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Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales From the Field, edited by Dianne Conrad (Open Book Publishers, 2023)

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Book Review: Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales From the Field

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Introduction

The act of scholarly writing combines elements of both science and artistry, posing a particularly daunting challenge for early-career researchers who may be navigating a complex maze to forge their own scholarly identities and careers. Mastery of academic writing requires a process built on persistent effort, practice, and refinement. Hence, novice writers may find golden nuggets of wisdom in the guidance of experienced writers who have overcome many challenges throughout their careers.

In response to this need, Dianne Conrad has assembled an impressive list of scholars to publish the book titled *Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales From the Field*. The book is a synthesis of personal, reflective narratives on academic writing by authors in the field of open, online, and distance learning (ODL). As described on the publisher's website,[i] the book is:

> a treasure trove of advice, reflection, and hard-won experience from experts in the field of open and distance education. Each chapter offers tried-and-tested advice for nascent academic writers, delivered with personal, rich, and wonderful stories of the authors' careers, their process, their research and their writing, and the struggles and triumphs they have encountered in the course of their careers.

This review, from an early-career researcher's perspective, aims to offer insights and spark a discussion among the community, and serve as a barometer for the intended impact of the book.

Book Structure and Organization

Upon reading the entire book, my impression is that the authors enjoyed considerable creative freedom in structuring their texts, leading to a departure from established scientific writing norms. This creativity was manifested in the choice and construction of the chapter titles, along with interesting anecdotes, many of which were written in first-person voice.

The open access book is structured into 15 chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion chapter, authored by the editor, and profiles of the contributors. All 13 reflection chapters are authored by single authors except Marguerite Koole et al.'s chapter which has four authors. Each chapter is unique and

does not follow a consistent structure or format. However, many of the chapters conclude with suggestions, guiding tips, or key takeaways for the reader. Nonetheless, I believe that each chapter could have benefitted from an abstract or summary. The authors included references at the end of each chapter, and a comprehensive index at the end of the book aids readers in locating specific content.

Analytical and Critical Commentary

Strengths

The book begins with a compelling foreword written by Terry Anderson, a prominent figure in the field, which I consider a valuable bonus chapter. Considering how the main chapters of the book are structured, I discuss overarching themes rather than employ a chapter-by-chapter review. Inspired by Paul Prinsloo's chapter, I take an analytical and critical perspective to categorize my key takeaways into three themes: *technical nuggets, psychosocial nuggets*, and *additional freebies*. According to Prinsloo, "what I bring, what I submit, is the result of my own sensemaking, often emerging from deep within myself" (p. 204).

The authors conveyed priceless information on technical aspects of writing, sharing *technical nuggets* about writing processes. Many of the authors highlighted how they approached idea generation, text structure development, effective language use, and audience engagement in their writing. For example, I found Jon Dron's concept of the *unwriter* particularly interesting, as he discusses how editing effort often takes longer than the actual text generation. He sums this up by stating that "the sense that you are making of what you are reading now is not, however, the same as the sense that I was making when I wrote it. … You are reading my words from the front; I am writing them from behind" (p. 33).

Further, authors emphasized the importance of effective language and audience engagement. Examples in the chapters by Pamela Ryan and Marguerite Koole et al. highlight the importance of understanding the cultural nuances of audiences in deciding appropriate registers for effective communication. Many authors advocated for using simple language, and I appreciate Aras Bozkurt's caution to early career writers against using metaphors until they have fully grasped what he calls "the anatomy of a scholarly paper."

Additionally, the authors stressed the importance of prior reading and background knowledge with Bozkurt stating that: "Before I begin to write, I sharpen my thoughts, develop a clearer vision of the topic, and build a cognitive map as I force myself to read more deeply on the topic" (p. 102). Mark Nichols, on his part, argued strongly for writing drafts as part of the literature review process, using the metaphor to "dance with" rather than "engage with" the literature. His advice to "treat literature as a conversation partner, not a library" (p. 160), is particularly instructive.

It was clear that certain affective, behavioural, sociocultural, and other personal traits influenced the creative writing process and scholarly personas of the authors. The lessons derived from these are what I call *psychosocial nuggets*. The book discusses the role of intrinsic drive, exemplified by personal traits such as passion, curiosity, commitment, and belief, as necessary ingredients for successful writing. Authors such as Junhong Xiao and Jennifer Roberts showed how resilience, agency, and ability to overcome self-doubt proved useful for their writing. Similarly, Paul Prinsloo, and Dianne Conrad in

thier authored chapters provided inspiring insights for individuals who may be venturing late into the scholarship space, with the sense of "coming from behind."

Themes on mentoring featured prominently for its role in moulding the writing skills of early-career academics. Likewise, the concept of stewardship, described by Junhong Xiao, advocates for established researchers "paying forward" what they had "taken from" their mentors to maintain quality within the discipline. The chapter by Tony Bates presents insights about the potential for serendipity, and how to effectively exploit networking opportunities.

The chapter by Koole et al. regarding how cultural identity influences one's writing style was enlightening. Janet's (co-author) discussion on how she manages the tension between her newfound Western "directness" and her African-rooted indirect communication style resonates with my own experience as an African undergoing scholarship training in a culture known for its very direct communication style. Furthermore, the book provides tips on developing one's research identity; for example, Pamela Ryan's chapter presents important lessons for researcher identity (or the lack of it).

The *additional freebies* are the unintended benefits novice writers stand to derive from the book. For instance, reading through the text enriches one's vocabulary warehouse, and there is a diversity of styles and approaches that the reader can reflect on and integrate into their own writing. More importantly, the references in the book provide a convenient catalogue for further reading. Two of my top picks include Ergin and Alkin (2019) on contextualization, and Ivanič (1998) on identity.

Limitations

While the book offers many nuggets for its readers, it is open to criticism in the following aspects:

- **The lack of consensus in terminology.** Throughout the book, the terms Open Online and Distance Learning (ODL), Open and Distance Education (ODE), Open, Distance, and Flexible Learning (ODFL) were used severally, ostensibly in the same context. This lack of consensus perhaps lends credence to the development of the umbrella term *Open, Distance, and Digital Education* (ODDE) to capture both the historical roots of distance education and recent digital media applications in education (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2023).

- **Scarcity on ground-breaking works and classical theories.** Considering the title of the book and the authors drawn from the ODDE field, it would have been insightful to highlight some ground-breaking works or classical theories and explore how they impacted the authors. Although sporadic references were made to some, the approach could have been more intentional.

- **No substantive discussion on ethics.** Although subtle ethical issues are contained in the book, I would have appreciated reading more insights about ethical dilemmas authors encountered and how they overcame them. More broadly, I would have liked to understand their axiological stances and how this reflects on their scholarly endeavours.

- **No reflections on artificial intelligence applications.** Considering the advancements in artificial intelligence applications over the period, I was eager to read reflections on any potential influences it might have had on the scholarly careers of the authors or, at the very least, their stances on its application in scholarly writing in general.

- **Not diverse enough.** While the attempt to achieve diversity among the authors is appreciated, authors from non-mainstream locations such as the Middle East, South America, and Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) are noticeably absent. Including some excellent voices from these non-mainstream locations could hold empowering value.

Overall Impression

The book is captivating and compelling, featuring narratives that resonate emotionally. As an early-career researcher, some reflections in the book provided substance to phenomena I was vaguely aware of but had not fully grasped. While not intended as a manual, the book offers valuable practical guidance for honing the skills and crafts of early-career researchers and serves as a wellspring of counsel for those more established. The book provides profound insights into the authors' works and the influences shaping them, from which novice writers can derive lessons. Indeed, I concur with the editor's assertion that the book provides "extraordinary fodder for novice writers and scholars" (p. 16). Finally, although authored by researchers in the ODDE field, the book's value transcends the field. For these reasons, I recommend it without any reservations to anyone interested in scholarly writing.

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[i] From *Open Book Publishers*, 2023 (https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/OBP.0356#metrics).