

**The seven-fold path: Teacher writing in the knowledge society***by William J. Hunter***The problem**

Teachers at every level of the educational system have grown accustomed to the idea that we live in a time of rapid change, with new products, technologies, and services emerging constantly. Yet we may be surprised when some of them, like i-Pods or Twitter, become household words before we have had time to Google them. An academic these days can wake up from an afternoon nap feeling just like Rip van Winkle. We might not be blamed for wondering where the creative energy and inspiration behind all this new stuff comes from.

**The role of education past**

However, we should not wonder too long or too hard. Our schools, colleges, and universities have been highly instrumental in the creation of the intellectual marketplace we variously call The Information Age, the Knowledge Society, or the Mobile Communication Society. Indeed, those of us who work in universities have sufficient hubris to think that universities are the primordial ooze for the evolution of thought. They are gathering places for old knowledge and new ideas as well as for old teachers and new learners. At their dark, moist and messy core, fragments of information meet flagellant inspirations and new conceptions develop. If the new conceptions survive, they enter successive gauntlets of critical analysis that prepare them to meet the light of day.

While universities have a social role that requires them to create and disseminate new knowledge, schools and colleges often have rich opportunities to do the same. University faculty may lament that the preparation to do research takes place at the doctoral level, but this fails to recognize two very critical features of the knowledge revolution:

- the development of new products and services in industry involves significant levels of applied research being carried out by people who may or may not have academic credentials, and
- the increasing availability of information through the Internet means that even elementary school students may have the latest academic journals at their fingertips.

**The role of education future**

I think the only responsible way to deal with these facts is to recognize that increasingly the ability to read, understand, and critique research will become a right, if not a duty, of citizenship. For this to happen, it is critical that elementary, high school, and college teachers begin to see themselves as teachers of citizen-researchers who need to know how to find, read, analyze, evaluate and critique research. Inventing new ideas that can stand the tough scrutiny of knowledgeable

peers may always be an achievement reserved for only some people, but teachers at all levels should recognize that they have a role in nurturing the talents that will be a key part of life in the more scholarly world of the knowledge society.

In a recent issue of this journal, Jim Gough (2008) related a story about a student who was misled by a website that asserted a 25% increase in the murder rate in Canada over a period when Statistics Canada indicated the figure had dropped 20%. Gough argues that errors like this happen because students may fail to distinguish sites that have advocacy roles (as in this case, [www.cap-crime-stats.com](http://www.cap-crime-stats.com)) from those that have informational roles (like [www.statscan.ca](http://www.statscan.ca)). He says: "This blurring of the borders can create a situation that is detrimental to the critical evaluation of information, confusion about the source and the kind of information provided." Increasingly, it will be the responsibility of teachers and librarians to educate children and the public about how better to make (previously) academic decisions of this kind. It is already the case that Ontario grade school curricula are replete with expectations that students will acquire research skills and understanding. A small number of examples is given in the box below.

#### Ontario Curriculum Expectations about Research

##### **Grade 9/10 Arts and English**

- identify research methods appropriate to developing ideas and text for a drama.

from <<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/arts910curr.txt>>

##### **Grade 9/10 Arts and English**

- evaluate the historical accuracy of a biography given on a website by researching reliable sources

from

<<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english1112currb.txt>>

##### **Mathematics**

- Students need to learn a variety of research methods and inquiry approaches in order to carry out these investigations and to solve problems, and they need to be able to select the methods that are most appropriate for a particular inquiry.

from

<<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/math910curr.txt>>

##### **Science**

- communicate the procedures and results of investigations and research for specific purposes using data tables and laboratory reports (e.g., report on an experimental investigation of the movement of materials across a

cell membrane);

from  
<<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/science1112curr.txt>>

Of course, this raises the unpleasant question: “If in the past we have not educated teachers and college instructors to do research, how can we expect them to assist students in becoming more knowledgeable readers and critics of research?” I think the answer to that question lies in an aphorism that is well-loved in college circles: “learn by doing.” The “doing” of research has many aspects: synthesizing existing knowledge, proposing new questions, gathering appropriate data, organizing and analyzing the data, drawing inferences and conclusions, and sharing the results. Most of these aspects play out differently in different disciplines, indeed, the unique set of research tools and research methods used by a community of scholars is largely what defines the discipline. However, the last bit, “sharing the results” is common to all and that is where I think school and college teachers can begin their “doing.”

### **The seven-fold path**

University faculty in Canada live by a simple rule: publish or perish. It is not just a catchy phrase; this dictum is the university’s way of fulfilling its social role as knowledge generator. School and college teachers need not take the advice to such an extreme, perhaps they could live by something like “Publish for Pete’s sake.” To this end, I recommend the seven-fold path.

The first fold in the path is to think about publication as simply another form of teaching—sharing knowledge and experience with learners who are outside of the classroom—teachers, parents, students in other places, industrial trainers, university researchers, and the general public. This is why I say that publication is an opportunity—a way to extend your practice and your influence. As online learning grows, many teachers will find writing to be an important form of communication even within their classrooms.

The second fold in the path is a self-imposed demand to clarify and formalize thought that comes when one knows that their written words will be read by others. It might seem that “texting” puts an end to this, but it is clear that writers make distinctions about the audience and the type of writing they are doing and adjust their performance accordingly. This paper is an example of what I mean—it started as a note to B.Ed. students about the reasons for learning about educational research. That note expanded into notes for my part in a panel discussion for college educators. Those notes got formalized and elaborated into a short paper that I posted on my website. That became a paper for *The College Quarterly* when I added some documentation, incorporated language about teaching that I had written just to clear my mind, used another note to B.Ed. students to create the text box above, and tried to assemble all of that as a paper for an audience of college educators.

The third fold is the way that writing engenders reflection. Writing about one’s own teaching experience or one’s ideas or about the key concepts in a course often results in serious thought about how to make things better. That means considering

change which is the first step in professional growth and development. For some, these reflections may include the possibility of engaging in some form of disciplined inquiry about teaching—such as action research.

The fourth fold is a small one: if writing encourages careful formulation of ideas and systematic reflection on practice, then it is reasonable to expect that it might well lead to improved classroom practice.

The fifth fold may be the real source of writers' block: when you make your idea public, you invite feedback, whether you want it or not. Some feedback is downright flattering ("Wait, you are Mehmet Lazarus? You wrote about using spell checkers to teach chemistry vocabulary, didn't you? Wow—that piece changed my life!") and nearly all of it is constructive in some way. Perhaps most rewarding is feedback that results in a new teaching and writing collaboration so that your writing becomes part of a process of community building.

The sixth fold is rewarding: there is a definite buzz to seeing your name in print. Even if someone lists you in the acknowledgements for their work or makes you the fourth author because you made what you thought was a trivial contribution to their thinking, you know that being an author makes you an authority and you can feel good about that. I once knew a behavioural psychologist who would routinely stop people in the hall and show them a photocopy of his most recent publication. They didn't get time to read it and they might not have understood the work, but people usually said something like "That's great, Bob." I asked him why he did this and he said that peoples' responses were "positive feedback" that would reward him for writing and he would therefore write more. And he did.

The seventh fold is very personal: it is the simple satisfaction of expressing yourself. You might get the same sort of thing from painting or composing music or building a garage—the sense of facing a challenge and having concrete results to show that you met it. We don't often get that kind of reward in classroom teaching—the rewards of teaching are frequently intangible and often deferred, so it is nice to have something solid to look at from time to time.

So with all these virtues in favour of teacher research and writing, how do you get started? The standard advice to anyone interested in a writing career is "read, read, read." In this case, read the writing of other teachers and of educational researchers. Some of it may seem inaccessible at first, but there is plenty of good stuff that is written for general consumption and this is a great place to start. For postsecondary teachers in Ontario (or elsewhere), The College Quarterly (<http://www.senecac.on.ca/quarterly/>) is a great example of accessible writing by knowledgeable colleagues. For classroom teachers, a great starting place is the Research into Practice series ([http://oade.cou.on.ca/\\_bin/whatWorks.cfm](http://oade.cou.on.ca/_bin/whatWorks.cfm)) which uses Ontario's Deans of Education as the editorial review team.

### **The last bit**

The next step will depend on each teacher's interests and levels of confidence with research methods. Not long ago, I encountered a teacher's blog in which he lamented the fact that when his graduate program ended he would no longer have access to research journals. I sent him a quick note with this link to the American Educational Research Association's list of nearly 300 Open Access education

journals: <http://aera-cr.asu.edu/ejournals/> . There is something in there for nearly everyone.

Still, this only has you reading, not writing. How do you do that? In part, it is a matter of just putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and letting the ideas flow, but if you want to be published, you will need to do more than that. You will need to think critically about the experiences and ideas you want to write about and try to put them into the broader context of what others have written. You might find “A framework for the activities involved in the writing process” (<http://sites.google.com/site/chasseurandhunter/home/papers-and-handouts> ) useful in getting you started. The next step is to find journals or magazines (or websites or even blogs) that publish the kinds of things you want to write and read their guidelines for authors. As an experienced editor, let me tell you this: if you don’t want to follow the guidelines, find a different place to publish. The guidelines are serious business.

If your interests run more along the lines of research or disciplined inquiry, then you will need to be comfortable with research methodology and that requires more than we can do here. Generally, though, a good starting point for classroom teachers is action research: <http://www.web.net/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html> . Although it is intended primarily for much younger researchers, there is good advice and some useful tools for researchers at Noodle: <http://www.noodletools.com/> .

In any case, you will need to look for the right place to publish your work. One good place is the journal or magazine that you most enjoy reading. Another is the place that published the works most closely related to your own paper (that you read when reviewing the literature). Another way of dealing with this is to follow the same kind of “getting your feet wet” process I recommended for reading—start with places that publish clear, easy-to-read articles for a general audience.

Today, however, authors have a whole lot of other options. For example, Richard Garlikov teaches philosophy at a U.S. college and he has created a web page to house his many thoughtful papers on teaching; <http://www.garlikov.com/writings.htm> . If you aren’t up to creating a web site from scratch, Google offers two tools that might interest you: Google Sites (where I posted an earlier version of this paper on a site I created using their tools) and Google Documents (which allows you to share documents with selected people—or everyone—and even to participate in collaborative writing by involving several people in revising a common paper). Or you can blog, Facebook, Wiki, Bebo, Twitter, etc. If you don’t want to be all that public, you could create a mailing list and just send your work to trusted colleagues. In fact, having your work read by “a critical friend” is often suggested as a part of the writing process.

Of course, if you get really serious, you will want to do graduate work, take research methodology courses and earn a Nobel Prize (it would be a first in education). Worse things have happened.

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Google Docs and Google Sites are available from a menu at the top of the Google search page.

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