# Writing about Learning and Teaching

## in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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"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.

# CHAPTER 8

# CHOOSING AN OUTLET

*Whom Do You Want to Talk to
about Learning and Teaching?*

*For most academics, developing the scholarship of teaching and
learning will only bring about change in their priorities if it
is embedded in disciplines and departments. (Healey 2000,
172-3)*

*There is a great deal more in common [between disciplines]
than many teachers normally perceive or acknowledge. Many
teaching methods described as discipline-specific are used widely
across the disciplines and take much the same form regardless
of context. (Gibbs 2000, 41)*

*Choosing a journal is in reality choosing a reader, a reader who
is a member of a specific discourse community. (Thomson and
Kamler 2013, 36)*

In choosing a journal, publisher, or conference to which to submit
your work, there are many factors to consider. As the above quotes
suggest, a key decision for scholars writing about learning and
teaching is whether to join a discipline-specific exchange or a
cross-disciplinary one. Other considerations include the timing of
selecting an outlet, whether or not the outlet is peer-reviewed, the
prestige factor (including the possibility of later submitting the piece
of writing to a national research assessment exercise, such as occurs
in the UK and Australia), and the research norms of specific outlets.

Selecting an outlet is not simple. It depends on your context, your personal and professional identities, your career aspirations, and your preferences, as well as consideration of the difficulty of getting published in some of the most competitive outlets or accepted to present at conferences that have a limited number of slots. Regarding the latter, Barbara Grant (2017) prefers small conferences, and Pat Thomson (2017a) advises: "You only conference when you have good cause." We focus mainly on publishing in journals in this chapter, but we also include a section on writing book chapters. The principles we discuss apply to choosing between many other types of outlets (see also Thomson 2013a). We make some specific comments about choosing book publishers in chapter 16, and in chapter 21 we discuss writing on various social media platforms.

## Start by Considering the Audience and the Conversation You Are Joining or Trying to Create

Here we argue that the first question you need to answer is: With whom do you want to be in conversation? As we point out in chapter 3, writing about learning and teaching means contributing to or creating a conversation. Hence, in choosing an outlet, ask yourself two questions:

- Is this the group (faculty/academic staff, students, public, etc.) that I want to be in dialogue with?
- Will this work contribute to a current conversation in this discourse community or create a necessary new one?

If you are aiming to submit to a journal, select one or two to target. Look at the journals in which the articles you cite are published and look at the articles' reference lists. Read the mission statements of these journals and scan what else they have published in the last few years that may relate to your topic. Editors appreciate citations to relevant work published in their own journals. Even better, rather than cherry-picking citations, show that you are listening to and engaging with current conversations. There is evidence that submitting to an inappropriate journal is the most common reason editors give for rejecting articles (Noble 1989). Though slightly dated, the

finding resonates with our own experience of editing learning and teaching journals.

## Publishing Within and Reaching Beyond Discipline-Specific Learning and Teaching Journals

Most authors approach publishing about learning and teaching from a disciplinary lens, as indicated in the quote from Mick at the beginning of this chapter. David Baume (1996, 4) similarly noted in the editorial of the first issue of the *International Journal for Academic Development*: "Many academics derive most of their professional identity from their discipline." This reality has been recognized in the last twenty years by academics in Australia (Neumann 2001), the UK (Cleaver, Lintern, and McLinden 2018; Healey and Jenkins 2003), and the United States (Huber 2000; McKinney 2012a). The best examples of putting this phenomenon into practice were the twenty-four Subject Centres, which were established in the UK (2000–2011) to promote discipline-based approaches to learning and teaching.

The Subject Centres, and other discipline-based initiatives, recognized that not only is the primary allegiance of most academics to their discipline or profession, but that some disciplines are characterized by distinctive forms of teaching, such as studio critiques in art and design, work-based learning in nursing and social work, laboratory classes in the sciences, and fieldwork in geography and earth and environmental sciences. If you are interested in writing about these pedagogies, a discipline-based outlet may be a suitable choice. Moreover, all disciplines have particular conceptions of knowledge, which are closely linked to the complexity of current research and scholarship in the discipline (Healey and Jenkins 2003; Kreber 2009). Denis Berthiaume (2008) contends that discipline-specific pedagogical knowledge is critical for understanding learning and teaching. The same may be argued for writing about learning and teaching.

Graham Gibbs (2000) notes that it is not just a matter of selecting a discipline-specific or generic higher education outlet. Instead, the question comes back to: *What conversations do you want to contribute to or create, which such exchanges are open to you, and which might not*

*be and why?* Different outlets foster diverse, yet related, discussions, and different values and dimensions of identity will influence both what you want to say and how or whether it will be received. These considerations are relevant to chapter 4 on identity and writing as a values-based practice.

When we think about publishing as being *in conversation* with others, then new possibilities emerge for contributing to different yet related conversations that reach new and wider audiences. The critical point is to recognize that the interests and situations of different audiences vary. If you recognize your audience, the unique contributions of your work can be clearly linked to the ongoing conversation of the outlet. All too frequently authors make assumptions about their readers' knowledge and understanding of disciplinary practices and national education contexts. Providing sufficient explanations of these details is particularly important if you are writing for a transdisciplinary, international audience (Thomson 2017b). Martin Haigh (2012) provides a useful discussion about writing successfully for one discipline-based journal, and his advice applies to most learning and teaching journals, whether discipline based or otherwise.

## Publishing in "High-Prestige," Open Access, and Institutional Outlets

In recent years, as research and teaching assessment exercises have grown in importance, scholars have come under pressure to publish in what are perceived as "high-prestige" journals and other outlets. Those scholars going for promotion or bidding for grants have felt similar pressures. Publication in such outlets does not, of course, mean that the papers are themselves high quality, or that high-quality papers are not published in other journals, but there is a basking-in-reflected-glory factor at work here, associating yourself, should you be published in a prestige journal, with well-known authors who have also been published there. The "top 10" higher education journals, based on Google Scholar citations, are shown in Table 8.1. One of the impacts of the pressures to publish in these journals is that they

also have high rejection rates. *Higher Education Research & Development,* for example, rejects 80% of submissions (Grant 2016).

**Table 8.1: The "top 10" higher education journals, 2019**

| Publication | h5–index |
| --- | --- |
| *1. Studies in Higher Education* | 52 |
| *2. Higher Education* | 50 |
| *3. Research in Higher Education* | 37 |
| *4. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* | 37 |
| *5. The Journal of Higher Education* | 36 |
| *6. Higher Education Research & Development* | 34 |
| *7. Journal of Studies in International Education* | 31 |
| *8. Journal of College Student Development* | 31 |
| *9. Teaching in Higher Education* | 30 |
| *10. Innovations in Education and Teaching International* | 29 |

*Source: Google Scholar, July 2019*

Citations for journals listed in Web of Science are widely used to provide rankings, though they are biased toward periodicals published in North America and have other issues as well (Rushforth and de Rijcke 2016). However, many journals concerned with learning and teaching in higher education are too new to have received a full listing, though some appear in the Emerging Sources Citation Index. Despite journal impact factors being widely criticized as a measure of individual academic performance, they continue to be used to underpin some institutions' academic review, promotion, and tenure policies (McKiernan, Alperin, and Fleerackers 2019).

Open access journals are becoming increasingly common as part of an ethos of open knowledge sharing in the digital age, and they are disrupting conventional academic publishing practices. For example,

*Teaching & Learning Inquiry* began life with a commercial university press publisher, but then transferred to become an open access journal. There are pressures from research funders for publications resulting from their grants to be made available instantly in open access depositories. Open access journals are free to read, although some have publishing fees to subsidize the costs of editing a journal. Most are supported by academic societies or higher education institutions. Like other journals, most have a rigorous peer-review system. Some depend on editorial review to ensure the quality of the publications. Many learning and teaching journals are published in open access format with no charges for submission or access—some examples are given in Table 8.2. These journals may be the most appropriate outlets for some of your work and link you to ongoing exchanges with colleagues interested in similar topics. We have each published in high-prestige journals and other learning and teaching journals in both print and open access formats, including many of the journals listed in Tables 8.1 and 8.2. We recommend seeking publication in a diversity of outlets.

Some commercial publishers also offer an open access option, but they will charge you to make your article available for free download. There is evidence that works published in open access are downloaded and cited more than those that are not (Hitchcock 2011; Piwowar et al. 2018). Pre-publication versions of papers may usually be uploaded to open access platforms (see chapter 28).

The pay-to-publish journals to be avoided are the predatory ones that promise very quick publication with virtually no quality checks (see Beall's List of Predatory Journals and Publishers). Be wary of unsolicited emails from journals that promise publication in a month or two. If you are unfamiliar with a journal, check to see if the authors publishing in the journal are leaders in their field and look on the journal website for the names of the editors or editorial board. You should also be wary of predatory conference invitations (see Rehm 2013 for a related discussion on ResearchGate).

**Table 8.2: Ten selected open access learning and teaching in higher education journals**

| |
|---|
| *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (AJSoTL)* |
| *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CJSoTL)* |
| *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)* |
| *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (IJ-SoTL)* |
| *Online Learning Journal (OL)* |
| *SoTL in the South* |
| *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal (SEHEJ)* |
| *Student Success* |
| *Teaching & Learning Inquiry (TLI)* |
| *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)* |

When first seeking to have your scholarship published, you may lack confidence to submit to a national or international journal, whether open access or closed, high prestige or otherwise. For you, an institutional journal may be the place to start. In the UK about 10% of universities have their own in-house journals, some of which publish work from authors outside the institution (Mistry 2017, 2018). Some are only available for faculty/academic staff of the university to see (Robinson-Self 2018). Publishing in such journals is a useful way of gaining experience with the process of publication and making your institutional colleagues aware of your learning and teaching interests, but these journals' dependence on volunteers who may change institutions or roles within the institution means that many of them only last a few years and the number of issues published each year can vary. You should ask yourself, "If my writing is good enough to be published in an in-house journal, is it strong enough to be published in a national or even international journal?" By the

time you have finished reading this book, you should be able to make an informed decision. Your choice of genre (for example, a research article or a case study, a reflective essay or a story) also affects your choice of outlet as some of the genres discussed in part 4 are not accepted by some journals.

When selecting an outlet, the likely time to publication may be a factor. The review process for many of the "high-prestige" higher education journals can take up to a year or more, and because these journals are inundated with submissions, many have a backlog of accepted submissions that delay assignment to a printed volume, though many are now making the accepted version of a paper available electronically before the print issue of the journal is published. However, the time question needs to be balanced with the reputation of the journal, especially if you are in the early stages of your academic career. It may be not only necessary but also wise to settle for a less prestigious outlet if you are just starting out or doing a PhD by publication of prior work or by portfolio (Smith 2015).

## Writing a Book Chapter

Sometimes an alternative outlet for your writing may be as a book chapter. Writing a journal article and writing a book chapter about learning and teaching have much in common, though the latter generally gives you more flexibility in length and structure, as well as in what can be included. This difference is well articulated by Pat Thomson (2013a):

> For a start, you can assume with a book chapter that you don't have to convince readers that the topic you're writing about is important. The editors are going to do that in the foreword. They are also likely to do a pretty thorough survey of the field, and to cover its history. So you don't have to do that kind of literature work in a chapter, unless it is one about the literature. . . . You just have to situate your own position and indicate the literatures that you draw on and to which you are talking/contributing.

It is essential, of course, that a book chapter fits into the theme of the edited collection. This may restrict the topics you can write about compared with writing journal articles, and it may increase the need to cross reference and avoid overlap with other chapters. However, if your chapter is part of a themed collection, you may reach readers who might not have looked at your article isolated in a journal, or whose institutions do not have access to the journal. Moreover, chapters may be easier to write if they do not involve undertaking primary research.

Two further differences between a book chapter and a journal article are that, first, book chapters do not always go through the anonymous review process that characterizes most academic journals. This can have the advantage, dependent on the book editor, that you need not make as many changes in the chapter. On the other hand, many promotion and tenure review committees and national research assessment exercises do not value chapters as highly as they value peer-reviewed journal articles. This may partially explain why book chapters traditionally receive fewer citations than journal articles. Discoverability and accessibility are also important factors to consider (Anderson 2012). Many publishers are now allocating DOIs (Digital Object Identifiers) to chapters in edited books and making most academic books available in e-book format, so chapters are becoming more discoverable and accessible. The cost of edited books varies widely, with some priced so high that only selected libraries can afford them. The emergence of open access book publishers is making these outlets an attractive option through which authors can disseminate their work. It remains to be seen whether these changes will have an impact on book chapters' citation patterns compared with journal articles.

A second difference between a book chapter and a journal article is that choosing to write a book chapter is not as simple as choosing to write a journal article. You usually have to be invited by the book editor or respond to a call for chapter proposals for a book project. Sometimes the idea for a learning and teaching book arises from a themed session at a conference, so looking out for such calls for papers

can be a way of contributing to a book. Another way is to propose to edit such a book yourself (see chapter 18).

## When to Select Your Outlet

Some academics leave the selection of a suitable outlet until after they have drafted their work, particularly if they are targeting general higher education journals, because there are many to choose from. Others start with a specific journal in mind, which might reflect a desire, or the pressure, to publish in the "top journals," or it might reflect a wish to write for a specific audience. Still other scholars decide as they are writing, taking account of the authors and publications they cite that link to the conversation with which they want to engage or that they want to start. Your decision depends on your situation. If you choose your outlet *before* you start writing, then you can write with a specific audience in mind and use the format and style appropriate to that outlet from the beginning. However, you might find the choice becomes constraining as you start writing. Perhaps you are citing more works from another journal, which might indicate that you should be speaking to a different audience. Or you find you need more space, so a journal with a higher word count might be a better option. On the other hand, having a journal identified from the start could keep you focused in a way that helps you complete the manuscript in a timely manner.

You may prefer to select two or three possible journals, so if you are rejected by your first choice you can amend your article for submission to your second choice quickly, though you will need to ensure that you are addressing their readership directly and you will, of course, need to reformat the manuscript to fit the journal's house style, including the format of references. Editors and reviewers are not impressed when they receive submissions that clearly—from the format—have been submitted to another outlet previously.

If you are struggling to identify an audience/outlet or are feeling overwhelmed by the writing task ahead, you might try searching keywords relevant to the piece you want to write in a general database like Google Scholar to see who is publishing similar work. Maybe, if

you are struggling to identify a suitable outlet, you should consider writing in a different genre. You might also revisit your abstract, if the genre for which you are writing requires one; revising it along the lines suggested in chapter 10 may help you decide on an appropriate outlet. If you are still uncertain, consider shaping the work for a conference talk. This may present an opportunity to engage in dialogue with other scholars about your work by creating time for discussion, often after your formal presentation (see chapter 17). You might also consider summarizing your paper by writing it as a blog post (see chapter 21) or a contribution to a professional society newsletter before starting work on a full journal article. Just be careful not to share too much if you plan to write it up for submission to a peer-reviewed venue, since many publications have legitimate concerns about work that is already published.

## The Focus and Research Norms of the Outlet

Selecting an outlet is related to selecting a genre, which we discuss in more depth in chapter 11. Whatever your preference for selecting a venue, it is important to ensure that your work is connected to the focus of the outlet *and* communicated in a way that makes sense for that journal. For example, if your work presents rich and in-depth narratives from a handful of colleagues to illuminate the complexities of pedagogical decision-making for new scholars in the health sciences, then your chosen journal should have a history of publishing rich qualitative studies or perhaps have new editors seeking to expand the methodological pluralism of the journal. In other words, your work needs to contribute to an ongoing conversation in a given discourse community, while also linking to the research norms of that community—or if it does not, you must find a way to productively challenge those norms and start a new discussion.

The importance of matching your article to the journal to which you are submitting is conveyed in the questions listed below, which were stimulated in part by an analysis of why sixty articles were rejected by the editors of the *Educational Action Research* journal (Convery and Townsend 2018).

1. Why do I want to submit to this journal?
2. Does the article focus on the stated aim of the journal?
3. Is your article written in a genre (e.g., empirical, conceptual, case study) which is acceptable to the journal? And, if not, have you contacted the editor to see whether they might accept something in a different genre (e.g., reflective essay, opinion piece, video)?
4. Have you read any articles from this journal? How does your submission fit alongside them?
5. Does it extend and challenge our knowledge and understanding?
6. Is the argument and contribution of your article explicit?

The key takeaway message from this chapter is that choosing an outlet means being explicit about who you want to be in conversation with and then checking that your article aligns with the outlet's aim and scope.

## Over to You

Choosing a suitable outlet to submit to, especially when you may have spent several months writing the piece, is a key decision. Whether you choose a discipline-based journal or a generic one, a chapter in an edited book or an article in a refereed journal, and whether you make your selection before, during, or after you have written your piece, is a highly contextualized judgment. Some questions that you may wish to consider in choosing a suitable outlet include:

- Will the outlet put you into dialogue with the intended audience (general higher education/discipline/region)?
- Does publishing in "top journals" in your field matter for your career progression?
- Are you in a hurry to get the work published?
- Have you considered developing a publication plan that reaches varied audiences with different forms of scholarship (see chapter 29)?
- Do you have the opportunity to submit a chapter to an edited collection? If so, is this a more suitable outlet for you than submitting to a refereed journal?