

Review of Healey, Matthews and Cook-Sather (2020) ‘Writing About Learning & Teaching in Higher Education, Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations across a Range of Genres’

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This article offers a short review of Healey, Matthews and Cook-Sather (2020) ‘Writing About Learning & Teaching in Higher Education, Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations across a Range of Genres’ published open-access by the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University in September 2020. The book itself was inspired by the positive response to a journal article focusing on a similar topic written by the authors (Healey *et al.*, 2019) and builds on many positive conversations since. Whilst the book isn’t explicitly related to the topic of student engagement, this review summarises some of the key strengths of the book and explores how it relates to writing about student engagement in higher education.

The authors, Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather, are experienced academics working in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America, with broad interests in higher education, pedagogy, and the scholarship of learning and teaching. Setting up a personalised and supportive feel to the book early on, Chapter 1 in part introduces the authors, their perspectives, and how they have developed as learning and teaching scholars and writers (p.4).

Part 1 articulates the books goals and some of the key points discussed are worth summarising here as they provide the link to writing about student engagement in higher education. A distinctive feature of this book is that it explores writing not only ‘traditional research’ papers for academic journals but looks at writing across a range of ‘genres’. The authors define genre as the “kind or form of writing you select. For example...an empirical research article, an opinion piece, a reflective essay, or a blog” (Healey *et al.*, 2020, p.3). Arguably writing ‘traditional research’ articles can be seen as exclusive to some groups, especially to students and early-career faculty (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2019); although it is noted that the concept of ‘traditional research’ being the peer-reviewed empirical research article is arguably a western/colonial construct. For student authors Cook-Sather *et al.* (2021) identify that offering a wide range of genres is of particular importance, and a number of journals, such as the *International Journal for Students as Partners* (Cliffe *et al.*, 2017), the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (Healey & Hill, 2019), and indeed the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* (Bryson & Hampshire, 2016), offer and publish a range of such genres with the intention of hearing the student voice and offering a space for students and staff to equally contribute to scholarly conversations. The prospect of students themselves writing brings into focus another key strength of the book in that it has been written with a broad readership in mind, including students (ranging from undergraduate to graduate students), professional staff (non-academic staff working in a HE institution) and academics/members of faculty.

Part 2 of the book moves on to discuss the potential of writing about learning and teaching, setting the conceptual scene for the more practical writing advice which follows in the later sections. Indeed, another key strength of the text is the clear, concise and ‘student friendly’ practical advice in Parts 3-6. Part 3 initially prompts the

reader to reflect on their motivation for writing, before discussing topics such as independent vs collaborative (staff and student) writing, deciding on a journal outlet and title, and starting to prepare the initial draft text. Part 4 picks up the writing process through the lens of eleven different genres, including the ‘traditional research’ article, case studies, reflective essays, opinion pieces, stories, conference presentations and social media platforms. Each genre is discussed in its own Chapter (12-22), unpacking the different novelties and opportunities for that writing style and offering some top tips and guiding questions for the reader, ending with an “Over to You” summary. These chapters offer evidenced practical advice which makes them effective, especially if the reader is new to that style of writing.

From a student perspective the final section of the book (Part 6) is particularly informative and discusses the process of submitting your writing to a journal, the process of peer-review, how to respond to reviewer comments, and how to finish the process by sharing and promoting your published piece. A personal favourite feature in Chapter 28 is the authors experiences of having a piece rejected by a journal (p.310). These accounts highlight to new writers that even regarded and successful academics such as the authors have faced rejection from journals, which in the words of Kelly Matthews is “oddly comforting” (p.310). Speaking from personal experience, a student’s first foray into the ‘world of academic publishing’ can be quite daunting, unfamiliar, and sometimes unsettling (especially if a negative review comes back or your work is rejected). Whilst a student might have been taught ‘how to write’ as part of their studies, they are often not taught ‘how to publish’. So, this detailed, and again evidenced, discussion is very helpful for student and less experienced staff authors.

Across the book Healey, Matthews and Cook-Sather chart the ‘writing process’ from start to finish, offering some practical advice for writing across a large range of different genres. Throughout various examples and personal accounts are explored which makes the book feel personalised and supportive, and certainly suitable for both students and staff to learn from. In summary Healey, Matthews and Cook-Sather explore how students and staff may create and contribute to conversations about student engagement through writing in a variety of genres, essentially highlighting that writing about experiences of higher education can be for anyone involved in it.

Book Link: <https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/books/writing-about-learning/>

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