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The Undulations of Writing for Publication

Mellinee Lesley

Abstract

Through autobiographical narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016), I explore a string of untold stories from my life about publishing academic writing. Using the self as data, the retelling of these stories examines what it means to cultivate a writing identity and more specifically what it means to write for publication. Through a critical literacy lens (Freire, 1996), I problematize the traditions of publishing and consider the ramifications for mentoring doctoral students into this realm of academic life. Thus, this reflexive essay (Luttrell, 2010) is a sorting through of nearly thirty years of chasing academic publications. This writing is a way to both make my thinking visible and tell a story of my becoming an academic writer through the shaping forces of audience, blind peer review, and conflicting opinions.

Introduction

Writing has never come easily to me. It is a strained experience framed by self-doubt. One of my earliest memories of writing in school was being humiliated by my second grade teacher when she assigned our class to write a letter to the next year's second grade students and then read our letters out loud to the class. When she got to my letter, she ridiculed my attempt at humor and made comments such as "this doesn't make any sense." In that moment, for the first time in my life I was confronted with an audience—in this case one not too fond of puns. Prior to this experience, writing in school largely meant dictation and penmanship. In

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contrast, writing at home had been something that was playful, exploratory, and completely mine. In second grade, my home writing self collided with my school writing self and marked the beginning of many moments of uncertainty I would encounter with writing as a student and an academic.

Through high school, college, and two graduate programs, I had numerous instances where my writing was praised and critiqued by different teachers. I never knew what feedback to expect, and the feedback I received was often confusing. Unfortunately, feedback did not get clearer as I earned advanced academic degrees. I remember being stunned as a first semester master's student in a rhetoric and composition program when the faculty member who was teaching a class over writing pedagogy complained about how terrible the first essays in the class were and how tortured he had been reading them on an airplane flight to some unrevealed but important destination. "Some of you need to get your goddamn grammar right!" He scolded. Wide-eyed, all I could think about through the rest of the class was whether I was one of the students who had made grammatical mistakes in my paper. I have often thought about the irony of a professor giving such hostile feedback in a class where we were studying effective writing pedagogy. At the time, however, my insecurities prevented me for pointing this out. Feeling powerless to ignore the whims of teachers, I believe the collective conundrum of such experiences led me ultimately to a career in higher education where I would continue to navigate critiques and confront the mystery of writing for an audience other than the self.

Although criticism over writing began for me as a young child, publishing—the pinnacle of criticism—did not become a goal for me until graduate school. In 1993, I entered a doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania. I was petrified and two months pregnant. I had recently relocated to the East Coast from the Southwestern United States and felt rather overwhelmed by all of the compounding changes in my life. The first week of classes, I spread my books and syllabi on the kitchen table and broke down in tears. "I can't do this. I can't read all of these articles and books and write 30 page papers," I sobbed. Without hesitation, my husband responded, "Yes, you can. You just need a time management plan. All you have to do is break up the work into smaller steps." Thus, my graduate studies began at a little kitchen table in Delaware with fears of my future and past swirling around me in due dates.

Initiation into the Publishing Club

As I progressed through coursework, publishing was a mysterious prospect that I had little understanding of. Mostly, I pieced together that publishing was extremely difficult and often paved the way to a failed academic career. "Publish or perish" was not just an arcane dictum. I saw faculty reach the three-year point in their career and vanish. "I think he's making other choices," my advisor euphemistically

explained, but I understood such departure was not exactly by choice. I also saw the toll fear of publishing took on untenured faculty through their haggard faces and vicariously shared in their distant stare toward an unspeakable horror.

One day in the library, I stumbled onto a book titled *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* by Madeline Grumet (1988). Intrigued by the title, I began reading. I found the book to be an eerie meditation on the confluence of motherhood and academia. It was like finding a cryptic note written to me from a future self I had little understanding of beyond the timelines for class assignments and a looming dissertation requirement. In this book, I saw my life as a female graduate student and adjunct faculty member laid out in the pages of another female academic's story. I had an invisible position in higher education, an endless mound of papers to grade, my own papers to write, a daily commute to navigate, and piles of laundry to do. I thought earning a doctoral degree would be the most liberating thing I could do professionally, but in the pages of this book my image of higher education as a hallowed realm of enlightenment and opportunity began to crack. Adding gender politics to the mix of the higher education career I imagined, made the prospect of publishing even more daunting.

Shortly after discovering *Bitter Milk*, I came across a narrative about academic writing by Linda Brodkey (1994). In this article, Brodkey described writing as a "protective mantle" and a "newfound power" for young girls (p. 528). Brodkey also noted her "many lean years of writing in school" (p. 528). For Brodkey, writing instruction in school occupied a highly contrived and abbreviated space. Very much like my own experience in second grade, the generative and creative impulse of a young child was curtailed by the strictures of a writing curriculum with little room for experimentation. Brodkey wrote:

> When I was in elementary school, before children were allowed to write, they were expected to learn to read, write cursive, spell, diagram sentences, punctuate them, and arrange them in paragraphs. The first writing assignment I remember was in the fifth grade—'Write about your favorite country'—and my essay on 'Africa' was a compilation of sentences copied in my own hand from encyclopedia entries. (p. 531)

Brodkey's K-12 writing instruction sounded like mine. As I advanced in school, writing was predominantly rule-governed and restrictive. It rarely represented an organic outgrowth of learning even in graduate school.

As a doctoral student, publishing became a new layer to the expectations of academic writing. I felt increasing pressure to publish, so I began to submit conceptual papers to journals for publication. Neither of my first two submissions were successful. One journal editor told me my paper on feminist research methodology was "not very good." Another journal editor accepted my manuscript, but stated I would have to pay to publish it. I had not heard of predatorial publishing at this point in my career, but the request made me feel as though the editor knew I was desperate to publish and saw an opportunity

to make money off of me. One of my peers advised me to stay away from this journal and punctuated her point with a rhetorical question, "Do you think our professors *ever* pay to publish?" In these early attempts at publishing I sensed there were unwritten rules such as illegitimate outlets, but I was not sure exactly how to go about determining them except to continue submitting my writing for review to journals I had been acquainted with through coursework. Consequently, I bumbled along in solitary pursuit of this ill-defined goal.

In my coursework as a doctoral student, I was imbued with theories of critical literacy (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 1996; Lankshear, Lankshear, & McLaren, 1993; Shor, 1999). As a researcher, I wanted to understand applications of critical literacy theories in various educational contexts and articulate these studies in such a way to further illuminate critical literacy. With this theoretical lens, my first publications were explorations into enacting critical literacy in various educational contexts. In particular, I studied the ways reading and writing about educational oppression shifted marginalized students' literacy identities, skills, and educational trajectories. Just before I graduated, I published a piece that was about creating space for critical dialogue in a freshman composition class.

I hoped my dissertation, which was an investigation over a year-long professional development initiative at an elementary school, would lead to several publications. The best part about writing a dissertation was that it put me back into a space where I was engaged in extensive writing at home and felt a degree of freedom. It was hard work as I drifted in a tide of data and theories for weeks at a time, but it was creative work. My chair read pieces throughout the process and offered encouragement and suggestions. This routine worked well until I shared my completed dissertation with the other members of my committee. The night before I defended my dissertation, one committee member called me to ask if I had published from my dissertation yet. I answered that I was waiting to defend before attempting to publish. "Good!" she retorted and proceeded to tell me I had written a "terrible" dissertation. I had traveled back to the East Coast for my defense and spent several hours calling peers who were familiar with my study to ask them what they thought about this odd, last minute phone call. Thankfully, my chair and my friends had been encouraging and patched together my devastated sense of self before I had to face this woman. The next morning in my dissertation defense, my chair began the discussion by stating, "We all agree that your dissertation is beautifully written." As soon as he made this statement, the committee member who had called me the night before interjected, "No we don't!" This abrasive comment stunned my chair who paused and asked the committee members to talk to me about what they would like me to revise. Once again, I was in a place where one teacher praised my work and another offered excoriating criticism. I passed my defense, made revisions, and graduated, but because of the one committee member's comments my dissertation felt stained, and I never attempted to publish any part of it. Bitter milk.

I accepted a position at a teaching intensive university, which allowed me

to recover from my dissertation experience and return to writing without the attendant pressure to publish. After five years, I felt the urge to venture into a research intensive university and entered the job market again. I had published a few more articles and amassed a great deal of teaching experience, but I did not quite feel as though I had accomplished what I set out to do with my career. Even though I was nervous about the pressure to publish, I was excited to create a more developed line of research.

Over time, my experiences with publishing, like my school experiences, formed a repetitive pattern of rejection and acceptance that eventually led to enough publications for me to be tenured and promoted. The route to this point in my career was fraught with revelations about the idiosyncrasies of publishing. Mostly, I learned the importance of conforming to the editor's instructions. I learned to modify titles and sanitize words and tune my voice to a dispassionate academic tenor. Even so, as the following review demonstrates, sometimes I was unable to meet the editor's expectations.

> *Comments to the Author:*
>
> *I was looking forward to this resubmission, but I feel that the author did not fully address the recommendations made by the reviewers. In particular, the methods still lack transparency. While the author provided more information about the students, he/she did not indicate what percentages of students fell into each master model and whether or not those students differed based on the demographic or content-area information provided. The reader is expected to trust the excerpted comments are representative, but it is not clear that they are representative of the sample or how they represent portions of the sample. The paper is still compelling, but these gaps in reporting the methods and results should be resolved.*
>
> *Also, the discussion and implications sections of the paper, while expanded, are not particularly compelling. More integration of the theory and research cited earlier in the paper and more guidance for teacher educators with suggestions for how to deal with these attitudes toward literacy habits would really strengthen this manuscript as a contribution to [name of journal].*
>
> *With more substantial revisions in the direction the author took with this first set of revisions would make this manuscript a good contribution to the literature.*

I learned to revise numerous times to have opportunities to publish. For example, I revised this manuscript a second time in order to publish it.

Difficult Truths

In the years that I have been a faculty member in higher education, I have found there are limits to the topics that mainstream educational journals are willing to take up and by the same token trends that editors are eager to support. Although both negative and positive findings lead to important research implications, as a researcher, I have experienced a publication bias toward positive solutions to educational dilemmas. Research that imparts too harsh of a critique of various educational practices and systems has been more challenging to publish.

In 2008, as I started to explore deeper, systemic issues of educational equity, I ran into increased difficulty publishing my writing. I spent the better part of a year trying to publish a manuscript about the deleterious effect of high stakes testing on fourth grade children who had failed the state mandated reading test the year prior. I diligently revised this manuscript several times for a journal ultimately to be told by the editor they would not publish it because it portrayed too negative of a story about high stakes testing. I actually worked up the courage to address my concerns with the journal editor who had rejected my manuscript because it was not "supportive" of high stakes testing. Tenured and beginning to amass a publication record, I felt emboldened to "talk back" (hooks, 1994) with the following email:

> *Dear [Name of Journal] Editorial Team,*
>
> *I'm sure it goes without saying that I am extremely disappointed in your decision to not publish my manuscript in the May 2008 issue of [Name of Journal]. Of course I am disappointed by the fact that this manuscript has been in revision at your request for a considerable length of time. I'm most frustrated by the fact, however, that the primary reason cited for rejection is that the manuscript is not coated in a positive veneer.*
>
> *It saddens me greatly that the stories of the children, teacher, parents, and administrator presented in this manuscript will probably never be accepted for publication in any journal because they represent critical stories as opposed to "creative," "constructive," and "supportive" stories of high stakes testing. The lives of the children depicted in this manuscript are already obscured by a society that does little to redress issues of social disparity. With your decision to solely focus on positive stories about high stakes testing, aren't you contributing to the very oppression high stakes testing creates with this population of students—minority children contending with poverty?*
>
> *I understand that you feel the "negative" stories about high stakes testing have already been told. While there have been such stories published in the past few years, they obviously have not had much of an impact on the policies surrounding NCLB accountability mandates. Does it not stand to reason, then, that more such stories need to be told in order to bring about a change?*

Please reconsider your decision to reject this manuscript due to the unpleasant reality it depicts. High stakes testing needs to be presented in a multiplicity of perspectives no matter what criticisms such perspectives may impart.

Sincerely,
Mellinee Lesley

I knew my retort would not result in a publishing opportunity with the journal, but I could not ignore the hypocrisy of editors who had asked me to revise and resubmit my manuscript three times to meet their specifications and then rejected it because it was too negative. Ironically, a couple of years later, the editor of this journal won an award for a book about critical literacy, which was a little more bitter milk for me to swallow as I watched her receive recognition for this work at an awards ceremony.

From this experience, I learned there were limits to the topics journal editors are willing to address in spite of an allegiance to critical perspectives. In the midst of the frenzy of the 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation, the trauma of high stakes testing was not a topic the editors deemed important. Fortunately, I was able to publish the manuscript in an international journal, so all of my effort with this study was not put aside like my dissertation.

I have run into other topics that after several submissions to different journals I have decided are unpublishable as well. One such topic is the rape culture adolescents are exposed to through digital media. Another topic is the chronically poor writing instruction taking place in "underperforming," urban high schools. Of this second topic, one reviewer wrote: "Part of me really appreciated the story being told through this research, leading to the understanding (that other researchers have made as well, as the authors realize and recognizes) that things have to change systematically in order to rethink the teaching of writing." Yet, the manuscript was not deemed appropriate for publication.

Negative findings like the trauma of high stakes testing, rape culture in digital media, and poor writing instruction leading to to a downward educational spiral for diverse students in an "underperforming" high school, have been the most difficult manuscripts for me to publish. Consequently, I have come to believe there is a publishing bias against such social critiques because they expose difficult truths.

Contradictory Feedback and Major Revisions

Another challenge of publishing I have experienced is receiving contradictory feedback that is difficult to decipher. Many times I have had one reviewer write extremely complimentary feedback and another write extremely negative feedback over the same work. This happened recently in a manuscript about zines, which are self-publications typically exploding with chaotic images over socially hidden and sometimes irreverent topics. With this manuscript, the editor wrote:

The reviews of your manuscript are clear and precise, so I won't reiterate them in detail. You'll note in general, however, that the reviewers had some differing perspectives on your piece: one recommends a "major revision" and the other "accept."

In this instance, I had to navigate the two perspectives, which meant discarding some of the feedback from one reviewer in order to address the other's suggestions.

In addition to contradictory feedback, a revise and resubmit decision with major revisions has been a struggle for me to navigate as a writer. Because suggestions for major revision can be overwhelming, sometimes I have opted to take the suggestions that made sense and submit the manuscript to an entirely different journal. A few months ago, I was asked to make major revisions in my theoretical framing of a manuscript. The editor wrote:

Currently, however, it is still difficult to see how the manuscript contributes to the type of theory building and empirically focused analysis that tends to be compelling to many readers of the journal and helps to define the type of articles we tend to publish.

Once again, I worked up enough courage to talk to the editor. This time, however, it was over the phone—a first for me. The upshot of the conversation was that the editor wanted me to cite theories from the field of rhetoric and composition instead of the ones I had cited from the field of literacy education. The editor's bias toward one disciplinary tradition made it difficult for me to take up this work. Publishing can be a punishing business for those of us with a shaky writing identity. Also, the older I get, the harder it is to accept feedback that seems biased toward a particular epistemological stance or in this case a collection of readings. Feedback skewed to a certain field or philosophical framing always surprises me because I expect reviewers to work within the context of the study. Recently, I received feedback over a book chapter that critiqued the manuscript for being too focused in the discipline of literacy education in my review of literature even though the study took place in a high school English department. The reviewer wrote:

Over-emphasis on literacy education. There's some lit review on outreach in that field. The only reference I think would be useful to those in say, Life Sciences, would be the Cochran-Smith & Lytle source. . . . The science community uses the 'DELTA' model to train grad student how to teach. We've used that model for 8 years to structure a 2-credit inter-D course on the principles and practices of CES.

These particular comments seemed too mismatched with the study to me, it was difficult to see any value in the feedback. When I receive this type of feedback, I often wonder about publishing parity and what Freirean (1996) resistance would

look like in academic publishing. I also wonder if self-publishing is the only truly egalitarian pathway and whether it could obliterate publishing bias.

Publishing as Mentoring

In spite of the issues I have encountered with academic writing and publishing, peer review is the only substantial mentoring I have had with writing since graduating from my doctoral program. Although some feedback is difficult to understand or hard to accept, feedback through the peer review process has been vital for me to progress in my academic writing career. I do believe anonymity of the feedback breeds fruitful dialogue. Frank and clear feedback can be beneficial. For instance, the following feedback helped me reorganize a manuscript to be more logical:

> *Your argument seems to be evident on page 3 where you stated, 'To better understand the affordances of composing through new media . . . shaped by critical media literacy.' I think this paragraph needs to come sooner in the manuscript, thus writing a shorter introduction. I also think the introduction needs to provide examples of research support for your second goal 'to identify key components of composing online . . . .' I think this is especially needed due to your title: 'Composing and the need for critical media literacy.' Thus, I recommend organizing this piece a bit more, and I have a few recommendations you may consider. I think the introduction needs to be rewritten.*

Even when a manuscript is rejected, cogent feedback is extremely valuable in guiding other projects.

I have had two occasions in my career where an editor took a particular interest in my topic and provided extensive feedback that pushed my manuscript to a higher level. In one instance, the editor asked me to include a discussion about the Common Core State Standards (National Governor's Association, 2010) because these standards were newly created and had been adopted by most states. This insight created a greater sense of exigency and national relevance for my research. In the other instance, the editor provided suggestions on my manuscript to help clarify several aspects and create a revision that addressed patterns of mechanical issues in my writing from the reviewer's comments.

On other occasions, I have received detailed feedback that greatly facilitated the precision of my writing such as the following example:

> *Change the word "Girls" to adolescent girls in the title (cover page). Related to punctuation and upper case, put a comma after the word sites (p. 2, line 10). Then on line 17, change hooks to Hooks.*
> *P. 2, line 39, put a comma after the word fifteen. P. 2, line 43, change internet to Internet.*

Feedback that includes an element of copyediting shows a level of investment from a reviewer often above and beyond what is required that has helped me develop stronger writing skills. This type of feedback is the closest experience to being in a writing group where peers read and respond to drafts of writing. However, not all faculty writing groups include this step of actual feedback over each others' writing (e.g., Elbow & Sorcinelli, 2006). Thus, the process of blind peer review is every academic's writer's workshop.

Coming Full Circle

Because of my varied experiences with writing for publication, I try to make a point of demystifying the publishing process for doctoral students I work with. Even so, I often feel as though I fall short of this goal partly because I did not have a professor overtly mentor me and, thus, have no model on which to base my actions and partly because I am concerned that I may convey opinions and information that will frustrate students. I have also found including doctoral students in the manuscript development and submission process to not be very helpful if the student struggles with basic aspects of writing and employing research methods. In these instances, I have found myself doing all of the work and have come to question the ethics of including students' names on manuscripts where they do not contribute intellectually to the project. I once included a student's name on a manuscript because she assisted me marginally with data collection and later found out she could not explain the study during a job interview. This challenged my assumptions about what students learn from collaborating on research projects.

Because of the complexities of writing for publication, I wrestle with how to scaffold learning about publishing and ponder questions such as: How do I better prepare doctoral students for the rigors and realities of publishing without inculcating disillusionment? To what extent should we teach doctoral students about the gate-keeping practices of publishing that can be idiosyncratic and biased? When is it productive to offer classes on writing for publication that include publishing testimonials of such experiences? What should true co-authorship look like between faculty and doctoral students? Is co-authorship the best route for mentoring doctoral students into writing for publication (Kamler, 2008)? How do we best show students the complexities of bringing a manuscript to print? Every time I mention a negative experience with publishing to students, I feel guilty when I see their eyes widen. Who is to say their experiences will be similar to my own? By the same token, I do not want to mislead them into thinking publishing is easy or even straight forward. A balanced perspective is certainly warranted.

In addition to mentoring doctoral students in ways that are productive, we need to address issues of publishing bias as a community of scholars. An inclination to publish research leading to positive results should be studied. We should also examine whether some journals have a bias toward certain topics

and paradigms of research methodology. To what extent are these predilections based on disciplinary traditions? In our crush to keep up with new trends, do we ignore other topics to the detriment of the field? A content analysis of topics published in different disciplines is needed as is a self-study led by journal editors on topics that are rejected for publication. We also need to examine the extent to which we are engaging in methodological rigor as a research community. Is there enough methodological variety in studies addressing the same topics? Similarly, to what extent are replication studies published? These questions point to the fact that there are much larger implications for the academic community to consider concerning publishing than my personal journey imparts.

Writing for publication is riddled with hope, despair and many contingencies. Publishing plays a major role in the knowledge base of a discipline, the public good, and the professional lives of academics. Thus, much more attention needs to be given to the realities of publishing. For example, publishing trends should be an ongoing discussion at every research conference. In the academy, we need to continually engage in evaluation of publishing practices and continue to examine the efficacy of traditions such as peer review. Something so integral to the health of higher education should not be discarded like spoiled milk. If publishing is the life force of academia, it should be handled and analyzed like any other form of phenomena worthy of study in higher education and be given much more attention.

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