



[Book Review] *Writing About Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations Across a Range of Genres* by Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather

A fundamental tenet of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is that it is “made public” by sharing the results and analyses of an inquiry so they can be interpreted by others, so they can then influence teaching, learning, and SoTL locally and more globally. This public-ness occurs in many different formats. Although oral delivery in seminars, workshops, and meetings are common, and digital media promise to expand the possibilities, the written format is currently the most widely accepted way of going public—not just because of the expectations of the academy, but also because written work is generally less ephemeral. SoTL would thus benefit from more support in illuminating what this writing can and should look like, and why. Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather’s *Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations across a Range of Genres* does just that.

As experienced SoTL scholars, current and past presidents in International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), and former and current co-editors of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, we volunteered to write about the book for [TLI Reviews](#)—the journal’s specific kind of review that focuses less on “Is it good?” and, through a series of [recommended questions](#), more pointedly on “What does it offer readers of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*?” Before we begin considering what the book offers to readers of this international journal focused on SoTL, though, it’s worth pointing out that it’s titled *Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, not *Writing SoTL*—to explicitly distinguish the authors’ intentions from how we reflect on its usefulness for *TLI* readers.

THE BOOK

The central assertion of *Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* is repeated explicitly throughout the book:

First, we argue that writing for publication is a complex process of creating and contributing to conversations, forging identities, and embracing opportunities for ongoing learning.

Second, we argue that we should recognize and value writing about learning and teaching through many different writing genres. (21)

These two points also frame the structure of the book, with the first part dedicated to how “Writing can capture and convey what makes us human, what makes us connected, what keeps us alive” (17)

and the bulk of the book focused the choreographies, logistics, words of wisdom, and templates for writing.

This book has several noteworthy aspects *as a book*, all grounded in the assumption that it should be readily available and accessible. *Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* is the third book in the [Center for Engaged Learning Open Access Book Series](#) from Elon University (US). Series Editors Jessie Moore and Peter Felten are curating a collection of books published both as free PDFs online and as hardcopies for purchase at a reasonable price. The books are also pleasing to the eye, from professional graphic design to font style and size, both of which matter to reading on screen, aging eyes, and accessibility. Online resources are also linked throughout the book, directly from within the PDF or through an easy download for hard-copy readers.

HOW TLI READERS MIGHT USE THE BOOK

In their first chapter, Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather identify their “Intended Audiences,” plural *audiences* made up of academics, professional staff, and students, each of which is defined as broadly and inclusively as possible. This intention reflects the broader values of the SoTL community, represented in its ubiquitous metaphor of the “big tent” (Huber & Hutchings 2005, 30), this journal’s guide for “[Writing for TLI’s Diverse Readers](#),” and ISSOTL’s “Diversity and Inclusion” goal of its 2019 [Strategic Plan](#). This intention also reflects some of the challenges of the SoTL community, namely, how to effectively speak to such a broad and diverse audience without (unintentionally) alienating part of that very audience. For example, some readers of *TLI* may find the descriptions of some of the conventions unfamiliar to those within their own contexts, despite the international list of thinkers (i.e., the authors, the readers listed in the Acknowledgements) behind the book. Writing for teaching awards, fellowships, and promotions, for example, is contextual. The authors note, “Given the wide range of different types of teaching awards, fellowships, and promotions, it is difficult to generalize about writing your application” (245), but since the center section of the book is focused on defining such conventions, they generalize anyway. These genres in Sweden for example are, first of all, quite rare. There aren’t many teaching awards or fellowships available, neither at the institutional nor at the national level. It may be the same in other countries, perhaps particularly outside of the English-speaking world. The genre of teaching and promotion portfolios in Scandinavia are also somewhat different than in many English-speaking contexts, in that they typically require substantial reflections on challenging teaching situations rather than a self-promoting style of writing.

We also wondered how scholars and writers in the humanities would see themselves in *Writing about Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. It’s worth noting that the one of us not in the humanities raised this question after we’d read the book, another observation on the larger challenge of writing for so many “intended audiences.” Perhaps, for example, in writing about empirical research articles—which the authors identify as “perhaps the most common” and “considered by many to be the most prestigious genre as they are historically assumed to be the basis for advancing knowledge and understanding, as well as confirming or challenging previous research” (117)—it would have been helpful to reframe and expand on the brief statement, “[t]he humanities have different format variations” (108). The way it is currently expressed runs the risk of “othering” the humanities, especially when the authors describe *only* the format from which, as they accurately note, the humanities varies: “When you write an empirical research article, your argument will unfold

across your introduction, literature review, methods, findings, discussion, implications, and conclusion” (119). What is a writer from the humanities to do here? To be fair, as we have seen in our work with *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, ISSOTL, and elsewhere, SoTL’s ambitious goals of being a big, inclusive, diverse tent may always be an imperfect endeavor, and that has to be okay.

Ultimately, we see *Writing about Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* as most useful for *TLI* readers who haven’t yet begun writing. Readers who wish for some guidance on writing in general, the book is effectively grounded in classic writing studies scholarship (e.g., writing to learn, writing as a process, reader- and writer-based writing, focusing on audience and purpose). Other readers may have a SoTL project under way or ready to be shared, and they’re looking for where to begin. Some who wish for a full primer on a new, human-centered approach to scholarly writing would find the first 75 pages enriching as they explore who they want to be with their work, and how they can capture that in their writing about teaching and learning. These pages lead readers through that identity-clarifying and -composing process. Others may seek specific advice for writing a good title or abstract, or figuring out the best circumstances to support their writing practice (e.g., time of day, space and lighting), or understanding the conventional definition of ‘empirical research article’ or ‘case study.’

As journal editors, we also see the book as especially useful for *TLI* readers who are preparing to submit to a specific journal. The authors offer straightforward advice about precisely following the chosen journal’s guidelines and include a detailed checklist similar to those found on journal websites. (*TLI*’s submission preparation checklist, for instance, is found [here](#).) Their paragraph on selecting keywords makes explicit a step that, for some writers, is often an afterthought in guesswork. And, although *TLI*’s peer review ethos is different from many other journals (Chick & Poole, 2015; Chick, Poole, & Blackman 2016; [Peer Review at Teaching & Learning Inquiry](#)), we find the “Responding to Reviewers and Dealing with Rejection” helpful for potential *TLI* authors. In fact, our editorial team recently discussed the range in quality and effectiveness of the response to reviewers submitted with revisions, so we can imagine pointing authors to Table 28.2, which outlines the options for “Agree[ing] with request,” “Disagree[ing] with the request,” and responding to “Reviewers [who] make contradictory requests” (310).

What we both found most inspiring is the book’s encouragement to be brave, to go outside of the ordinary, and to consider writing in different ways. In this way, the book aligns well with *TLI*’s vision, and models some of the moves we’d like to see more frequently in all SoTL made public:

- explicitly describing the authors’ identities and positionalities,
- conceiving of writing beyond the technical and transactional and instead representing it as a human endeavor written by real people with identities and emotions and stories, and
- generously quoting and citing from a range of voices.

These moves—these strengths of the book—mirror our desire to see in *TLI*’s pages more SoTL conversations that vividly “reveal the array of lived experiences” (6) among different disciplinary, institutional, and geographical contexts, and in many different genres and mixtures of genres.

Because of the possibilities for the SoTL community based on the strengths above, parts of the book that are less useful—not “bad,” just less useful for SoTL writers—stand out a bit, particularly for those new to writing about teaching and learning. For example, while the book covers a lot of ground in its 300+ pages, it includes chapters on writing about teaching and learning in opinion pieces and social media but not in theses, book reviews, or grant applications. We go back and forth on this issue, though, as we recognize the role of writing for the public, but we wondered

whether shorter chapters might've allowed room for these other important genres. It's hard, though, to fault the authors for setting boundaries, and again, the book is titled *Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, not *Writing SoTL*.

There's another tension with the middle section of the book that we see as a less ambiguous concern for *TLI* readers. Within the context of the first 75 pages, their overarching goal seems to be to invite writers to try out something unfamiliar, a genre that might capture that essence of *who I want to be with this work*. Yes! Yet while the authors purportedly encourage "a blurring of the boundaries within and between genres" (112), nearly half of the book's 330 pages are devoted to carefully "naming and clarifying" (103) their 11 conventional genres. Further, as they admit at the beginning of this longest section devoted to naming and clarifying these conventional genres, "We suspect that many readers will jump to this part of the book because it is practical and provides detailed sets of questions to guide writing" in these 11 genres (100). Here's the rub. Despite the intentions expressed in places, the bulk and potentially most read part of the book is found in chapters that neatly circumscribe 11 genres in ways that may not be conducive to the human-centered writing inspired in earlier pages that "many readers will" (or may) have skipped.

Ultimately, we don't seek "clearer descriptions of the boundaries among genres" (112) in an effort to *reinforce* any distinctions between the genres, but instead because we wonder about the apparent clarity (or even utility) of the authors' descriptions of these genre boundaries. Indeed, rather than guiding writers toward blurring boundaries and mixing genres to reflect their early, inspiring observation that "Writing can capture and convey what makes us human, what makes us connected, what keeps us alive" (17), the planning document in Figure 11.1 begins with "1. Decide on a genre" (emphasis added; 114), and the chapter titles tell us that, for example, "empirical research articles" are for "analyzing and reporting data," whereas case studies are for "focusing on practical experiences," and reflective essays are for "revealing the process." These distinctions are unfamiliar to us, and we are experienced SoTL writers. In fact, we're more familiar with efforts to encourage writers to weave together what are here presented as separate purposes, or to draw together pieces from what are here represented as distinct genres. In other words, an effective SoTL publication or presentation would (regardless of its genre, and depending on its length and audience) contain many of the *moves* represented across the multiple chapters couched in these 150 pages. (For this reason and more, in "[Types of Submissions](#)," *TLI* avoids calling for narrow genres and explicitly "invites all types of articles, an intentionally broad category encompassing the conventional writing products of many disciplines.")

We are certain the authors didn't intend for their book to be used in this way. In fact, in the first chapter, they have a lovely paragraph about how genres are "always evolving," and how they seek to "trouble these divides" between them, quoting a colleague who asserted that "conceptual and theoretical pieces are also research articles" (15). And later, they acknowledge that "The genres we name overlap" (108), and "the boundaries between [some of the different genres they discuss] are blurred.... The characteristics of each genre are best seen not as mutually exclusive but rather as overlapping and falling along a continuum" (155). But these individual passages, the early pages full of human-centered approaches to writing, and the caveats toward creativity, complexity, and hybridity struggle to disrupt the potentially compliant effect of distinct chapters and seemingly crisp delineations between these genres in the book's middle section.

Stepping back again to look at the book as a whole, *Writing about Learning and Teaching in*

Higher Education focuses on the important post-SoTL-project phase of going public, which gets little attention and even less support in currently available resources, so the book begins to fill an important gap. Its contribution, like the work of Helen Sword (2019), significantly humanizes the act of writing about teaching and learning in higher education. Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather invite readers into their personal stories, their developments as writers, their different preferences, and their successes—as well as their struggles and failures. We hear these last experiences too rarely, especially from experts in the field. Additionally, many of the pages read like a conversation with the authors, or an extended workshop where the facilitators share their material and their stories, and then invite participants to reflect and share their own. These facilitators—the authors of this book—ultimately ask us to explore how our individual identities affect our SoTL work, how our SoTL work affects who we are, and how our writing can capture these experiences.

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