

Young Writers Writing for a Publisher's Market

Roy A. Weaver

Discussed here are matters closely related to where the young educator and would-be writer "lives." Why write? What about institutional pressure to write? How to get published? These questions and others are treated by a skilled author-educator.

Fantasizing a lifetime of substantial royalty checks from a bestseller, the aspiring young author in education begins his/her career by satisfying a series of questions.

Why write for publication? An interview of writers revealed an assortment of reasons. "To share the nature of successful school programs so that others might replicate them," a district school administrator replied. A teacher, turned staff-development-leader, noted, "I wanted teachers, with whom I am closely allied, to understand that supervision could be a warm, personal, non-threatening way to improve what they are doing. I wanted to give them some specific, step-by-step directions I thought would be helpful," she concluded. Another author claimed, "I write for publications because I enjoy it. Since I first saw a science fiction story I wrote at age 18 in print, writing has been a part of me—an avocation." A university assistant professor responded to the question by saying, "I find writing somewhat painful—but I have little choice if I wish to survive. I *must* write."

While these answers do not represent a total range of possible responses, they are impressionistic. Some writers wrote because they believed that they had ideas that would be helpful to others. Others tended to emphasize a "how-to-do-

it" or "cookbook" approach to school management or to teaching. Some writers wrote purely for the thrill of seeing their thoughts in print. Knowing that someone else might be reading what they had created intensified the pleasure. Most writers interviewed declared that they had to write. Not because they enjoyed it. Not because they wanted to write. Not because they believed they had interesting and helpful ideas to share with others. Primarily, because they believed that upward economic mobility, tenure, and professional status and prestige were integrally tied to publication. Many of the writers in this group believed that institutional pressures more than personal desire served as the motivating force.

Institutional pressure. Nowhere is such pressure so intense as at the university. Institutional standards for evaluating the quality of writing are suggestive of the types of articles written. Reports of research—the more highly quantifiable and statistically complex the better—are an initial step toward professional survival. Such research, if published in refereed journals, allows the writer to take a second step toward meeting institutional expectations.

* This discussion is based on a survey of 159 journals listed in the *Education Index*. Ninety-eight usable questionnaires were returned.

The ethics of survival, that is, the pressure to "sell out" one's beliefs to an institution are overwhelming for the young writer in universities today. With prospects of a 20 percent or greater decline in the number of educational personnel in higher education over the next decade, the writer must produce that which *best* exemplifies institutional demands. Compromising one's beliefs in such a situation is the rule rather than the exception. A researcher might prefer to conduct an ethnographic study based on informal videotaped interviews and a series of photo essays. However, young writers fighting for promotion and tenure likely succumb to "more scholarly techniques"—those conventionally accepted as most sophisticated technically.

The resulting data may be presumed to be useful for or related to the education of children, youth, or adults. At least it is "useful" from the point of view of the institution, the researcher, and the researcher's peers—the few who may read the study. In reality, the practitioners for whom the data were supposedly produced seldom pay attention to research results let alone act on them. As a high level metropolitan administrator noted recently, "I don't need Coleman, Pettigrew, and Green to tell me about flight from the inner-city. The demographic data coming to my office each month are evidence that during implementation of our desegregation plans, middle-class people are leaving the city."

It is not so important to the young writer in the university that what he or she publishes is read by others, let alone is somewhat helpful to others. What is important, as Pierre van den Bergh noted in his book *Academic Gamesmanship*, is to "Rush into print, [particularly] in the early stages of [a] professional career. For one thing, [there is] no reputation to lose. For another, most people who are instrumental in hiring or promoting . . . will never read anything [one writes] besides [his] vita. Almost any department prefers [a professor] to publish trash rather than not publish at all."¹

In contrast, for practitioners, publishing is a bonus. From a public relations point of view, discussions of innovative teaching techniques, curriculum development projects, or new approaches to supervision printed in journals may bring notoriety. In some instances, appointments to higher

status positions may ensue. Invitations for consulting or for speaking at meetings and conferences may be forthcoming. Adjunct teaching opportunities at local community colleges and universities may be negotiated. Unlike his/her counterpart in many universities who may receive similar rewards, the practitioner's future in the education community is not contingent on conducting research, writing, and publishing. In either case, for writers who wish to publish, the motivation becomes less important than the process of getting into print.

How do I get something I've written into print? The process of getting an article published may involve several approaches. A quick but ethically questionable avenue requires the hiring of a ghost writer.² Depending on the contacts with publishers the ghost writer maintains, this approach may be costly as well as unproductive. Most ghost writers do not assure publication, but do ask for payment upon completion of a manuscript.

A second, more frustrating and time-consuming process requires "going it alone." This trial and error method forces the writer to learn by experience. Writing a manuscript may be painful, but following up on queries and rejects is no less agonizing. While an occasional acceptance may buoy one's ego, this "hit and miss" approach is highly unpredictable. While doing one's own work and selling one's product is more acceptable than hiring a ghost writer, the chances of being published are no greater.

A third approach engages "the hustle." "The hustle" demands tracking the currency of topics (those that are most marketable) and creating associations with influential and published persons. While the conventional method of reading a variety of education journals may be helpful, it only establishes trends of interest and a history of what was acceptable for publication six months or more prior to distribution of the journal. One must go a step further and develop a line of com-

¹ Pierre van den Bergh, *Academic Gamesmanship*. New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1970. p. 88.

² If you are a poor writer to begin with and rely heavily on an editor, then you may actually be employing a "ghost writer" since there is a fine line between extensive rewriting and original authorship.

munication for anticipating "hot" issues. Much more time-consuming than either of the preceding avenues to publication, "the hustle" consumes energy and may be as costly and as unproductive as the others.

Signals as to the "sellable" articles come from a variety of sources. Attending conferences related to one's interests or expertise affords an opportunity to keep informed. As important, conferencing can be used to meet noted persons in one's field. An intent of attending conferences should involve establishing such associations. A handshake coupled with a pleasant greeting may lead to later contacts. One should feel free to call an acquaintance, regardless of his status, and say: "We met at the meeting of the Association of . . . I want to follow up on something you said during your presentation. . . ." A brief letter thanking the person for taking the time to talk by phone may further open the line of communication. Continuing telephone calls or letters may elicit useful sources of information for keeping up on "hot" issues. In time, sending a completed paper, requesting a reaction, and asking for possible publishers may be appropriate.³

If one is unable to attend conferences, the next most viable communication link is by letter. Read and critique something a notable writer has published. If possible, indicate how your writing is related. By providing new insights to the author's interests or alternative sources of data, an opportunity for continuing communication may emerge.

Another component of "the hustle" involves contacting organizations and associations related to one's area of interest. The same principles of communicating with authorities in one's field of study hold for contacting representatives from these groups. Talking with editors of journals or other publications supported by an organization can provide a potential link to future publications.

Establishing the "support group" offers another approach. A network of persons who are willing to share manuscripts and critique them may enhance the quality of manuscripts if not improve the chances for publication. Such an exchange encourages persons in the group to suggest where they think a likely publication opportunity exists once they have read a manuscript. Matching a writer's interests to those of a pub-

lisher may occur more rapidly through an exchange.⁴ Assuming that each of the members of the group has contacts with persons with publishing experience and information about marketable topics, a valuable data bank can be created and used.

A final approach requires working with a mentor. If the mentor is a well-established writer and overwhelmed by requests, then publishing opportunities break more rapidly. When a mentor is asked to write a book review (often a low priority for the journeyman author) suggest that you be given a chance to do it. If he accepts the offer and you create a quality product, then opportunities for co-authoring manuscripts may ensue. It is critical for an apprentice in such a situation to monitor requests and demonstrate an active interest. Ask to proof material he is writing and be constructively critical. A statement like: "You write nicely" is inadequate, if not a complete turn-off. A thorough analysis urging "flared" phrases, reordered paragraphs, updated references, and so forth helps establish credibility for the aspiring apprentice. A consistent effort may assure future co-authored pieces. While an approach to getting into print is important, some authors hope that readers will at least notice what they have written.

Where should I publish if I want people to read what I write? An interesting dilemma emerges from the refereed research journal syndrome supported by many universities. The likelihood that one's writing will be widely read and circulated diminishes when research is stressed. None of the journals with high estimated readership (50,000+) exclusively publish research findings. Only one, *Reading Teacher*, mentioned research as a part of the journal's interest and only as a supplement. Three midrange journals (10,000-40,000), *American Educational Research Journal*, *The Elementary School Journal* and *Sociology of*

³ It is critical that the paper sent is well done. The quickest way to destroy an emerging relationship is to forward a dull, unedited piece of writing.

⁴ It is important to have read carefully the type of articles published by the journal a writer intends to approach. Explicitly following stylistic and presentation format increases the likelihood that the manuscript will at least be skimmed superficially.

Education indicated primary emphasis on research. Four others, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Journal of Reading*, *Journal of Teacher Education* and *Review of Educational Research* noted an interest in research pieces along with conceptual and descriptive writing. The volume of primarily research-oriented publications resides in the low range category (500-9,000) and tends to be restricted to special fields, as illustrated by *Exceptional Children*, *The French Review*, *The German Review*, *Journal of American Indian Education*, *Journal of Special Education*, *Language Learning*, *Research in the Teaching of English*.

For a writer who desires a potentially sizeable readership, yet must publish research, a compromise position is attainable. Rather than follow the typical format for presenting research—problems, hypotheses, methodology, analyses, findings, conclusion and recommendations—data can be couched in a journalistic format. If the overriding concern rests on how many people read an article, then such an approach may entice more readers.

Descriptive and conceptual pieces are more widely read. An article that demonstrates "how to" teach reading using an oral language approach or a piece that examines obstacles to implementing a career education program will surface among the education community more readily than discussions of hard research. The format alone will not sell a manuscript. Equally as critical is the topic selected. Framing an insightful, well-organized, stylistically-sound piece around a current or to-be-timely issue increases the likelihood for a manuscript's being considered, if not published.

What are the "hot" topics? Caution must be used in labeling a topic as "hot." The schizophrenic world of education puts out fires and stirs the flame of new ones so quickly that issues of timeliness and importance come and go. Certain topics maintain longevity. School integration, basic skills development, and preparation for adulthood continue to be highly marketable topics with a lengthy ancestry.

Since the mid-sixties many of the "hot" or most published topics have been societally-related. Environmental education, ethnic studies, bilingual/bicultural education, career education, education of the handicapped have been in vogue. Topics

focusing on teaching strategies to upgrade the skills of learners, emphasizing how the diverse needs of learners from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds can be met, demonstrating ways to equalize school finance, and exploring models of learning options appear most timely.

How long will it take for a decision to be made? While each journal attempts to maintain a policy on the length of time it takes to make an acceptance/rejection decision, the time varies depending on several factors. Some journals are booked as much as a year or two in advance. A decision may drag on for several months since anticipating appealing pieces beyond two years is difficult. For those who rely primarily on solicited manuscripts, a decision may be reached in a much shorter time since space for unsolicited pieces is severely limited.

The number of manuscripts that must be reviewed will also affect the length of decision-making time. A few journals report nearly 1,500 manuscripts submitted during a year, while most indicate an average of from 250-500. Reviewing several hundred manuscripts is time-consuming. As a result, it generally takes from six to twelve months before the article appears in print.

But I've tried everything . . . At the outset of this paper an assumption was made—that the young writer can write well enough to be published. However, not everyone can write. It is an art requiring some initial ability. It is tiring, frustrating, and difficult to put words on paper. It can be as equally troublesome to get them published. A great service can be rendered by admitting that piling verbage into overstuffed library stacks merely stirs more dust. [E]



Roy A. Weaver is Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.