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

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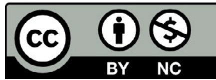

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2. The Way of Academic Writing: Reflections of a Traveller

David Starr-Glass

> What the Way is to the world, the stream is to the river and the sea.
>
> Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Chin*, Chapter 32

This chapter touches on many issues, but it has one main purpose — to encourage interested members of academic communities to consider writing and publishing, especially if they have not done so previously.

Writing and publishing are realistic goals for all members of the academic community — for those who are passionate about their disciplinary area, their research, and their teaching. A self-perceived inability to write might deter some, but the greatest blocks to successful writing and publishing are low motivation and a lack of encouragement. Successful scholarly writers must be dedicated, resourceful, and encouraged.

It might be argued that writing only makes sense for those in the early stages of their academic journeys, with writing and publication being seen as necessary prerequisites for a scholarly career. It is certainly advantageous to begin writing early; however, cultivating an interest in writing can be just as rewarding for those who have seen their careers blossom, gained considerable disciplinary knowledge, but who have published little or even not at all.

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Before Embarking on the Way

Writing is a craft that requires ongoing effort, focused commitment, and a dedication to refinement. It consumes but does not waste time, especially when the writing explores issues with which we are involved in our professional practice. Academic writing (which in this chapter is considered synonymous with scholarly writing) provides an additional dimension — an expanded and extended dimension — for disciplinary engagement and professional development. Writing is a formal and dedicated practice that can potentially heighten awareness and stimulate deeper reflection about the what, why, and the how of our academic activities.

Some academic writers emphasize the importance of the final *product*: the published manuscript. Others — including the present writer — recognize that it is the *process* of writing that is perhaps of even greater value. The process of creating and communicating new meaning can significantly complement the other areas of our academic lives. It can infuse them with a fresh and synergistic energy and, of course, it can increase our interest, awareness, and satisfaction. Academic writing has inherent value and pragmatic utility, but perhaps its enduring worth is when it is recognized as an extension of self.

This chapter is a personal reflection on practice. I hope that it will be appreciated as a sharing of thoughts that might help and encourage, not as an exercise in self-indulgence or the manifestation of late-onset reminiscence.

A little contextual background might be in order. My areas of academic interest are business, organizational behaviour, and occupational psychology. I have advanced degrees in these areas and a master's in open and distance learning. I identify as an eclectic scholar, a transdisciplinary explorer, and an attentive teacher and mentor. I strive to guide students in their exploration and construction of knowledge. As an academic and researcher, I self-categorized as a bricoleur — bricolage is a recurring theme in my published work (Starr-Glass, 2010; 2019).

Over the last twenty-five years, I have published over 100 peer-reviewed works divided more or less equally between peer-reviewed journal articles and edited book chapters. I have also written dozens of reflections and opinion pieces for academic and non-academic

journals and published three non-fiction books. I greatly enjoy writing and have benefitted from it. For me, writing is a challenging but pleasurable experience that provides an opportunity to pause, reflect, and communicate what is important to me and what might be of interest to others. Writing is a voice — my unique voice — and I always understand that what I write is the starting point of a new conversation with the "other."

Early Steps on the Way

Academic writing provides voice for those within the disciplinary area: voice at both a communal and a personal level. Potentially, academic publications contribute to three separate but connected processes:

- Defining and shaping the disciplinary community.
- Defining and shaping the individual, or individuals, within the community who have authored the work.
- Creating bridges between the community and those beyond and outside it — scholars in other disciplines, novices in related fields of practice, and those who are interested in entering or exploring the subject domain.

Each academic discipline develops its own unique norms, culture, language, and modes of communication. Academic disciplines have been perceptively seen as distinctive tribes occupying and defining distinctive territories (Trowler et al., 2012). In some disciplines — and in some institutions of higher education — there is an expectation of communicating research and/or teaching experience: the "publish or perish" imperative. Here, although other facets of writing and publishing are recognized, the prime concern is to expand and consolidate disciplinary territory. Although academic publications certainly shape and strengthen the community, they also provide benefit for the individual author: enhancing professional reputation, facilitating future research grants, and working towards promotion and tenure (Korkeamäki, et al., 2018).

However, in many other disciplinary areas — and especially outside the research university — publications are desired and appreciated but are neither required nor forced. In these settings, writing and publication

are viewed as laudable peripheral activities but not at all central to the overall academic enterprise. Significant teaching commitments and academic obligations often leave little time for writing and institutions themselves may provide little by way of reward or recognition for those who publish. Even where academic writing is valued and encouraged, publishing is usually skewed — a small number of prolific writers produce most work, most faculty members publish little and only occasionally (Rørstad & Aksnes, 2015).

Perhaps, in these low-publishing disciplines and institutions, faculty members come to doubt whether they have a voice — whether they have knowledge, experience, or perspectives that are novel or significant enough to communicate. Otherwise, thoughtful and highly competent academics are often prone to what has been termed "Imposter Syndrome," and they may seriously doubt their own competency, professional ability, or scholarly worth. Writing is perceived as the specialized activity of special people. When teaching loads are heavy, time is at a premium, and the work-life balance is significantly out of balance, writing is just not seen as a realistic or viable option.

That was the context within which I worked. I had been teaching undergraduates for many years, but the idea of writing a journal article never occurred to me. Not, that is, until I was teaching a management course in which all of the students happened to be Belgians — a truly international venture: an American college, located in Jerusalem, which (at that time) served a predominantly European student body. My students were bright, articulate, and communicated exceedingly well in English (for most of them, their third language). But there was a problem.

The subject matter was uncomplicated, but it did not resonate with students. The textbook was a well-known American one, but students had difficulty in fully appreciating the nuanced assumptions, values, and beliefs that permeated it. They had difficulty in understanding what "American" businesses did and what preoccupied "American" managers. After much discussion, it emerged that a very real and palpable national cultural divide existed between my students (Belgian) and the learning material (American).

I wrote a short article for a management journal, reflecting on the teaching/learning challenge and outlining how I had attempted to bridge

the cultural divide. After many weeks, the reviewers' observations finally arrived (this was in the era prior to email). I read the first page of blistering comments and cringed. I felt that my audacity in submitting a manuscript had been called out. I really had nothing to say and what I had said was patently foolish, or at least ill-advised. I was an imposter and the reviewers had recognized me as such. The review was about four pages long, but I only made it through the first two. I was deflated, chastised, and dejected. I put the reviews aside and resumed my day.

Only later, on re-reading the summarized reviews, I found that the editor had added a short note at the very end: "If you address the minor points raised by our reviewers, we would be pleased to publish your work in our next edition." I read the reviews again but could not reconcile them with the editor's optimistic note. Of course, I took the editor's advice, rewriting the manuscript and carefully addressing each "failing" raised by the reviewers. The revision was accepted without comment and my first published article saw the light of day. In the process, I learned something very important about peer-reviews, peer-reviewers, and editors. This was my first somewhat shaky step on the way and I was in my late forties (Starr-Glass, 1996).

Thoughts Along the Way

There is an extensive literature on the purpose of academic writing: what it is considered to do, how it can be recognized, and how it might be evaluated (Boyer, 1990; 1996; Glassick et al., 1997; Tight, 2018). It might be a good idea for the prospective academic writer to review this literature. However, it should be appreciated that much of this work centres on the creation of academic writing in newly established disciplinary areas (such as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) and the intent of these authors is to utilize writing and publication as a means of advancing and consolidating these new disciplinary domains.

There is a much more limited literature on how to *produce* academic writing. The present chapter is not intended to be an extensive or comprehensive how-to manual; nevertheless, the following points — gained from personal experience and ongoing involvement — might be of use for those contemplating academic writing and publishing.

Consider Content

Writing for publication only materializes if there is content. There are two obviously linked issues. First, the writing — what appears on the printed page — must contain ideas, concepts, and observations that are accessible and potentially useful to the reader. This content is created by the writer, but it is ultimately identified and utilized by the reader. Content is what the reader decodes, recognizes, and remembers. Content, in this sense, is what the reader engages with and considers — it is from the content presented that the reader will construct his or her own narrative and new understanding.

But this public *presented content* is grounded in a second domain: the unique and personal *content of the writer*. This content is the writer's inner reservoir of knowledge, appreciation, reflection, and expression. It is the existence of this internal content that initiates communication, even if that communication is only with the self. In order to write there needs to be *something* to write about — something in the writer's interiority that is capable of identifying itself and demanding articulation.

Communication is not simply about the transmission of a message. It begins with the writer who encodes the message, which is considered significant, and ends with the reader who attempts to decode this and bring it into his or her world. Communication always involves people and is always personal. In the academic world, writing for publication is often narrowly considered to be "appropriate" when it is impersonal, judiciously sterile, and remote from the human source of its origin. Academic writing may well be a place for distance, detachment, and objectivity; however, it cannot avoid being a place for personal connection and human communication. That connection is with *you*, the writer. That content is from *you*. Search within you for things that are important to you. Search for your authentic voice. Find it and engage with it. Ensure that your distinctiveness permeates what you write.

Reflect on Experience

Academic writing seeks to convey knowledge: new consideration of theory, novel applications of principles, and consolidations of what is currently known. Knowledge is a fluid and personal construction.

Experience is the process through which knowledge becomes recognized, tested, and understood to be relevant at both a personal and disciplinary level. Schön (1991) distinguishes between two complementary reflective practices: *reflection-in-action* (which takes place as we are actively engaged in the practice) and *reflection-on-action* (which is a retrospective reflection on what has been done). It is through reflection both in and on our practice — and the articulation and communication of those reflections — that new knowledge is created, affirmed, and revised (Eraut, 1985).

All academic writing is implicitly a reflection on experience. Be willing to share your own reflections, not just on knowledge but on practice. The two are always contested — they are in a process of dynamic evolution, not of static certitude. Your writing will contribute to the process of disciplinary vigour and evolution, just as it will contribute to your own growth.

Be Mindful of the Journey

When you read a published article, you are engaging with a final product. In a metaphorical sense, this was the writer's destination. Destinations, however, are only part of the journey. As a writer, it is the whole journey with which you will be preoccupied. You have to know where you want to go, but you also need to appreciate that there is no clear and obvious way of reaching that place. Structure the journey: know where you are going. Tentatively map out the journey: know how you will reach your destination.

Set out and do not be afraid to explore the territory: you might find that it is simply not shown or not accurately depicted on your map. Some pathways will quickly appear but then prove to be dead ends; other routes may suggest themselves slowly but be more productive. The published article shows no trace of these explorations. It shows no sign of the way in which the journey was changed, the multiple drafts that were created, or the continual reiterations and refinements that are part of the article's literary history. All of these remain with the writer but are not evident to the reader.

Personally, when starting to write a new academic work, my destination is usually somewhat vague and covered in shifting mists of

possibility. Over time, there is a growing sense of where I want to go and then a tentative idea of the way in which that destination might be reached. For me, this process takes time and ongoing reconsideration. It cannot be rushed but — usually in a rather sudden and unexpected manner — things begin to crystallize and pathways become visible. This crystallization usually begins with a title that seems to encapsulate the central idea of the work: my titles are conceived first, just as my abstracts and introductions are always written last.

The process is undoubtedly different and unique for other writers, but the point is that all academic works are actively constructed and reshaped: they do not magically materialize. Some writers of academic works might claim that their final articles "wrote themselves." Many more acknowledge that the art and craft of the writer lies in a process of construction and reconstruction: the final publishable article takes shape gradually; it does not appear in an instant. Acceptance of this at the outset might be particularly valuable for new writers, focusing them more on the journey that lies ahead rather than the destination.

Mine the Unknown

There is a common adage that you should write about what you know. This seems intuitive and makes a great deal of sense, especially in academic writing. Readers of academic works want to be informed, not necessarily entertained. For the writer, however, there can be advantages and pleasure in learning about a new topic — a topic about which little or nothing is presently known — through the process of writing. As scholars and practitioners, we are constantly involved in creating and absorbing new knowledge. One of the tests of whether new knowledge has been acquired is whether you can successfully explain it to someone else, especially to someone familiar and competent with the general subject matter of the disciplinary area.

You might want to consider writing as part of your learning experience. Through writing you have not only attempted to inform your reader but, in doing so, you will also be challenged to acquire a greater understanding about something that was previously little known to you. To do this, immerse yourself in the unknown material, construct your own knowledge from it, and learn more in order to anticipate and

answer the questions that your reader will have. Continue to exploit that double learning-feedback loop until you believe that you have acquired some degree of competency with the subject matter.

Share your growing understanding of the subject with interested colleagues and knowledgeable peers. Continue to read extensively and eclectically. Reflect on what you are learning and on how you are beginning to form new outlooks, perspectives, and connections. At this stage, you might like to communicate your new understanding by writing an article, or book chapter, from which your readers can, in turn, gain a deeper understanding of the topic. Academic writing is a powerful process through which the presently unknown is mined, brought to the surface, and shared with others who might have a nascent interest in the subject but who have not themselves become miners.

Target Journals

It might seem logical to write what you considered a stellar manuscript and then seek a publisher. That can work, but it is often more effective and rewarding to think backwards — first target the journal that seems like a good vehicle for the work before writing. Start by researching outlets that seem relevant and appealing. Look for a journal in which you would be happy to be published. Check the journal's scope, its intended readership, the composition of its editorial board, the kinds of people who are published, and manuscript submission requirements.

You may aspire to publish only in high-impact journals with impressive disciplinary profiles and citation rates: many people do. But, as you contemplate writing your first few manuscripts, keep in mind that these journals are aggressively competitive, receiving large volumes of submissions and rejecting most (perhaps more than 90%). Citation rates are important and impact factors have a place, but they do not exclusively define a journal and may not provide you with the outcomes that you really desire in publishing.

Select three or four journals that attract you. Browse content, read editorials, and see who is publishing what. Is there a fit between you, your proposed manuscript, and this publication? Would you be pleased to see your work in this journal alongside the works of these other scholars? Keep in mind that the acceptance rate for high-quality journals

is traditionally maintained at about 15%. Assiduously avoid journals that have higher acceptance rates, "expedited publishing pathways," or which require publishing or open access fees. Remember that when you are published, your work (and you as the author) will be forever connected with this journal — its quality, reputation, and standing in the academic world. There are many people desperate to be published and there are also many predatory publishing houses only too happy to profit from their desperation or their vanity.

Submit for Acceptance

Once the best outlet has been selected — write and submit. When overworked editors receive a hundred new manuscripts, they do not select the best thirty for subsequent peer review: they reject the least promising seventy, and they do so very quickly. Many "ifs" come into play: *if* the subject matter is inappropriate for the journal, *if* the length is excessively long or short, *if* there are five references in a 7000-word literature review, *if* the English usage is obscure or problematic, *if* the submission requirements stipulated APA but the manuscript is crafted in exemplary MLA style, *if* the manuscript lacks any coherent structure, etc.

Any one of these points does not guarantee automatic rejection, but it significantly increases the chance of the manuscript ending in the larger pile. Your strategy — your responsibility as an author seeking publication — is to ensure that none of these "ifs" apply to your submission. Never submit to be rejected. Never contest an editor's decision to reject. If your manuscript is rejected, always learn lessons from that rejection. If your work does happen to be rejected by the first targeted journal, submit to the next one on your list.

Never simultaneously submit the same manuscript to multiple journals — it only underscores a lack of confidence, commitment, and determination to allow the submission to your targeted journal to be successful. Simultaneous submissions may make a great deal of sense for writers, but they are frowned upon by the publishing world, consume unnecessary and pointless reviewer time, and are explicitly forbidden by most academic journals.

Appreciate Criticism

Your manuscript will be reviewed. Reviewers are expected to provide critical feedback about the *manuscript*; it is not an assault on *you as a person*, although it can sometimes feel that way. Reviewers gauge the academic quality of the manuscript, the level of the author's subject area competence, and the appropriateness and integrity of research methodology. I review manuscripts for about a dozen journals and book proposals for a number of publishers. I anticipate that reviewers will be thoughtful, critical, and competent. They should be able to assess whether a manuscript can be published or whether it might be reworked in ways that will benefit the author, the journal, and the readership. If reviewers see potential, they should be constructive and supportive.

Unfortunately, some reviewers fall short of these expectations. Some are novices, who have not acquired these skills; others present themselves as overburdened, jaded, and sourly cynical. Yet all reviewers — even the less agreeable and the less than competent — can help you see things that were previously unseen and prompt you to communicate more effectively.

Never argue with reviewers — make the effort to appreciate their comments and respond constructively to them in your revised manuscript. In the past twenty-five years, I have only challenged a single reviewer (via the editor). The reviewer summarily rejected my manuscript and advised me to have a native English-speaker help me in the future. It turned out that she was a graduate student, performing her first review. She had assumed that, given the international context and setting of the paper, I was a "foreigner." Her characterizations were unreasonable and incorrect. It was clear that she had not actually read the manuscript — or if she had, her reading was distorted by her initial stereotyping. I had published previously with that journal and knew the editor. I objected to the review and she, somewhat embarrassed and apologetic, reassigned the manuscript to several other reviewers. A few minor changes were requested and the manuscript was subsequently published.

Think about Book Chapters

Academic writing is not restricted to peer-reviewed journals; it also encompasses chapters in edited books. There are numerous calls for such chapters and these calls require the submission of a chapter proposal. The focus and scope of the book are clearly stated in the call, as is the chapter format. Writing a book chapter is a satisfying way of reviewing subject matter in depth, engaging with the literature, consolidating prior knowledge, exploring new areas of interest, and producing a novel perspective and understanding. If the chapter proposal is a good fit with the book's purpose, the odds of acceptance are high. If the first review of the submitted chapter is positive, publication is almost guaranteed.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate the wide scope and flexibility associated with chapter writing. Characteristically, book chapters are usually longer than peer-reviewed journal articles and this length allows for a more extensive, creative, and compelling narrative.

Writing a book chapter is always an option, but it can be particularly valuable at two points in the academic writer's career: beginning and maturity. At the beginning, the chapter can be a wonderful way of exploring new academic territory and providing a relatively low-risk entrée into academic writing. For the mature writer, book chapters provide a valuable vehicle for integrating and consolidating accumulated knowledge, experience, and practice. There is a caveat. Book chapters generally have a much lower readership and citation rate than journal articles. They may be helpful in starting your writing and publishing trajectory, but they will make little significant impact on your citation metrics (h-index, i-10 index, etc.).

Considering the Way

The way of academic writing passes through two continuously alternating territories: one located within the writer, the other in the external world where the writing is consumed. If you want to enter the world of academic writing, you will retrieve fragments of your knowledge and communicate excerpts of your experience to those who are interested in learning. You will undoubtedly contribute to the shared understanding and practice of your disciplinary area.

If you contemplate the way of academic writing, you will be compelled to reach into the reservoirs of your knowledge, experience, and professional passion. You will be challenged to communicate these to an external readership that is usually familiar with your academic discipline. Sometimes, you will attempt to enlarge and expand the disciplinary world with which you identify; other times, you will seek to challenge and reshape these worlds.

Those who are on the way of academic writing come to appreciate that they have been changed and enriched by it. They also come to realize that they have — to some degree — enriched their disciplinary area and strengthened their professional practice. It is difficult, perhaps unnecessary, to measure the extent of that enrichment. The point is that you — as a scholarly writer — have elected to participate actively in your disciplinary community, to contribute to its growth and development, and to enhance your personal and professional growth. You will also be able to enjoy the craft of writing and the pleasure of your literary creations.

The way is open to all within the academic world. Faculty members are sometimes coerced by supervisors, peers, and circumstance to travel the way. They may be knowledgeable and demonstrate their scholarly competence. Sometimes, however, academics arrive on the way by choice. They too may be knowledgeable and competent travellers on that way, but — in my own experience — those who have elected to write, to connect, and to share voluntarily tend to enjoy the journey more than those who had academic writing thrust upon them.

At the outset, this chapter laid out its main purpose — to encourage interested members of academic communities to consider writing and publishing, especially if they have not done so previously. Hopefully, that encouragement permeated the chapter and helped you to reach this point. It is with encouragement that the chapter ends. It is for you to consider what the next chapter should be.

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