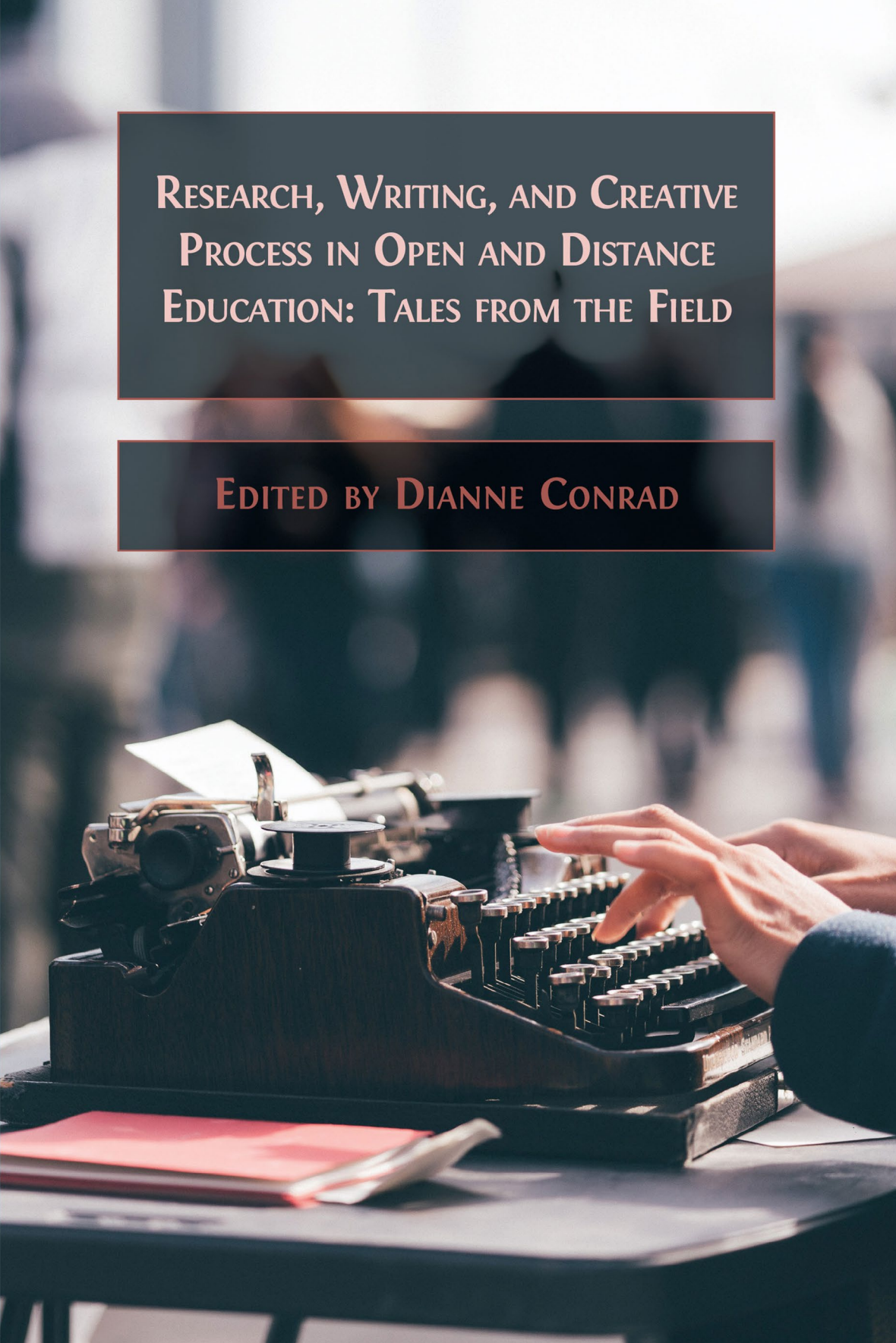
Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales from the Field

Edited by Dianne Conrad



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4. What Lies Beneath

Pamela Ryan

> So I began to have an idea of my life, not as the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but as the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know… I could not understand at all (at that time) that my real purpose might be to learn to have no purpose.
>
> Marion Milner, *A Life of One's Own*, p. 12

Let us begin with a little perspective. For a substantive period of my life as a researcher, the phrase "open learning" did not exist. I matured as an academic long before the digital era: I typed up my master's dissertation on an ordinary typewriter, and my PhD on a brand-new electric typewriter. The internet was a dream in someone's head. So, obviously, the field of open and distance learning did not exist. Like several other contributors to this book, I came to open learning tangentially by migrating, in my case, from literary studies to issues about openness in postcolonial theory and thence to open learning. The notion of learning without boundaries had great appeal for me as it aligned not only with my personality (independent, freedom-loving, creative, not very good with rules and regulations) but also with my research interests which always seemed to go against the grain in some way. The poetry of Sylvia Plath was largely unknown and unrecognized when I was writing about it in my master's dissertation. My PhD thesis crossed disciplinary boundaries, blending gender studies, psychoanalysis and literary studies into one research question: "What do women want?" My published research in postcolonial studies focused on border crossings and forced migration. So, openness in education was a natural choice and remains a passionate interest of mine. That sets the scene in one

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way. The other is more nebulous, more personal, and stems from the quotation by Milner (2011) which opens this chapter.

When I was in my early thirties, I visited a well-known astrologer for a reading of my birth chart. She closed the session with a sentence which has reverberated ever since, and which caused initial consternation and, later, wry acceptance. She said, gravely yet with compassion: "You will not realize your destiny in this lifetime." This worried me deeply. Was I "destined" to be a wanderer, fruitlessly following different paths and achieving nothing? Is one's destiny out of one's control or could I change this "fate"? And what has this got to do with writing and research? Everything, as it turns out. Milner's words are an exact reflection of my predicament and, I have come to believe, my gift.

I write to discover what I do not know.

The title of this chapter is intentionally cryptic, but I hope my brief introduction has given you a clue as to why I chose it. For me, research and writing (the two are not necessarily conflated) are concerned with finding out what lies beneath the surface. I usually begin with a title that excites me without having the faintest idea about how to extrapolate from it. That comes with time, and the process that falls between the conjuring of a title and the writing of a research paper entails a long and slow engagement with ideas and with how best to communicate those ideas.

When Dianne first called for expressions of interest in her new book, I leapt at the chance to write something. The theme was enticing because it entailed a reflexive process on the part of each contributor, and this appealed to my creative bent. The first call was sent out in February 2022 with a deadline set for the end of September. I quickly wrote out a draft outline for my proposed chapter and sent it off. And that was the end of it. Months went by. I occasionally thought, with a fair amount of guilt and annoyance at myself, that I really should get on with the writing, but perhaps because there was no definitive research question or outcome, I found the thinking extremely challenging. Where to begin? Potted biographies are boring most of the time so I did not want to begin there, and if I couldn't begin there, then where? September arrived. I began to panic, simultaneously composing emails to Dianne explaining why I was not going to write the chapter after all. Then a friend told me about a conference he wanted to attend in 2024. The conference is in a

field that could not be further from my own: Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and the title is — you guessed it — *What Lies Beneath*. At a time when I should have been thinking about, and writing this chapter, I was immediately smitten with this phrase and began thinking about what I would write if I were a medieval scholar. The title was evocative. I had been reading about mycelia and networks that connect with tree roots that allow trees and other plants to communicate with each other. Beneath us, at any place, is this subterranean network of thread-like fibres that mimic our internet. I would take the idea of the green man, or the search for the holy grail, and link this with my favourite poet, T. S. Eliot. I ran to fetch my very old and heavily annotated copy of Eliot's poems and found the passage from *The Wasteland* which begins:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images…

I was not sure why these words came into my head as soon as I thought of "what lies beneath" but it makes perfect sense now. I was looking for something, something that was not visible, and all I had to work with was "a heap of broken images." I needed these images to coalesce into a shape. I needed a green tree to grow out of the desert.

Then I stopped. What on earth was I doing? Instead of writing a real chapter for a real book, I was wasting time dreaming up a mythical paper for a conference I had no intention of attending. Talk about procrastination!

And then it struck me. I knew what to do. I would use this moment to write a self-reflexive piece on how I approach and have always approached a research assignment, because the route I take is disappointingly consistent. I sign up eagerly, even greedily; I come up with a title that I really like, then I do nothing. For a long time. But miraculously, every single time, and always at the last minute, I manage to produce something I like, and submit the work on time. Is this a personal vagary? Am I peculiarly lazy? Or is the truth closer when I say that I am scared? Scared of writing. From that fear issues procrastination. The words I quoted earlier, by the astrologer, about my destiny, still reverberate. However, that fear is enormously productive, as is the slow burn between the choice of a title and the writing of the chapter, which

allows ideas to percolate. Could this, I wondered, be helpful to other writers? Certainly, I was overjoyed to find Geoff Dyer's book *Out of Sheer Rage* (2012), supposedly his magnum opus on D. H. Lawrence, in which he postpones writing about Lawrence indefinitely:

> ... after years of avoiding Lawrence, I moved into the phase of what might be termed pre-preparation. I visited Eastwood, his birthplace, I read biographies, I amassed a hoard of photographs which I kept in a once-new document wallet, blue, on which I had written 'D. H. L.: Photos' in determined black ink. I even built up an impressive stack of notes with Lawrence vaguely in mind but these notes, it is obvious to me now, actually served not to prepare for and facilitate the writing of a book about Lawrence but to defer and postpone doing so.

I almost wept when I read these words:

> All over the world people are taking notes as a way of postponing, putting off and standing in for. My case was more extreme, for not only was taking notes about Lawrence a way of putting off writing a study of — and homage to — a writer who had made me want to become a writer, but this study I was putting off writing was itself a way of putting off and postponing another book.

So, is procrastination, at least for some people, part of being a writer? Unless you are extraordinarily disciplined by nature, you are likely to put off the moment when you settle down in front of your computer and begin writing. Firstly, there is the desk to tidy. This must be done *now*. The act of sorting and resorting, assigning places for things and reassigning places for things, then carefully cleaning each thing is the first step. Then there is the making of tea or coffee. Then your phone pings, and it might be important. Then there is a knock at the door. Then you are not in the mood to write after all, and besides your brain has the consistency of congealing porridge. Tomorrow then...

Most of us recognize this reluctance to begin a task. Perhaps this reluctance is not merely a natural consequence of fear but a generative precursor to the creative process, allowing different parts of the brain to work on something that is going to be challenging but which needs time to develop, in much the same way as walking or any kind of movement aids the mental or creative mind (see Williams, 2021). So, procrastination per se need not be a liability. But there is a more insidious form of procrastination at which I excel: repression. I pretend that I do not have

a deadline. I strenuously avoid thinking about my topic for weeks, even months. Occasionally, I will have a brainwave after reading something in a book or magazine that has no bearing on my topic. I will make a note somewhere, either in the Notes app on my phone or on a piece of paper, or in a notebook that happens to be within reach. Invariably, I can't find that note when I need it.

At this point, the editor of this book should be thinking: what is this woman doing? I wanted my contributors to give sound advice to aspiring researchers, but she is proving to be a terrible role model. I agree. I am not much of a role model. Yet I have published plenty over my long life as an academic, and I have had good responses (usually) to my work, so bear with me.

All research begins with a question — usually "what" or "what if." The more difficult and compelling the research question, the more interesting will be the research journey. If something seems obvious to you, then it will be obvious for your reader. Oftentimes, when we write about that which we are certain, the result is flat. When writing is exploratory, hesitant even, it becomes a kind of "thinking out loud" which enlivens the dialogue between writer and reader. Moreover, as a literary scholar, I have been trained to read texts for their points of difference and for their gaps or silences. I am interested in what is not said, in what is left out of a text because I believe it is important to take nothing for granted but to question received notions so as to reveal their hidden contradictions and tensions. In any discipline, certain beliefs become embedded in their discourse and presented as self-evident, therefore true, and it is the intellectual's task to delve into those tensions and extrapolate the hidden dimensions of a text or an issue.

In line with this thinking, the idea of the palimpsest is rich with possibility. What we think of as self-evident is usually only the top layer of a complex, richly layered architecture. This idea of layering used to fascinate me when I lived in Johannesburg, where, underneath the city, lies a vast network of mine tunnels which cause occasional earth tremors. More poignantly, underneath the surface of many cities in South Africa lie the bones of previous generations. Do you remember the excitement a few years ago when the bones of Richard III were discovered under a car park in Leicester? What lies beneath may be hidden but resonant with history.

This has been a long digression, but it is aimed at emphasizing the central motif of this chapter — that what lies beneath, hidden from view, is fertile ground for research inquiry and research writing.

The word *research* derives from the French word *rechercher* which means "to look again." Research is about looking and looking *for*. It is concerned with digging beneath the surface to find what lies below. Let me explain this by referring to another genre. I have recently joined an art class and am making a study of my local landscapes. I am blessed to be living in a particularly beautiful part of the Western Cape, South Africa, not far from Cape Town. I can see mountains from my kitchen window and can get to the Atlantic Ocean in fifteen minutes. When I started painting mountain scenes, my paintings were very gauche. It took me several weeks to learn how to look — to *really* look. I now notice the subtle shadings when the light falls at an angle, and how to mix paint to best depict light and shade, closeness, and distance. Research involves a similar learning experience. One's first question must be followed up by further and stringent questioning. The initial "what" turns into "what if" and "what then?" Our first gaze is rarely accurate. We have to look behind and to the side of the question, scratching the surface to discover what lies underneath.

In fact, perhaps we can replace the pejorative term procrastination with "slow writing." I cannot imagine the act of writing without a simultaneous act of reading. My best ideas emerge after reading something that makes me stop midstream and think. Somehow those ideas, nudged by what I have just read, get stirred and shaken, put on a slow simmer, then set aside on the back burner. Ideas must go through a slow burn or allowed to rise unhurriedly like a sourdough mix. There is something about this gentle simmer that is immensely productive. Writing cannot be rushed.

If you have survived thus far and are still reading, I have a few tips which have emerged from my own experience as a writer. The first one, as I have hinted, is that writing emerges out of reading. That may seem obvious, but I am not necessarily thinking here about reading that is directly related to the research topic. I read a wide range of material and occasionally my reading will spark an idea which I have to jot down quickly. If I leave my chair to get to my computer, the brilliant idea will vanish along with the choice words I had thought of to elaborate on the

idea. But by some miraculous process, the reading moments and the collection of misplaced ideas coalesce at some point and then I am ready to write. A more successful method of note-taking for me is using the old-fashioned notebook to copy notes and quotes by hand. I find this more rewarding as a research tool and have a series of notebooks which I have kept since the eighties (some with characteristically brightly coloured covers) and which I still take pleasure in reading.

It is the circling around the "re" part of the research process that is the ticket to writing success. More often than not, when I am about to write an academic piece, my best ideas come from reading that is completely unrelated to the topic. For example, when I was asked to contribute to a book about open educational resources or openness in academic work, I was reading *The Hidden Life of Trees* in which Wohlleben (2017) shows how trees connect with other trees via a "wood wide web," an intimate network and partnership between fungi and roots. It's a fascinating account of what we do not see — a form of life that is more resilient than anything else on our planet and which has existed for billions of years. The resonances with the internet sparked further thinking about how initially the internet was seen as an open, free form of communication and information sharing but how recently this notion has become tarnished by oversharing and surveillance; and this fed into my chapter on openness and what it means.

Reading a variety of texts from different disciplines has benefited my thinking about open learning in productive ways. In my journey as a researcher and writer, I inclined more and more to taking ideas from other disciplines: psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and so on. I found being restricted to one discipline confining, whereas ideas from other disciplines lent an extra dimension to my thinking. When I first read Clifford Geertz (2000), the American cultural anthropologist, I was captivated by the idea of *thick descriptions*, a concept Geertz derived from the philosopher, Gilbert Ryle. *Thick descriptions* involve carefully analyzing human actions in terms of their cultural context as well as the influence brought to the analysis by the interpreter (this has intriguing resonances with the thinking in quantum physics which shows how and whether or not the observer influences the movement of neutrons). The example given by Geertz is the difference between a twitch of the eye which is involuntary, and a wink, which is purposeful. Although the

two may look identical, there are subtle differences, cued by the context. This is a very simple explanation but it will suffice for now. This idea of the importance of context had huge relevance for my thinking as a literary scholar because I was trained in Leavisite principles whereby the text is all. The scholar of literary texts had no recourse to information outside the text, so bringing to bear on the text information about the author's life or tendencies was taboo. As you can imagine, a study of Sylvia Plath without her biography would be unthinkable these days, but in my master's thesis I stuck rigidly to the poems themselves, sometimes hesitantly mentioning the impact of Plath's father on her work. Now, context is acknowledged to be significant and we are intrigued by facets of a writer's life and loves. We merge these facets into our thinking about the text.

Another helpful borrowing from social anthropology is the topic of "wicked" problems. When I became absorbed by topics outside of literature, such as forced migration, postcolonialism, and identity, I was dealing with wicked problems, those that have no imaginable solution at the time of writing. Think about forced migration, sub-Saharan poverty and unemployment, climate change, and suchlike. These are issues that are so huge, so complex, sometimes so overwhelming, that we would rather not think about them. These are wicked problems. Open and distance learning as a research topic, while it may not be a wicked problem, lends itself to deep thinking about context. For instance, it matters where such learning takes place. Students who study at a distance in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, cannot rely on a steady electricity supply for their online needs while studying. Nor do they always have the financial resources to afford the necessary hardware to access the internet. In a sense then, this becomes a wicked problem as we excavate the reasons underlying poverty and unemployment, poor social benefits, and electricity shutdowns.

My second tip is to remain true to yourself. I am not a conventional researcher. I do not like rules and I do not like to be confined. My most successful articles have occurred when I arrive at ideas sideways. By approaching a topic tangentially, I can examine it more deeply and more creatively. It is similar to reading backwards. Often that simple act can reveal more than was first apparent when reading conventionally. Coming at something from an unusual angle can be fruitful in

unexpected ways. This is not to say that research that proceeds logically is less pleasing. My point here is that one method may not suit everyone, which is why the recent trend in South Africa of determining in advance how doctoral dissertations should be set out, via a predetermined set of chapters, fills me with dismay. I like to be creative in whatever I am writing. For example, the final chapter of my doctoral dissertation was set out in two columns. I had reached the end of a very long road without answering my research question. So, after months of internal debate, I decided to "fess up" and present my concluding chapter as a visual display of uncertainty. Two opposing views were presented on the page, so that the reader had to peruse one column, and then the other. One of my examiners nearly gave up on me at that point, but she (fortunately for me) grasped what I was aiming at, and praised me for it, suggesting that of all the chapters, this one should be published.

The lesson here is to be brave enough to stay true to oneself. It has generally worked for me although there have been times when I have suffered for it. I am not suggesting that we become research mavericks. I hope that what will emerge from this confession is an encouragement to follow the path that most aligns to your deepest and truest instincts while finding a way to express those in ways that accord with scholarly norms. To take the best of yourself and align it with the best that scholarship stands for.

My next tip is similarly derived from my own experience. Apart from procrastination, repression, and wayward creativity, I have another "problem" as a researcher, and that is my low boredom threshold. This has given me several challenges along the way because it has meant that I find it impossible to repeat myself. I had a dear friend who was the exact opposite. She discovered Henry James in her English Honours year, went on to write a master's thesis on James, then a PhD, then a book, and so on. She never deviated. As a result, she became a world expert on Henry James and was given an excellent research rating. This was not the case with my research. I discovered Sylvia Plath in my Honours year and went on to write my master's thesis on her poems. This was in the early days of Plath research when there was only one book available on the poet. I therefore relied on close readings of the poems for the bulk of the dissertation. If only I had persevered with Plath, I would now be a world expert. Instead, over the following two decades I read and

wrote about, variously, postmodern American poetry, women's studies, feminism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and, finally, for my PhD, produced an interdisciplinary investigation involving psychoanalysis and women's writing. Not content with that, I entered the field of open educational resources and devoted my research time to investigating how OER could change the face of higher education, particularly in postcolonial territories. In sum, my research interests are varied.

This shifting from one topic to another did not do much to get me a good research rating in South Africa. The feedback suggested that I was "too diverse," that there was not an obvious thread linking my publications, that I needed a clearer focus. Naturally, I was dismayed by this reaction and I wondered if my research career was doomed to mediocrity because I could not be said to be an expert in anything. It was only much later that I found the thread that my reviewers thought was missing. Borders of all kinds and resistance to boundaries, whether these be physical, intellectual, or academic, have been a constant theme in my work. Crossing borders and borderlines has been the connecting thread or *ficelle* that forms the core of my writing career. I have sought out sedimented practices and forms and nudged them aside in favour of an open exploration, a journeying to find out what lies beneath and beyond. I have not found it easy to be contained within a disciplinary border, preferring instead to notice what happens when one discipline is placed alongside or in between another. What new insights are revealed when literary studies finds a neighbour in anthropology, for instance? What stops us from reinventing a discipline, to stretch its seams, and to open it up? This has led to a rethinking of timeworn structural oppositions — indigenous/exotic, inside/outside, home/away — into a more fluid displacement of certainties with questioning and doubt. I prefer to pursue a continuum rather than a fixed line of inquiry. And openness as a field of inquiry is a particularly fertile place to linger awhile, especially if you can find correspondences between openness as a broad concept and open learning as a research topic.

My advice here, therefore, is to do what feels right for you and follow your research passions. No one can write with any verve without being inspired by the topic. At the same time, and to avoid receiving the kind of feedback I received from the National Research Foundation, you need to cultivate self-awareness and anticipate potential misunderstanding in

your readership. Make clear the linkages between your lines of inquiry and know that each person's research journey is unique. Far better to keep the momentum in your writing than to hit a brick wall caused by indifference to your topic.

Following on this point, it is important always to be aware of your imagined audience — those who you are writing for and those whom you will address — then adapt your register accordingly. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of audience. The people you are writing for determine your register and approach. I would not be writing in this conversational style if this were a book on a different topic, say, *The Self-Organisation of Students in Distance Learning*. This is another way of saying that you need to pay attention to the norms of the journals you are thinking of submitting your manuscript to if you are writing an article. You have to heed the journal's house style, but it involves more than this. If you are wise, you will read back issues of the journal in question to see what kinds of articles the journal deems publishable. A personal example of not reading an audience correctly follows. When I entered the field of open and distance education as a researcher, I was still very much enmeshed in literary norms and in postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. I attended a conference on distance education in Bergen, Norway, and presented a very abstruse, theoretically inclined paper to a bemused audience. It went down like a damp squib apart from one person who understood my references and applauded with gusto. Learn to pick your conferences. There are those that welcome critical discourse and those that do not. Writing is always intertwined with communication and if you are not communicating with your readers, you are not writing with effect.

In conclusion, writing this chapter has afforded me the opportunity to think freshly and for the first time about the less obvious components of what it means to "do" research in the field of open and distance learning. Looking back over 50 years of research and writing and reliving the precious times I have spent in various libraries across the world has been a joy and an unexpected learning experience. My most treasured memories are of these times in some of the finest libraries in the world and those memories are stored safely away in my notebooks. My last words to you are to be brave, be adventurous, follow your interests, trust your instincts, and follow the rules sensibly. The field of open and

distance learning is a vast territory leading to a variety of approaches, and I believe we have not nearly exhausted its fertile possibilities. We are only at the cusp of thinking about what "the commons" really means, and it is an urgent responsibility, in my opinion, that we stand ready to contest all efforts to shut it down.

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