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

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9. Writing and Making the World

Catherine Cronin

> The only way to make borders meaningless is to keep insisting on crossing them... For when you cross a border, you are not only affirming its permeability, but also changing the landscape on both sides
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> <div align="right">Lina Mounzer, 2016</div>

Like many people, perhaps, I feel that my identity is a blend of multiple and often contradictory aspects. I am a born New Yorker who has made my home in the west of Ireland. I am an open education scholar, community educator, engineer, and feminist. My winding path through formal education includes mechanical and systems engineering, women's studies, and open education — BSc, MEng, MA, PhD. I have worked mostly within academia, often in the community, and for a short time in the IT industry. I am impelled to question, and often to transgress, borders and boundaries.

While writing is not my primary professional activity, I consider it to be central to my work — and even to my sense of self. Whether it is a research article, book chapter, blog post or review, writing is where the often disparate parts of "me" come together. Always and inevitably, all selves come to the writing table. At times in my career as a scholar, I tried to quieten some of these voices, but not any longer. If I were to share any advice with fellow scholars and writers it would be this: In order to say what you need to say, know the rules of your field, discipline, and genre. Follow them. Then challenge them, subvert them, extend them, and renew them — as much as your purpose requires and your situation allows.

In preparing to write this chapter, I reflected on my forty-year career, focusing specifically on research, writing and publishing. While

not written as a reflective memoir, I have organized my reflections around three key periods: my formal education, early/mid-career, and completing my PhD as a mature student. I imagine these stages as moving from tilling the soil to planting, growing, flourishing, et al.

Formal Education: Tilling and Planting

As a researcher and writer who left elementary school in the 1970s, I marvel at how often I return to foundational lessons I learned in those years. I hold enormous gratitude for the teachers who helped me to develop an understanding and deep love for language, reading, and writing. As noted by other authors in this volume, I am grateful to the elementary school teachers who taught me grammar and spelling (diagramming sentences!), even though my favoured academic subjects were mathematics and science. All these years later, I continue to learn — and to break rules and make mistakes, of course. But those language foundations are firm ground on which to stand when facing any writing task, even today.

In my engineering education (BSc and MEng), writing was not a priority. The curricular focus was on mathematics and problem-solving. However, in my late twenties, I returned to education to complete a Master of Arts in women's studies. What a joy! My motive was to take a deep dive into subjects that I loved (history, sociology, literature, feminism) but had not had the opportunity to study in my engineering education. Deep reading, study, and discussion of intersectional feminist theory, histories of education, and sociological analysis were like water to a parched throat. From my lecturers and peers (all mature students), I learned much about research and academic writing, but also about the imperative of recognising and valuing the personal and political. Reading work by scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Paolo Freire and Cynthia Cockburn revealed the raw truth of this for me. I continue to believe that neither the personal nor the political should be ignored in the interests of achieving so-called "objectivity" in academic writing. I completed a master's dissertation in the area of gender and technology, drawing on all I had learned in the women's studies course, together with my lived experience as a young woman engineer (Cronin, 1992; Cronin, 1995).

This formative experience of combining the personal, political, and academic helped to change the path of my career and my life. Thereafter, I sought work that would enable me to develop and contribute as an educator and researcher in areas with social impact and a commitment to furthering equity.

Early/mid-career: Growing, Pruning, Maturing

Throughout my career, I have worked in higher and community education, including large-scale research projects, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and supervising, adult education, programme management, and developing and teaching community education programmes. In reflecting on these varied experiences for the purposes of this book, I identified three experiences that were instrumental in helping me to develop as a writer and to find confidence in my voice.

I worked as an associate lecturer with The Open University in Scotland for several years in the 1990s, teaching two courses: Issues in Women's Studies (U207) and Introduction to Information Technology: Social and Technological Issues (DT200). This was my first work as an open and distance educator, made doubly fascinating because DT200 included teaching online using CoSy, one of the earliest applications of online conferencing systems in higher education (Wilson & Whitelock, 1998). By far, the greatest satisfaction of working as an OU associate lecturer was teaching and learning with students — all mature students bringing their varied life experiences to their studies. Teaching with the OU also meant benefitting from outstanding professional development and support — at a distance, but no less personal and effective for that. At regular intervals, samples of my assessment feedback to students would be reviewed by a senior lecturer, who would return written feedback to me. While this helped me to develop as a teacher, it also helped me enormously as a writer, striving always to balance assessment and academic requirements with the personal development and wellbeing of each student.

I also worked for three years as a researcher for a sector-wide project funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, "Winning

Women in Science, Engineering and Technology"[1] (1995–97). Our small team of researchers explored barriers to access, participation, and progression for women in STEM fields in Scottish higher education; and highlighted global examples of good practice designed to address these challenges. This was an opportunity to undertake collaborative research and writing as part of a team of experienced researchers; to work with advisory groups across a national higher education sector; and to present research findings to funders and to the sector. Our work was published in summary form as a set of guides for Scottish higher education (described in Roger, Cronin, Duffield, Cooper, and Watt, 1998). However, our theoretical findings, including a feminist analysis of women's under-representation in STEM, were not accepted by the funders for inclusion in the guides, despite endorsement by our advisory groups. As researchers, we believed in the importance of this work. Two of us from the research team undertook to refine the work and ensure that it was published in an academic journal (Cronin & Roger, 1999). This was an important and foundational learning experience as a researcher and writer: undertaking work of value, challenging hegemonies, encountering structural resistance, and persisting in finding alternative paths to publishing.

A third early/mid-career experience that proved foundational was moving to a full-time post in an Information Technology department in higher education in the mid-2000s: coordinating a fully online master's programme and teaching in a BSc programme. At this stage, I was deeply steeped, academically and in practice, in critical and feminist pedagogies and research. I consequently found myself challenging many boundaries — particularly regarding assessment, collaboration, and community engagement. Writing was central to this work in a number of ways.

I first worked to change the assessment requirement for the undergraduate module to wholly continuous assessment, eliminating the need for a final exam. This enabled me to design new forms of continuous assessment, many with input from students. Students were asked to submit various forms of written work during the semester (e.g., annotated bibliographies, reflections, project proposals), each of which

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1   What was called SET (Science, Engineering and Technology) is now commonly called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

would receive feedback; this technique enabled students to refine their work as it developed. Students also were invited to choose the mode of their final digital media project, with the primary requirement being to apply what they had learned to design and develop a digital resource for a community that was meaningful to them. Students developed websites, blogs, videos, and podcasts for a range of diverse communities interested in music, dance, history, physical fitness, animal welfare, and more. Openness also played a role in this work. I supported students in publishing their work openly, if they wished. In addition, through the use of social media and open tools, our small learning community in Ireland collaborated with students and educators in the UK, Germany, Spain and New Zealand (Cochrane et al., 2013; Cronin, Cochrane & Gordon, 2016).

Alongside all these experiences as an educator and researcher, I began to blog, finding enjoyment in writing informally about teaching, assessment, and key issues such as digital literacies, digital identity, privacy, open teaching, open research and more.[2] Altogether, these research, teaching and publishing (formal and informal) experiences led me to a point in 2014 where I chose to complete a long-considered PhD.

PhD and Post-PhD: Flourishing, Still Learning

People undertake doctoral studies for myriad reasons. I began PhD research in my fifties; my motivation, at that stage, was not primarily to increase my career prospects. My motives were more complex. I was working as an active open educator/researcher, often being asked to speak with groups about digital and open education issues. I found myself sharing the experiences of my students, citing others' research, and reflecting deeply on the challenges of openness within higher education, particularly regarding the furthering of equity in education. I came to believe that by completing substantive research in this area, I could better advocate within my institution (and perhaps more broadly) for the need to develop critical digital/open capabilities and to implement supportive open education policies. In essence, I identified a research topic of value and felt that undertaking this as a

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2   See http://catherinecronin.net/blog/

PhD researcher would enable me to do the work with the structure and support required. I cobbled together what funding I could, completing the research initially while working full-time and latterly by researching, and writing full-time.

PhD research is primarily a solitary endeavour, so collaborating wherever possible was crucial for my motivation and mental health, as well as for continuing to learn and to challenge my assumptions. GO-GN,[3] a global network of doctoral researchers in open education, was a lifeline of peer support, mentorship, and friendship. Also helpful was an informal group of researchers/writers (a mixed group of students and staff) who met regularly for "Shut Up and Write" sessions at my institution. A few of us from this group also met informally, using Wendy Belcher's (2009) *Write Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* as a guide. We adapted the timescale to nine weeks and over the course of one summer, we supported one another in completing and submitting our respective articles. The process helped me to produce the first publication based on my PhD research (Cronin, 2017).

Completing a thesis is a huge challenge for any researcher. The deeper one studies and understands any topic, the more complex and multifaceted it becomes. When and how to draw a line under the work and submit — a gnarly question! In my case, working to a strict submission deadline (after which I would return to full-time work) proved helpful. I relied here on my IT and project management background. A year before my deadline, I created a chapter outline for the thesis, scheduled weekly deadlines for writing, review, and revisions of each, agreed these with my supervisor, and set to work. It was a demanding year and there were several setbacks. But breaking the Herculean goal of completing the thesis into (somewhat) smaller tasks helped me to get it done — submitting just three weeks later than planned. It was not the perfect thesis, but it was *my* thesis and it was done!

Career opportunities did arise after completing the PhD. I went on to work for three years at Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, a small, academically-led team supporting all higher education institutions in Ireland. As digital and open education lead, I advocated for and supported the

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3   See https://go-gn.net/

development of open capabilities across the national higher education sector and led the development of a sectoral guide to creating enabling policies for digital and open education (National Forum, 2021). This period of work was undertaken almost entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic. As with so many of us working in higher education during that time, it felt as if every fibre of my being was required to do the work that needed to be done, i.e., to support students, faculty, and staff. For me, that meant relying on teamwork, collaboration, communication, research, and writing; values such as prioritising care and equity; and advocating for those who were most marginalised during the crisis.

Writing our Challenging Times

I write this in summer 2022, with swirling crises all around. Climate and ecological emergencies, a continuing pandemic, deepening inequalities, rising authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism, and more. We are all embedded in this context, regardless of our disciplines or areas of expertise. My response is to make sure that my work is charged with this urgency, whatever ultimate form the work may take. I intentionally seek to engage in diverse collaborations that are committed to equity and social justice. This includes co-editing *Open at the Margins*, a collection centring marginal voices and non-dominant epistemic stances in open education (Bali et al., 2020); co-editing a special issue of *Learning, Media and Technology* focused on feminist approaches to education and technology (Atenas et al., 2022); writing and co-editing *Higher Education for Good: Teaching and Learning Futures*, a book focused on hopeful higher education futures (Czerniewicz & Cronin, forthcoming); as well as other projects (e.g., Atenas et al., 2022; Zamora et al., 2021).

As writers, each of us is unique. I wish for all writers the opportunities and confidence to bring all of yourself to your work. Returning to the advice shared at the start of this chapter: by all means know and follow the rules, but don't stop there! Challenge rules and conventions, subvert them, extend them, renew them — as much as your purpose requires and your situation allows. Our words create the world anew, each time we write. As Angela Davis et al. (2022) wrote of the brilliant Octavia Butler: "we will dream our way out; we must imagine beyond the given" (p. 16).

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