

## Part 6

# Research Education: Developing Globally Competent Researchers for International and Interdisciplinary Research

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## Observations about Research Methodology during 15 Years of Presenting Capacity-Building Seminars

### Abstract

In this paper, the author shares some of his most important impressions and experiences that he accumulated over a span of more than 15 years of facilitating courses in the foundations of scholarship and article-writing. This is done in an effort to stimulate discussion about the “art” of article-writing and also to help budding academic article-writers to come to grips with this art.

Keywords: scholarship, foundations of science, writing of scholarly articles, academic capacity building, budding scholars, theory building

### Background

After my retirement at the end of 2000 as Dean of the Faculty of Education of the former Potchefstroom University in South Africa (now known as the North-West University), I became involved in various capacity-building projects at the three campuses of the North-West University and at several others across South Africa. This involvement is of two kinds: (a) presentation of article-writing seminars in Faculties of Education across the country, and (b) presentation of a basic course in Philosophy of Science for newly appointed lecturers at the North-West University, a project that I have been involved in since 1977.

My involvement in these two projects has brought me into contact with young(er) colleagues from a variety of disciplines trained as scholars at a multitude of institutions of higher education, both in South Africa and abroad. The attendees to these courses and seminars come from all university post levels, from basic researchers to senior appointees who, for instance, left banks, commerce, engineering or other professional fields to become university professors. My encounters with all of these colleagues over a span of 15 years in the case of the article-writing seminars, and a span of 38 years in the case of the basic course in Philosophy of Science have constantly added to my insight into how young and not so young scholars have been trained for the profession of university lectureship, particularly for the task of doing research and writing scholarly articles based on that research.

The purpose of this paper is to share some of my impressions about the training of scholars, in particular to express concern about some of the aspects that I regard as shortcomings in their training. I do this in the hope that by highlighting some of the problems that I have encountered we could reflect on how to address these shortcomings so that future generations of scholars might benefit from our reflections.

### **Some impressions**

#### *The “bottom drawer”*

Whenever I meet for the first time a group of academics convened for the purpose of learning to write scholarly articles, or to actually write articles under my accompaniment and facilitation, I invariably discover that practically each one of them has one or more articles lying in the bottom drawers of their desks. Closer inspection reveals that many of these articles embody some of the authors’ very first efforts at writing a scholarly article and that their work had been rejected by either the editors of journals or by the reviewers employed by the editors. In some cases, the remarks about their work were of such a negative and disparaging nature that the authors felt quite discouraged about the prospect of ever writing a publishable article.

My usual reaction to such discoveries is to encourage the attendees to take those articles out of the bottom drawer and let us see how we could change and improve them to become publishable – at least, in principle. In my experience, the eventual publication of the articles that previously had been rejected by editors and reviewers had a very positive effect on the attitudes of the article writers in question.

I raise this point about the articles in the bottom drawer for the specific purpose of drawing attention to the fact that editors and reviewers in general do not reject articles on spurious grounds but rather on the basis of serious shortcomings in the submissions. (This underscores the fact that many academics could benefit from taking a course in article reviewing.) In the rest of this paper, I shall mention some of the shortcomings that I have detected in draft articles through the years.

#### *Poor English*

Although I am not a native English-speaker myself and hence can hardly point fingers at others about their usage of the English language, I have observed through the years that the English used by prospective article writers has not been of the appropriate standard. I concede that writing an article in a second language is a daunting task. It is difficult to expound an argument in a logical and coherent manner in a second or foreign language. Much of my time and work through the years has gone into language editing, mainly for the purpose of helping me as a facilitator to understand what the author actually wished to convey. This is not only a problem in South Africa; I had much the same experiences with the work of the Koreans who continued their advanced studies under my supervision. Through the years, I have seen many instances of Setswana, Afrikaans, Korean or Russian (et cetera) thinking formulated in English words. In addition to this, there has been a movement in recent years for “African English” to be given the same status as United States, New Zealand or Australian English. It is clear from reviewers’

reports, however, that African English will have a long journey before becoming acceptable.

I mention this language problem to convey my concern that if article writers are not able to put across their thoughts in a lucid and coherent manner, they might experience problems in addressing all the research methodological problems that I mention below.

### *Structural shortcomings*

Many articles seem to be rejected because of structural shortcomings. Some journals are very prescriptive about what structure articles should adopt, and rejection on the basis of incorrect structure is inexcusable in such cases. Most journals are not as prescriptive, however, and leave it to the authors to decide on the best structure. The problem here is that most of the fledgling authors have not had any previous training regarding the structure of an article.

In order to be able to meet most of the structural requirements, through the years I have developed a structure which I encourage the attendees of my courses and seminars to follow. This standard or template structure enables reviewers of articles to follow the argument as it systematically unfolds. In some cases, reviewers state that while they value the structure, they would advise authors to change some of the headings or even omit some of the sub-headings. This occurs mainly with respect to reports on empirical research.

### *Failure to see the difference between the article itself and the research that it is a report of*

In most cases, a scholarly article is a report on completed research. This is true particularly of articles reporting on empirical research that was done by authors or by their research team. Seeing the article as a report on research already completed has two implications. The first is that one refers to the research in the past tense, as something that occurred in the past and the results of which are now being disseminated to the scholarly community. The second is that one should be acutely aware of the distinction between the underlying research being reported on, and the article which is the report thereof. This distinction will help the author to avoid inane statements such as: "The purpose of this article was to determine the extent of the change that took place as a result of the application of teaching method X". The purpose of the article is in fact to *report* on the *research* that was done to determine the extent of the change.

While it is easier to make this distinction in articles that report on empirical research, it is somewhat more problematic in the case of articles that reflect the thought processes of the author as they unfold, as in the case of an argumentative or conceptual article or one that defends a contention.

### *Either too little or too much guidance from supervisors*

In many cases, the articles written during the article writing seminars that I present flow from dissertations (Master's studies) or theses (Doctoral studies). In some cases, articles reflect the complete underlying studies for the degree in question, and in others, they focus on particular parts of the underlying studies. This in itself is a challenge because reviewers are hesitant about approving articles that

have been drawn from either a dissertation or a thesis. Measures have to be taken to “hide” the fact that the underlying research reported in a particular article has already been disseminated in the form of a dissertation or a thesis. (I understand that this is not the case in some other regions, such as North-America.)

Of greater importance, however, is that the amount and the quality of the guidance a particular article writer had received from his or her supervisor (dissertation) or promoter (thesis) can be noticed in a draft article. In some cases, the supervisors / promoters had clearly given too much guidance, to the extent that the student had just executed instructions with regard to research method without actually understanding the rationale behind the choice of methods and the research steps taken. This becomes clear when an article writer is asked to explain the rationale for having applied particular research methods. Their supervisors / promoters had not created opportunities for them to explore the entire array of research methods and statistical techniques before helping them select the most appropriate ones. Other supervisors / promoters seem to have been guilty of giving too little guidance and advice; the students seem to have been left more or less to their own devices and insights. Also in such cases, there is very little insight into the rationale for choosing certain methods and techniques. There are, of course, exceptions to both these conditions; such colleagues seem to know which methods and techniques to mention and discuss in their articles and why those methods and techniques have been selected.

Since many of the colleagues who attend the article-writing seminars are on the way to becoming supervisors and promoters themselves, I usually make a point of emphasising that it is too late to be concerned about the choice of research methods and statistical techniques once one has reached the stage of article writing about the research findings. Such choices and selections have to be made when the research design is drafted.

### *The lack of a conceptual and theoretical framework*

Similar choices and selections have to be made in the process of drafting a conceptual and theoretical framework. Article writing presupposes the presence of a well worked out conceptual and theoretical framework. When I began presenting these workshops in 2001, we discovered that many articles had no conceptual or theoretical framework, or just a short literature review (cf. Van der Westhuizen, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2011). The bulk of article content was devoted to detailed reports of previously conducted empirical research studies, very much in line with a positivistic approach. These articles tended to consist of detailed graphs, tables and figures and discussions, in many cases merely repeating the contents of the graphs et cetera in narrative form. Fortunately, after working with a large number of colleagues over the past 15 years, the idea has now taken root that article writers should have a conceptual and theoretical framework already in terms of the underlying research. Once one has reached the article writing stage, it is too late to be concerned about the construction of a conceptual and theoretical framework.

### *Conceptual and theoretical framework versus a literature review*

When I began presenting article writing workshops, I found that many colleagues still presented “literature reviews” on the basis of which they launched

their empirical investigations. I devoted attention to this problem at every one of the workshops by emphasising the fact that a literature review forms only one of at least four steps in the construction of a conceptual and theoretical framework. I am glad to mention that my work seems to have paid off since nowadays I find that none of the colleagues who had ever attended one of my seminars seem to be satisfied with presenting a mere literature review. They now devote the necessary attention to each of the four steps in the creation of a conceptual framework: conceptual work, analysis and reflection of standard theories (the so-called literature review), the search for an over-arching “master” theory, and the ideal of developing a theory that could potentially gain universal recognition (e.g. Nussbaum and Sen’s capabilities theory; Rawls’ social justice theory; Habermas’ critical theory). These colleagues understand that they might never reach stage four of theory construction. They are prepared to work towards that objective, however.

### *Methodological confusion*

Apart from the fact that attendees to my article writing workshops tend to confuse the terms “research methodology” (i.e. the specialised science or study of research methods) and “research method” as such (i.e. the method of doing actual research), I find that many of them are confused about particular distinctions in this area. This is not surprising if one takes into account that the standard text books in in the demesne of research method(ology) tend to differ as far as the use of terminology is concerned. What one author regards as a research approach the other sees as a research orientation; what one refers to as a research plan, the other sees as a research design, and so on.

I have decided to enter the fray by offering my own understanding of the terminology (see Van der Walt, 2015, pp. 403-409). I usually do not have the time during an article writing workshop to establish whether I have indeed added to the confusion by presenting my table of what I refer to as “difficult distinctions with respect to the different research steps” that a researcher must reflect on before even contemplating the writing of an article. In fact, I do not see the need to establish whether I have clarified the situation somewhat or further obfuscated it because decisions about research design and research methods belong to a previous phase, namely the research leading up to the article. My only hope is that the younger colleagues will grasp the importance of reflecting on these “difficult distinctions” and guide their own students to also reflect on them *before* arriving at the stage of article writing. Put differently, I tend to leave the choice of research methods to my colleagues who train young scholars about doing research.

### *Neglect of pre-theory and theory*

Although this point is not directly connected to the art of article writing, it is difficult not to notice that attendees to the different workshops have rarely been adequately trained to reflect about the pre-theory (i.e. the philosophical foundations of their subject fields such as the ontology, cosmology, anthropology, epistemology, ethics, deontology and so on) of their disciplines. This neglect, I suspect, is part of the aftermath of positivism and empiricism.

Reflection about standard theories and theory development seems to get more attention, however, as mentioned above. The problem is that many article writers are

under the impression that the section of the article reporting on the empirical research is the most important part of the article, and that theory building (the conceptual and theoretical framework discussed above) is ancillary to the empirical research. My view of the role of empirical research might be slightly contentious. In my opinion, the term “theory building” is synonymous with “science”; science is theory building, I contend. The whole point of practising science is to construct theory and to test the boundaries and validity of extant theory by every ethically justifiable means possible. One of the means at a scholar’s disposal is to do empirical research. Research has a percolating nature: extant theory must be tested and validated (or falsified, as Popper insisted); this testing and validation can take various forms, including further theory development and also via empirical research. Put differently, empirical research is not done for its own sake or because of its intrinsic importance but rather as a test and validation of existing theory.

This circular argument about the relationship between existing theory and the testing, validation or falsification of theory through either further theory development or via empirical investigation has implications for the structure of an article. The most important implication is that the discussion section in the article should be tied back to the conceptual and theoretical framework. The discussion should reveal to what extent the theory outlined in the theoretical framework should be retained, changed, refuted or adapted.

## Conclusion

Article writing represents the final stage of a research project, the stage where a scholar disseminates research findings to the scholarly community and attempts to add to the body of knowledge about a particular subject or knowledge field. In a sense it is the tip of the ice-berg; much must have already been done in preparation for this final stage of article writing. Unfortunately, as my experience has shown, this preparation is not always of the desired standard. However, if I may end on a positive note, I can attest to the fact that there has been a marked improvement in eradicating many of the shortcomings mentioned above over the past 15 years that I have been involved in article writing training and seminars.

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