

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 2

SITUATING OUR WORK

*Focus, Motivation, Educational Research,
and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*

Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules. (Foucault 1972, 224)

We describe in chapter 1 the ways in which we want both to illuminate discourses associated with writing about learning and teaching and to complicate those. We wish to acknowledge and also work against the reproduction and reactivation of rules that limit and exclude, as Michel Foucault highlights in the quote above. We focus on eleven genres in which many scholars need or want to publish: empirical research articles, theoretical and conceptual articles, literature reviews, case studies, books and edited collections, conference and workshop presentations, reflective essays, opinion pieces, stories, social media, and applications for teaching fellowships, awards, and promotions. We include communicating orally, such as by making a conference presentation or giving a workshop, because such presentations typically involve working with text and often are an important stage in writing or promoting something that has already been or will be written. Furthermore, by including writing applications for teaching fellowships, awards, and promotions we recognize that not all writing results in publication, although it is important to be aware of how

much gets “published” by virtue of being available electronically—a contemporary reality all writers should keep in mind.

At the same time, we cannot unpack every discourse or form of writing. Therefore, while we argue in this book for writing about learning and teaching in higher education across a wide range of genres, we do not discuss every genre of writing or associated form of production. For instance, we do not discuss theses, book reviews, or applications for educational grants. We also do not address video as a venue for dissemination, and we do not focus on writing for audiences beyond other scholars of learning and teaching—knowledge mobilization beyond the academy. Nor do we address the mechanics of grammar. Finally, we do not delve into *how* to conduct learning and teaching research. Rather, we focus on writing about such inquiries (usually for publication) in various genres, not only those that rely on dominant, distanced (and largely Western) constructs of data collection but also those that privilege personal, sometimes complicated and messy, lived experiences.

While conventional academic wisdom typically privileges data- or theory-driven research, and for good reasons, there are also good reasons to question dominant assumptions regarding what “counts” as research on learning and teaching, what is “publishable,” and where we might publish our writing. Some of the genres we explore in this book are well established, some are more recently recognized, and all are always evolving. Furthermore, the divisions among the genres and the language used to distinguish them may be helpful in illuminating the current norms of any given approach, but our goal is also, to borrow Jennifer Fraser’s (personal communication, August 4, 2019) phrase, “to trouble these divides.” As they point out, for instance, “conceptual and theoretical pieces are also research articles.”

We argue that creating and contributing to scholarly conversations about learning and teaching in higher education include, but also move beyond, traditional journal or book chapter outlets. While these may be required and appropriate venues for some scholarly work, we argue for complicating established genres and for publishing in outlets that welcome the rich, messy, and relational practices

of learning and teaching in higher education institutions around the world. We advocate not only writing in a diversity of established and evolving genres but also blurring the divisions among those genres and embracing exploration, experimentation, and enjoyment as much as intentional adherence to expectations in writing. We see these efforts as part of pursuing the larger goal of capturing and valuing the wide variety of learning and teaching practices that exist and the diversity of the perspectives of the many, differently positioned people engaged in such work.

We acknowledge, in advocating this expansion both of writing genres and of writing processes, the difficulty that many scholars experience when coming into learning and teaching as a scholarly field from different disciplinary contexts and institutional cultures and the extent to which identities affect and inform choices. You may be an accomplished academic who is an expert in your field but who also wants to write about learning and teaching; you might be in a teaching-focused role with little experience with academic writing; you may be an undergraduate or graduate student altogether new to academic writing. And regardless of your role, you may or may not be a confident academic writer, and how you experience yourself and how others perceive you will also have an impact on your choices. If writing about learning and teaching projects and experiences is new to you, you are simultaneously forging your identity as a learning and teaching scholar, striving to clarify your values as both a scholar and a practitioner, and continually learning through writing—hence the importance of understanding the fostering of identities as an ongoing process. This book aims to support all scholars, across roles and contexts, in their respective processes of creating and contributing to scholarly conversations about learning and teaching, and also of developing identities, clarifying values, and learning through writing.

Why Write about Learning and Teaching?

When Helen Sword (2012, 159) writes about writing, she uses the words “passion, commitment, pleasure, playfulness, humor, elegance, lyricism, originality, imagination, creativity, and undisciplined

thinking.” When Pat Hutchings (personal communication, June 11, 2019) reflected on her motivation for writing, as she read through a draft of this book, she mused: “When I’m working on a piece of writing, suddenly everything becomes more interesting, more connected, ideas get sparked. It brings thinking to life, so to speak.” These reflections offer several of the best reasons we can think of to write. Writing can capture and convey what makes us human, what makes us connected, what keeps us alive; it allows us to express and to perceive the joyful feeling and clarified understanding of which humans are capable. And when, as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2014) argues, we use language that resonates for the people we address, we deepen understanding, catalyze learning, and foster connection.

These reflections on writing in general apply in particular ways to writing about learning and teaching. In the last two decades, quality in learning and teaching has become a priority for most institutions, governments, and professional bodies at state/province, national, and international levels. In keeping with this prioritization, we see increased professionalization of staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning, and we see increased demand to provide evidence of the beneficial impact of learning and teaching research, practices, and policies at individual, program, institutional, and national levels. These increases have led to expanded calls for and increased interest in writing about learning and teaching. We are at a moment when the ways that many of us in higher education spend our time—in engaging in or supporting learning and teaching—can become the focus of academic writing, allowing us to bring the personal, human potential of writing into dialogue with the professional, institutional work we do.

Like the language used to name the various genres for writing, the terms “learning” and “teaching” signal a far greater diversity of practices and subjects of inquiry than any single term can capture. When the terms are linked, as they are in our title and much of our discussion, they might seem to refer to a single, undifferentiated phenomenon, but our goal in linking them parallels our goal in at once naming and striving to complicate genres. Writing about

teachers' teaching and about students' learning might, in some ways, as Ronald Barnett (personal communication, July 28, 2019) notes, "call for different stances on the part of the writer given the different considerations that come into view." At the same time, we suggest that learning and teaching are always happening in more than one direction and on more than one level. There are certainly instances of teachers learning from and teaching each other, students learning from and teaching each other, and, as our own work emphasizes, teachers and learners working in pedagogical partnerships in which typical roles are complicated and sometimes reversed. We therefore use "learning and teaching" not to conflate the multiple, multi-directional, multi-layered work each term signals but rather to offer a reminder of that multiplicity.

As we discuss across the chapters in this book, different genres of writing weave the personal and professional together in different ways, and each invites a foregrounding of and a focus on different aspects of the work of learning and teaching. Furthermore, writing can focus on theory- and research-led approaches or on practical applications. Whether you write in the more formal language typical of most empirical research articles, theoretical and conceptual articles, and literature reviews or the more informal language typical of reflective essays, opinion pieces, social media, and stories, you are conveying the phenomena, insights, and possibilities that affect us as human beings who engage in and reflect on learning and teaching. How all the genres for writing about learning and teaching evolve depends on how those who write and read shape those genres. This is the excitement of creating and contributing to scholarly conversations, developing identities, clarifying values, and learning through writing.

There are many excellent general guides to academic writing (e.g., Belcher 2009; Day 2016; Stevens 2019; Sword 2012, 2017a) that are packed with useful advice. However, few texts include discussion of writing about learning and teaching in higher education or examine the wide range of genres that we explore in this book. While many writing guides target PhD students publishing from their dissertations (e.g., Kamler and Thomson 2014), there are distinct issues in writing

and publishing about learning and teaching that “remain unaddressed in generic or disciplinary publication materials” (Chick et al. 2014, 4). These issues include the need to analyze general processes of learning and teaching and go beyond discipline-specific phenomena, and the need to address a wider audience with a greater diversity of experiences and perspectives than you might find within particular disciplines. While you may find some sections of the text clearly focused on writing about learning and teaching, it may seem that other parts of the book discuss writing more generally. We have endeavored to strike a balance among the following:

- arguing for writing as creating and contributing to scholarly conversations, developing identities and affirming and expanding values, and engaging in ongoing learning;
- illuminating and complicating established genres and legitimating newer and evolving ones; and
- offering advice about writing that might be familiar for some and can be found elsewhere but might be new to others and feel different as one approaches writing about learning and teaching.

Linking Higher Education Research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Since this book is concerned with writing about learning and teaching in higher education, it is relevant to authors contributing to higher education research conversations and to scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) conversations. The similarities and differences between higher education research and SoTL have been widely debated over the last two decades (e.g., Brew 2011; Case 2015; Geertsema 2016; Larsson et al. 2017; Potter and Kustra 2011; Tight 2018a; Trigwell and Shale 2004). Perhaps the key distinction centers on the purposes of the scholarly inquiry being conducted; in educational research, the fundamental goal is generalizable knowledge, and in SoTL the core purpose is to improve teaching and learning for the particular students being studied (Geertsema 2016). This primary difference often leads to divergence in the research methods and the audiences for educational research and SoTL (Ashwin and Trigwell

2004, 122), and positions SoTL as a form of both scholarly inquiry and academic development (Felten and Chick 2018).

This distinction also has implications for how scholars and practitioners write about learning and teaching. The essential genre of educational research is the scholarly article, while SoTL is open to a far wider range of “going public” with processes and findings. These include not only articles in journals but also approaches such as presenting at university learning and teaching conferences, writing reflective essays, and applying for learning and teaching fellowships (Fanghanel 2013; Geertsema 2016). Keith Trigwell and Susan Shale (2004, 534) suggest that publication is one way, but not the only way, to communicate about learning and teaching:

We have publication of research on teaching as a component in making scholarly teaching activity public, but as there are many other ways of making public how learning has been made possible, we believe it not to be essential and that the scholarship of teaching could be happening without it.

Paul Ashwin and Keith Trigwell (2004) offer different levels of pedagogic investigation to show a range of ways of communicating the outcomes of learning and teaching investigations (Table 2.1). All three levels involve scholarship and are interrelated, in that personal knowledge underpins contributions to local and public knowledge, and contributions to local knowledge may be a stepping-stone to contributing to public knowledge. Public knowledge, in turn, is “read by others to inform themselves, . . . build local, institutional knowledge, and thus the cycle of knowledge building continues” (Geertsema 2016, 129).

Since many scholars come to SoTL or discipline-based educational research from a different disciplinary location than education, producing educational research outputs will be a different challenge for them than it is for those trained in education (see also chapter 22). Kerri-Lee Krause (2019) outlines a spectrum of education research paradigms, from positivist through to supercomplexity—with neo-positivist,

pragmatic, interpretivist, and transformative in between—that offers another way for writers to make sense of learning and teaching in a supercomplex higher education environment. Regardless of which paradigm you write in, however, we recognize, as Ronald Barnett (2019a, 239) argues, that “writing is at once a communicative act and a creative act.”

Table 2.1: Levels of pedagogic investigation

Level	Purpose of investigation	Evidence gathering methods and conclusions will be	Investigation results in
1	To inform oneself	Verified by self	Personal knowledge
2	To inform a group within a shared context	Verified by those within same context	Local knowledge
3	To inform a wider audience	Verified by those within same context	Public knowledge

Source: Ashwin and Trigwell (2004, 122)

Over to You

The argument that runs throughout this book is twofold. First, we argue that writing for publication is a complex process of creating and contributing to conversations, forging identities, and embracing opportunities for ongoing learning. Second, we argue that we should recognize and value writing about learning and teaching through many different writing genres. Much of what we argue goes well beyond learning and teaching, but this is our area of expertise that we are passionate about and applying our arguments to this area is the focus of this book.

How do you see yourself starting or continuing to engage in scholarly conversations about learning and teaching in higher education

across a wide range of genres? Answering the following questions may help you address that larger query and position yourself to realize the potential of writing about learning and teaching:

- Why are you interested in writing about learning and teaching?
- Which genres of writing have you experienced, and which would you like to try out?
- In writing about learning and teaching, do you see yourself as contributing to higher education research or SoTL, or both?