Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales from the Field

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1. Introduction and Welcome

Dianne Conrad

I embarked on this project with great excitement. The topic of research and the writing process has fascinated me for years and continues to do so; additionally, literature on this topic seems to be much needed. It is well known in academe that doing research and publishing that research are important and necessary activities for advancement and recognition in the field. Our field of open, online, and distance learning (ODL) is multi-faceted, global, and progressive, thanks, in no small measure, to the inclusion of technical functionality and affordances at the heart of what we do.

Over the past many decades of growth in ODL, our field has expanded to include myriad journals hosted by organizations and institutions all over the world. Scholars' initial choices of a few print-based journals have grown to feature a wide range of online and open journals covering micro, meso, and macro levels of research. For the new scholar, challenges to publishing can include a range of decisions, from locating a research topic to choosing an appropriate publication venue. And of course, in between lies the mountainous task of writing.

As I describe in my chapter that follows, I was once a novice writer who anguished for too long over how to get started! And then… I put fingers to keyboard and began. From that point on, I was learning, honing, gathering, and, to the best of my ability, perfecting. Writing is a craft that requires endless skill, labour, and repetition. At times, I look back at a piece published years earlier and realized that I could have written it differently — perhaps better or more concisely. One can always improve.

Much of my writing "know-how" comes from a period of six years when I served as editor of the prestigious *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* (thank you, Terry Anderson for that precious opportunity and thanks to Rory McGreal for co-editing with me). It was indeed a privilege to be privy to so many scholarly works — so many topics, so many styles. But I must also credit my elementary school education which, in the 1950s, included a rigorous focus on grammar and punctuation. In high school, I studied Latin, French, and Spanish; those pleasant excursions into other languages, especially the dead one, firmed up a strong sense of sentence structure and verb tenses. English was my first undergraduate degree at university, although I do not think it contributed to a sense of "writerly-ness" as the curriculum was all literature and I'm fairly certain that teaching assistants marked my essays in a perfunctory manner, not being too concerned with the mechanics of the work.

There were two occasions in graduate school that I recall as instructional. The first, in my master's programme, involved a professor sitting down with me and attacking my use of punctuation in a paper. "Pull up your socks, Missy" is actually what she said. I was appalled; and I knew the scolding she gave me was not deserved. Her own success with writing was less than superb. Her publications were minimal. From that experience, I learned to have faith in myself and not to invest trust or respect willy-nilly in the professoriate.

The second occasion was more constructive. I was writing my first piece for publication and I passed the paper before the keen eyes of my doctoral supervisor for input. She promptly slashed the first eight pages of the document. "Not necessary!" she barked. Apparently, I had greatly surpassed the appropriate amount of context and history for my argument! That lesson in topic-honing and the resulting humiliation was an important one.

To construct this book, I reached out to many colleagues and scholars with whose work I was familiar and asked them to contribute their stories of creativity, research, and writing process. Some well-respected colleagues were too busy to comply, understandably. But the roster of authors who are contained here is impressive and this book is filled with amazing and humbling stories. The pages herein offer considerable and valuable input from these excellent writers.

On Reflection

It has been my experience that the technique of writing reflectively has either been taken for granted, not exercised well, or perhaps not taught well. I have encountered many doctoral students who had not engaged in reflective writing prior to my asking them to do so. Perhaps, too, the difficulty could be that of language, as is often the case. I, myself, have been puzzled by the occasional reference to *reflexivity* (as regards cognition and thought and not science) as opposed to *reflection*. Even dictionary advice differs (English Language and Usage, n.d.); in the long run, the terms appear to mean essentially the same thing, reflection being the modern and more commonly used term; hence its use here.

Schön has been a primary source for understanding reflection, both *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. As is implied by the prepositional use of "in" and "on," the latter refers to thinking back, retrospectively, to actions or practices that have been completed; and trying to make sense out of them in some way — to interpret, to learn, to improve or change.

Not everyone is comfortable writing reflective material and not everyone has the time, either personally or academically (see Prinsloo's chapter for a detailed description of how academic time vis-à-vis writing is measured and valued), to do so. Ellen Rose, in her thoughtful book *On Reflection: An essay on technology, education, and the status of thought in the twenty-first century*, argues that we must reconsider the value of, the meaning, and the practice of reflection in order to halt the technological juggernaut of our times. Slow down, she says, and take the time to "simply stop and think" (2013, p. 108). She suggests that reflection is, or *can* be, a "way of being," a way that we can move forward in our practises with integrity and creativity.

Realizing then, that there is an important and necessary role for pondering one's writing process, I asked contributors to this book to consider the following: background and scholarly training; scholarly interests; reasons and motivation for researching and writing; guiding philosophies; conflicts, barriers, mentors; opportunities, insights, and sorrows. Contributing authors responded to each facet of my request in varying degrees. This, I found fascinating — noting, as I did, the influence of socio-economic, geographical, and political backgrounds,

education, and personal choices in their stories, mediated by just plain luck. There is no "one size fits all" here.

A sterling example of authors responding to "place and space," as described above, can be found in Koole's chapter. Taking stock of the history and heritage of their Canadian province, Saskatchewan, Koole invited three colleagues to a guided discussion wherein they addressed my seed questions through each writer's particular lens. The resulting polyvocality demonstrates an intriguing mix of voices in the narrative. Not surprisingly, the chapter is very long, but rivetingly informative.

I also asked for words of wisdom: advice and takeaways. To that end, there is a wonderful collection of tips and advice for novice or struggling writers provided in these pages. Among others, Bozkurt has provided a clear outline of his writing process, certain to be of use to those who are trying to find their own way. In these sections of the chapters, similarities can be noted. I take this as a prized agglomeration of seasoned wisdom from "the folks who know," those whose mentoring is invaluable.

On the topic of mentors, I see this text as a mentoring opportunity not only for me but also for the contributing authors. It takes the passing of years and the accumulation of experience to wake up one morning and realize that one is now equipped — now mature enough — to serve as a mentor to others. At least it did for me! My sense is that this realization creeps up on an individual, perhaps hastened by others asking for advice, guidance, or assistance; perhaps encouraged by a sterling performance review or reflection for a tenure application. Whatever the circumstances, there comes a time for giving back. (For more insight into mentoring and its value, see Starr-Glass's and Roberts' chapters; and see Xiao's chapter for "giving back.")

The contributing authors in this text span a remarkable breadth of experience, history, and geography. I am indebted to each of them for sharing their stories so articulately, so honestly. Each one is unique; many are disarming, even shocking. The scope of approach to the task can be perceived from chapter titles — an interesting balance of functionality and personality. But all are incredibly informative and, in my opinion, extraordinary fodder for novice writers and scholars.

Given the diversity described above, I did not struggle to try to identify themes or likenesses. Each story stands alone, although you will find some of the same hurdles and barriers described as they were

experienced by our contributors in diverse ways. And, on the positive side, you might also notice several references to curiosity, passion, and the quest for knowledge. On the negative side, authors enumerate hardships both professional and personal, often in startling detail.

That said, what was of great interest to me, as I think it will be for you, was the variety of ways in which these well-known and celebrated contributors to our field framed the exercises of "looking back" and "giving back" — giving back in the sense of digging deep into their experiences to share insights arising from their own histories and advice based on those histories. To trace the journeys described in several of these chapters (see, for instance, Bates, Garrison, Cronin, Ryan, Dron) has provided humbling reading for me. I have worked with, and know personally, the majority of this book's authors; however, hearing their own thoughts and words on the topic of "self" and the self's relationship to the crafts of research and writing opened up many new portals of information — personal information, philosophical musings and stances, and great dollops of humour. *This* is what these pages are intended to share.

Enjoy these reflections and musings from these colleagues in the field. They are so precious; and perhaps even rare in that many contributors have not written before about their own writing or creative experiences. So many of the authors confessed this to me and, better yet, told me that they had found it a very enjoyable activity, perhaps even liberating. For those revelations, I am extremely grateful.

In the most positive and appreciative sense, I enjoyed reading the stories of early struggles, wrong turns, and barriers. I suffered these myself. I had come to graduate work freshly out of a marriage; my children and I lived in semi-poverty in somewhat less-than-attractive student family housing in a large, strange city. Eventually, my cheques bounced. An early research grant, the proposal designed and submitted by my then boss and mentor, Walter Archer, saved the day. As his research assistant, I happily accepted my share of the funds.

My master's thesis was written at night on an Apple 2e in a dingy kitchen after the kids had gone to bed. My twelve-year-old was entrusted with the care and feeding of his eight-year-old brother while I attended classes. I rode the bus, which made the journey home even longer. The

boys fought insufferably; tears all around. (But I am happy to say that they are best friends now, in their maturity.)

Because of my financial situation, I always wore two hats: administrator (day job), and university teaching (part-time-when-available job). I taught, co-taught, tele-taught, video-taught, summer-course-taught… and then, as described in my chapter, I finally began to write. My writing enabled me to consort with "real" academics at conferences, allowed me to be invited to contribute chapters and articles here and there. Other contributors have also described "late" entries into the field, and Brookfield's (1990) description of Imposter Syndrome is also mentioned. Perhaps we have all experienced that.

Occasionally, I regret not taking up an offer to join a faculty as a "real" academic. (See also Nichols' views on this positionality.) Most of the time, however, I am content with my dog-legged journey to retirement. I have been privileged to meet so many inspiring and wonderful people, truly pioneers and innovators in our field. I have enjoyed so many fruitful, exciting conferences and had the opportunity to speak my piece. I have travelled. I have had fun.

Best of all, though, I recently found myself in a position to tell not only my own story, but the stories of many of my colleagues, in this book. I sincerely hope that readers enjoy and benefit from the wealth of experience and honesty contained in these pages.

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