

Conversations in writing: a book review of M. Healey, K.E. Matthews and A. Cook-Sather (2020) *Writing about learning and teaching in higher education: creating and contributing to scholarly conversations*. North Carolina: Center for Engaged Learning

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Overview

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) occupies an uneasy space in the academic research landscape. Both defining its nature and purpose and arguing for its inclusion in the wider research agenda of a university have long been challenging tasks for those who want to contribute to discourse about teaching and learning in their own disciplines. In this context, a book about writing that embarks on a mission to encourage 'scholarly conversations' in a range of writing genres is welcome. This is what Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews and Alison Cook-Sather offer us in their new publication, *Writing and learning about teaching in higher education*. Making the book open access not only embodies the authors' own values, but broadens its scope beyond its virtual pages to a wealth of other material via a click of the many links embedded in the text.

Structure and content

The book is a long read with its almost 400 pages, divided into five parts. The first two parts situate it in the context of a particular set of scholarly conversations to which it hopes to contribute. The remaining three parts weave together a neat summary of eleven possible writing genres with a useful set of 'how to' chapters that lead the reader through the multi-layered process of producing writing for publication in its many forms.

The endless potential of the written word is reflected in some of central threads that the authors unravel in the first half of the book. Firstly, they argue for the place of writing in initiating and sustaining scholarly conversations. Secondly, they connect writing with the development of academic identity, and, finally, they advocate the principles of the writing to learn movement. In so doing, they hold to the view of writing as an exploratory tool, a process of thinking and learning, rather than simply a final, polished product. For me, this sets the book on a solid foundation; my own research on building writing communities in higher education suggests that both process and product should underpin any initiative or encouragement to our colleagues (and ourselves) to write.

At times, though, the argument skims over some of the complexities and challenges of writing about teaching and learning that, in reality, make it a good deal harder than the authors acknowledge. My perception is that this is borne from good intentions. The aim, I think, is for the book to serve as a comprehensive volume that both explores some theoretical perspectives on writing and acts as a 'how to' guide to getting writing done and getting it published. However, in the end, it felt a little safe and shied away from some uncomfortable truths.

The chapter on 'Fostering identity through a values-based approach to writing' is a case in point. I concur absolutely with the contention that 'writing about learning and teaching both draws on and can complicate, shape, and reshape our academic identities' (p.33). But the development of academic identity is bound up in the complex relations between the individual and the institutional and disciplinary communities in which we participate. One of the implications of this is that those of us who want to write about learning and teaching can find ourselves traversing a political minefield. Our institutional cultures may not recognise or value this kind of writing and thus the supportive cultures that might allow us to make time and space to write are scarce. I wanted Healey, Matthews and Cook-Sather to tackle this head-on; instead the concept of identity was presented as almost entirely unproblematic.

More successful are the chapters in the second half of the book, which offer the reader clear and concise guidance for writing texts in a range of genres. The 'guiding questions' that are a feature of each chapter are a useful starting point and the acknowledgement that genres overlap and boundaries are blurred prevent this section from feeling too formulaic and over-simplistic. In the same vein, the chapters about submitting work and

responding to the dreaded peer review offer clear, practical advice - and make a welcome plea for constructive comment and kindness on the part of reviewers!

Final thoughts

I was left wondering, though, whether there was a place for being a little more contentious – perhaps for pushing, rather than simply blurring the boundaries. In the end, despite the material on other genres, there is more guidance on the drafting, submission, review and revision of a journal article than any other writing form. And ultimately, despite the range of possibilities apparently available to them, Healey, Matthew and Cook-Sather opted for a book – albeit open access – as the conduit for a call for writing that sparks scholarly conversations. I can't help wondering what kinds of conversation might have exploded had they opted for a blog. Perhaps this is the elephant in the room: the book never quite acknowledges the tension between living with the status quo and bravely resetting the landscape by embracing in their entirety the many other forms of writing that might open up our scholarly conversations beyond the confines of our existing academic communities. But this is some challenge – and at least Healey, Matthew and Cook-Sather have given us some tools for the task.

Author details

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