

Writing for publication as a tool in teacher development

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Writing is widely accepted as a tool in the personal and professional development of teachers. Among other forms of teacher writing, writing for publication is rather unusual as it requires courage to share ideas and unfavourable working conditions prevent teachers from finding time and space to write for publication in the first place. In this study, 21 teacher-authors who have published in Humanising Language Teaching, an online open-access journal and forum for teachers, report on how their publications contributed to their own personal and professional development. The reports show that the teacher-authors do not see themselves primarily as writers but as teachers who intend to inform peers about their professional lives. The participants report that writing gives them a feeling of satisfaction in that they have gained a sense of membership to an international community. They also state that writing for publication helps them to reflect on their classroom practice and to develop research skills.

Introduction

There is general agreement that professional development is a complex and ongoing process which necessitates a move away from traditional workshop delivery models of training to continuing self-reflection. Conceptualized through this alternative perspective, the importance of writing for teacher development has been widely recognized. It is a form of reflection and self-monitoring that helps teachers become aware of their knowledge base, skills, and attitudes (Johnson and Golombek 2002). It is a discovery process in which teachers come to question their own teaching and develop an insider point of view on their own practice (Richards and Lockhart 1996). Therefore, writing contributes to professional learning as it allows teachers to develop ownership, agency, and authority in their profession (Wood and Lieberman 2000). Additionally, with their insider view, teacher-authors can substantially contribute to the understanding of teaching practice, highlighting elements that might remain unnoticed by outsiders (Hopkins 2002).

Writing for publication among other forms of teacher writing

Burton (2005) distinguishes four modes of teacher writing, suggesting that it takes place in a continuum ranging from writing to inform oneself as reflective practice at one end, and informing others through stating expertise at the other:

- private writing as personal documentation and reflection in form of journal keeping; the audience is the teacher herself;
- shared writing as documentation and reflection written for another teacher or, for instance, supervisor (i.e. dialogical journaling);
- published, non-refereed writing to inform a teaching community through group journals or email lists (for example Yahoo groups, blogs); and
- published, refereed writing refers to the publication of articles in journals or book chapters with public access (for example *ELT Journal*, *Humanising Language Teaching (HLT)*).

Among these forms, writing for publication is rather challenging for several reasons. First, it might be perceived as intimidating because it is often associated with the role of teacher as researcher, requiring skills to conduct valid and reliable research, and to write academically; consequently, teachers regard ‘achieving refereed publication as an unusual professional milestone, rather than a natural means of communication’ (Burton op.cit.: 2). Second, unfavourable working conditions hinder teachers from taking up writing (ibid.). Next, in contrast to university-based scholars who are expected to make research accessible to the public, writing for publication is usually not regarded as a core duty of teachers; actually, there is evidence that teachers conceptualize research differently from more formal models of academic research, seeing it as a way to share reflection on practice (Borg 2007). Additionally, the psychological distance between teachers and research may be based on teachers’ concerns that research is potentially parasitical, as researchers are often believed to serve their own needs by exploiting the teachers’ contexts (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). Finally, the exclusion of teachers from participation in educational discourse is often promoted institutionally in order to prevent them from raising their voices in decision-making processes beyond the classroom (Perrillo 2010). Consequently, teachers are likely to internalize a role model, and thus, it is assumed, will follow instructions issued by superiors (ministries, principals, etc.) and will abstain from publication as a ‘space in which their right to participate is far from settled’ (Whitney, Dawson, Anderson, Kang, Rios, Olcese, and Ridgeman 2012: 393).

Purposes and benefits of teacher writing for publication

Considerable insights into the constructive role of teacher writing for publication come from studies carried out within the National Writing Project (NWP), in which American teachers at all grade levels and in all subjects are introduced to the task of writing through seminars and workshops, and then are given the opportunity to publish articles (Whitney 2010). Wood and Lieberman (op.cit.) showed that teachers in the NWP benefitted from three learning principles; Whitney *et al.* (2012) confirmed these in a study including teachers writing independently:

- 1 *Authorship*: teacher-authors perceive themselves as capable of creating ideas to be shared with others. Writing for publication provides opportunities for self-expression and exercising their own voice, thus developing a sense of authorship.

- 2 *Authority*: perceived authorship enables teacher-authors to gain authority as they recognize their own expertise, knowledge, and understanding as worth sharing. Teacher-authors also understand that authority does not necessarily come from outside.
- 3 *Authorization*: projects, networks, or publications authorize ‘teachers to move forward in developing and sharing knowledge, lending the credibility of the network and its reputation to the actions of any one teacher in it’ (Whitney *et al.* 2012: 392).

Writing for publication contributes not only to teacher learning but can also improve the quality of teaching in the classroom and inform research. We will deal with these benefits in turn.

As teacher-authors predominantly write about their classroom practices, they start from observing them and then analyse and reflect on them by putting documented practices into the perspective of research-informed literature. Thus, writing for publication helps recognize different views and forces teachers to ‘accommodate new ideas with old habits and beliefs’ (Wood and Lieberman *op.cit.*: 259). Such a process may not directly lead to better teaching, but it may lead to refining the skill of reflection and, indirectly, to more effective teaching. However, it may also generate feelings of insecurity as teachers have to develop their own authority stances by making ‘rhetorical decisions about how best to construct and communicate an authoritative self in public presentations of their work’ (Whitney, Zuidema, and Fredricksen 2014: 70). This includes thinking about the addressed (or imagined) audience as well as their own role as teacher-authors, and contributes to professional development that goes beyond the traditional teacher model positioning teachers within the classroom (Whitney *et al.* 2012). Teacher-authors also report that writing for publication enhances their enthusiasm towards teaching and promotes self-criticism, and allows them to shape their own teaching philosophies and to align practices with espoused theories. Furthermore, publication empowers teachers to gain authority and leadership in their institutional context, and to become part of a wider conversation in the professional community through sharing good and bad practices; building on this, teacher-authors contribute to a shared professional culture in which they move away from an isolated profession towards creating new possibilities for their own learning through collaboration (Wood and Lieberman *op.cit.*; Whitney *op.cit.*).

Obviously, teachers’ writing is informed through classroom practice and informs classroom practice. Publication then offers teachers the opportunity to have their knowledge critiqued, refined, and expanded through feedback. Writing also helps teachers anticipate problems students are faced with in writing classes (Wood and Lieberman *op.cit.*).

Finally, teacher-authors inform research disciplines (such as ELT or applied linguistics) providing an insider view of classroom events. Hopkins (*op.cit.*) argues that teacher-research might be advantageous in examining classroom reality over research conducted by outsiders because teachers conceptualize teaching differently, being more focused on the individual development of their learners. Vice versa, teacher-authors have

the potential to bridge the gap between teaching and research as they are more likely to notice and apply insights coming from university-based research (DiPardo, Whitney, Fleischer, Johnson, Mayher, McCracken, Miller, Stock, Zancanella, and Zuidema 2006).

Providing a forum for teacher-authors

HLT, an internet-based open-access journal, aims at giving language teachers a forum to share their ideas. Covering a wide range of topics, it presents lesson ideas, reflections, and classroom research for ‘teachers looking for ideas and interested in teacher development, as well as candidates taking CELTA and DELTA courses, and those doing MA degrees in ELT or Master’s in ESOL, who can find background reading for their assignments’ (see <http://hltmag.co.uk/index.htm> for further details).

Teachers writing for *HLT* are often those who have dared to step on to a wider stage without being supported in projects like the NWP. We assumed that their reports on why and how they decided to get a manuscript published in *HLT* would deepen understandings of the potential for writing for publication as a tool for teacher development. Addressing key elements of this issue (cf. Whitney *et al.* 2012), i.e. the teachers’ own perceptions as authors, their incentives, institutional encouragement (if any), and the perceived contribution to their own personal and professional development, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1 How do the teacher-authors perceive themselves as authors?
- 2 What reasons do they report for writing for and publishing in *HLT*?
- 3 What do they report as the contributions of writing for publication to their own personal and professional development, if any?

The study Participants

The participants were teacher-authors who published in *HLT*. Authors who were classroom-based educators (i.e. teachers, as evidenced in the biodata attached to the articles) were included in the study. Academic teachers or PhD students were not asked because writing and publishing were regarded as a part of their professional duty. In six issues of *HLT* (15/3 (2013)–16/2 (2014)), 35 teacher-authors were identified and invited to participate in the study by email. Twenty-one teacher-authors (10 women and 11 men) responded. They were located in Turkey (four participants), Argentina (two), Israel (two), Romania (two), Brazil, England, France, Iran, Italy, Libya, Oman, Poland, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam (one participant each). Their ages ranged from 24 to over 50, and teaching experiences varied from 2 to over 25 years. Thirteen out of the 21 participants held a Masters degree. While 11 participants were English teachers in the tertiary sector, five worked for secondary and two for private language institutions. One teacher-author reported not being active in the field. No biodata were available for two participants.

Data collection and analysis

The interview questions were taken from Whitney *et al.*’s (2012) standardized open-interview guide. To address the research questions of the current study, seven interview questions were chosen (see the Appendix), particularly to represent the categories used by Whitney *et al.* (2012), such as audience, authority, and outcomes. We had two more assumptions in mind while selecting questions from the original guide:

one was that more questions would negatively influence the participants' willingness to respond, and second, collecting data through email would not allow the researchers to probe answers. However, as the participants came from all over the world, email was the only choice available.

The responses were analysed using a conceptual content analysis including initial coding to identify concepts and encoding of concepts to establish categories. Then, coding categories were established through clustering and presented under themes (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Results

The results are presented within four themes:

- the teacher-authors' perceptions of themselves as writers;
- their perceptions of current *HLT* contributors and readership;
- their reasons for publishing in *HLT*; and
- the perceived significance for their professional development.

Teacher-authors' perception of themselves as writers

All teacher-authors in this study defined themselves as individuals who had something to share with others. Most of them did not see themselves primarily in the role of professional or academic writers. They focused on their identity as teachers who were interested in sharing teaching practice:

I do not consider myself to be a professional writer. When I have a strong opinion about something I have experienced in my classroom, new pedagogical theories or practices, I often clarify my own thoughts and arguments by writing them down and submitting the results to a professional forum. (...) I like to share my ideas with fellow professionals as they so generously share theirs. (Participant 12)

Focusing on their occupation as teachers intending to share something, the participants claimed authority as they had expertise resulting from classroom experience. Some teacher-authors said that they were not authors following the conventions of academic writing, but evolved a style conducive to their intentions: 'I write mainly classroom ideas, so my articles follow the same format, introduction, eight to ten ideas and short conclusion' (Participant 14). Writing is seen as a creative act dealing with an issue tied specifically to the teacher's context:

I'm not much of a writer really, but I do enjoy creating articles. I talk about myself mostly and as every teacher's experience is unique, I figure that we all have something original to say. I try to follow the 'show, don't tell' maxims in my writing. (Participant 18)

Another teacher-author cast doubts on her identity as a writer and compared writing for publication with teaching:

I see myself as a communicator more than a writer specifically. I'm a teacher, and I conceive writing as teaching through a different medium. When I teach, I try to find the way to reach my students, to guide their learning in the most effective manner I can; when I write I intend to do the same, that is, reaching my audience, achieving effectiveness in getting my message across. (Participant 10)

Fourteen of the participants were non-native speakers of English. However, only one teacher-author stated that this circumstance affected her self-perception as a writer. She said that she was always afraid of making mistakes due to her assumed linguistic disadvantage, but she would compensate for this by being 'enthusiastic, obsessed, and never satisfied! I imagine it must be like that when you write in your second language' (Participant 9). Other teacher-authors pointed to commitment towards writing as a key factor in their teacher-author identity as well, but only four participants explicitly regarded themselves as 'good' writers. Instead, the participants highlighted their history of professional writing: 20 teacher-authors drew attention to their previous publications; only one participant stated that he had not published before.

Teacher-authors' perceptions of current *HLT* contributors and readership

The participants felt that, in general, *HLT* contributors were enthusiastic, open-minded, and reflective teachers. Participant 4 emphasized the practical, classroom-based side of writing for *HLT* and held a rather pessimistic view about her profession:

I think authors of articles in *HLT* are mostly teachers of EFL around the world. I think they are teachers who are researchers and who are trying to find solutions for shortcomings, teaching and learning problems. I think they are reflective teachers and honestly speaking I think not many teachers are reflective.

How did the participants position themselves in relation to academic research? Six explicitly named university-based 'academic' researchers as contributors to *HLT*, besides teachers. This might not be due only to the fact that *HLT* indeed publishes articles written by university-based scholars. It might also indicate that the teacher-authors claimed authority to enter an area that might be regarded as restricted to scholars, and/or that their articles were written with the intention of contributing to research in ELT and not 'just' to provide solutions to practical problems.

When most of the participants in this study viewed the contributors of *HLT* articles mainly as teachers, it was not surprising that they assumed the journal's audience consisted predominantly of teachers as well. A remarkable number of teacher-authors stated that the contributors to and readers of *HLT* were identical, i.e. reflective, innovative, and enthusiastic teachers who participated in activities promoting teacher development, such as attending conferences. Only four of the participants assumed that scholars and researchers were also among the readers, and there were three teacher-authors who thought of university students as potential readers. Trying to identify the readership of *HLT* was in fact a process of imagining an audience, as the journal is freely accessible to everybody.

Reasons for writing in *HLT*

The reasons teacher-authors gave for getting their articles published in *HLT* refer to three themes: first of all, personal reasons including the teaching setting, second, the nature of *HLT* as a suitable journal for publications by teachers, and third, a strong motivation to share.

Driven by the wish to say something important, the participants regarded publishing as a way of giving more 'visibility' (Participant 9)

to their work by sharing it with an international community; even though they wrote about content related to their local situations, they saw the need to share it with an international audience. For two teacher-authors, *HLT* was a practical way to get assignments completed during MA studies published, while three participants were invited to submit a manuscript after making contact with the editor at conferences. Another participant said that he thought publication in *HLT* would secure a teaching position in his institutional context. Frustration with her own institutional context was the reason given by one participant who reported that her school did not provide a basis to share ideas. Only five teacher-authors reported that their publications received recognition or reward in their teaching setting; two teachers said that an extra bonus was paid by their universities; two secondary school teachers reported on scores given for publication being necessary to get a better teaching position; and another university-based instructor said that the link to the publication was sent to all staff members. Most of the participants, however, reported no institutional recognition at all:

Supposedly, it is encouraged but in practice I'm afraid there is no difference between a teacher who is a researcher (and maybe has articles, books, etc.) and a teacher who neither does research nor knows even alphabets of research. No reward, bonuses, payment or even appreciation is offered. (Participant 4)

A further incentive for some participants to choose *HLT* was the scope of the journal: it covers a wide range of issues and addresses a practitioner community. This is evidenced in the following excerpt where one participant recognized the value of the humanistic approach of *HLT*:

Although it may not have as wide an influence as other journals in the field (such as *ELT Journal*), I admired their focus on humanising our profession. English Language teaching/learning is (...) far too focused on testing and assessments. *HLT* attempts to balance that by looking at the learner holistically. (Participant 2)

The data strongly indicate that 'sharing' is a stronger motivational factor than 'publication', i.e. the participants were not driven by a 'publish-or-perish' maxim. For example, while Participant 12 explicitly referred to the 'wish to share and contribute to my professional community', Participant 14 reflected on the distinction between sharing and publication concluding that public sharing would become an integral part of professional development:

For some people, publishing in *HLT* could be a step towards recognition, so they could be 'budding writers', but many are classroom teachers who have something to say, like me. I think this is very healthy, and I think more and more teachers are seeing writing as part of their job, not just something for the few.

Perceived
significance for
professional
development

The participants perceived writing for publication as contributing to their professional development. They related this perception to:

- satisfaction deriving from an achievement shared with a community beyond their own immediate context;

- usefulness for their own classroom practice;
- broadening their academic skills; and
- professional advancement.

First, teacher-authors reported feelings of deep satisfaction deriving from publication. They related this feeling to the experience of achievement:

[Publishing] made me a little more confident in my abilities; allowed me to think that I can do something which I had previously thought beyond me; given the incentive to attempt more complicated and difficult challenges. (Participant 18)

The feeling of achievement was connected to the perception that publishing gave them the opportunity to have their voices heard by an international community of teachers as they received feedback from peers.

Second, writing for publication was considered to have positive effects on their teaching practice:

It has made me deeper into theory, to cite relevant experts on the matters I write about. I strongly believe it is not just about writing descriptively what you do in the classroom but to reflect on your teaching and find arguments to support what you do, and to reconsider what does not work. (Participant 21)

In a similar vein, Participant 5 stated that writing clarified his view on classroom practices, which might have remained unnoticed if he had not written about and published it.

A third perceived contribution of writing for publication was as a tool for learning about research and academic writing. Five participants elaborated upon this, reporting that they learnt the different steps in conducting a study from selecting a topic to paper submission, and Participant 4 concluded that publishing helped her ‘to approach the character of a researcher, who must be logical, unbiased, accurate, updated, and knowledgeable in the field’. Participant 13 questioned if his abilities would meet the standards of academic writing:

It has helped me to improve my skills as a writer. I believe I am still learning how to succeed when composing the genre but still struggle with the specificities of idioms, or how to improve the selection of words. To be honest I wish I could take a course in academic writing.

In terms of professional advancement, while one teacher-author reported that he was given a teaching position due to a conference presentation, another participant said that he was assigned to work in the writing centre at his university. The collaboration with academic writers had made a difference to his professional life:

For many teachers, writing becomes a kind of side interest, but for me, it has become the main focus of my career, as a teacher of EAP writing, an editor of academic articles, and as writer myself. (Participant 14)

In summary, the teacher-authors perceived writing for publication as a viable strategy in their personal and professional development enhancing

job satisfaction, helping question their own classroom practice, and leading to new professional directions. One participant summarized the outcomes of writing for publication as follows:

It has given me far more confidence in my authority as a teacher; EFL specialist; ESP practitioner; academic—what you will. Being published is assurance that what I think, or what I choose to say, has a currency that goes beyond my immediate milieu and is regarded as worth a hearing by my peers. (Participant 11)

Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study suggest that writing for publication is a tool for teachers to develop a reflective stance towards professional practice. In using this tool, the teacher-authors distance themselves from their perception of ‘academic writers’, playing their own writing abilities down and emphasizing their intention to share solutions to classroom problems with peers. Thus, they position themselves in a ‘community of practice’ (Whitney *et al.* 2012: 400). They gain authority through exchange of ideas following a ‘teachers-teaching-teachers model’ (Borko 2004: 10), and *HLL* provides them with authority. Similar to other studies (for example Wood and Lieberman *op.cit.*), writing is seen as a way of challenging and reshaping classroom practice; the data also reveal insights into how writing gives teachers new career directions or acts as a response to frustrating teaching situations. Most notably, the participants report that writing for publication has empowered them and given them a feeling of satisfaction; this is surely the difference that writing for publication makes compared to other forms of teacher writing. These results indicate the significance of writing for publication as teacher learning is conceptualized as both personal construction and reflective practice (Richards and Farrell 2005: 6–7).

The limitations of this study lend themselves to directions for future research. First, more teacher-authors publishing in other journals or magazines (for example *ELT Journal*, IATEFL publications) would yield more generalizable findings. Second, more than half of the participants held a Masters degree and worked in the tertiary sector; further studies are necessary to examine teachers situated in less academic contexts. Third, 20 out of the 21 participants had previous experience with publication and the interview questions focused mainly on successful writing outcomes; future research should examine (unsuccessful) attempts to publish and the process of choosing a journal so that conclusions for the promotion of teacher writing in professional development programmes can be drawn. Nevertheless, with an awareness of all these limitations, this study reveals the importance of providing teachers with forums where they can present solutions to classroom problems without being overly concerned with academic writing norms. Writing for publication in ELT-oriented journals or networks will surely contribute to the personal and professional development of teachers.

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Note

1 This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 8th International ELT Research Conference, 15–17 May 2014, Çanakkale/Turkey.

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Appendix

Interview questions

- 1 Tell me about your history with professional writing.
- 2 How would you describe yourself as a writer?
- 3 What prompted you to work on your article published in *HLT*?
- 4 Who do you think of as the authors of articles in *HLT*?
- 5 Who do you think of as the readers of articles in *HLT*?
- 6 How, if at all, is publication recognized or rewarded in your teaching setting?
- 7 What difference has publication made to you, if any?