clear in your head but as soon as you try to express it to someone, out loud or in an email, you realize it was not so clear after all. Conversely, you might think your idea is murky and unformed, but as you explain it to a friend or colleague, you realize that it's clearer than you thought, and you feel quite strongly about sharing it. In both cases your critical friends can help you further clarify and substantiate the idea, and they can affirm its worth and your excitement about it or help you refine and further develop it. As we discuss in [chapter 7](#), if you choose to co-author with others, they can provide this kind of support as well as motivate you through the task, offering a usefully different perspective.

Over to You

Dimensions of motivation highlight both reason and feeling, both internal and external factors and forces, both inward- and outward-focused attention. For you, does motivation (wanting to communicate) come before inspiration (having something to communicate)? Inspiration involves your head and your heart and listening to your own voice and to the voices of others. Keep in mind that, “Once published, you begin to meet people who know you through your writing” (Day 2016, 14) and “seeing your name in print gives a satisfying frisson of excitement” (Day 2016, 15). Consider addressing the following questions to explore your motivations to write about learning and teaching:

- How does your motivation relate to your identity or identities as a learning and teaching scholar?
- If you are writing about learning and teaching only because it is required or expected by your department or institution, how can you make such required activity joyful and fulfilling?
- What kind of writing is best suited to clarify your own questions about learning and teaching?

- How might you inspire yourself to contribute insights, approaches, challenges, and recommendations to any given evolving discussion or new dialogue about learning and teaching?
- In what ways might dialogue with colleagues increase and help direct your motivation?