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Joining a Scholarly Conversation: Publishing Your SoTL Work

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Joining a Scholarly Conversation: Publishing Your SoTL Work

Abstract
The path to publication is often long, emotional, and bewildering. We share key insights from our experience as authors, educators, and members of the editorial board with The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning that we hope will help authors better understand and navigate the path to publication. In writing a compelling story, we suggest that it is necessary to join a conversation with self, the scholarly community, and the journal. We unpack each of these dimensions and offer considerations on how to craft a powerful manuscript that could ultimately get published.

Le chemin qui mène à la publication est souvent long, émotionnel et déconcertant. Nous partageons des idées clés basées sur notre expérience en tant qu'auteurs, éducateurs et membres de l'équipe de rédaction de La revue canadienne sur l'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage. Nous espérons qu'elles aideront les auteurs à mieux comprendre et à parcourir avec succès le chemin menant à la publication. Nous suggérons que pour rédiger un récit captivant, il est nécessaire de se joindre à une conversation avec soi-même, avec la communauté des chercheurs et avec la revue. Nous déballons chacune de ces dimensions et offrons des considérations sur la manière de créer un manuscrit puissant qui pourrait être publié.

Keywords
academic publishing, peer review, advice, scholarship of teaching and learning; publications académiques, évaluation par les pairs, conseil, avancement des connaissances en pédagogie

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The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has at its heart improving student learning. It contributes to this effort through careful scholarly inquiry into teaching and learning across disciplines within higher education. SoTL also includes as a key component communicating the results of a project or study. This is the purpose of publishing a SoTL paper: communicating the results of your study with a journal's readers, some of who might want to use them to facilitate evidence-informed teaching and learning. There are three components to communication: the message, the sender, and the receiver. The sender needs to present the message in a form that the receiver will understand otherwise no communication has truly occurred.

The majority of SoTL authors have experience with writing in a particular discipline. There are certainly similarities between writing a SoTL paper and writing a disciplinary research paper: the research must be situated in a broader context, the data collection and analysis methods must be clearly presented so that the reader can judge the credibility of the results, and the discussion must outline the authors' interpretation of the results and their limitations. However, there are differences between the disciplines in terms of expectations for papers, and therefore there are undoubtedly differences between writing in your disciplinary field and writing for SoTL.

One major difference between disciplinary writing and writing for SoTL that goes beyond expectations of form and style, and that should influence every aspect of how a SoTL paper is written, is that the SoTL community (the receiver or audience) is multi-disciplinary. As a result, in some instances, equipping the reader to assess the worth and relevance of your work will require more information than you would provide to your disciplinary audience.

Below we share insights that we hope will help you pursue SoTL publications. Our main focus throughout this paper is on communication and conversation. As authors, educators, and members of the editorial board with the Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CJSoTL), we offer some insights from our experience that we hope will smooth the (too often bumpy) road to publication. We have categorized our feedback as joining a conversation with (a) self, (b) the scholarly community, and (c) the journal.

Conversation with Self

Is My Manuscript Clear?

You have written a beautiful paper which, you are convinced, absolutely clearly explains what you did and what you found. However, when we have so much related information in our head, it can be difficult to see clearly the limitations of what we have included in the manuscript. Varpio and colleagues (2018) offer priceless advice when they urge authors: "Don't let an editor be the first person to review the manuscript." Thoughtful and insightful review by some "critical friends," as well as writing and rewriting several times before submission are essential. If a critical friend or colleague struggles to understand what you are trying to say, then it is quite likely that the editors and reviewers will as well. Therefore, it is imperative that you have a second (even third) pair of eyes read your manuscript before the editor reviews it.

Have I Kept my Biases in Check?

We all have hidden biases. While an unconscious bias may not initially seem problematic, issues can arise when biases make their way into the manuscript. In addition to potentially affecting your interpretation of your results, biases can alienate some readers who might otherwise find value in your work. Some soul-searching is in order before you write.

Being transparent throughout your manuscript about the decisions you have made and articulating why those decisions were made can mitigate issues related to your biases. What voices, worldviews, and norms inform your selection of literature review, recruitment of participants, and interpretation of findings? Share this with your readers. Have you presented a one-sided view or have you allowed for alternative viewpoints to be expressed and legitimized within your manuscript? You can play a key role in unearthing your biases by carefully considering such questions.

Give careful thought to how you use language. In order to welcome more readers, do your best to avoid stereotyping descriptors, cultural misappropriations, sweeping generalizations, and assumptions about the gender identity of participants. For example, we need to be cautious of using binary terminology (she/her or he/him) when we do not know others' pronouns. For guidance on how to think about sentence structure changes needed when using gender neutral pronouns, such as singular they usage, see for instance Airton (2018). Words matter and using appropriate language can go a long way to ensuring your message is communicated in a respectful, accessible, and inclusive manner.

Which Journal Should I Choose?

Your manuscript needs to fit the target audience and mission of the journal to which you submit. Experience at CJSoTL has been that in most cases when a manuscript is not distributed for review, a poor fit is to blame. Careful selection of your first-choice journal will help you avoid this form of rejection.

For example, CJSoTL is a journal published by a parent organization, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), rather than solely by a publishing house. Its aim and scope are therefore aligned with STLHE's. Part of the CJSoTL mission statement reads that it is "designed to facilitate the development and dissemination of scholarly activity that sheds new light on student learning and teaching practice in colleges and universities." (CJSoTL, n.d.) In other words, if you are writing about teaching and learning in K-12 or in the context of non-credit continuing education, CJSoTL is not the journal for you. CJSoTL is also "designed to provide an infrastructure for the encouragement, promotion, modeling, and sharing of the scholarship of teaching and learning across all Canadian post-secondary institutions." (CJSoTL, n.d.) This indicates that there is a regional imperative. This does not necessarily mean you must present results from Canadian institutions, but you do need to demonstrate relevance to a primarily Canadian audience.

If your work is very specific to teaching and learning in your discipline, a broad SoTL journal may not be the right venue for your work. A manuscript that is very discipline-specific may be rejected without being sent out for review because only a small fraction of a broad SoTL journal's readers would consider your study relevant. In that case, you should consider a journal with a more specific intended audience (e.g., *Anatomical Sciences Education or the Journal of Teaching in Travel and Tourism, or Physical Review - Physics Education Research*). Similarly, if your investigations are related to a specific paradigm or modality of teaching and learning, then selecting a journal that focuses on that area may be the best choice for you (e.g. *Journal of Experiential Education* or *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*).

Whether you choose to publish in CJSoTL, or in another SoTL or disciplinary education/teaching journal, we encourage you to carefully read the journal's mandate before submitting. Submitting to a misaligned journal is likely to lead to disappointment and would be a waste of your precious time.

Am I Ready to Submit?

Beyond your paper being ready for submission, are you emotionally ready? Even though for some journals, including CJSoTL, helping authors to develop as scholars is part of their mandate, some manuscripts are rejected. We want to acknowledge and highlight the emotional labour that goes into publication as it can be disheartening for everyone involved when a manuscript is rejected. However, unless you think there were serious flaws in your research design and wish you had done things differently, do not be discouraged. There are always opportunities for good ideas to travel. It may be a matter of finding the right venue, journal, or critical friend to offer the necessary feedback.

Conversation with the Scholarly Community

Communicating Your Context

Your Physical Context

Context matters in SoTL. It matters a lot. Your class, at your institution, may be very different from the reality of a colleague teaching at another institution, even when the course is nominally equivalent. For instance, all comprehensive universities offer first-year calculus, but class sizes and demographics vary tremendously. If the results of your work are to be useful beyond your classroom or your institution, your reader needs to understand the context in which the study was done. Who are the students at your institution? Who are the students in your class? Is the course required or is it an elective? Are all the students in the same program? Where is the course situated in your students' degree(s)? By answering these and similar questions, you can help your reader assess how relevant your work is to their context.

Your Scholarly Context

One of the most common comments that we receive from reviewers relates to the absence of signature readings. It is important that you provide clarity of scholarly context for your readers. Did you include all the references that an interested reader should consult to deeply understand your work? Keep in mind that the list may differ depending on the journal in which you wish to publish: the readers of a broad SoTL journal may need more guidance than those of a disciplinary education journal. For instance, in a paper about publishing in SoTL, a relevant and useful citation would be Glassick et al. (1997), who, when assessing and evaluating the basic criteria for scholarship, discuss the need for publications to have clear goals, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique.

While it is important to reference signature readings in your manuscript, it is equally important to avoid perfunctory citations, which only serve to weigh down your paper. In a citation analysis of published SoTL articles in one year's worth of *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, Cappello and Miller-Young (2020) found a high number (74%) of perfunctory citations and a much lower number (26%) of more substantive ones. To support better use of citations, Cappello and Miller-Young include a coding scheme to help authors assess the depth and breadth of their literature reviews. Unless a reference is substantive and adds meaning to the written text, including it just for the sake of increasing the number of citations only makes your paper heavier to read.

Your Theoretical Context

When you conceived of your SoTL study, collected the data and analysed them, your thoughts and decisions were most likely guided by theories or models related to learning. These provide the framework for your work, the "structure explaining the concepts and premises" (Varpio et al., 2019, p. 22) that guide your study. As Grant and Osanloo (2014) state, this theoretical framework "...consists of the selected theory (or theories) that undergirds your thinking with regards to how you understand and plan to research your topic, as the concepts and definitions from that theory that are relevant to your topic" (p. 13). If your reader understands your theoretical framework, they will have a deeper understanding of your work, the decisions you made and why you made them.

There are several advantages to making your theoretical framework explicit; doing so helps your readers understand the design of your study, it exposes the limitations of your work, and it adds rigour and meaning to your study. As you write your paper, ask yourself: Have I explicitly communicated my theoretical framework? Have I interwoven the framework throughout the manuscript and engaged with it at different steps? This is done very effectively by some authors. For example, in reporting on their study of undergraduate perceptions of information literacy, Gross and Latham (2009) identify their framework in their abstract: "A relational approach, informed by competency theory and the imposed query model, provide the framework for the study design and interpretation of the data" (p. 336). They describe competency theory in their literature review stating that "this framework has been expanded in the current study to include perceptions of information literacy…" (p. 338), revisit this theory in the discussion section noting that "these self-views are consistent with what would be expected from the point of view of competency theory" (p. 345), and use competency theory again to ground their conclusions. These repeated references to their framework help the reader understand how their theoretical context informs and affects their work.

Communicating Your Analysis and Results

Writing about Quantitative Data

Some SoTL authors come from disciplines where quantitative analysis, and in particular the use of inferential statistics, is standard. However, this is not the case for all SoTL readers. Nonetheless, it is important that any reader be able to judge the validity of your analysis. This then requires explanations of why certain tests were done and why they are valid in this instance. An author cannot be expected to include a primer on statistics as a section of their paper, but a little attention to how sentences are written can go a long way toward bridging the statistical chasm between you and your reader. In many cases, it is helpful to begin by stating one's goal then name the test used to reach that goal; a reader unfamiliar with the test is more likely to build up a sense of what was done, more likely to continue reading the paper, and more likely to look up the test to learn about it. Consider, for instance, the following statement: “Chi-squared tests were performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between two categorical variables, namely between living scenario and sex, and living scenario and College of study.” For someone used to statistics, this sentence is fine, but it can be off-putting to others. An alternate phrasing might be: “We wished to determine whether there were significant relationships between living scenario and sex, and between living scenario and College of study. To do so, we used Pearson's chi-squared test, which is a valid test for comparing two sets of categorical data” (Hobbins et al., 2018; original form of the statement reproduced with permission). The reader first learns the objective then how this objective can be attained. The reviewer who had commented on how heavy-going the methods section was in the first round of review had no issues with it in the second round.

We frequently come across papers that use several statistical tests to analyze the same research questions. While this may be appropriate in some cases, a strong rationale for why many different statistical tests were used is needed if you wish to convey your results in a powerful and clear manner. If an additional test does not add substantively to your analysis, do not include it in your manuscript. Your readers will thank you for keeping the analysis narrative clear and focused.

The results of parametric statistical tests assume that the data follow a normal distribution, yet they are often presented without any discussion of the applicability of these tests. Your readers need information that will allow them to decide whether or not they agree that the use of a parametric test is justified. For instance, you could show a graph of the data, report the skewness and kurtosis, or report the results of a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test or a Shapiro-Wilk test.

We caution authors to exercise care when referring to p-values and significance; misleading statements are often made in this context. We recommend, as a starting point, reading the American Statistical Association’s statement on p-values (included in Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016). Consider including effect sizes, at least for cases where you point to a significant difference. A difference can be statistically significant yet unimportant in practice. Adding effect size information may allow you to deepen your discussion by expanding more in cases with larger effect sizes.

It is, of course, essential that, if you are going to use statistics, you use them properly. Software packages make it easy to run statistical tests, but the fact that numbers are calculated does not mean that the test was appropriate for the data under consideration. Caution is warranted lest statistical tests be misused and their results interpreted incorrectly or overinterpreted. If you are not yet confident in your quantitative analysis skills, talk to a statistician!

Writing about Qualitative Data

Some SoTL authors come from disciplines where qualitative analysis is standard. However, this is not the case for all SoTL readers. Nonetheless, it is important that any reader be able to understand the rigour and trustworthiness of your findings. This then requires clarity in terms of the thought processes that influenced decision-making, including a rich description of the participants’ accounts.

It is especially important to offer a detailed description of the methodology and be transparent about data collection methods and instruments. For example, the following are all important details that need to be articulated to your reader: the number of sites involved and why these sites were involved, the method for recruiting your study’s research participants, and the number of participants you recruited. Helping your reader properly assess your work also requires that you be attentive to your entire dataset and clearly describe the process of identifying patterns and drawing conclusions. At the heart of qualitative data analysis is the process of uncovering constructs, patterns, insights, and the multiple realities experienced by the participants themselves.

Care should be taken when choosing which quotes to include in your manuscript. Not every quote gathered needs to be displayed, especially if it simply repeats what another respondent has said. Consider, for instance, the following quotes: "I need some degree of control over my responsibilities," "I need to have the ability to identify and dictate what the work is," and "I need a sense of agency over the things I do." Including all of these quotes and several similar ones, makes the paper too repetitive which can easily alienate the reader and even misrepresent what is at the essence of the research. Selecting sufficient and relevant quotes from the participants to tell the story in a concise and logical way can be a rewarding experience. Yet, for this to feel like a conversation and an authentic exchange of ideas with your readership, we would encourage authors to make sure they also offer their insights gained, based on the interpretation of those quotes; providing their voice as the researcher/writer.

Whether you use quantitative or qualitative methods, or a mix of the two, in communicating your analysis and results, your manuscript should tell your readers what you did, how you did it and why you did it. Keeping this in mind while writing will greatly enhance your manuscript.

Conversation with the Journal

Reviewers Join the Conversation

If you act as a reviewer yourself, then we are sure you will share the sentiment that the generosity of the reviewers for CJSoTL deserves praise and admiration. Recognize that journal reviewers and editors are volunteers and so there is a limit to how much time and energy they should spend on your paper. They receive no recognition for their contributions to your manuscript, they are not listed as co-authors, therefore you should not expect them to do substantial rewriting for you. Please respect that reviewers are highly valuable and precious to the effective running of a journal.

The review round can be a frustrating experience or it can be an opportunity to improve your paper so that it is more impactful and helpful for a broader swath of SoTL scholars and instructors. Because we put so much time and effort into conducting research and crafting papers, we can be defensive when modifications are suggested. However, when we shift our focus toward viewing the review process as a scholarly conversation, we find that it allows us to refine our thinking and how we communicate about our work.

When inviting reviewers, editors think about the topic of the research, certainly, but also about the methods and about the intended broad reach of a SoTL journal. The reviewers are meant to contribute different perspectives; it is normal and even desirable that they should highlight different aspects of your manuscript for improvement. If one reviewer is positive and another more critical, you will need to respond with tact and balance.

There are times when a reviewer offers a criticism that causes an author to think: "Did they even read the paper? They completely misunderstood!" If this happens, pause to figure out why they misunderstood. What could you have expressed more clearly? What crucial background or context element was missing for the reader? If a reviewer misunderstood, chances are that other readers would also, so the feedback, while initially frustrating, highlights an opportunity to improve communication.

It is absolutely essential that you respond to every point raised by all reviewers and that you do so very clearly. In addition to the new version of your manuscript, submit a document that lists every comment made by the reviewers and, for each, a statement of how you addressed that comment or why you chose not to address it. The latter is an important point: you do not need to do everything the reviewers suggest, but you must have a good reason for not following a suggestion and you must help the editor and the reviewers understand that reason. In some cases, it may be: “Because of constraint X, we could not do Y.” If that is the case, then there is probably a future reader who will appreciate it if you write this in your paper. In other cases, the reviewer may have disciplinary expectations related to how papers are written. If you choose to ignore related suggestions, you should explain why.

Whether you received fairly positive feedback or feedback that requires more work, be appreciative of the time and thought that went into providing it. A comment or few to this effect in your response will be very much appreciated.

The Editor’s Role in the Conversation

You have received feedback from your reviewers and tried to respond. This is where the editor joins the conversation. The reviewers are not always right, nor are you always right. There are several voices involved, and the editor acts as facilitator/mediator. If the opinions of your reviewers diverge, it may be worthwhile consulting the editor for guidance on how to proceed. If all your reviews are critical, remember that you and your authorship team have a voice here. If you do not agree with some comments, explain your side to the editor. We are all rational humans in this endeavour, and we should hope to reach an understanding through respectful discussion. In the end, it is the editor who, taking into consideration the reviewers’ feedback and your response, determines the outcome. This may lead to further conversations with reviewers, i.e., another round of reviews and/or with editors. Whatever the case, these conversations are opportunities for growth.

Conclusion

The road to publication can be long, emotional, and arduous. We hope that by understanding the process better, you will be able to enjoy the journey and embrace both the highs and the lows along the way. We suggest that in writing a compelling story, it is necessary to join a conversation with yourself, the scholarly community, and the journal. By focusing on the conversation and on communicating with your eventual readers, you will craft a more impactful manuscript. By approaching the review round as a conversation with reviewers and editors, you are more likely to properly address all the feedback received. Reviewers and the editorial team are there to help you communicate more clearly and with a wider readership. All of these considerations are opportunities to return to your writing with a fresh pair of eyes and new insights. The conversation will allow you to take pride in your craft.

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