

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 19

PROVOKING THOUGHT

Opinion Pieces

I want my scholarship to have a public purpose. . . . Whereas academic writing takes months, years, even decades to publish, editorials and thought pieces can have an immediate impact. (Sara Warner, quoted in Kelley 2016)

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. (hooks 1989, 9)

To be a scholar is to create and share new knowledge. Indisputably, we value discipline-based, empirical research as knowledge creation in the academy (Boyer 1990), and we typically focus on reporting research results when we publish that work. As we become scholars of learning and teaching, however, what we *think* and *believe* also matters, as does who we are and where our voices are and are not heard, because we are engaged as human beings in the lifelong work of learning. Aside from, and in addition to, any research we might conduct, we have experiences, formulate judgements, and take stands informed by values, perspectives, and experiences that shape and are shaped by our identities and our practices. Usually we limit the sharing of these value judgements to informal corridor conversations with peers. We know from research that these conversations are powerful exchanges that can shape our practices (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2017; Roxå and Mårtensson 2015), yet we rarely translate these informed

opinions into formal publications. As Sara Warner notes in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, editorials and thought pieces—sometimes called op eds in news outlets and what we are calling opinion pieces—can have an immediate impact, and using one’s voice, as bell hooks suggests, especially for those who have been oppressed and exploited, can be at once defiant and healing—an integral part of education as “the practice of freedom” (hooks 1994).

The genre of opinion pieces allows us to assert a value judgment about learning and teaching based on considered experience and informed perspective. The genre privileges subjectivity, as the intention is to share informed perspectives that make no claim of objectivity. The genre also privileges the author—someone using “I”—who is central to an opinion piece as someone with expertise, experience, or a unique standpoint. Indeed, the voice in which we express our thoughts and beliefs is part of the message, differs from others’ voices, and takes courage, creativity, and conviction to develop (Robbins 2016; Sword 2009). In this sense, and compared to traditional research articles, the opinion piece genre recognizes different ways of knowing and expressing knowledge that can more readily enable a diversity of voices, especially those that have been underrepresented, to join the scholarly conversation about learning and teaching.

Our metaphor of writing as *contributing to and creating conversation* is easily applied to this genre. An opinion piece invites you to use your own voice, acknowledge your position and context, draw explicitly on your experience, and write in a conversational tone to share stories of practices linked to value judgments informed by knowledge and subjective experiences. However, writing an opinion piece involves more than stating ideas, claims, or critiques. We communicate *what* we think and believe—our opinion—along with *why* we think it, in order to persuade and provoke readers in ways that require us to be both passionate and analytical.

In this chapter, we discuss what the opinion piece genre can accomplish, and we explore qualities of effective opinion pieces that are published in academic outlets or online media platforms. We also

present a framework to guide you in writing an opinion piece with examples drawn from published opinion pieces, and we conclude with reference to some examples.

What Can the Opinion Piece Genre Accomplish?

The work of an opinion piece complements other genres that privilege objectivity and primary research. Expressing an opinion clearly and persuasively can “sway hearts” and “change minds” (Duke University n.d.). Opinion pieces “give people more opportunity to develop their arguments” (Wood 2017) and reach a broader readership, particularly when they are printed in open access journals, news outlets, or blogs. The genre of opinion pieces can accomplish many things, as signaled in Our Perspectives 19.1.

Our Perspectives 19.1

What the genre of opinion pieces has offered us

Alison: I have appreciated the opportunity that opinion pieces afford to blend critical insights based on lived experience with consideration of the wider import of those insights and experiences. An opinion piece (Cook-Sather and Porte 2017) I co-authored with a student from a group underrepresented in higher education, for instance, allowed us to articulate the importance to both of us, from different angles, of clarifying the way particular participants and processes in higher education get named (in this case “hard-to-reach” students). Through writing this piece, we clarified our own perspectives and commitments and contributed to ongoing interrogation of the terms we use and the effects they have, particularly on those marginalized and harmed by the academy.

Mick: I enjoy reading provocative, well-written opinion pieces, though I have limited experience of writing them. Several years ago, I wrote an article for the *Times Higher* in which I expressed the opinion that “disability legislation may prove to be a Trojan horse, and in a decade, the learning experiences of all students may be the subject of greater negotiation” (Healey 2003a, 26). It attracted

quite a bit of attention at the time, though the prediction proved to be hopelessly over-optimistic!

Kelly: I had not considered writing an opinion piece until someone invited me to do so (Matthews 2016). After initial concern, I gave myself permission to embrace drawing on my experience and owning my voice. Bringing literature and experience together to take a stance in a short, focused piece of writing was powerful for me. Because of the short length and clear focus, people regularly talk to me about that work. I get the sense that it has had more reach than most of my research articles. It is challenging to write a short piece, and I always think of the expression: I didn't have time to make it short.

Your perspective: What has the genre of opinion pieces offered you, or what might it?

Sara Warner's point, quoted at the opening of this chapter, about the immediate impact of editorials and op eds signals the potential of opinion pieces to reach more people and speaks to a growing movement for scholars within the academy to reach into the public sphere. Penning an opinion piece about learning and teaching, whether in an academic journal, a news outlet (e.g., *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *The Conversation*, the *Times Higher Education* magazine, *The Chronicle*, *SRHE News Blog*, and other learned society newsletters), or a blog (e.g., *Inside Higher Education* blogs), gives you the potential for a larger readership. In short, opinion pieces can engage the broader public in ways that traditional academic publications rarely do (Leigh 2008).

Opinion pieces invite writers to appreciate that what they think matters, and then share their views publicly, which might feel uncomfortable; publicly sharing a value judgement might seem to require a high level of expertise and standing in the academic community. Yet, the voices of scholars, including undergraduate students, with unique standpoints can enrich the learning and teaching practices that unfold in increasingly diverse classrooms and university communities. Reflection 19.1 describes how Alexander Dwyer, as a then-undergraduate

scholar, had to navigate insecurities and identify his unique perspective to write an opinion piece for publication in an academic journal.

Reflection 19.1

The experience of writing an opinion piece

Working on an opinion piece (Dwyer 2018) gave me a degree of intellectual and creative freedom. It enabled me to explore some of the more abstract ideas I was thinking about based on a research project I was involved in that explored how students are engaged in higher education. But it also allowed me to draw on my experiences, observations, and frustrations (emotional reactions). I was motivated to write an opinion piece because I felt like I had something to say. However, I did wonder if I was credible enough to have an opinion and this did impede my initial writing process. But I was able to move beyond this by focusing instead on asking myself what was unique about my perspective. As a student who was working in a different way with academics, I observed some of the social and professional interactions that are like the “backstage” of higher education that most students don’t get to see. I identified my unique perspective. In addition, thinking about my work as (in a small way) giving a voice to students who are underrepresented in academic publications helped me see the work as fundamentally valuable. This helped me move beyond my feelings of self-doubt and the belief that I lacked credibility and power to speak about the institution.

Alexander Dwyer was an undergraduate student at The University of Queensland, Australia, at the time he wrote this opinion piece.

What Should You Strive for and What Should You Avoid?

Opinion pieces are short, focused works that put forward an informed judgment related to learning and teaching practices, policies, or research agendas. “Provocative” and “relevant” are common adjectives used to describe opinion pieces, which are often intended to provoke

thinking and change or advance the current learning and teaching conversation. Thus, they might illuminate a need, contradiction, opportunity, inequity, or new way to think about learning and teaching. They can also draw attention to existing practices that would benefit from recognition, acknowledgment, and expansion. Sometimes, opinion pieces are a way of suggesting a future research agenda or a theme for a conference session. No matter the topic, opinion pieces help define your identity as a learning and teaching scholar because they require you to embrace your voice, share your standpoint, and assert a value judgment.

Opinion pieces tend to adopt a persuasive writing style that draws on considered analysis of the topic. A strong opinion piece communicates *what* you think—your opinion—and *why* you think it explicitly connected to *who* you are. In communicating all of these, you can own your stance by using “I” and adopting a conversational tone with readers. The platform for publishing your opinion piece will inform the style and tone you adopt. In an academic journal, you might strive to connect your opinion to other academic literature. In contrast, you might avoid referring to academic outputs that are not open access if you publish your piece through the media, instead drawing on conversations in public forums.

Academic Focus

Opinion pieces for academic journals usually range from 1,500–3,000 words depending on the outlet. They might also be called editorials (often written by journal editors or invited by editors, although not all editorials are opinion pieces), points for debate, or opinion essays. However, not all learning and teaching journals will publish opinion pieces, so if you do not see the genre listed as a submission type for a given journal, consider contacting the editor to inquire.

As an example, the journal we co-edit, the *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)*, publishes opinion pieces that are “short and thought-provoking pieces, stating a position and supported by a persuasive argument.” The criteria for review are:

- Addresses a current issue or debate related to partnership in teaching and learning
- Advances interesting, innovative, provocative, and/or critical ideas about partnership
- The argument should be supported where appropriate by academic literature, experience, and/or evidence.

(International Journal for Students as Partners, “Submissions”)

You will want to consult journal guidelines about their specific requirements because many editors have a sense of the topics they prefer for opinion pieces, or they might not accept this genre. Furthermore, the genre can overlap with case studies and reflective essays (see chapters 15 and 18), so you might also want to communicate with the editor about the ideal genre for your work. For example, if you find you are describing your practice in detail to support your opinion, then a case study might be a better option. In short, the lines between genres are variable, so communicating with editors makes sense before writing or submitting your work.

Public Focus

When writing for media outlets or through blogs, you are likely to have tighter word limits. Like journals, other outlets will have guidelines to follow. Many universities offer guidance on writing for a public audience, including opinions for news outlets. For example, tips from [Carleton College \(2016\)](#), [Duke University \(n.d.\)](#), and [Association for American Colleges and Universities \(Mintz 2019\)](#) offer overlapping advice that is summarized below.

- Make a single point
- Aim for 600–800 words, but always check with the outlet as word lengths vary
- Communicate your single point at the beginning of the piece
- Tell your readers why they should care about the topic
- Give examples and be specific
- Embrace your personal voice
- Use the active voice

- Have a call to action
- Relax and have fun

How Might You Go about Writing an Opinion Piece?

Like composing a reflective essay, writing an opinion piece requires a mindset and approach that differ from what might be required to write in other genres. Rather than reporting results or describing your rigorous research design, opinion pieces ask you to consider your standpoint, draw on your experience, and assert a value judgment. Like reflective essays, they allow you to present your reflections, but an opinion piece is persuasive, as you explain your rationale or the thinking that shaped your stance. For Ronald Barnett (personal communication, July 28, 2019), writing an opinion piece means

leaping into a different mindset. Adjectives such as pithy, bold, forthright, clear, authoritative, and confident should be the order of the day. Eschew nuance, qualifications (a & b produced c & d & e but then f & g & h). Brevity is key: short phrases, short sentences, short paragraphs. Even terseness. One is trying to be attractive and translucently clear to busy readers who are not academics.

Once in the mindset, a helpful way to understand the elements of an opinion piece is to draw on our Guiding Questions below, which include examples drawn from a selection of opinion pieces. In our [online resources](#), you can access a version with just the questions to easily use yourself. We suggest you answer each relevant question and then order them to give you a structure. With this framework in mind, review some of the examples we present below to identify the different ways writers go about writing an opinion piece.

Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining an Opinion Piece*

1. What is the broad topic you are writing about?

Give readers a sense of the focus of your opinion piece. What is the area or topic you will discuss? What was the impetus for

exploration and analysis that led you to write the piece? You can be as straightforward as:

I'm a researcher who focuses on raising disability awareness in educational settings. (Bialka 2018)

2. What is your opinion or stance on the topic?

Before moving into arguments, be explicit about your stance. State it succinctly and ensure it is clear in your title, as the example below demonstrates:

What Straight-A Students Get Wrong

If you always succeed in school, you're not setting yourself up for success in life. (Grant 2018)

3. Why are you writing this opinion piece?

Be sure to tell readers who you are and how who you are shapes the piece. Arguing for representation and equity, eight students from the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus show how this can be done:

We come from a diverse range of racialized or gendered identities and abilities. We have all directly been impacted by or witnessed the damaging effects of colonialism and Western hegemony. As such, we hold a heightened sense of urgency to dismantle broader power structures in society, be they related to race, gender, age, sex, experience, or anything else in between. (Bindra et al. 2018, 10)

4. Who is your intended audience? Who are you writing it for, specifically?

You might have multiple different kinds of readers within the broader arena of higher education, and naming them is productive. In his piece on straight-A students, Adam Grant explicitly speaks to this group of students:

If your goal is to graduate without a blemish on your transcript, you end up taking easier classes and staying within your comfort zone. (Grant 2018)

5. How did you come to form this opinion? What literature or experiences are you drawing on to support your opinions?

Related to who you are, give readers a sense of how you came to your current stance, as such:

My argument arises from my identity as an undergraduate student studying anthropology, my experience as a student partner over the past two years, and a synthesis of my thinking following research projects exploring conceptions of SaP [students as partners] from students and staff in partnership and institutional leaders responsible for implementing the partnership. (Dwyer 2018, 11)

6. What examples will you use to illustrate the argument for your opinion?

Examples bring experiences to life and can give readers a strong understanding of your argument and stance. You can draw on an example from research, or tell the story of your own or someone else's lived experience. A story of exclusion of one person can be powerful, as presented here:

AnnCatherine Heigl, a sophomore at George Mason University, recently attempted to join all eight sororities at her school. All eight turned her down.

The reason the sororities denied AnnCatherine is because she has a disability: Down syndrome. (Bialka 2018)

7. How might your opinion make a difference for others—in practical application or in terms of policy?

Identify what actions might arise from your opinion piece; this is your call to action for the scholarly learning and teaching

community. Rajani Naidoo does this in her piece on equality in higher education systems:

What options do we have to remedy this situation? First, we could try to stop policy-makers focusing on world-class universities as if these exist in a vacuum. Second, we could redirect the focus through our own research and policy advocacy to develop strategies on how national and global systems of higher education could potentially interact to reduce inequality.

Third, we need to avoid dichotomising access, quality education and research excellence. It is very important to avoid seeing these as necessary trade-offs, but to find ways to link these in a positive sum manner. (Naidoo 2018)

**As with other frameworks 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. The questions are based on those in Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, 39).*

Over to You

Opinion pieces occupy an important niche within publishing, and they achieve different goals from other publication genres. Particularly in writing about learning and teaching, which is practice based and always entangled with our subjective realities, opinion pieces offer you a powerful opportunity to deepen, expand, affirm, change, connect, and complicate scholarly conversations in ways that research articles, case studies, and reflective essays often cannot. Questions to ask about writing opinion pieces include:

- What have you formed a value judgement about that can enrich ongoing conversations in the learning and teaching community?
- How will you draw on your lived experiences, evidence, or research to illustrate your stance?
- Where will you share your opinion piece and in what ways will that choice of venue influence how you write it?