Writing about Learning and Teaching

in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations across a Range of Genres

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CHAPTER 4

FOSTERING IDENTITY THROUGH A VALUES-BASED APPROACH TO WRITING

> *Engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning requires instructors to critically reflect on aspects of their practice, examine their beliefs about teaching, consider their sense of self in relation to their practice, and even question and challenge institutional and social norms related to teaching (Cranton 2011; Kreber 2013; Manarin and Abrahamson, 2016). (Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin 2018, 1)*

Writing is an important medium of expression in most disciplines in higher education, and the range of intersecting practices that inform such writing, as Janice Miller-Young, Michelle Yeo, and Karen Manarin note above, involve our whole beings. Research findings, insights from experiences, opinions, stories, and more are typically shared through written formats, mainly academic journals, books, chapters, or conference proceedings and, increasingly, in various forms of digital media. In the process of selecting and organizing the new knowledge created, the academy relies on peer review through which established scholars evaluate the quality and importance of submitted work and offer reasons for their assessments. While we regularly write about what we discover through our research and teaching, compose new curricular content, or offer written feedback on student work, many of us would not identify ourselves as *writers.* Instead, we are teachers, or students, or researchers, or scholars along with being family members, friends, caregivers, and members of non-work-related communities. One of the reasons we have written this book is to encourage more

academics to consider themselves writers. Writing of a wide variety of kinds is indeed one of our responsibilities as academics, and to embrace that responsibility as an expression and further development of identity and values can be an empowering experience.

Building on chapter 3, in which we framed writing as creating and contributing to a scholarly conversation, we therefore assert that writing is a relational communication process that is informed by and shapes our identities as writers and scholars in learning and teaching in higher education in ways that are intertwined with our values. Our values become clear when we interrogate our assumptions. We all hold assumptions about what constitutes good quality and important scholarly publications, for example. These assumptions influence our writing and how we understand ourselves as writers—our identity. In the introduction to part 2, we wrote: "How we experience the writing process and the decisions we make about writing—what we write about; whom we write with, about, and for; what genres we prefer to write in—shape the writers we are and will become." These decisions that shape us as writers are driven by what we value in writing and as writers. Exploring the values informing your writing can uncover assumptions, provoke new insights into your identities as a learning and teaching scholar, and enable a more purposeful approach to writing, including possibly writing in new genres.

In this chapter, we outline this central thread in the book—that writing is a process of identity formation that enacts and clarifies our values and, therefore, affects us intellectually, socially, and emotionally. By exploring the ways writing about learning and teaching both draws on and can complicate, shape, and reshape our academic identities, we reveal writing as more than something we do in some mechanical, one-off way; it is an intellectual, social, and emotional activity that requires deep engagement in a series of thoughtful, iterative steps. We discuss how writing affects us, why writing about learning and teaching can be easier for some and more difficult for others, and why the writing process can provoke a range of emotions. In doing so, we offer a set of questions to illuminate the benefits and the challenges of embracing writing about learning and teaching.

Writing as "Values Work"

Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson (2014) view writing as work that requires physical and mental effort. They also discuss writing as "identity work." This physical, mental, and identity work is all guided by values, whether explicit or tacit. By values, we are referring to what matters to you, what you believe is worthy of writing about, what you see as important in the process of writing, and what you strive for in terms of outcomes of the work of writing. These values take the form of principles or personal standards that influence how you judge your writing and the writing of others. Your values inform decisions about what writing genres you prefer to read and write in because of what those different genres privilege and make possible.

For example, do you prefer reading or writing empirical research articles over opinion pieces? Why? How do you feel about writing award applications focused on your own practices? Why do you feel that way? Do you believe writing about learning and teaching is more rigorous when it claims to be presenting objective facts? Why or why not? Can undergraduate students contribute to knowledge generation by writing about learning and teaching? Why or why not? Are written works about learning and teaching only scholarly if they cite other published works? Why or why not? How you answer these questions reveals what you value about writing along with beliefs about research, what counts as scholarly writing, and who is able to contribute to and create conversations about learning and teaching in higher education (see chapter 3).

Our values are inextricably linked with our identities as writers. Our values about writing tend to arise from our disciplinary or "home base" communities and only reveal themselves when we start to write in new ways. Some of our disciplinary backgrounds align more closely with writing about learning and teaching than others. Mick, coming into learning and teaching from geography, had a different experience from Alison, who came from education, who, in turn, had a different experience from Kelly, who navigated from early publications in biomedical sciences to higher education. In each case our disciplinary training is grounded in specific ways of

seeing the world and in certain understandings of knowledge that also reveal what we value in writing. In practice, these can translate in subtle ways. For example, whether we use the first person or not speaks to how we value the position of the writer—whether they distance themselves from the written work or claim their agency in authoring it.

Embracing writing as values-based work further affirms how our unique positionality shapes us as writers and helps us identify our motivations for writing about learning and teaching (see chapter 6). Knowing what matters to you about writing also shapes your identity as a writer, a process in continuous formation.

What Do We Mean by "Identity"?

We think of "identity" as the way in which "individuals define and experience themselves and are defined by others—how an individual/personal sense of sociocultural location and character intersects with how that individual is constructed in many different ways within any given culture and society" (Cook-Sather 2015, 2). We all have values and commitments as well as backgrounds and experiences that inform our identities, and as Jennifer Fraser (personal communication, August 8, 2019) reiterated when reading a draft of this book, "our identities are also constructed/imposed depending on the structural privileges and oppressions that we experience in the academy." Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler's (2013, 2016) thinking about "identity work" in their texts focuses on getting published in the social sciences and conveys the idea that, as writers, we are enacting an imagined view of who we are and want to be. That means the whole writing process is a personal experience that affects us as people and is affected by the people with whom we interact.

Our identities as writers in higher education are complex and dynamic. As three white academics who have been in full-time positions in institutions of higher education in Australia, the UK, and the United States, we have benefited from the privileges afforded people with our ethnic and institutional identities. This means we have not had to negotiate certain practices of exclusion, bias, and other forms

of discrimination and harm that some of our colleagues with different identities have had to navigate. We have also endeavored to use our privileged positions to create new spaces and opportunities, such as through the students-as-partners work we all do. Furthermore, Alison has focused on culturally responsive practice (Cook-Sather and Agu 2013; Cook-Sather and Des-Ogugua 2018) and epistemic justice (de Bie et al. 2019), while Mick has explored how disabled students may be better included in higher education (Fuller et al. 2009; Healey et al. 2006; Healey, Jenkins, and Leach 2006). With colleagues, Kelly has argued for the inclusion of subjective self-definition of social class in higher education research (Rubin et al. 2014) and offered approaches to inclusive practices in introductory science subjects (Matthews, Moni, and Moni 2007). Through our work as co-editors of *IJSaP*, we have created space for students historically marginalized in higher education to have a voice in the academic literature (Bindra et al. 2018; Yahlnaaw / Aaron Grant 2019). In this book, we use our privileged positions to argue for, model, and invite the creation of and contribution to scholarly conversations that support the development of identities, clarification of values, and learning through writing for a range of differently positioned scholars. In this chapter, we focus on how our disciplinary identities interact with our identities as writers in learning and teaching.

How We See Ourselves as Writers in Higher Education

Much of higher education is organized into disciplinary groups. Scholars have evoked the analogy of academic tribes and territories to describe the cultural norms engrained in most academic disciplines (Becher 1994; Becher and Trowler 2001). Most of us learn to write for publication through our disciplinary training, and we see the writing process as part of joining that disciplinary community—as fostering our identity as a scholar in a discipline. Writing in mathematics is a fundamentally different experience from writing in education, even mathematics education. Whether we are writing alone or in collaboration (see chapter 7), our views on authorship are shaped by our disciplinary location (see chapter 8). Our disciplinary identities

shape the information context we work in—the discourses that flow around us, influencing what we see, read, hear—even before we go searching for material to draw from. They also influence whom we cite in our publications (Tight 2008).

As more and more universities embrace Lee Shulman's (1993) notion of teaching as community property that should be as public as research, there has been a surge in academics publishing about learning and teaching in higher education. Yet many of us are coming from a disciplinary background that did not train us in writing at all, let alone in writing about learning and teaching, and it can often be profoundly destabilizing to become a beginner in a discourse again and cause scholars to question at once two activities they may be expert in—teaching and research (Weller 2011). Indeed, trying to learn to write about learning and teaching can disrupt our sense of identity as scholars and raise uncomfortable questions about ourselves (Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin 2018). In particular, if we view writing as only a technical activity, then the assumptions from our discipline might come into unproductive conflict with assumptions that underpin the learning and teaching scholarship field, which is rich in context, subjectivity, and messy human relationships. If embraced, however, the "troublesome conflict" of coming into learning and teaching scholarship that some people experience can be transformative, particularly when the struggles are shared with others in a supportive learning process that nurtures our identities as writers in learning and teaching (Simmons et al. 2013).

While a small yet growing number of students are studying learning and teaching in higher education through graduate programs and PhD studies in disciplines beyond education, many of you will come to this form of writing from an academic discipline other than education. The process of writing according to the conventions and norms of your discipline shaped or are shaping your identity as a scholar, and learning to write about learning and teaching is also a process of identity formation. Acknowledging this is important because it creates space to recognize the worldviews and assumptions you bring from your discipline. Regardless of your disciplinary pathway into

writing about learning and teaching, your identity plays a role in how you become a learning and teaching scholar, as illuminated in Reflection 4.1.

Reflection 4.1

How engaging in a pedagogic research project changed my identity

My conversion to a discipline-based pedagogic researcher was an unintended outcome of participating in an early 2000s project to improve the educational effectiveness of fieldwork in geography and the earth and environmental sciences. Initially, I was skeptical, even dismissive about the rigor of the pedagogical research component, due in part to my own shortcomings and my science background. I could only see quantitative research and large data sets. However, what interested me was the fieldwork element, and how I could possibly enhance the quality of my own fieldwork teaching. So I thought I would give it go. Over the course of a residential training event and subsequent national research project with like-minded colleagues, I was able to try out qualitative research for the first time, and realising it has value, I had a road-to-Damascus moment. Subsequently, I have focused my research almost entirely on writing about learning and teaching. So, what happened to me? I think it was an exposure to, and the better understanding of the value of, pedagogic research approaches, and how they can be used to make direct impact on day-to-day teaching with students.

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Becoming a Learning and Teaching Scholar through Writing

We become scholars of learning and teaching through writing as our identities evolve from either another disciplinary location or through direct preparation in the field of higher education. We encourage you

to be conscious and intentional about developing your identities as a learning and teaching scholar through experimenting with multiple genres (see part 4) that both conform to and diverge from writing norms and conventions typically privileged in Western academic contexts (see chapter 11). Because this range of genres enables more people, and a greater diversity of people, to create and contribute to conversations about learning and teaching, we urge you not only to develop your own voice but also to learn to read the voices of those differently positioned from yourself. This will allow you to forge identities for yourself in dialogue and collaboration with others who are forming their—possibly very different—identities. A community like this will only thrive when scholars with differing identities reflect on their experiences of learning and teaching to tell "true" stories (see chapter 20), as advocated by Nancy Chick and Peter Felten (2018). These stories can reflect how learning and teaching unfold across and within different countries and contexts for scholars in an array of social locations. To tell such true stories—and there is never only a single such story (Adichie 2009)—it is essential to reflect on the values shaping our writing about learning and teaching.

The Opportunity to Embrace and Expand Your Values in Writing about Learning and Teaching

In asserting that writing is a values-based practice, we encourage all of you as writers to intentionally live the values that matter to you. This could mean embracing new possibilities as a writer that may at first cause discomfort and perhaps even angst. This could equally mean affirming values that lead you to embrace another way of writing about learning and teaching. We are exploring values not to reach consensus about what the values informing your writing about learning and teaching should be, but rather to demonstrate how a diversity of writers with different values can be in conversation to construct richer understandings of learning and teaching in higher education across contexts, countries, and cultures.

To that end, we come back to a set of interrelated questions published in our *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* article (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019).

Guiding Questions to Reflect on Your Values as a Learning and Teaching Writer

1. **How can you use writing in learning and teaching in higher education to:**
   - shape your identities and nurture your sense of belonging within the learning and teaching discourse community?
   - bring yourself to your writing and express yourself with a clear voice?
   - engage both emotionally and intellectually?
2. **What opportunities does writing about learning and teaching afford you to:**
   - inquire into the complexities of teaching (and learning) and of students' experiences of learning (and teaching)?
   - participate in an ongoing conversation with the learning and teaching in higher education discourse community?
   - push "conventional boundaries" within the discourse community by drawing on your disciplinary expertise or embracing a methodological pluralism?
3. **How might you embrace the potential of learning and teaching writing to:**
   - acknowledge, affirm, and constructively critique rather than attack or undermine?
   - illuminate and expand, rather than obscure or diminish?
   - represent context-specific complexity well, rather than reduce to generalizable simplicity? (Poole 2013)

Source: Adapted from Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, 34).

Our values can shift and wobble in ways that are both liberating and exhausting. As Nicola Simmons illustrates in Reflection 4.2, what we value about writing speaks to our motivations to write and can

come into conflict with how we work in, and what we understand to be the purpose of, higher education. If we value collaborative writing, as Nicola Simmons does, then writing is a process of shared learning and sense making with others. How we approach writing if we value collaboration is far different from how we approach writing alone. Nicola Simmons' reflection names the entangled messiness of our fluid identities as writers as those identities embody and enact what matters to us and intersect with other aspects of our lives.

Reflection 4.2

How values shape our motivation to write

To be honest, although it would be simple to say that I write because of academic expectations, that is not my main driver. I write because writing helps me make my thinking explicit and lets me see it from outside, and I often write collaboratively because I am hoping to support others' work or gather multiple perspectives to enhance my own. I love writing with diverse groups and am always excited at helping stitch together a transdisciplinary and transnational space. That building of bridges and smoothing of edges is an inherent part of me; editing diverse group perspectives lets me express it in written form. When I was asked to reflect for this book, I was also reminded of how writing can be a lovely form of escapism: by working with people from around the world, I get a chance to travel and to leave behind some of the work challenges one too often encounters. The intellectual play of the collaborative writing craft offers a wonderful holiday from the daily angst.

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Our culture also shapes what we value. Peter Looker, in chapter 3, reflected on the importance of acknowledging our "cultural blindness" to ensure that writing about learning and teaching connects globally (see Reflection 3.1). We can extend his reflection to encompass the importance of acknowledging how our culture shapes our

values. By reflecting on our values as writers, we can become more aware of what others value and create space for richer conversations informed by multiple perspectives and differing values about learning and teaching.

Over to You

We understand writing to be a form of communication, a relational process, that brings us into conversations with a community of scholars. A thread weaving throughout this book is writing as a process of identity formation—a process that intersects with our values and affects us intellectually, socially, and emotionally. For this reason, we include "Our Perspectives" and "Reflections" from colleagues throughout the book to show the varied experience of writing about learning and teaching in higher education. Here are some questions to consider about fostering your identities through a values-based process of writing:

- How do you see yourself as a writer, and how do you want others to see you as a writer?
- What matters to you about writing?
- Which of these priorities relate to discipline-specific work and might be a benefit or a barrier to writing in a different field?
- What does dialogue with differently positioned people reveal to you about your identities? In what ways have you used or could you use writing to develop your identities and support the development of others' identities?