

To Linger on the Edge of Bad Feelings: Thoughts and Advice for Graduate Students on the Unsure Dance of Writing for Publication

ERRER À LA FRONTIÈRE DU MALAISE: PENSÉES ET CONSEILS POUR LES ÉTUDIANTS GRADUÉS HÉSITANT À ÉCRIRE DANS LE BUT DE PUBLIER

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Article abstract

In this paper, I discuss the process of developing a piece of writing for publication. Written for an intended audience of graduate students in the field of education, I discuss writing for publication as an arrangement for significance, the question of finding a discursive and intellectual home, the selection of an appropriate journal in which to publish, the importance of spaces and rituals of writing, and the conversational dynamics of peer review.

TO LINGER ON THE EDGE OF BAD FEELINGS: THOUGHTS AND ADVICE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS ON THE UNSURE DANCE OF WRITING FOR PUBLICATION

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I discuss the process of developing a piece of writing for publication. Written for an intended audience of graduate students in the field of education, I discuss writing for publication as an arrangement for significance, the question of finding a discursive and intellectual home, the selection of an appropriate journal in which to publish, the importance of spaces and rituals of writing, and the conversational dynamics of peer review.

ERRER À LA FRONTIÈRE DU MALAISE: PENSÉES ET CONSEILS POUR LES ÉTUDIANTS GRADUÉS HÉSITANT À ÉCRIRE DANS LE BUT DE PUBLIER

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, j'aborde le processus de production d'un texte dans le but d'être publié. M'adressant aux étudiants gradués dans le domaine de l'éducation, je parle de la publication en tant qu'élaboration d'un message, de la recherche d'une famille discursive et intellectuelle, de la sélection d'une revue dans laquelle publier, de l'importance de l'espace et des rituels de la rédaction et des dynamiques conversationnelles de l'évaluation par les pairs.

Over the following pages, I offer my thoughts on the process of developing a piece of writing towards publication. Intended primarily for graduate students in the field of education, this is by no means a definitive guide on the subject, but more appropriately a series of prompts: creative kindling. Since a writer's method will always remain uncertain (even and especially to writers themselves, who can never be totally certain of the methods they employ in the writing they do), the following descriptions remain approximations. Their usefulness hinges on the reader's / writer's ability to translate between others' words and their own needs. I hope that what I have to say on this subject proves to be of some use.

SIGNIFICANCE AND DESIRE

Writing towards the goal of publication — a task that involves becoming an intelligible conversant in the world of shared and not-always-easily conveyable ideas — can certainly be an exhausting and a thoroughly mind-numbing, potentially paralyzing, self-questioning experience. It grates at the psyche, it steals away sleep, and at times, it forces us to question our status as intellectual beings and even the balance of our very mental stability. It is not a simple thing, and in fact, if we take it seriously (as I believe we should), it invariably works to define the substance of who we are as individuals, what our place in the world is, and — as theorists in the conceptual landscape of teaching, thinking, and learning — it can deliver meaning and value, while also stripping these things away, leaving us sadly and madly adrift. It is an artistry and a skill and, as with any art form, it can be done well and with joy and authenticity, or transformed from a place of possibility, to a paint-by-numbers approach that leaves invention cowering frigidly, unclothed, abandoned outside the back door in the freezing winter. As Shoshana Felman (2007) notes of literature, writing for publication exists in “a paradoxical space of pleasure and of frustration, of disappointment and happiness” (p. 47). It is a thing of love, a thing of hate, and a drama of deep obsession. At its best, it achieves what Kristeva (2000) calls “the copresence of thought and pleasure” (p. 85), turning the words that seep in the tendrils and shadows of being to containment, light, and warmth.

In remembering his time as a prisoner and learning how to be a philosopher, Bernard Stiegler (2009) writes, “that which, today, is very prominent and consistent, laden with meaning and in that sense, ‘significant,’ never fails to become, tomorrow, indifferent, totally insignificant, and the very opposite of what it was” (p. 27). This understanding — that significance is never a permanent or unquestionable attribute — strips away from the object of study (whether personal experience, a poem, an interview, a transcript, a piece of policy, a work of literature or theory) the capacity for determining meaning. Instead, this capacity rests squarely on the position of the person experiencing the text — remembering, theorizing, relating, and reading. “There is nothing insignificant in itself,” Stiegler tells us; “what can be insignificant are not the things themselves, or in themselves, but the relation I have or rather that I do not have with those things, such as I articulate and arrange them” (p. 27). And this, I argue, is the ultimate challenge of writing for publication: not to think of it as something that you have to do, as a jumble of lines on a curriculum vitae; unless, that is, you want your words to read as pure exhaustion. Instead, your words should brim with exquisite method; they should feel alive in the tongue and on the body. Writing for sharing is also an inherently creative task of arrangement for significance, of drawing desire lines — “unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 570) — that nevertheless lead to the place you wanted to get: a published paper.

MINING THE GAP

Let's imagine you've written a paper in one of your courses that you're really proud of, and after spending countless hours theorizing and developing your ideas, and feeling encouraged to pursue this writing further, you want to look at getting this piece published. When I was doing my doctoral studies, I approached every paper I wrote as potentially publishable, and except for a couple of false starts, they mostly found their way to the printed page or online screen. If this is the path that you want to pursue, the first thing that you want to identify is the field in which your work will have the most resonance, which of course may actually be a multiplicity; I'm reminded here of Kristeva's (2000) interjection that "No single role is possible in itself" (p. 165). Nevertheless, it's important to recognize that, even though your work may be interdisciplinary, different journals, different fields, and different audiences will require different languages of inquiry, different references, and different areas of focus. For myself, while I was completing my Master's degree, I was lucky enough to be introduced by a member of my thesis committee to the field of curriculum studies, a broad area that allows for, and even encourages, wild and speculative thinking. I joined a group of other graduate students travelling to the Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory in Dayton, Ohio, and once there, and over late-night conversations, I felt like I had found my discursive home. As graduate students, it is important to find such a space (or at the least, a halfway house, a temporary place of residence), where the conversations that take place bring you alive, give you goose bumps, deliver you towards meaning.

In essence, it is important to find a place in this world of shared ideas where you can also recognize yourself. It is no secret that the experience of learning how to navigate academia can be outright alienating and unsure, and in fact, I've been to my fair share of conferences where all I've wanted to do was cower in the corner, and just head back to my hotel room and take a fast trip to the mini bar. But eventually, and thankfully, I recognized myself — my passions, my insecurities, my intellectual inclinations — in the words and conversations of others. In school, as elsewhere, we need friends that speak a similar language. At least, that has been my experience. And for some of us, finding this space of shared language, a space that brims, a space of actual possibility, can be a challenging and difficult path.

The British psychoanalyst, Marion Milner (2010), in her almost inconceivable book, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, describes how an important task of human development and maturation "clearly centres round [the] problem of finding a particular niche in the social world, of finding the gap or need in the social structure into which one can pour one's energies and find that they are wanted" (p. 154). There is a need, as we grow up, to find appropriate sites for recognition and creative self-invention. While Milner stresses "that those who can find a ready-made gap have an easier task...many have to make their own,

and some can neither find one nor create one” (p. 154). For many of us, then, the academic environment may not be an immediately inviting context, and as Milner relates the act of painting to the art of living, we may also extend her thinking to the task of finding an intellectual home: “perhaps,” she suggests,

in painting one does create one’s own gap by deciding on the frame, both literally and metaphorically; for one can make the size of the gap, the frame that has to be filled, to suit oneself; and one must also choose what shall fill it. (Milner, 2010, p. 154)

Though I may be making an untenable stretch here, such an endeavor – of finding a frame, of making that frame one’s own, to suit oneself, to recognize that frame as an intrinsic part of who you are, to know there is a chance that this frame might actually be able to contain you (and containment, if it works well, is always a kind of pleasure) – this is what it is like to be part of a productive intellectual community and, on a practical level, to find a good journal in which to publish your work.

If you have located such a journal, the next step is to read this journal well and in the context of the larger set of conversations that you want to join, and to find articles whose ideas and conceptualizations in some way align with your own. In part, this is a strategic move. If you reference multiple pieces from the journal that you hope to publish in, the editors and peer reviewers will obviously be aware that you’re not just submitting your piece out of happenstance, or on a whim, but because you actually care about the intellectual community that they are invested in supporting and developing. As well, if you can’t locate these articles, it is also probably a good indication that this particular journal may not be the right fit for your piece. In editing your writing for publication, you should also then cite these articles. Weave them into your conversation, and if necessary, take a step back and redevelop your piece based on what you’ve been reading. Remember, every journal has an audience, communities of readers who attach themselves faithfully to particular publications and ideas. There are ongoing dialogues, controversies, analytical lenses, and subject matter that bear more significance to some communities than others, and I should here remind you of what I said earlier: writing for publication is the process of developing an arrangement for significance.

Also, I should note that I’ve come at this idea of finding a suitable journal from one possible end of many (sort of through the back door, if you will), but you could also write your piece with a particular journal in mind from the very beginning. I have done things this way as well, especially when writing outside of my primary area of comfort or “expertise.” If you have already established a relationship of honesty with your supervisor, you may also ask them for recommendations of suitable places to publish, though you should also remember that, as graduate students, you are often ahead of the curve. When it happens, finding a journal that you have never encountered before

but know is a good fit for your questions and pursuits is a truly exciting thing, a discovery similar to scouring the library shelves, or the walls of a used bookstore, and locating a book that changes your life. When you're touched in this way, it is also important to ask about where the elusive, frustratingly capricious object of your intellectual desire lies. As with love, which often comes knocking when you're least expecting it, desire in writing might operate in a similarly unpredictable fashion. In fact, in many ways, erotics, writing, and education, are often-inseparable enactments; they are generally felt before being understood: "[the] dynamic of simultaneity between eroticism and symbolism," which includes the practice of writing, "is present from the very start of the speaking being's life" (Kristeva, 2000, p. 85).

SPACES AND RITUALS OF WRITING

What might we do to approach the task of writing and editing as a manageable thing? I walk my dog. I stare out the window. I daydream about my love. I walk to the corner and I sit on a bench and I walk to a tree and I lean on that tree. I lean there thinking about nothing at all, but the sweat on my brow; it is a humid day. For Michel de Certeau (1984), "To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper" (p. 103).¹ It is a good condition to think about what we are writing, without actually thinking directly about such things at all. For me, it is a walk, but for you, it may be something else: a bath, a drive, half an hour with a novel, whatever it takes. If mindless and relatively unintentional, a good walk can serve as the ultimate act of defamiliarization, setting a productive distance between yourself and the ideas to which you've become seemingly, inextricably connected.

I try to wonder what that person who is walking down the street with their face to the ground is thinking about. I repeat in my head a string of words. It becomes like a kind of mantra, and then suddenly, I realize this string is the exact sentence I've been waiting to write, and whose incompleteness, only a few minutes ago, was driving me completely mad. I rush home. I put pen to paper. Writing is always about being obsessed. And there's also a beautifully monogamous quality to being in the throes of a good write. Your mind, your body wants nothing else. I can only ever concentrate on one piece of writing at a time. I may be someone who gets easily distracted, but when I am lost in the depths of a write, I am stuck knee deep in what we may call "the omnipotent desire for the good feed" (Robertson, 2001, p. 200). In the middle of a week or a month of writing, I wake up each morning and I plan what I want to accomplish: perhaps to seek out a particular theorist's ideas on death, perhaps to focus a footnote, or maybe, today is the day I will finally realize what this paper I am writing is actually about.

Space and time also need to be claimed by the author, created for the craft of writing. We all need to protect the time we have, or the day just passes by. When I lived in Toronto, I did much of my writing at the OISE library. I found a little room without distractions, tucked away near the children's literature section, filled with AV equipment that was terribly old and never got touched; it was lonely and I gave it some company. I dubbed this room "the cave," and I guess I got lucky, but no one ever entered this cave while I was mumbling the words I was crafting; an alchemy of language that was shaping me just as much as I was shaping it. I would write for hours on end in this decrepit, anonymous cavern, and then my goal being reached, I would head on home and breathe the fresh air deeply. We all have our own little rituals in writing, I'm sure. Some people can write in a crowded room, so I'm obviously speaking metaphorically here, but find a room of your own. Let there be sun in that room, and take a nap if you need it. Don't feel guilty about closing your eyes. The best words come when the mind has had a good and a truly rejuvenating rest.

ENDINGS

Having finally written what you set out to say, your piece will surely at one point feel finished, though how will you know when your paper is actually ready for submission? On this point, an important question to ask yourself is: What do you expect your endings to do? Do they answer the questions posed, do they continue a conversation, or do they perhaps prompt a new one? For myself, I typically know when something is ready to go into the world because I feel a sense of confidence and a strong desire to share. However, to temper these feelings, and since enthusiasm can be a complicated kind of trickster, I put the piece away for at least a week, approaching it with new eyes after the dust of creation has effectively settled.

Preparing a piece for publication is also markedly different from writing a conference paper, which is an inevitably ethereal thing, a one-off, and an isolated moment in time. It is a beautiful thing, to be sure, and what is especially beautiful about it is the fact that no one will hear every single word you say. It is the same thing with teaching. The teacher expounds, and is never in full control of every single word they're saying. The student listens, but never hears every word that is spoken; to do so is an impossibility. However, with a written piece, every word achieves a sense of permanence, and it is to this end that I typically use conference papers as a way to workshop things that I may later want to publish, as a first take on a series of ideas that will eventually achieve a kind of stasis. It is also here that the question of the arrangement of significance will either make sense, or fall dead in the water. I don't like to write things that don't have legs, but at times, I need to admit that something I've written may be fundamentally flawed.

PEER REVIEW AS DYNAMIC EXCHANGE

After submitting a paper to a journal, there's a preliminary waiting game that unfolds, the first of many, as the author waits to hear back from the editors to see if their work will be sent out for review. In my own experience, about a third of the time I hear back from the editors that, unfortunately, what I've written is not suitable for the journal in question, perhaps because my analysis is deemed incomplete, or my arguments are thought unsuitable for the journal's readership. After receiving such a response, I typically feel dejected, and though these emotions of sadness and insecurity are common, it is also important to recognize that this doesn't make them any less real. After all, I've done my research, and I think my piece would be a perfect fit for the journal in question. After putting these comments aside for a few days, though — and this time away from such comments is crucial — I make one of two choices. I either rework the piece for submission elsewhere, taking the editor's suggestions seriously, or I send it soon to another publication, convinced that my piece is strong as it is and that it will eventually find the home it deserves. This decision is always equal parts defensiveness and pride (if you actually care about something, you will be at least a little bit defensive about it), and sincere consideration for the generous ideas of others. No matter how challenging, it's essential when trying to publish that we always take time to actually listen to the ideas of others. To respond well to an editor's comments, it is important to recognize the value of reading as a kind of active listening that always presupposes a dialogue and element of care. Moreover, no matter the editor's initial decision, and especially if it's clear that your work has been read with precision and thoughtfulness, you should always be sure to write back, thanking your readers for taking their time to consider your writing.

Ideally, though, your piece will be sent out to a number of blind reviewers, and admittedly, this is the most psychically destabilizing part of the process of publishing an article. This period of waiting often feels like groping in the dark, and while sometimes you might hear back in a matter of months, at other times this step will take up to a year, and it is certainly a disappointing thing to not hear back for so long, only to receive a series of negative reviews. In handling such reviews, be they positive or negative, I'd like to propose that we think of reviewing through the lens of reader response and in relation to narrative desire. As a reminder, the theory of reader response proposes that "meaning is not something in the text or the reader" (Sumara, 1996, p. 110), but is actually evoked through the reader's interpretive moves. As the text may guide the reader, the reader's personality and past experiences also invariably affect the text. The reviewer, then, is not only reading the text, but also reading themselves in the text, and even though the reviewer acts as an arbiter of intellectual precision, their reviews are never objective — nor can they be, nor should they be — and much of their review depends on how the text converses with their often-unspoken and often-unconscious assumptions,

hopes, and desires. As Peter Brooks (1984) writes, “We as readers ‘intervene’ by the very act of reading, interpreting the text, handling it, shaping it to our ends” (p. 235), and in this light, the best way to conceptualize the practice of peer review is as a conversation and “process of dynamic exchange” (p. 236), both with other people, and with other people’s desires. As with any narrative, in considering reviews, “it is important to consider not only what a narrative is,” as Brooks notes, “but what it is for, and what its stakes are: why it is told, what aims it may manifest and conceal, what it seeks not only to say but to do” (p. 236). While the words of reviewers are about ideas and the use of language, they are therefore also always about desire.

To respond well to a reviewer’s suggestions, then, it remains important to consider the ways that, even though it may be between people who do not know each other, the process as a whole is an incitement to participate in conversation. However, if we accept that a reviewer is not only responding to text, but also, their unconscious desire in reading what they make of themselves in the text and how their concerns are represented, answering to their suggestions and making the requisite changes can assume the shape of an extremely unsure dance. Importantly, you always need to provide the editors with a document outlining the changes you’ve made, and how you’ve taken up the reviewers’ suggestions. At times, reviewers may actually be at odds with each other, and if this is the case, you need to figure out which of their suggestions are most in line with your own intentions, being careful, though, not to entirely discount any one reviewer.

In my own practice, I try to make as many of the proposed changes as possible, and as a final point on the process of peer review, every single piece of writing that I’ve sent out into the world in this way has been improved by the suggestions of others. In fact, certain reviewers, in their generosity, have affected the entire trajectory of my thinking, proposing books and theorists that I may not have considered as relevant to my work at the time, but which have since become essential. Again, it’s a practice of listening, and when you listen well, you inevitably notice things that you may not have initially expected to hear.

(IN)TERMINAL STATION: CLOSING THOUGHTS

As I emphasize above, writing for publication is an always-unsure dance; there are multiple voices and desires at play, and various causes for hesitation, anxiety, and insecurity. However, if you strive to use this work productively, it can also serve to turn the vice of obsession to virtue, allowing for a space to experiment within and articulate a world of shared meaning. For Felman (2007), who writes about literature and the ambivalence of human expression, it remains necessary to get dirty and muddy and sometimes linger on the edge of bad feelings: there is “no outside,” she notes, “no safe spot assuredly outside

of madness” (p. 45). Indeed, as educational researchers, we also must contend with — and perhaps even celebrate — the fact that a little bit of madness is always at least a little bit a part of our job.

NOTES

1. Michel de Certeau (or his translator, at least) uses “proper” as a noun.

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