Becoming a Writer

Ann E. Austin

Michigan State University

In this invited essay, Dr. Ann E. Austin reflects on the process of becoming a writer. Drawing from her own experiences as a graduate student and faculty member, as well as her scholarship on socialization in doctoral education, Austin identifies four key components of writing and publishing. These include the ability to frame good questions, a commitment to productive writing habits, an understanding of how to improve as a writer, and a sense of identity as a scholar. She closes by highlighting four ways in which students learn the skills, values, and habits of thought that foster success in writing and publishing.

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"Guess what??? Check out this message…I am so happy and excited!!" I am writing this essay just a few hours after receiving an excited e-mail message from one of my doctoral advisees, who had received positive reviews, along with some requests for revision, in response to her first article submission. This news is cause for celebration, because we both know that this achievement is the result of hard work, persistence, and commitment, and that it will be a springboard for inspiring her to continue as a thinker and writer willing to put her ideas into the public sphere. The editors of *Higher Education in Review* have asked me to reflect in this essay on the process through which students learn to prepare and publish academic papers—and the respective roles that faculty members and students play in this important part of graduate education.

Over the past decade, I have written about graduate education as a process of socialization that helps new scholars prepare for and transition into their careers (Austin and McDaniels, 2006). In this work, I have especially appreciated Bragg's (1976) definition of socialization, which, while not written specifically about the doctoral experience, highlights what should occur in graduate education to support students in learning to write and publish. The definition emphasizes "the learning process through which the individual acquires the knowledge and skills, the values and attitudes, and the habits and modes of thought of the society to which he [or she] belongs" (p. 3). In this essay, I highlight four of the most important skills, attitudes, and habits of thought that I believe doctoral students should develop in regard to writing and publishing: the ability to frame good questions, a commitment to productive writing habits, an understanding of how to improve as a writer, and a sense of identity as a scholar.

Developing the Ability to Frame Good Questions

My dissertation advisor was Zee Gamson, a highly regarded sociologist whose thinking has enriched greatly the study of higher education—and a wonderful advisor and friend. Like many students, it took me quite a while to find a good dissertation question, a process that involved lots of conversations with Zee. I can recall several times when I thought I was nearing a good question that Zee put her hands atop each other, and rotated them in opposite directions, asking "Well, what is the tension?" As I recall, the only real "tension" over several months was from the pit in my stomach as I realized that I still wasn't close enough to a researchable question!

This tension heightened on the day that I drove over to the building in Ann Arbor where, at least at that time, hard copies of dissertations from around the country were prepared for purchase. I had seen a reference to a dissertation recently published at another university, which seemed pertinent to my almost-completed proposal, and had dashed over to buy it hot off the press. While many years have passed, I can still remember the sinking feeling as I sat in my car, eagerly opened the dissertation, and discovered that it was very close, too close, to the study that I wanted to propose. A few more months of work ensued to find a topic that could be distinctly mine.

With the support and guidance of Zee, I did ultimately find a solid question and succeeded in completing my dissertation. But my relief was short-lived as I was asked very soon after starting my faculty career to teach a course on research design. Now I was responsible not only for myself, but for a whole roomful of people trying to frame researchable problems—not to mention the advisees waiting outside my office for support and guidance as they sought to develop their own questions!

This new responsibility caused me to come to grips with the process and importance of framing problems and researchable questions as an essential starting point if I wanted to write and publish—and if I was to help students in this process. I recognized that effectively framing problems and researchable questions is not the same as identifying topics that I think are interesting. I learned more fully what Zee meant when she would ask me what the "tension" was. That is, I realized that a problem worthy of the time, resources, and effort involved in research and writing has at its heart a driving question, a puzzle, a gap in understanding or knowledge, a contradiction—in short, a tension. As a faculty member, I have developed ways of asking students to articulate what they want to know about a topic, why they want to know this, and why they think finding this out is or should be important to them or others—in other words, what is the "tension" that they see and want to explore. One of the greatest pleasures to me as a faculty member is helping students move from a topic that interests them or a concern they have, toward the identification of a well-framed problem and carefully articulated question—one that the student can reasonably research and the findings and publication of which will make a difference, even if only modestly, in regard to knowledge, understanding, or practice.

Finding and framing problems and questions is not only an abstract process. I believe this process involves alertness, systematic thinking,

and the discipline of capturing ideas. Finding and framing questions that matter involves recognizing that, usually, good ideas emerge and evolve; they may seem to be the result of sudden inspiration, but, in my experience, that inspiration is usually the outcome of a process of diligent thinking and hard work. I suggest that students keep journals in which they record on an ongoing basis the questions and ideas that come to mind while reading articles and books, attending class, carrying out work assignments, or talking with colleagues. What questions are intriguing, what actions in practice seem to contradict research findings, what big issues or problems resonate with one's passions?

I have learned that the good ideas that emerge in my thinking through reading, listening, and hard work can disappear quickly if I fail to engage in the discipline of capturing them. For many years, at the end of each day, I would empty my book bag of note cards on which I had jotted thoughts and questions, toss these cards into a recipe box, and then review the contents of the recipe box every few weeks. This practice enabled me to identify and begin to frame the specific problems and questions that were developing in my thinking as worthy of my sustained attention as a researcher and writer. Whether relying on note cards or the ease of entering quick notes into a computer file, scholars benefit from the discipline of capturing and monitoring their ongoing thinking. I have found that this process enables me to frame questions that I really care about, that I think are important, and that will sustain my interest over time.

Developing a Commitment to Productive Writing Habits

As a doctoral student, I had the very good fortune of receiving guidance and mentoring from both Joan Stark, then Dean of the University of Michigan School of Education, and Zee Gamson. As the literature on socialization tells us, novices learn much from observation. I worked closely with both Joan and Zee and watched how they organized their work and lives. They differed in personal and professional style, but I learned from each that excellence and success as a researcher and writer are based on dedication, discipline, and persistence. I have always appreciated the ways in which they invited me to participate with them in research and writing projects so that I could learn the process of being a scholar and writer. They also each modeled the ways in which a faculty member can teach about the habits of being a scholar through example. As an early career faculty

member, I also encountered the work of Robert Boice, who conducted research on the strategies and habits of new faculty members who were finding success in their work (1992). Several of his findings made a great impact on me. First, he emphasized that faculty who were successful as writers established the practice of writing regularly rather than waiting to feel inspired. He also found that successful writers have the habit of using small periods of time to write, rather than assuming they must wait for large, open blocks.

Informed by my mentors and others whose lives demonstrated how to integrate writing into the broader array of daily responsibilities, as well as by Boice's research findings, I have tried to develop a sense of discipline in my own work that has helped me as a writer. (I should also mention that raising three children led to the realization years ago that I would either need to cultivate the ability to use whatever periods of time I had, or that I would need to wait about twenty years to find long, quiet periods.) As I have sought ways to deepen and refine my own discipline as a writer, I also have enjoyed sharing what I have learned with graduate students.

I urge students to develop a sense of discipline as a scholar. One can cultivate productive habits that lead to writing and publishing—learning how to settle in to work without procrastination, how to stay focused and avoid distractions, and how to pace one's work over the course of days and months. I think the students whom I have advised also appreciate our frank discussions as we share ideas about how to deal with barriers to moving forward productively as a writer. (I think they are particularly fond of my confession that, in times when somewhat drastic efforts are needed to accomplish my goals as a writer, I have been known to line up M&M's and reward myself with one after each paragraph that I succeed in writing.)

Developing an Understanding of How to Improve as a Writer

One of my most vivid memories of my graduate experience involved a lesson about how to improve as a writer. When I started my doctoral work in higher education, I also decided to pursue a master's degree in history and American Studies. During the first semester, I had the good fortune to take a history course with a very well-known and highly regarded American historian. The class members read a great deal each week and also wrote papers every other week, analyzing and critiquing the authors we were reading. My papers were always returned covered with a great deal of red ink to display suggested revisions and

corrections. As the weeks went by, I became convinced that I may have made a great mistake to embark on doctoral study, and that I was surely imposing on the professor's patience since he had to spend so much time to respond to my papers. With great embarrassment, I went to his office hours to report that I was planning to drop the course since I seemed not to be doing well. To my amazement, he explained that he was spending so much time giving feedback and corrections on my paper because he felt I had "solid potential," and that I should stay in the course, study his corrections on each sentence, and use the feedback to improve each subsequent paper.

This experience, and others, offered several important lessons that have helped me as a writer and as a faculty member, and that I hope graduate students learn. I learned that developing as a writer means being willing to write, rewrite, seek feedback, and revise some more. I learned that thoughtful feedback is a gift and that my responsibility as a writer is to cultivate the humility and appreciation, coupled with the doggedness to continue, that enables me to receive and consider such suggestions. These lessons are very helpful if one wishes to publish, since the process typically involves willingness to engage in revision. Now, as a faculty member, I strive to provide direct, thorough, and helpful feedback as students develop as writers. I also encourage students to learn how to turn a critical eye to their own writing, develop the ability to ask for specific feedback and critique from others, and see revising as a normal part of the writing and publishing process.

Developing a Sense of Identity as a Scholar

Writing and publishing are important because of the contribution they make to knowledge and practice. The doctoral experience should help emerging scholars develop an understanding of and commitment to fulfilling their responsibility to contribute to their professional and scholarly communities. Certainly this responsibility involves participating in conferences and assuming, at various times in one's career, various service roles within the profession. However, a particularly important part of a scholarly identity is entering the conversation with other scholars in one's field. This process involves writing, submitting one's work for scrutiny through the process of peer review, and making one's research, interpretations, and ideas available for public consideration by publishing one's work.

Faculty members can help graduate students develop this understanding of scholarly identity through the examples they set.

When I was a doctoral student, I appreciated being included in research projects where I could see how the work moved from questions, to research and data analysis, to manuscript writing, to submission and critique, and ultimately to publication. The availability of such apprenticeship opportunities can be a very important piece of learning in the doctoral experience, and, I believe, is virtually indispensable if a student is going to develop as a scholar who writes and publishes. Furthermore, a doctoral student who is learning through apprenticeship usually gains more than only technical experience. He or she is likely to learn how scholars express collegiality to collaborators, how work is balanced with fun, and how on-going conversations among colleagues about their work can lead to new ideas.

Final Reflections

How do students learn these skills, values, and habits of thought that foster success in writing and publishing? My answer is informed by my knowledge of the literature and research on the socialization process as it is experienced by doctoral students, as well as by my memories of my own graduate experience and my reflections on twenty-five years of being privileged as a faculty member to work with doctoral students. Graduate students learn to write and publish through *observation*, *apprenticeship*, *discipline*, and *practice*. Faculty members must be willing to model ways of thinking and acting, offer questions and critique, discuss students' interpretations of their observations and experiences, challenge them to deepen their commitment to improve as writers, and support them as they experience successes and failures. When the process works well, students and faculty members together can enjoy the pleasure and accomplishment (as well as the invitation to continue to write) embedded in the e-mail message I received today from my advisee who has received promising responses from an editor: "I wanted you to know right away! It's been such an amazing and rewarding journey so far!"

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Ann E. Austin is a Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education and the Director of the Global Institute for Higher Education at Michigan State University. She can be reached at aaustin@msu.edu.