Cultivating Excellence in Academic Writing and Publishing: Our Individual and Collective Responsibilities

Bradley E. Cox and Meghan J. Pifer

Cox, B. E., & Pifer, M. J. (2009). Cultivating excellence in academic writing and publishing: Our individual and collective responsibilities. *Higher Education in Review*, *6*, 1-9.

Editorial
Cultivating Excellence in Academic Writing and Publishing: Our Individual and Collective Responsibilities

As graduate students, we are often told of the importance of academic publishing. For those who become faculty members, publishing one's scholarship is reiterated as a key standard by which one will be reviewed for hiring, promotion, and tenure. *Higher Education in Review* was established in 2004 to give graduate students first-hand experience with the publishing process, and each of the journal's invited pieces (Austin, 2009; Geiger, 2006; Terenzini & Pascarella, 2008) offers a unique perspective on academic publishing. These essays, as well as those published elsewhere (e.g., Post, 2009), highlight the potential of journal articles to contribute to the scholarly dialogue and provide guidance for those of us just entering the field of higher education. It is our hope that *Higher Education in Review*, its student-authored articles, and its invited essays will enhance the academic socialization process. These resources alone, however, cannot teach emerging scholars all they need to know about the complex, and sometimes confusing, process of academic publishing.

Our time at *Higher Education in Review* has allowed us a unique perspective on the processes by which the community of scholars engages in training our newest members to become published academic writers. In particular, we have noticed that many of the conventions within the field remain hidden or unspoken, making information difficult for graduate students to ascertain. Information about academic writing and publishing is often exchanged through informal conversations or within particular groups (such as academic programs, research teams, or student cohorts), thus limiting access to such information to those who are in the right place at the right time.

We have also come to recognize and appreciate the privilege of serving as co-editors of *Higher Education in Review.* The experience has undoubtedly affected our own graduate education, socialization into the profession, and understanding of academic publishing. In this editorial, we hope to share with fellow graduate students some of the knowledge we have gained through this experience and to prompt a broader discussion about academic publishing within the professional community. We attempt to make public what is often private, to put in print that which is typically only spoken, and to disseminate widely that which is usually transmitted directly from one individual to another. In doing so, we attempt a proactive approach to graduate

student socialization that clarifies convention, increases access to information, and stimulates discussion about academic publishing.

A Year Full of Questions

In the following section, we recall three events we experienced during our term as co-editors and share some questions that arose in response to these events. These questions address purpose, ethics, and discourse in academic publishing.

A Question of Purpose

Earlier this year, we joined four other journal editors from Penn State's College of Education in a panel discussion about writing for publication. The session was well attended by graduate students and faculty members from the various academic programs within the College. The session was an open forum for discussing the formal procedures and practical considerations that must be addressed when submitting a manuscript to a journal. Throughout the conversation, however, panelists and attendees returned to the issue of purpose. What purposes do scholarly journals serve? For what purpose does one submit a paper for publication?

A Question of Ethics

Two days before this volume of *Higher Education in Review* was scheduled to go to press, we discovered that one of the accepted articles had recently been published in another journal under a different title. We met with the journal's Editorial Board, sought counsel from faculty members, and quickly concluded that we must inform the authors that we would be unable to publish their manuscript. What was at first a disappointing surprise became a learning opportunity for us and the rest of the Board. In fact, it led to the development of this editorial as a way of increasing dialogue about academic publishing within the scholarly community. Within our own small community, the discussion in response to this situation began with two questions: Had we not been clear that we only published original work? Was it possible that the authors were unaware of a standard that we perceived to be the norm?

A Question of Discourse

At a recent educational conference, two career awards were presented in front of an audience packed with graduate students (it was a free lunch). The award recipients were lauded for their voluminous publication and presentation records; a junior scholar was noted for

having published and presented over 100 times, and a senior scholar had done so more than 300 times. While each of the recipients earned their awards for the quality of their scholarship, their teaching and mentorship of graduate students, and their service to the field – indeed, the introductory remarks acknowledged all of these things – it was the triple-digit numbers that resonated with one of us who attended the event. What are we communicating to our students when we use numbers of publications as measures of success? Are we training students to pursue quantity more than quality?

A Community of Scholars

These three events remind us that our graduate experiences are meant to prepare us for membership in a community of scholars. In her essay in this volume, Ann Austin recalls Bragg's (1976) definition of socialization, "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). We raise questions about the purpose, ethics, and discourse of academic publishing to initiate dialogue about socialization into this community of scholars, which we hope readers will continue with their colleagues, mentors, and students.

The Purpose of Publishing

We suspect that most members of the academic community would recognize at least three purposes of academic publishing: to advance knowledge, to engage in scholarly dialogue, and to progress toward employment, promotion, or tenure. The first two purposes, knowledge development and scholarly dialogue, represent the fundamental role that published scholarship can play in the development of an academic field or discipline. As *de facto* arbiters of scholarship, journal editors and reviewers determine whether a particular manuscript constitutes a substantive contribution to current knowledge. At many journals, including *Higher Education in Review*, only a fraction of the submitted manuscripts meet this standard. Those manuscripts that make it to print often go through a long process of multiple revisions, sometimes taking several years.

When effective, this process results in clearly written, powerfully presented, and intellectually significant scholarship. Yet, for graduate students and junior faculty members, the publishing process can feel long and arduous, especially when they are constantly reminded of

the need to extend their vitas. Of course, we all write for different reasons. We suspect, however, that nobody begins a Ph.D. program saying, "I need the Ph.D. so I can get tenure." Rather, most enter with a pressing concern, an intellectual curiosity, a passion for learning, and a belief in the construction of knowledge. Moreover, especially in education, students enter graduate programs because they want to make a difference and improve lives. We are fortunate to work in a profession and a field where this is possible.

Thus, we encourage scholars to reflect on the fundamental interests that led them to pursue graduate work and membership in the academy. These early motivations can serve as reminders to frame publication as a process by which we advance knowledge and engage in scholarly dialogue – thus encouraging a focus on the quality, not quantity, of one's scholarly contribution. Such a perspective may also serve to preserve and advance academic journals as tools of intellectual discovery, scholarly discourse, and practical application.

The Ethics of Publishing

The ethics of scholarship have received considerable attention lately, particularly the notion of "double dipping." The topic was addressed in a presidential session at the Association for the Study of Higher Education's (ASHE) 2008 annual conference in Jacksonville, FL (Gasman, Milem, & Renn, 2008). Scholarly ethics have also been the subject of several editorials in social science journals (e.g., Baggs, 2008; David, 2008; Roig, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). Ethical practices are difficult to define precisely, and it is no surprise that opinions on the matter are mixed (see Jaschik, 2008; Lederman, 2008).

Writing a strong, ethically sound manuscript takes time, thoughtfulness, deliberate action, and constructive feedback. We encourage authors to avoid the temptation to replace these things with hasty efforts to get published. It is the submitting author's responsibility to take all appropriate actions to ensure ethical practices in academic writing and publication. We encourage continued dialogue on the ethics and values that we, as individuals and as an academic community, seek to uphold. As a starting point, we offer the following three ethical guidelines that we believe are widely applicable, regardless of publication-specific practices.

First, manuscripts should be submitted to only one publication at a time. At no time should a manuscript be simultaneously under consideration by more than one journal or publisher. It is acceptable, however, to resubmit a manuscript to a second publisher if the original

submission did not lead to publication. In addition to the ethical considerations, this guideline simplifies the legal complexities associated with copyrights, which authors typically pass to their publishers.

Second, publishing a conference paper is not only acceptable, it is encouraged. We recommend that authors simply acknowledge in their cover letters the conference at which their papers were presented. Students and faculty members alike present papers at conferences to obtain feedback from discussants, other presenters, and the audience. Authors can then consider this feedback when preparing their manuscripts for submission to a journal. *Higher Education in Review* is pleased to publish papers that have been presented at conferences. In fact, the article in this volume authored by Willis Jones was first presented at the 2008 ASHE annual conference.

Third, each manuscript submitted for publication must be substantively unique. While it may be appropriate to write multiple papers on a particular issue or using a particular dataset, each paper must make a unique substantive argument. Changes to language or organization do not, alone, give rise to distinct, publishable papers. If at all uncertain about a manuscript, authors should use their cover letters to alert editors to similar publications they have authored. With this information, editors can then use their own professional judgment to determine if the submitted work constitutes a new substantive contribution.

While arguing that the major burden of responsibility for ethical publication rests with authors, we also acknowledge the collective responsibility of faculty members, journal editors, and the academy at large. Having come very close to printing a previously published manuscript ourselves, we acknowledge our own culpability in the incident. We remain in discussions with the Board and outside counsel about how to improve our practices to prevent such an incident from occurring again. We also welcome feedback and suggestions from our readers as to how to improve our practices.

Responsibility for ensuring ethical writing and publishing falls on emerging scholars and distinguished scholars alike. By modeling ethical practices themselves and discussing professional ethics with students, faculty members can cultivate ethical practices among graduate students. Editors can contribute to ethical practices by ensuring fair decision-making processes and taking due diligence to publish only original scholarship that advances knowledge. We urge all members of the academic community to actively and publicly contribute to the dialogue surrounding professional ethics and ethical publishing.

The Discourse of Publishing

Comments like the one made at the conference awards ceremony described above occur regularly and in a variety of places, including introductions of keynote speakers, speeches recognizing senior scholars, and presentations of candidates before job talks. Clearly, numbers matter when it comes to academic publishing. Although these numbers provide relevant quantifiable measures of productivity, they also send clear signals to graduate students and emerging scholars. Being clear about the importance of publishing, but often unclear about its purpose and process, has the potential to socialize graduate students and early-career professionals to value quantity over quality. For this volume alone, graduate students submitted more than 35 manuscripts to *Higher Education in Review*; yet, we are publishing only two student-authored articles in Volume 6. While we are pleased that submission numbers continue to improve, we note that there was not a commensurate increase in quality.

Our experiences with *Higher Education in Review* have led us to believe that graduate students are anxious about the publication process and often confused by conflicting messages or a lack of guidance. The importance of publications, particularly peer-reviewed journal articles, as benchmarks of academic success is conveyed, but specifics of how to initiate the process of writing and submitting one's work for publication are hard to come by. For graduate students and junior faculty members who are told that they need to get published – soon and often – to make a name, get a job, be promoted, or earn tenure, the publishing process can seem daunting, confusing, and frustrating. The inconsistent guidelines about fundamental questions such as what to publish, why to publish, where to publish, and how often to publish may contribute to the high levels of stress that many early-career faculty members experience when it comes to publishing (Lindholm, Szelenyi, Hurtado, & Korn, 2005).

Just as we note our individual and collective roles in maintaining ethical standards, we draw attention to the variety of opportunities to promote dialogue and train graduate students to pursue both quality and quantity in their work. Students can seek out experiences and conversation with fellow students, advisors, dissertation chairs, and mentors that will allow them to understand what constitutes good scholarship. Faculty members can engage with students in formal presentations, collaborative writing, and informal accounts of their own publishing experiences. Professional associations, student

organizations, and graduate schools can dedicate resources (sometimes as simple as a space for conversation) to fostering dialogue within the graduate student population and between students and professionals. Discussions of this nature can take place in classrooms, conferences, departmental workshops, or over a cup of coffee.

It is imperative that emerging scholars have opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation with peers and mentors about academic publishing. We encourage all members of the academic community, in their variety of roles, to engage in collegial conversation about academic publishing. We have found students to be eager for information, grateful for conversations with faculty, and full of ideas and questions. Continued conversations about publishing could be rewarding for all participants and will contribute to the advancement of the field.

Conclusion

There will always be different expectations for publication among disciplines, institutions, programs, faculty members, and students. We value this diversity and the dialogue that comes from a variety of experiences and opinions. We believe that it is the nature of scholarly research and writing to rely upon the lens of the researcher and the voice of the author, and that each scholar must hone his or her own standards of excellence in academic writing. We write this piece not to suggest a particular standard, process, or norm. Rather, this editorial is meant to illuminate the challenges and opportunities that present themselves in the current process by which we socialize graduate students into the profession and, specifically, the realm of academic publishing. We hope this editorial has provided an opportunity to reflect upon our practices and ask ourselves how we can each work to clarify the purpose, affirm the ethics, and advance the discourse by which good scholarship becomes great publications.

To our fellow graduate students: we encourage you to keep writing, keep submitting, and keep asking questions of yourselves, your peers, and your faculty mentors as you cultivate practices of excellence in your own careers.

To faculty members: we remind you that you are our models – for research, for writing, for standards of excellence, for ethical practices, and for scholarly dialogue. We thank you for your contributions to graduate students' education and professional development. Please, continue to raise questions and share insights about academic publishing, and continue to invite your students into the conversation.

References

Austin, A. E. (2009). Becoming a writer. *Higher Education in Review, 6*, 63-69.

Baggs, J. G. (2008). Editorial: Issues and rules for authors concerning authorship versus acknowledgements, dual publication, self plagiarism, and salami publishing. *Research in Nursing and Health, 31*(4), 295-297.

Bragg, A. K. (1976). *The socialization process in higher education*. Washington, DC: American Association of Higher Education.

David, D. (2008). Scientists as Schrodinger's cat: Reply to Roig's "The debate on self-plagiarism: Inquisitional science or high standards of scholarship?" Journal of Cognitive and Behavioral Psychotherapies, 8(2), 259-261.

Gasman, B., Milem, J. F., & Renn, K. (2008, November). *Is it double dipping or not?: The ethics of presenting and publishing in higher education.* Presidential session at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Jacksonville, FL.

Geiger, R. L. (2006). Why we write. *Higher Education in Review, 3*, 69-73.

Jaschik, S. (2008). Double dipping in conference papers. Retrieved March 24, 2009 from http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/05/20/double

Lederman, D. (2008). Defining and debating "double-dipping." Retrieved March 24, 2009, from http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/11/10/dipping

Lindholm, J. A., Szelenyi, K., Hurtado, S., & Korn, W. S. (2005). *The American college teacher: National norms for the 2004-2005 HERI faculty survey*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

Terenzini, P. T., & Pascarella, E. T. (2008). Getting it almost, approximately, just about right. *Higher Education in Review, 5*, 127-133.

Post, D. M. The comparative education preview. *Comparative Education Review, 53*(1), 1-11.

Roig, M. (2005). Re-using text from one's own previously published papers: An exploratory study of potential self-plagiarism. *Psychological Reports, 97*(1), 43-49.

Roig, M. (2008a). The debate on self-plagiarism: Inquisitional science or high standards of scholarship? *Journal of Cognitive and Behavioral Psychotherapies, 8*(2), 245-258.

Roig, M. (2008b). Reply to David's "Scientists as Schrodinger's cat." *Journal of Cognitive and Behavioral Psychotherapies, 8*(2), 263-267.

Bradley E. Cox and Meghan J. Pifer are Ph.D. candidates in the Higher Education Program and co-editors of *Higher Education in Review* at the Pennsylvania State University. Both editors contributed equally to this editorial; their names are listed alphabetically.