

LESSONS LEARNED OF AN EMERGING ACADEMIC RESEARCHER: THE FIRST THREE YEARS: PART A.

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Abstract

There have been calls that there is little examination into the research process. Hopper (2005) points out that too little about research writing is debated and the lack of discussion leads to an allure of mysticism. There is little debated about the writing and practical aspects of research and the secrecy of writing “is a disservice to novices and veterans” (Hopper, 2005, p. 177). This paper captures the experiences and lessons of an academic researcher written after three years experience as a researcher and tutor in an Institute Tertiary Provider (ITP) and after an intense academic year of research output presenting and attending international conferences. In addition, the researcher has been researching the habits of successful academic business researchers. The comments within this paper are for the intention of improving the research commentary through primarily informing emerging researchers of some useful knowledge. The provision of the paper is intended to help reduce the effort and time for emerging scholars to learn the norms of the research culture and community, and thus, the emerging researchers would be more equipped and speed the process of prolific research. This paper illustrates that conferences, in addition to other research activities, can be used as a bridging or stepping stone for new and emerging researchers to achieve journal publication, and thereby greater peer esteem and credibility.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank the Faculty Research Subcommittee (Wintec) and the Central Research Approval Group (Wintec) that made this paper possible.

Keywords: Reflection, research, teaching, emerging, faculty.

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There have been calls that there is little examination into the research process. Hopper (2005) points out that too little about research writing is debated and the lack of discussion leads to an allure of mysticism. There is little debated about the writing and practical aspects of research and the secrecy of writing “is a disservice to novices and veterans” (Hopper, 2005, p. 177). This paper captures the experiences and lessons of an academic researcher written after three years experience as a researcher and tutor in an Institute Tertiary Provider (ITP) and after an intense academic year of research output presenting and attending international conferences. In addition, the researcher has been researching the habits of successful academic business researchers.

The author of this paper studied business at a university before obtaining teaching positions and consequentially choosing an academic accounting position at an ITP. While research projects have been conducted by the author prior to the current position at the ITP, the current position required teaching and research as part of the ongoing role. From the outset, the position explicitly involved research. The pressures and requirements of research at the School within the ITP led the researcher to investigate and research what makes a successful researcher.

For the new and aspiring academic researcher, research is initially looked upon as a process of identifying a research question, collecting the data, analysing, and writing of the research before submitting the article for publication in a journal. Previous study and qualifications enable the researcher to understand the process of research.

The process sounds simple and logical, but misses the detail of what is required from the academic. The description also omits the structure and politics of the community.

Few lessons are learned in structured academic study about the required actions when at the post of a teaching and research position. Even more important is that prospects for writing in one's career are established early (Boice & Jones, 1984; Cresswell, 1985; & Reskin, 1977). A subject of Boice's (1992, p. 1) study summed a new faculty's experiences up:

“somehow I think that if I had gotten off to a better start, I could have had a much better career. What was missing here was a caring attitude that translated into showing me how to manage the way the people who did make it do”.

Before an emerging researcher reads on, they should be aware of what Chow and Harrison (1998, p. 469) summarised as the character of a successful accounting researcher. The successful accounting researcher is:

a person who has sought and obtained rigorous training in methodological and writing skills and who explores important, timely and interesting topics. He/she presents his/her work at workshops and conferences to gain exposure and feedback and submits his/her work to journals which are interested in his/her type of research. Beyond gaining access to support resources (both colleagues and physical), this person has a strong work ethic and a very strong desire to succeed. He/she is highly dedicated to his/her work and persists and perseveres.

Chow and Harrison (1998) point out the training and research skills required and also allude us to the personality and attitude of the researcher. A missing factor is the tacit knowledge, including the culture, community, and experiences of researchers.

This paper uses Kolb, Rubin, and McIntyre's (1974) model of learning that portrays knowledge acquisition as a cycle of an experience, observation and reflection of that experience, before forming concepts and testing of those concepts. The experiences of the first three years researching are observed and reflected upon.

The comments within this paper are for the intention of improving the research commentary through primarily informing emerging researchers of some useful knowledge. The provision of the paper is intended to help reduce the effort and time for emerging scholars to learn the norms of the research culture and community, and thus, the emerging researchers would be more equipped and speed the process of prolific research.

1.0 Useful Resources

Texts on the practical aspects of research and the academic career that were found useful are *How to Research*, by Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight (2001) and *Scholarship Reconsidered* by Boyer (1990). Humphrey and Lee (2004) provide many anecdotal accounts of the research career of accounting researchers and Perry (2002) provides exemplars of individual research projects for those interested in the social sciences.

Boice (1992) provides a description of the results of the early years of new faculty and is worth reading, even though the focus of the text is teaching, the chapters on scholarly activity are useful regarding research writing.

The following list adapted from Stout (2005) provides useful research recommendations, especially for new accounting researchers, and provide more information on the process of academic research: Ashton (1998), Campbell (1995), Czyzewski & Dickenson (1990), Davidson & Lunt (2000), Draft (1995), Henderson & Reichenstein (1996) (1998), Hermanson & Hermanson (1996), Sadler (1999), Schneider (1995), and Zimmerman (1989).

The research experiences of the author's first years as a teaching and researching academic, in addition to the research investigations of established researchers, are provided in this paper. The discussion that follows was inspired from the discussions of a special issue of *Accounting Education: an international journal* (2005). The comments contained in this paper are for the intention of improving the research commentary through primarily informing emerging researchers of some useful yet tacit knowledge prior to undertaking much academic scholarship. The provision of the following comments should reduce the effort and time for emerging scholars to learn the norms of the research community, and thus, the emerging researchers would be more equipped and speed the process of prolific research.

The following section of the paper describes those factors relevant to new and emerging researchers, followed by lessons regarding conferences, and then followed by lessons regarding journal submissions.

2.0 The Academic Environment

An academic is required to undertake various activities of teaching and research. Recently these activities have been more broadly defined as scholarship (Glassick, 2000). In addition to the broader definition of scholarship, the central theme of Hill (2000) that researchers should develop ventures by smaller, interconnected, networked, and incremental steps, should be developed. This paper illustrates that conferences, in addition to other research activities, can be used as a bridging or stepping stone for new and emerging researchers to achieve journal publication, and thereby greater peer esteem and credibility.

A new member to the research community must know the norms of research performance to attain career advancement and to maintain employment. Institutions frequently do not explicitly set a minimum requirement of research, nor an expectation of required research topics. New faculty have been found to have no sense of how much or what sort of writing is required for tenure, except through the grapevine (Boice, 1992). New faculty arrived at the conclusion that lots of writing is required and there is never enough research. One could argue that the lack of requirements provides researchers with freedom of choice for which they may have chosen the career for that reason.

The expectations on a university are different to those of other Institute Tertiary Providers (ITPs). Universities focus more on research than teaching and career

advancement is more closely linked with research outputs than teaching standards. The teaching standards are assumed to be met.

The role and emphasise at an ITP are different to a university. The teaching contact hours are more at an ITP than a university and may be at more extreme times of day. The variety of students are different, the background knowledge and ability of students are different, possibly with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Class sizes and teaching requirements are different at ITPs than universities and the staff may be expected to do more activities than research and teaching.

3.0 The ITP Environment

Expectations on faculty oscillate between the poles of teaching and research (De Lange, 2005, p. 134). The oscillations between the teaching and research objectives are common to most tertiary institutions, including universities. The illustration of the oscillations may appear with the support or non-support of research funds.

The fluctuating support provided by the institute affects a researcher's outputs and also affects the researcher's will to commit to future research. The withdrawal of support and funding can also cause extra long delays for researchers to resume research projects. After a period of abstinence from the research project, the researcher will need to re-establish in their own minds the stance, argument, and perhaps methodology of the project. Much of the previous read literature may need to be reread. This experience is common of new faculty and this is why Boice (1992)

suggests that rather than taking blocks of time to conduct research, research should be frequent, even if only for a brief moment. The frequent time spent in research prevents the researcher from requiring large amounts of time for recall.

3.1 Blocks of Time

The reader must absorb what is relevant to them and their particular situation. Researchers as writers have been said to be idiosyncratic (Hopper, 2005). Hopper provides advice that the way for him to continue the thought process of writing is to stop work mid-sentence or mid-section, take a break and then get back to the writing. The method of Hopper does not work for the author of this paper as the intended sentence or logic of the section is forgotten during the break.

Boice (1992) also refers to large blocks of time as periods of binge writing. Cresswell (1985) indicates that, contrary to what many advocate, binge writing is unproductive in the long run. Subsequent days after bingeing receive less writing as a result of the bingeing.

New faculty typically spend much of their time in the first few semesters preparing classes (Boice, 1992). This is perhaps because new faculty are concerned about punishments from student complaints about teaching than concern about the lack of scholarship (Boice, 1992). Contrary to what many assume, teaching and writing productivity are not counter productive (Feldman, 1987). More time spent on research writing typically does not result in poorer teaching according to Feldman

(1987). Boice (1992) has also found that teaching and writing productivity are not counter productive. Exemplary new faculty were found to have balanced work habits so teaching preparation was about 1.5 hours for every hour of class time, and two hours per week was spent on collaboration and writing.

Continuous research activity, advocated by Boice (1992), inevitably avoids binge writing. Writers, and new faculty in particular, believe that blocks of time are required to achieve writing. Unfortunately, the great demands on faculty compel new faculty to get blocks of time, in evenings, weekends, or vacation. The results of new faculty aiming to conduct writing in their personal time, was also consistent with the authors experience who conducted research during personal time.

3.2 Research Output

Regardless of the position in the institutions funding cycle, academics are required to meet minimum research output requirements. The minimum varies from institution to institution and may not be based on comparable measures. A recent example was provided by an institution that required lecturers assigned as researchers to complete at least one Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) rated output per year. An output per year is a reasonable request, but PBRF does not specify criteria of what makes an output. PBRF ratings are given to a holistic view of a researcher's accumulation of research. Also, PBRF does not give ratings or points to individual outputs. The PBRF rating is given to output accumulated over a six year period, while the minimum research requirement stated above was per annum. At best, the

PBRF criteria state that two outputs equivalent to a PhD thesis are required for the minimum rating.

The minimum standard of one research output per annum was also applied to new and emerging researchers without substantial investment in resources, research systems, computer or administrative support. The researchers were also expected to conduct high levels of teaching hours and prepare new courses. The high teaching levels and research requirements set as the minimum standard were higher than agreed levels between the union and the institution. The manipulation of the institution to require new and emerging researchers to achieve beyond agreed levels adds extra stress and burn out among those the institution should be supporting.

Without knowing the norms and expectations of research output requirements, the new and emerging researcher is prone to be overstretched. The RAE assessment exercise in the UK indirectly provides perceptions of required standards. Wright and Tippett (2005) argue that RAE encourages researchers to reach quality thresholds manifested in the form of publishing in high quality rated journals, and then the researchers attempt to achieve quantity through publication of four papers over a five year period.

For an indication of the typical and average output of researchers and accounting researchers in particular, see Tower and Ridgewell (2005), Tower, Desai, Carson, and Cheng (2005), and Mathews (2005). See also Herron and Hall (2004) for the feasibility of publishing.

3.3 Support

The managers or heads of departments will need to be aware of the type of research support they need to give. Especially as the difficulty of managing scholarly activity is that “subtle discouragements work in surprisingly powerful ways” (Boice, 1992, p. 162). The conditions that new faculty are in encourage procrastination and distress (Boice, 1989).

Chow and Harrison (1998) found that there needs to be supportive colleagues, time strictly for doing research, access to computers and databases, supportive research climate, financial and other research support, helpful doctoral assistants, a mentor, and access to an excellent library. Other important factors for research were personal attributes and skills of the researcher. Once an article has been written the research leader may be the most suited person to critique and select potential journals.

An emerging researcher should begin to take an interest in their strategic approach to research especially if PBRF ranking is aimed for. PBRF refers to the establishment of a framework of research. In a ITP a pedagogical or education research project is likely to be easier to undertake than discipline or theoretical research. Describing the implementation of the education research project may also be easier than evaluating the usefulness of the project. As English (2005, p.170) states: “Much motivation in teaching is intuitive. We are part of the experiment, as are our students. Since our ‘subjects’ are our students, ethical considerations preclude teaching different streams of one cohort differently for the purposes of running a controlled experiment, making

a research design to evaluate outcomes based on the perceptions of live subjects problematic”. In addition, an emerging researcher needs to identify that researcher’s in the field of educational research, such as accounting education research, are typically not considered distinguished. The prominent accounting researcher is typically not a researcher of education.

Business disciplines, such as accounting, each have sub-disciplines. Each of these sub-disciplines has special journals, languages, conferences, preoccupations, and reputation systems. As each sub-discipline requires different knowledge, a researcher who focuses in that area reduces the time spent learning other areas. Hopper (2005) even suggests that there are factions of editor reviewers and academics that welcome papers from their group members, but shun the submission of papers from outside the groups. These group members are sometimes also referred to as gate keepers, that is, the group members hold the key to whether an individual is allowed into the community of writers.

Fads, research cycles, and consequential ‘bandwagon’ effects of research are also omitted from the simple research description. For a comprehensive discussion of the effect of research cycles on publication success refer to France (2004). Wright and Tippet (2005) elude us to these research cycles. Research cycles consist of a writer that publishes a seminal work. The writer is a seer, or becomes a seer because of the seminal paper. The seminal work is then followed by prolific work of other researchers who develop the work. Lastly, the seers provide more impetus by publishing further research based on the seminal work. Producing the original seminal work requires knowledge, experience, and novel insights. For these reasons,

an opportunity exists in the second stage for the new researcher that can develop the novel work and add to the proliferation of the research.

4.0 Conference Papers

Research papers are frequently show-cased and given peer critique by the research community before submission to journals. De Lange (2005) provides one of the few articles that explicitly state that the article was inspired by a call for presentations at a conference. Other papers may indicate the inspiration derived from a conference call of papers by the acknowledgements made on the paper.

Acceptable quality of research questions and rigour are culturally defined. The culture is that of the research community and the norms are learned through the participation in that community. While academics write and re-write to gain publication, the norms are learnt (De Lange, 2005, p. 135). Referees are considered to be more informed of these norms and of the changing norms. One potential way for emerging researchers to learn the norms is to write and submit research papers to conferences and journals. The standard for achieving acceptance for a conference paper is usually lower than for a journal. The suggestions associated with submission of conference papers can also be applied to journal submissions.

The presentation of a conference paper should be weighed against other alternative academic activities. When there is more than one research project the researcher must choose between the projects and choose between conference presentations. The

presentation of the paper and attendance at the conference provides the opportunity to also learn what else needs to be altered to the paper to get the paper to an acceptable level for publication in a journal, and thus learn the norms of publication.

4.1 Conference Paper Benefits

The process of writing a paper for a conference presentation makes the author immerse their self into the literature. The writer learns more deeply about a subject through the use of writing (English, 2005). The writer must comprehend the literature that already exists, but also must order their thoughts into logical reasoning. The writing process is a process of learning as much as it is a product.

The activity of aiming at making a submission sets deadlines for the researcher thereby motivating and providing an output. The act of submitting an abstract for a conference sets a goal of developing a full paper. A full paper is a basis to make further submissions to journals. All of which are setting deadlines that are self imposed. The choice of submission is the writer's choice.

Attending and partaking in conferences can provide leads and slants that could be investigated. Conferences, especially the international conferences, provide external advice on papers, establish academic reputations, establish contacts with like minded researchers, aid decisions about the choice of targeted journal to submit to, and may elicit submission invitations from editors (Hopper, 2005). However, conferences of general interest keep the researcher with knowledge of activities of their peers, the

conferences of specific interest that have a narrow discipline boundary provide ideas for the researcher.

Conferences also allow journal editors to make invitations to authors to publish the work in the journal. This activity is rare, but a valuable opportunity for both researcher and editor.

4.2 Submission

To attend a conference, the attendee requires funding from the tertiary institute of employment. Funding is typically and, in some cases, only given if papers are accepted by the conference organisers. To attend a conference and gain large benefits from a conference, submit a paper.

Reviewers of conference papers or journal submissions are like conference discussants “typically looking for reasons to reject a paper” (Stout, 2005), so do not take the critique personally. Use the reviewer’s comments to improve the paper. This advice may seem obvious, but is more difficult in practice. The most adaptive researchers look for positive in a critique (Boice, 1992).

To improve the chances of obtaining conference paper acceptance, a suggestion is to attend annual conferences the year prior to submitting the paper. Attendance at the conference provides the expectations, standards, and norms of that conference. Topics and type of papers typically accepted and presented can also be seen at the

previous conference. Standards at some conferences are higher than other conferences and the attendees can be critical or supportive. Some conferences have specific research, topic, or methodological areas, and other conferences have general research, topic, or methodological areas. Particular conferences have the opportunity to present posters instead of papers. Acceptance to present posters are a valuable means to gaining conference attendance funding, while also gaining the benefits of conference attendance. Posters are also on display at conferences for longer periods than a paper presentation and the poster provides a means of illustrating to the research community the author's current research agenda.

Some conferences are refereed, have refereed streams, publish the conference papers in the proceedings, or have discussants. Refereed conferences and refereed streams are a review and provide the author with useful comments. Both refereed and published conference proceedings are more highly valued in performance reviews and are more valued when obtaining conference attendance funding. However, publication of the paper in the conference proceedings can prevent the paper from publication in journals. Discussants of conference papers are allocated the specific task of critiquing the paper and they inevitably identify flaws and potential improvements of the paper. The discussants are a valuable component for authors developing a paper for journal submission, even though the work of the discussant can be demanding.

A learned issue of having research projects is that the pressure to meet deadlines can occur at the same time as other important activities, though some conference organisers avoid that stress on authors by making paper submission deadlines during

non-teaching periods and holding the conference during a non-teaching period. International conferences are least likely to avoid the stress on authors as many countries do not hold teaching breaks at the same time.

There will also be organising and payment of the conference trip, of which submission of funding may be an extended process. In some institutions administrators plan and organise pay for the trip in other institutions, especially those ill equipped for research, the researcher is required to plan the trip. Sometimes the situation is less problematic if the researcher plans the trip as particular events will want to be avoided or attended by the researcher. The researcher may also attempt to minimise costs and teaching disruption in the hope of having more chance of obtaining conference funding and leave permission. And at the same time the researcher wants to receive the greatest benefit from the conference through networking and attending paper presentations. The person most equipped to balance the benefit of conference attendance, costs, and teaching disruption is the researcher.

5.0 Conclusion

There is little investigation into the tacit knowledge of researchers. Researchers in an academic environment require more than knowledge of the scientific research process. Researchers need to be aware of and familiar with the environment and conditions that they are in. The institution and the pressures upon academics provide subtle factors that consequently affect the situation of the researcher.

Aspects of the academic's environment may be subtle such as the managing of tasks and writing time, and the expectations of faculty. The environment of the academic can be difficult and cruel, but the academic must rise to the challenge if they are to provide research activity.

Conference attendance and submission provides suitable means for academics to immerse them self into the research community. Researchers must submit some form of writing and forces the academic to provide an output. There are many conferences and the researcher needs to choose conferences that are fitting to their development or research topic.

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