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

Edited by Dianne Conrad

Cover image: Thom Milkovic, 'Vintage Words' (2017), https://unsplash.com/photos/FTNGfpYCpGM

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

5. Reminiscences and Reflections: No Regrets

Dianne Conrad

Like many of my academic colleagues, I love to write. My writing time feels good, even when I am stuck staring at an unfinished paragraph or — worse — a blank page. Sometimes during this often-gruelling process, my mind wanders off into the nuts and bolts of the enterprise; but it always returns to task once the wheels start turning again.

Here is my chance to further explore this process that fascinates me and gives me such great satisfaction.

I see now in my rear-view mirror that I have always been a writer. In Grade Four, I co-edited the class newspaper with a like-minded classmate. Together, we huddled over a very small typewriter and produced… I cannot recall! But I know we took it very seriously. At the age of twelve, I wrote what I considered a novel but was probably, in truth, more of a novelette. The typewritten, stapled-together pages featured the adventures of a young heroine (twelve-year-old Janet) who lived in Somerset, Bermuda. To this day, I have not been to Bermuda, and I do not know now why it enthralled me; but clearly, I had researched it. Sadly, my younger sister threw my manuscript into the fireplace in a fit of anger one day and thus ended my career as a novelist.

Skip forward many years and I am again enthralled with writing and research.

Getting Started

As a doctoral student, I was reading voraciously, of course, trying to get my hands on everything that seemed relevant to my topic. At the time, I was working as the assistant director of a master's programme and was very involved in curriculum development. Together, these two occasions caused me to often think of articles I was perusing: "I could have written that" or "Why did *I* not write that?" But I had no idea how to start. It seemed a daunting task and I simply did not have the courage. I also did not really have the time, a fact that I will offer as a lesson for prospective writers: it takes time. It's said that writing is lonely, and yes, it can be. We spend a lot of time alone in the room with the computer.

During those years, I was working with Randy Garrison who was the Dean of my faculty at the University of Alberta. Randy was already a noted and prolific writer and, at the time, was just embarking with colleagues on the now-famous research that produced the Community of Inquiry model and the three "presences" of online learning. I bought him coffee one day and point-blank asked how to get started writing. He was very charitable and shared his own writing stories with me. The two that I remember are 1) his advice that by the time you sit down at the computer, your ideas and concepts should be so clear to you that the words should just pour out of you; 2) related to that, he wrote one thousand words in the morning before he tackled his day job at the university.

That was a good start for me. He also said, "just write," which is the advice I often give to others. But I also have to thank Katy Campbell, another colleague at the time, for having a similar discussion with me at another coffee shop; and Margaret Haughey, who was my dissertation supervisor. Both offered advice and support for my desire not just to write but to publish.

And so, in a period of non-writing, when Margaret was reviewing an early version of my dissertation, I began to write. I wrote about what I knew — about the experience of being an online master's programme administrator and working closely with learners. My data were gathered from students in the programme in which I worked and from my own experiences. The article found a good home in the *American Journal of Distance Education* in 2002 and I was launched. Thank you, Michael Moore and Joe Savrock!

Training and Lessons from the Dissertation

My academic background, including a long-ago undergraduate English degree, has shaped me into the learner, teacher, and writer that I have become. I feel advantaged having studied literature and having had the opportunity to write many papers and sharpen myriad writing techniques and skills. As an editor, I observed the difference that basic writing prowess affords an author. As a teacher, I stress this fact to learners and I take the time to do what I can to assist their growth in this area. I have no idea if I am ultimately successful, and in fact, some research shows that students do not pay attention to feedback on their papers. I would hope that this is not the case. Whatever, the virtual "red pen" is inextricably lodged in my hand, forever.

In my more cynical moments, I maintain that the only times I really ever learned anything in my graduate studies were during the writing of theses, specifically the doctoral dissertation. As time goes by, I think I value the dissertation learning even more. Aside from content and research skills, I learned perseverance, fortitude, and a type of tired doggedness that comes with endless late nights, an empty brain, and despair. But I believed in what I was doing and in what I was writing. I believed in the dissertation's potential value as a contribution to the field. Moreover, I *liked* it. I liked the topic and I liked the places to which it took me. I recall waiting with great anticipation for the release of Wenger's 1998 Communities of Practice research; I thought that it would contain the kernels of what I needed to know. It didn't, but the book was still inspiring and relevant. More lessons, all of which I have passed on to learners over the years: There is no "answer," there is no magic bullet, just stay on the trail like a bloodhound. Read, read, read. And the corollary to that: There is a time to stop reading and start writing.

Why and How I Write

I am driven to write because there are things I want to say. There are some things that I always wanted to say but did not have the time to construct the appropriate vehicles. But, over a career, I have found *more* topics that I want to explore. Some of these beckoning interests have accrued from reading others' work, some from my own experience; and, I admit, some

from frustration arising from my observations of the workplace and the field. My interests have been varied. Unlike some very strong scholars in our field who have become known for their close attention to certain topics, my parameters have been more eclectic. I attribute this to a short attention span! As a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) reviewer, I have noted the dedicated research path of many applicants and SSHRC's emphasis on maintaining the path. This is not my style. "Curiosity" and passion would better describe my approach.

But the curiosity, of course, arises from the surrounding academic environment. At one time in my early career, I was deeply involved in prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). As a non-traditional approach in higher education, PLAR required intense championing and marketing of its process. I was keen on both and wrote many articles on its various aspects. I presented at many conferences on PLAR-related topics such as learners' processes, learning, e-portfolios, and infrastructure. The passion I felt for PLAR — and the belief I had in the practice — invested the writing process with energy.

During my first "PLAR period," I was also managing an adult education programme that was delivered at a distance using several modes. I later moved from the adult education programme to a graduate programme in technology and communication; in spite of a different label and a more advanced level of study, my adult education background was never far away. As assistant director of an online programme, I was heavily occupied with curriculum and programme organization and was very involved with the student body. I became intrigued with their learning and with their adaptation to online learning. Many were learning at a distance for the first time. Our programme was rich with potential data and my interest in the online learning process ballooned. It was at this time that the seminal work of colleagues Garrison, Anderson, Archer, and Rourke was creating new energy and theory in the ODL field: I was benefitting from my proximity to these scholars and the exciting environment that they created. Again, the energy generated by my commitment, interest, and *belief* in what we were doing was more than enough to keep me writing and conferencing.

I was learning at this time about the value of networking and conferencing, although neither came naturally to me. I am at my core reserved and shy; teaching rooms full of adult learners had given me

coping skills, however, somewhat akin to being on stage for a certain amount of time. I could manage that! I also endured, for my entire career, a sense of "come from behind."[1] That is, I was always "catching up," and was in awe of those who were already more established and more published than I was. That perception continued to cause me some insecurity and stage-fright in large gatherings.

Writing, on the other hand, was safe and secure; and I had confidence in my skill at the keyboard. If I had been a fiction writer, my agent would have been hard-pressed to get me out to market the product! But sitting in the quiet of my home was a comfortable and even enjoyable way to express myself.

How one learns or writes is an important part of this book's theme; creative processes have always interested me. For my doctoral dissertation, I considered where learners did their learning and, because of that, I travelled to interview my participants in their "natural" learning habitats, be they homes or offices. I based my judgement of the environmental importance to the creative process on my own senses: I noticed over the year that I attended to business matters more efficiently and professionally if I was sitting at the computer rather than on the sofa in front of the television. I graded papers more effectively and with greater confidence in certain places. And so forth.

My Writing Process

It is an understatement to write that substantial differences exist between the fields of hard science and those of social science and humanities. As an education scholar and a "soft science" researcher, I have little knowledge of hard science research, other than that novice scientists aspire to be accepted onto an established research team, led

---

1   In a nutshell: I began my graduate studies at age forty during a divorce and I single-parented my children in poverty conditions in a city where I had no relatives or support. Hence, when I finally joined the "PhD" club at age fifty-four, I assumed I was about twenty years behind everyone else who had had a more direct route to that goal. Fortunately for me, I was youthful-looking and I do not think my colleagues realized that I was older than most of them. I certainly did not realize that so many of the scholars that I idolized were actually younger than I was. In a way, my desire to "catch up" is what has kept me motivated and inspired to continue to teach, research, and publish beyond retirement.

by a productive senior researcher who is usually funded for their work. Such teams publish papers that feature many authors as compared to papers emerging from the social sciences and humanities sector, where single authorship is as common as papers with multiple authors, but usually not more than six.[2] From personal experience, however, I know that "hard" scientists do not consider social science and humanities research as valid research, especially when qualitative in nature.[3]

My own tendency in research endeavours, mentioned above, was to investigate those aspects of my field and practice that interested me or caused me to question. I have been fortunate always to have access to study participants. In my role as dissertation supervisor, I have seen learners whose intended research interests are thwarted by the impossibility or difficulty in obtaining participants for the study. As a supervisor, I caution against entering research situations that for many reasons — logistical, social, political — are not going to yield results.

Researchers must also consider the participants from another angle. I learned this lesson (I thought the "hard way") years ago when conducting research for my master's degree. As I was studying learners who were engaged in distance education at a time when such learners were in short supply in Canada, I chose Athabasca University as my locale and requested permission from that institution to contact their students. After much delay and fuss, I was asked to appear on-site at Athabasca University (AU) to be interviewed by their distance education faculty. It was a cold February day when I drove from Edmonton across the bleak and snowy prairie to meet these people, all of whom I knew by name but not personally at this time. I was terrified. (Remember, I considered myself "young" at the time, and therefore naïve; and my inquisitors older and experienced in the ways of everything-research.) In the long run, it emerged that Athabasca faculty were simply tiring of the larger, traditional university to the south of them continually using AU students as research subjects. They wanted to see "boots on the

---

2   An exception to this commonality, for example, is a recent set of papers written by the COER (Centre for Open Education Research) group from Germany, a cooperative assembled by Olaf Zawacki-Richter and populated by graduate students and global scholars. Working collaboratively on a multi-year project, COER's published papers display a very long list of contributors.

3   I was once told so in no uncertain, in fact, belligerent terms, by a well-established university chemistry scholar.

ground." They wanted to hear me discuss my rationale and purpose. It all worked out well; and that initial visit to a lovely small town on the banks of a grand river presaged my move there to take up a position at AU fifteen years later.

If the master's thesis served as an introduction to some of the foibles of conducting research, the doctoral dissertation amplified the presence of hiccups and foibles. One encounters inspiration and de-motivation from unexpected sources. One grabs the inspiration from wherever it presents itself — literature, friends, happenstance — and accepts and strategizes the hurdles. In my case, my supervisor did not share my vision of what I wanted to do; I understand now that I would have drifted too far into the psychology realm and was not sufficiently trained in psychology to take that approach. And perhaps, neither was she. We compromised on the topic, leaning more heavily into the pedagogical side of learning. Negotiation is always the way forward.

The dissertation process can be very lonely. After progressing through the programme with peers and/or in a cohort setting, as I did, one is suddenly alone, left to manage a path through endless literature, the collection of empirical data (usually), and the massive task of organizing all those pieces into a readable and coherent work that must follow, to the letter (usually), institutional guidelines. The writing of the work is bookended by two oral exams, the first allowing you permission to proceed, having exhibited your competence to do so; and the second to "defend" your work to a committee of experts in the field. It is daunting, to say the least, and successful completion requires dedication, flexibility, and a thick skin.

"Situated" Writing

We all face and contend with situational issues as we write, as mentioned above in my description of my doctoral research. Nobody lives or writes in a vacuum — or without circumstantial effect. My own writing was relegated to evenings and weekends because of my personal situation (see footnote 1). I have always held an administrative position in post-secondary settings: I began that career journey when I accepted a position as Programme Manager for an adult education programme, having cut my teeth in that university faculty by serving as a Research

Assistant to my mentor, Walter Archer. Very generously, he hired me for the position when it became available, conveniently for me, just as I was completed my master's degree. From that time on, I taught as well but always on a part-time basis, to supplement my income. But I realized that I really enjoyed the administrative work of organizing and "running things," and so, even though I was invited to apply for actual tenure-track academic positions, I chose to remain in administration, wearing two hats, teaching steadily on contract here and there, both face-to-face and by distance. (See also Nichol's chapter, where another administrator tells his story.)

The writing, therefore, was also part-time, but I was so energized by the process that I never tired of sitting down at night after the kids were in bed to plug away at it. Weekends, holidays... I just kept at it. Success came early and that affirmation encouraged me even more. I relate this history for those readers who might be experiencing the same hardships that I was at the time, notably, poverty and never-ending stress.

It was wonderful to be asked to contribute to an edited volume or to have a journal piece accepted. Although I never held a tenure-track position, my publication record left many colleagues not realizing that fact. And I tell *this* story to encourage those readers who *want* to write and publish, regardless of which hierarchy you fit or do not fit into.

Perhaps my position as an administrator rather than a tenure-track academic contributed to my "lone wolf" stance as a writer — or perhaps not. Whatever the reason, I tend to work best alone. Many other notable authors in our field have worked successfully in teams or at least with a colleague (see, for example, Garrison's chapter, which outlines the benefits of collaboration).

Perhaps my eclectic choices of topic were best addressed alone, thus allowing me to do what I wanted. If I had been tenure-track and searching for funding in order to grow my CV, it may have been more strategic to buddy up with colleagues, especially those with sturdy reputations! But I did not need to do that, and that allowed me more freedom. That said, my topic choices were not pie-in-the-sky; they were solidly fixed within the field and, as such, were well-received and cited.

I must also admit that I preferred my own writing to the styles of some colleagues. As mentioned earlier, I am fussy about the mechanics of writing, more so than many, and this fact has worked well for me. In

truth, I think I have been invited aboard some collegial writing projects because of my ability to punctuate and edit. And I have accepted some of these invitations because I understand that that is my intended role, and it has not bothered me that, as such, I am not the first author. (However, in several cases, my attention to the work has served to "move me up" the authorial hierarchy! And so it goes.)

The Logistics of Writing

Writing requires discipline. I have known some very fine writers whose disciplined approaches define certain hours of the day for sitting at the computer. My own process is not so regularized. *If* I am pressed for time or working to deadline, I will commit myself to sitting down and creating some number of words every day. If the pace can be more relaxed, I wait until the moment is right, until I can feel the creative juices flowing. Those are precious and enjoyable times: the words flow, the keyboard crackles, and pages fill up. In between those high-productivity spurts, however, the mind does not stop formulating and playing with ideas. The research continues, usually via Google as a starting point, then progressing to university library collections and search engines. I find Google remarkably useful and easy to navigate. When I am actively writing, I also keep a close eye on newspapers and other news sources for new or current developments that may relate to my topic.

One of the most frustrating things for a writer is to have to track down a reference source after the fact. In spite of great diligence, this annoying necessity usually occurs at least once in any writing project. I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of keeping a close eye on the compilation of references.

I must admit to being very old-fashioned in my use of technology. I do not use a programme for footnotes or any other sort of formatting; I do it all manually. I enjoy the "tiddly" aspect of creating my formats; the repetition and detail sharpens my attention span, which is normally short. As I write, I gather the footnoted material and assemble it in a separate file, updating and saving constantly. Similarly, each draft is saved with the daily date. And weirdly, toward the end of the project, when I am terrified of a computer crash or glitch that renders me helpless, I send penultimate drafts to trusted members of my family for

safe keeping, usually with instructions that say, "Do not open or read! Please just store in a safe place."

I have had a very satisfying writing career. My first publication won a prestigious award. My dissertation won a prize. My curiosity-driven approach has allowed me to "follow my nose" and exercise my imagination. I think I have been a useful mentor to those who have asked me for advice and to my students, with whom I always share ample writing tips and even conduct mini-workshops. I am detailed and old-school; I believe in punctuation, apostrophes, and hyphens!

My regrets in my writing career are few. I do recall being asked to contribute a chapter to a colleague's book many years ago; shockingly (to me), it was rejected. That was hurtful and I did not understand the rationale that was presented to me. But I was young and just skulked away, storing the unwanted piece in the depths of the computer. Years later I retrieved it, read it over, and was still stymied by its rejection. Another time, I was unable to finish a piece and shelved it. Again, years later, I took it out, re-read it, and marvelled to myself at how good it was! Sadly, that particular era in our field's rapid evolution had passed by then and my topic was no longer cutting-edge or relevant. A lost opportunity.

When serving as editor of a large journal for several years, I have seen scholars "dust off" and resurrect what was certainly an older work, sometimes in pursuit of tenure or some other imminent goal. Authors have even admitted this motivation in a note to the editor. Clearly, this tactic is not a good idea. Honour and integrity should always shine brightly on the academic writer's radar.

Advice to the Novice or Hesitant Writer Who Seeks Publication

The best advice I can offer is *get started*. And, after that:

1. Seek out advice and ask questions of deserving colleagues.

2. Be very interested in your topic.

3. Keep a file of potential sources/ideas/quotes… whatever.

4. Acquaint yourself with the nature and scope of your intended audience/place of publication.

5. Ask questions of the editor if relevant.

6. Re-read, re-visit, revise. Edit, edit, edit.

7. Do not fall in love with your own words. Be ruthless with yourself.

8. Comply with guidelines, word length, format, etc. *Pay attention*!

9. Be prepared for revisions and do not be discouraged.

10. Respond to your reviewers with courtesy and the relevant/ requested information.

Concluding Remarks

I have read in some of the other chapters in this book of colleagues' research writing hardships and barriers; and I have certainly experienced — and detailed here — those of my own. But, as has been offered by others, my takeaway advice is *just write*. Start something. Obviously, it is best to tackle something that you know and are passionate about. The process of researching and writing can be lonely, long, and arduous. But it can also be extremely satisfying, even comforting. And it has been mentioned that it is nice to see your name in print. After my first book was published, one of my kids personalized a coffee mug for me. With a picture of the book's cover were these words; "I wrote a book!" Very nice indeed.