

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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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.aa3>
Subjects: LCSH: Academic writing handbooks, manuals, etc.; Education, Higher Research; College teaching; College teachers as authors

CHAPTER 5

CONCEPTUALIZING WRITING AS A LEARNING PROCESS

It is uncontested that writing enhances learning. (Silva and Limongi 2019, 213)

Expert writing is a process of discovery or invention. (Baaijen and Galbraith 2018, 199)

The first two chapters in part 2 of this book emphasize the deeply inter- and intra-personal work of writing: thinking about your writing as a way of creating and contributing to scholarly conversations (chapter 3), and fostering your identities as a writer within those conversations and for yourself in ways that intersect with your values (chapter 4). This chapter focuses on writing as a learning process—as a way of learning about the scholarly conversations you might want to create or contribute to, about yourself and your values, and about what you already know and do not yet know or understand about learning and teaching. It embraces a concept, writing to learn, that was developed during the 1970s and 1980s in relation to teaching higher education students to write (*Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse*) and that has come to be accepted as a given among writing scholars, as the assertions above from Silva and Limongi (2019) and Baaijen and Galbraith (2018) attest. In this chapter we cite some of the foundational thinkers of the writing-to-learn movement and discuss this widely accepted concept in relation to the writing that you as experienced scholars, new scholars, or student scholars can use both as a mode of exploration and discovery and as a form of publication in and of itself.

Writing to Learn: Origins and Applications

Two of the early proponents of writing to learn, Toby Fulwiler and Art Young (1982), explain that writing to learn is focused on writing “to order and represent experience to our own understanding.” By writing for ourselves as learners and audience, we can benefit from writing to learn because the language we generate “provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding” (Fulwiler and Young 1982, x). William Zinnser (1988) wrote a book with the title *Writing to Learn* to ease the fear people feel regarding writing in general and the particular fear people have of writing about topics for which they assume they have no aptitude. Like Toby Fulwiler and Art Young, William Zinnser made the argument that writing can be understood as a form of thinking, and that by writing through your thoughts you clarify and gain confidence in them.

Writing to learn is used most often in pedagogical contexts as a strategy employed by teachers across the disciplines to help support student writing (see, for example, advice from the [Center for Teaching Excellence at Duquesne University](#)). It is one of several categories of writing typically emphasized in higher education, which include:

- writing in the disciplines (developing the language and discourse practices of particular areas of study),
- writing to engage (which focuses on promoting critical thinking), and
- writing to learn (typically short, impromptu or otherwise informal and low-stakes writing tasks).

Writing to learn is often juxtaposed to “transactional writing” that aims “to accomplish something, to inform, instruct, or persuade” ([Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse](#), n.d.).

In short, what distinguishes writing to learn from writing for other purposes is its focus on the process of coming to understanding and its emphasis on the benefit to the person doing the writing as a form of learning.

Using Writing to Learn for Yourself

Using writing to learn requires seeing your writing as a space in which you learn for and by yourself. Many people, especially those who do not think of themselves as writers, have trouble believing that writing can be helpful to clarify thinking. In *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande (1934) offers advice that still resonates nearly a century after she wrote it: develop a mindset or attitude that makes possible the productive generation of words to name insights and experiences. If you are one of those people who does not see yourself as a writer or who doubts the benefit of writing to clarify thinking, ask yourself what kind of shift in mindset (perhaps created by making time to free write, reading books on writing, or participating in a writing workshop) and what kind of encouragement (e.g., collaborating with an experienced colleague in writing a blog) you might need to embrace writing as a generative process of learning.

Once you embrace a mindset conducive to this approach, you can use writing to learn as an experienced scholar, a new scholar, or a student scholar to help you figure out what you are thinking and to keep track of your thoughts. Perhaps you will want to keep a journal, a kind of ongoing dialogue with yourself through which you clarify both your questions and your evolving understandings of learning and teaching. Naming those insights for yourself helps you not only clarify them but also find language to capture and represent them. You might focus on naming for yourself what scholarly conversations you want to contribute to, or create, and why. The understandings you develop through this focus and the language you develop to name those understandings will help you clarify with whom you want to be in dialogue and perhaps what you want to talk about. You might focus on writing to yourself about your identities, how you define yourself and are defined by others—how your “individual/personal sense of sociocultural location and character intersects with how [you are] constructed in many different ways within any given culture and society” (Cook-Sather 2015, 2)—to develop who you want to be through your writing. Finally, you might consider writing to learn about your assumptions, to uncover and explore them through

reflection, which can provoke new insights into your identities as a learning and teaching scholar and enable more purposeful approaches to writing across genres.

If you experience fear of writing, you can use writing to learn to work through it. Such fear manifests itself in many forms, and *Our Perspectives 5.1* offers some glimpses of our own experiences to open up the conversation about fear. The anxiety, fear, and relentless discomfort of expressing yourself through written text is common to many, but not all, writers. Accepting that writing is a process and that it does not have to be perfect before others can see it can be difficult when you feel the fear of rejection, humiliation, and failure (see [chapter 28](#)). Talking about our fears as writers and what shapes these fears is a first step in addressing them. Reframing writing as a learning process, instead of a technical right/wrong task or only a performance for others, is another way to overcome fear. Fear may also dissipate if you give yourself permission to dwell, explore, ponder, imagine, and experiment. Many people find a form of free writing—continuous writing for a set amount of time, such as five or fifteen minutes, without stopping, censoring, or editing—especially helpful to access and express what they are thinking (Brande 1934; Elbow 1975). Technology today allows for countless drafts that can remain private or be shared as needed.

Our Perspectives 5.1

Opening up about our fears of writing

Kelly: Writing is a daily act of courage for me. My fear of writing dates back to first grade when my identity as a reader, writer, and student took shape. I was labelled a slow reader by the teacher (Ms. Claudia, who is forever burnt into my memory). My mother viewed the problem as a school problem, so I was given special tutoring at school but no reading or writing support at home. I spent countless weekends writing spelling words over and over as a result of failing the weekly spelling tests. When I started to show improvement, Ms. Claudia assumed I was copying off the boy next

to me. To address the issue, she literally caged me off from the class by surrounding my desk with a large, cut-out box so I could not see anyone during test time. Of course I have a complicated relationship with writing marked by anxiety and fear. It was not until my undergraduate research experience that I learned that writing is never perfect, spelling errors are easy to fix, and writing is an iterative process. Dr. Hill, the lab leader, would send me draft manuscripts to edit, which seemed crazy to me, yet I would not have dared to decline his requests. Imagine my surprise to find his writing was filled with the little errors that used to get me in trouble in English classes. I would fix them, and he would be grateful I had. He was not embarrassed or bothered in any visible way about his errors. Through that experience, I realized writing is a learning and thinking process, which addressed some of my fears of being humiliated (thank you, Ms. Claudia) and gave me courage to face my writing fears.

Alison: I have never had any fear of writing, and I actually look forward to the few minutes here and there as well as to the entire days I can devote to working through draft after draft of any piece. This easy relationship with writing has meant, though, that I need regularly to remind myself how difficult, challenging, and even torturous writing is for many people. When I forget that fact, I can be less than empathetic and even impatient (with colleagues, never with those I am teaching to write)—responses I recognize as profoundly ungenerous and inequitable. It's also the case that, although I don't struggle with writing, I do worry that what I write might not make sense to others—and sometimes, in fact, it doesn't, if I haven't spent enough time translating what is clear to me into terms that might resonate for—or at least make sense to—others. But perhaps because my identity as a writer has woven itself through every phase of my life and virtually every role I have had, from teaching high school English through teaching college composition through embracing writing as an integral and energizing aspect of my identity as an academic, I do not have fear around it.

Mick: Fear of writing for me revolves around lack of confidence in what others will think of what I have written. Have I misunderstood some of the arguments? Have I expressed my ideas poorly? I cope with these fears through redrafting what I have written several times before asking generous colleagues for their comments. Hence, through self-evaluation and by responding to the feedback from my critical friends, I use my writing as a learning experience. However, I have a residual fear about how much I have learnt and whether I continue to make the same mistakes, especially in the quality of the writing.

Your perspective: What fears, if any, are shaping your writing and how can reframing writing as a learning process change your relationship to those fears?

Moving from Writing to Learn for Yourself to Sharing Your Writing to Learn with Others

The audience for writing to learn is, initially at least, yourself. If you want to move from writing to learn for yourself to writing to learn to share with others, you will want to shift from what Linda Flower (1979) called “writer-based prose” to what she called “reader-based prose.” Shifting from an audience of yourself to an audience outside yourself and likely outside your context requires thinking about how to translate what you have represented to your own understanding, to use Fulwiler and Young’s (1982) terms, into a representation accessible to others’ understanding. Reflective essays (see chapter 16) and stories (see chapter 20) are genres particularly conducive to the products of writing to learn, focusing as they do on lived experiences and day-to-day practicalities of the work of learning and teaching in higher education. An undergraduate student author explains how such reflective writing supports a “manner of inquiry” through which you can “make sense of things and find patterns without being tunnel focused on arriving at conclusions” (quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 19). And, as Pat Hutchings, Mary Tyler Huber, and Anthony Ciccone (2011, 37–38) argue, “The writing process not only

focuses one's attention on one's own work but has a marvelous way of lighting up the work of others, bringing what might otherwise go unnoticed into one's sphere of interest and analysis."

Over to You

In this chapter we extend to all writers the concept and practice of writing to learn as it has been used to teach university students. We see this as part of our larger project in this book to expand who can be seen as writers about learning and teaching, how we write, and what we write about. We invite you to pause to reflect on yourself as a learner and a writer by answering these questions:

- What do you want to learn more about regarding learning and teaching in higher education, and how can you use writing to explore that?
- What insights that you generate for yourself through writing might be usefully shared with a wider audience?
- How can you imagine using writing to clarify your understandings of ongoing and potential scholarly conversations about learning and teaching, your own identities and possible roles in those conversations, and your values as a writer?