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

Edited by Dianne Conrad

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Foreword:
The Way of Academic Writing

Terry Anderson

A year ago, Dianne Conrad asked me (along with the authors of this text) to write a "reflective chapter" on research. At times in my career, I would have been thrilled to be invited to write and publish in an academic book — especially on a topic that did not require any original data collection. However, I declined as I had officially retired (a great excuse for not committing to projects). But more importantly, I was still getting over a chapter I had recently submitted to an ambitious encyclopedia project. I did not know a great deal about the topic I was asked to write on, but it inspired my curiosity and it was an important development in our field. I thought, well, all I must do for an encyclopedia article is document and try to make sense of the relevant research, which I did. The first draft came back with the reviewers' comments that stated that, among other deficiencies, "the article was rudderless." I am a sailor and I have a managed a boat with a damaged rudder; I was not flattered. Worse, I could see the problem — but I couldn't see a solution. Fortunately, a co-author helped save the day and while we were left with an acceptable, perhaps even a good chapter, I was left with a bruised ego and yet another incident of "Imposter Syndrome." Even after a celebrated career, ten books and over 100 peer-reviewed articles, I felt yet again that I was a phony academic — an imposter. Thus, I declined Dianne's request.

The story did not end there as twelve months later, Dianne asked me to write this foreword. How could I say no twice? Fortunately, this time I had the benefit of being able to read the chapters (standing on the shoulders of real giants) and I gained not only tips and techniques,

but, more importantly, insights into the craft and into the personalities of these distinguished academic authors.

The authors have common interests and proven publication records in the swiftly growing field of open and distributed education. From this commonality, one might conclude, based on the notion of "academic tribes," that they would hold common views on writing methodologies, formats, styes, voice, publishing outlets, and writing perspectives. However, after reading the chapters, it became clear that this particular academic tribe is more like an old-fashioned zoo than a homogenous cohort. The animals (authors) on display hail from many countries, come in many academic sizes, and share a common audience; but they have each found a distinct voice in the eclectic world of teaching and learning in ways that extend beyond the classroom. Thus, in this text we find qualitative and quantitative researchers. We find authors for whom issues of racial and social justice are critical and central while others don't go there. We find authors, those who, until this text, have never written an academic paper in the first person; and those who can't imagine writing from any other point of view. This eclectic yet connected context provides a very rich tapestry of knowledge honed by the experience and skill of successful writers.

Even prior to COVID-19 times, the educational world was waking to the reality and need for lifelong education that spanned both geography and time. This sense of opportunity, coupled with a commitment to being a part of something; as well as possession of the skills and, just as importantly, the opportunity to write and research, further defines the animals in this zoo. I hope each reader takes the opportunity, not only to read each chapter closely, but to carefully note which of the approaches, challenges, perspectives and contexts most matches their own. Equally valuable is noting how authors who have many different contexts, styles, and approaches to writing produce a stimulating academic work. Of course, all these authors have multiple products available for scrutiny in the academic press and a trip down a Google Scholar-inspired rabbit hole will provide a deeper context and understanding of these writers. The reader can be confident that exploring and following many of the paths and actual suggestions from the authors will result in both improved writing and likely more success at having their work published. After all, if the authors in this book were not good at these tasks, they would not be included here!

I also assume that readers of this book are engaged in some sort of academic enterprise, and many are likely researchers in open and distance education. Thus, they too have commonalities. All university academics are required to research and share (publicize) the results of their work. Though this is well known and generally perceived to be a reasonable expectation, there are many who come to higher education with neither the desire nor the skills to both conduct research and to disseminate that work which is most often achieved through writing. For them, following Rilke's advice (from Paul Prinsloo's chapter) they must "examine the reasons they write and check whether it reaches its roots into the deepest region of your heart, admit to yourself whether you would die if it should be denied you to write."

For many, publishing means communicating in a language that it is not native to them. For others, it is teaching and mentoring, programming, or researching — and not writing — that inspires and energizes them. Through a careful reading, the chapters in this text will provide comfort, technique, and inspiration for those for whom writing is not an enjoyable activity. Few of us will match the quantity and quality of the writers in this text, but we all can learn. Fortunately, those attracted to the academy are usually good learners and thus most will find this book both useful and very, very interesting. There is also hope in this book — even for those for whom writing deadlines and expectation hang like Damocles' sword waiting to destroy their academic careers — that they will find at least one chapter with sound advice that speaks to them.

In Canada, we are struggling to come to terms and deal with a history of poor treatment of the first inhabitants of this continent. One of the cultural norms we are coming to appreciate is the value of acknowledging and listening to elders. Certainly, and chronologically, many of these authors are old and grey enough to be called "elder." However, Chief Clarence Louis notes that elders become elders not by thinking of themselves as such but by recognition of their unique worth and wisdom by others. Further, an elder is one who has special knowledge — whether of hunting, homemaking, healing, or husbandry. You are thus holding a book of wisdom written by elders, honed by Dianne's considerable editing skills, and forged in the fire of real-world experience of practicing education research. Each of these chapter's authors gives us an elder's wisdom — often a brief chronological

overview of the important events, people (mentors, colleagues, and students) and the ideas that inspire and motivate them.

Many of the authors' names and work will be familiar to those working in open and distance learning. Only choosing successful scholars has its advantages in that these authors have had their work revised, edited, copy-edited, and both published and rejected. They've walked the talk. One of the joys (burdens?) of publishing widely is that your name pops up regularly in the reviewer databases. This means that you have a chance to see others' initial efforts, and you are allowed and indeed required to work to not only help the author move to a better work, but also to winnow the crop, sorting the grain from the chaff.

Assuming that readers of this volume are researchers, potential researchers, or those who feel guilty because they are not writing and publishing enough makes me confident that this volume is a useful work. Some of the authors note specific do's and do not's; others narrate what forces and personal idiosyncrasies compel and fuel their research journeys. The remainder celebrate the joys and insights of writing. Or as Jon Dron eloquently expresses it: "Writing for me, personally, is both a cognitive and emotional prosthesis, something that helps to form my identity as much as it emerges from it. I am the maker and the made, the writer and the written." Thus, this work offers tools and tricks for the pragmatic as well as visions and inspiring dreams for the visionary.

Let me end this "blurb" with a comment about the editor herself. Dianne Conrad is a most amazing woman. At what would be the end of very successful career as an administrator, a teacher, researcher, editor, mother, grandmother, and recently wife, Dianne decided to be a be a full-time writer. I recall a comment from the famous Canadian author Margaret Atwood, who commented (while rolling her eyes) about professionals who described their plan to become writers in their retirement, if they could match the skills, training, perseverance, and luck of the many professional authors that Atwood had taught and mentored over her career, not to mention having the skill and tenacity to author the many works of fiction, poetry and essays that Atwood has produced.

In "retirement," Dianne has published five books as well as articles, book chapters, and journal reviews. This volume is perhaps her most important (but knowing Dianne, it is likely not the last) in that it

provides the meta-thinking in addition to the nuts and bolts of writing for academic publication. Dianne, along with these chapter authors, teaches us to fish — obviously more useful than selling us a fish. On behalf of all those who dream, plan, and look forward to experiencing the thrill of reading one's own work in press, congratulations, and thanks Dianne!