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Writing and publishing for early career academics

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WRITING AND PUBLISHING FOR EARLY CAREER ACADEMICS

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Abstract

This panel will describe strategies to help early career academics prepare a first publication and develop a research agenda. This interactive session provides graduate students and early career scholars with an overview of the types of papers frequently found in academic journals, and shares approaches to writing for both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed sections. The panel includes engaging participants in discussion around current research topics, drafting a manuscript, and building and executing a research agenda. The strategies and insights we share will be particularly useful to those wanting to understand the academic publishing process more thoroughly.

Keywords: Writing, publication, research, journal

Whether you write for practitioner, professional, or academic journals, publication breeds new possibilities for knowledge acquisition, improved writing skills, obtaining faculty appointments, consulting and other employment, and potential collaborations on new projects (Rocco, 2011; Rocco, 2018). The availability of graduate courses specific to writing for publication in an academic journal are limited (Plakhotnik et al., 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this panel is to discuss strategies to help graduate students and early career academics prepare a publication and develop a research agenda. The strategies and insights we share will be particularly useful to those wanting to understand the academic publishing process more thoroughly.

There is a great need for information on the research, writing, and publication process because developing a record of publication is essential to building a scholarly reputation, securing academic jobs, and earning tenure and promotions. A critical component of developing a thriving community of scholars is mentorship of graduate students and early career researchers (Seepersad et al., 2016). As such, this interactive panel fulfills a need in our discipline to connect participants to journal editors, successful researchers, and like-minded peers, through publication mentorship. This session will also provide ample opportunity for participants to ask questions, get specific feedback, and interact with presenters and other attendees.

Approaches to defining a topic, descriptions of non-peer-reviewed and peer-reviewed publication types, the process of selecting a journal, developing a manuscript, the peer-review process, and methods for developing and executing research agendas are discussed. To ensure participant engagement and responsiveness to learner needs, participants are invited to share

research topics they are exploring. These examples will be developed throughout the discussion providing application to participant work.

Defining a Topic

Determining a topic of interest is generally not difficult for students or scholars no matter how much or little experience they have. The difficulty is in narrowing the topic to a researchable purpose or research question. Author's approach this narrowing of topic to researchable question using various strategies. Successful strategies on how to turn an idea into a publication include discussing ideas with potential co-authors or colleagues, reviewing the literature on the subject, and searching implications sections for further research suggestions. Authors identify a good idea, begin to refine the topic, and craft a purpose statement and research questions for peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed papers, by reading material related to the topic, considering this material and the direction the author is interested in, and preparing drafts that are edited and revised until the idea is refined into a meaningful purpose.

Sources must be used intentionally and carefully to support the purpose and research questions that stem from the topic (Jacobs, 2011). Sometimes class papers can be turned into publications. While this most likely requires revising and finetuning the existing purpose it's often easier to hone these skills practicing on an existing paper. Not all class papers have the potential to be published, however there is no chance of publishing a class paper without making the revisions necessary to elevate it to a submission-ready manuscript (Collins, 2015).

Non-Peer-Reviewed Papers

Most journals publish some non-peer-reviewed or nonrefereed articles. These are works that are not blind reviewed by peer reviewers (Hatcher & McDonald, 2011) but are instead editor-reviewed for content typically after acceptance. These publication types can be a great way for an early career scholar to build a record of publication.

Two types of non-peer-reviewed publications include perspectives papers (Rocco, 2013) and book/media reviews (Hite, 2015). Perspectives papers are often a form of developmental scholarship that explore the experience, reflection, and/or perspective of the author. This is an opportunity for writers to explore new ideas and present provocative recommendations for practice, research, and teaching. Book and media reviews offer a unique contribution to journals by providing an overview and critique of recently published work that might be of interest to journal readers. Reviews should offer insight regarding who should read or view the item, why it was produced, a summary of the content and an evaluation and critique of its overall quality and usefulness (Hite, 2015). Panelist and participant examples, will lay the groundwork for discussing ways that various topics could be addressed in different types of non-peer-reviewed writing including perspective papers, writers' forums, and book reviews.

Peer-Reviewed Papers

Journal articles are often considered to be the pinnacle of research publication in our discipline of Adult Education. Most scholars recommend testing ideas at conferences before completing the development of a manuscript for submission to an academic journal as an article. Selecting a journal for publication, types of papers, and the evolution of a manuscript from conference paper to published article are discussed.

Conference Papers and Abstracts

Conference papers are a good way to venture into the world of refereed or peer-reviewed publications in a relatively low stakes environment compared to academic journals. Submitting a paper to a conference is often an important first step for scholars who would like to “test” their ideas with an audience of colleagues in their discipline. Some conferences have proceedings where the papers (or an abstract) are published. Other conferences do not have proceedings and allow only for author presentations of papers, abstracts, poster, or panel discussions. The differences and the relative weight or importance of each option when seeking an academic position, promotion and tenure, or listing on a CV depends on the culture of the institution, the context of the institution (research or teaching; public or private), and the experience level of the person presenting the work.

Types of Papers

There are a variety of peer-reviewed papers. Some do not include data such as conceptual, positional, theoretical papers, and integrative literature reviews. Others use data such as structured literature reviews and empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, and evaluation). The type of paper depends on the focal point and the author’s intent. Conceptual and position papers are similar in that they take a position on a concept or describe alternate strategies for using a concept. They might also analyze a concept through a particular framework, lens, or theory such as using a feminist lens or critical race theory to examine the concept of employee engagement. The paper becomes a position paper when the author takes a definite stand arguing that the idea is useful or not useful, good or bad. A theoretical paper can expand an existing theory or suggest a new theory. There are many types of literature reviews. Integrative literature reviews take literature or concepts from different fields and use the literature to support a point, discuss an issue, or raise questions about a concept or event for instance. A structured literature review treats the literature as data from collection to analysis. Empirical papers use people, places, things, and events as sources of data that are collected and analyzed using methods in the qualitative, quantitative, mixed, or evaluation traditions.

Selecting a Journal

There are many adult education journals (see Empire State’s list <https://subjectguides.esc.edu/c.php?g=227023&p=1504539>; Teacher’s College’s list <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/organization-and-leadership/adult-learning-and-leadership/resources/major-journals/>; and North Central University’s list <https://ncu.libguides.com/c.php?g=618782&p=4306463>). Decisions about which journal is the correct outlet for an article should be made as early in the writing process as possible. The manuscript must fit the objectives of the journal and types of papers published. For example, not all journals publish all types of papers. The author should be familiar with relevant articles published in the journal, author guidelines, and submission requirements.

Evolution of a Manuscript

Developing a manuscript first includes researching the style and expectations for the manuscript, considering timeline, appraising the expertise of yourself and co-authors, seeking feedback before submission, and verifying that your manuscript meets the submission guidelines of the target journal. Strategies for success in each of these areas will be discussed including pulling examples from the target journal that match your manuscript type, reverse engineering outlines of published papers, and having upfront negotiations of roles, responsibilities, and author order when working with collaborators.

Peer-Review Process

There are various aspects of the peer-review process, including the review process, the meaning of the editor's decision, how to address the feedback in the manuscript and in the letter to the editor, handling a rejection, and other concerns. The roles and responsibilities of different people associated with the journal who may handle your manuscript including the managing editor, editor assigned to your manuscript, and the blind reviewers will also be explained. There are different decision types common among journals including reject and revise, revise, or accept with minor or major revisions. Journals also typically have standards for deadlines and turnaround times.

The review process can be intimidating for authors that have not experienced peer review. Receiving a revise and resubmit decision is the most common decision received on any article written by the most prolific author. The feedback should be considered carefully and addressed meaningfully. If your article is rejected from a journal, you are often not permitted to resubmit it to that journal again. Therefore, it is important to carefully consider your outlet and the quality of your work before submitting. Rejection does not mean the end of the manuscript. The feedback provided should be used to improve the paper in preparation for submitting the paper to another outlet.

Drawing from Brookfield (2011) and from personal examples strategies for evaluating reviewer feedback, working with coauthors to address changes, and communicating with editors are shared. The review time for a typical journal article is anywhere between 2-6 months, though generally speaking most journals try not to exceed 3 months in review. The time it takes is generally the result of reviewers being late to submit a review or of the difficulty journals have in securing reviewers who agree to review. Therefore, it is also important to remember that building a research agenda and flow of published articles takes time and patience.

Developing a Research Agenda

The best topics to write about are those you are curious, excited, and care about. These are often at the intersection of your formal education, work/life experiences, and personal/professional interests. There is great value to integrating publications into a long-term cohesive research agenda and identifying strategies to define and execute such an agenda. All types of papers, peer-reviewed and non-peer reviewed are all part of a comprehensive and emerging research agenda.

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