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WRITING PRACTICE IN LIS: STRATEGIES AND VISIONS (Panel)

Abstract

Whether leaping or stumbling, *writing* is the final and arguably most difficult and important stage of the research process. Our evolving literature review reveals, however, that writing receives little attention as a practice within Library and Information Science's methodological armamentarium. Accordingly, this panel engages the CAIS community in a constructive and serious discussion concerning writing within our discipline. An overview of the literature will be offered, accompanied by four presentations by writing strategists featuring distinct contemplative, critical, ethnographic, and institutional visions. The panel will conclude with questions, a discussion, and the brainstorming of potential positive interventions in writing practice.

1. Background

Inspired and motivated by our own leaps and stumbles when writing for publication, and as a means to obtain a better understanding of Library and Information Science writing practices at this time, we searched disciplinary databases including *Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA)* and *Library Literature and Information Science Full Text (H. W. Wilson)* employing keywords such as 'writing,' 'writing development,' and 'writing pedagogy.' Collecting a total of ninety-four items, approximately one-third of these items have been reviewed since, leading to a number of inductively-generated themes, among them *sundry advice on writing, barriers and motivations*, and *writing interventions*. These initial themes are highlighted next, as context for our panel and discussion.

Sundry Advice on Writing

A small body of literature exists that dispenses practical guidance to library professionals who wish to write for publication. The booklet (2003) *How to Get Published in LIS Journals,* for example, offers a range of brief articles, among them Hernon's examination of the peer review process and Hinchliffe's instructions on presenting a manuscript to a publisher. Joint (2003) provides recommendations to library professionals new to publishing, and in a later article (2006) argues that academic writing and professional development are associated activities. Gordon's (2004) manual *The Librarian's Guide to Writing for Publication* delineates steps in the publishing process and the requirements to write for distinct publication types, while additional manuals for library professionals include Langley and Wallace (2010), Smallwood (2010), Nilsen and Ross (2013), and Hollister (2014).

Barriers and Motivations

Research has been carried out concerning barriers and motivations influencing library professionals who write for publication. Bradley's (2008) study, for instance, determined that being embedded within a community where publication is neither expected nor the norm may function as a barrier. Further barriers distinguished by Shenton (2008) include a lack of personal confidence and support, particularly in managing concerns such as article rejection and peer review. A survey by Clapton (2010) identified as the most significant barrier a lack of time for writing. Conversely, motivations to write involve authorial and institutional recognition, the desire to share results, and professional development. Satisfaction with achievement and responsibility were motivations identified within Edem and Lawal's (1999) exploration of publication output among Nigerian library professionals.

Writing Interventions

Recognition that library professionals benefit from support in becoming productive writers has led to the development of a number of interventions to support them. Tysick and Babb (2006) inspected a writing group for library professionals formed at the University of Buffalo in 2002. The group held bimonthly one-hour meetings, received guidance from senior leaders, and eventually expanded into a system of peer mentoring aiding new library professionals to become assimilated into the academic culture. Fallon (2009, 2010, 2012, 2019) has investigated the potential of a blended learning approach to support Irish library professionals to develop the motivation and skills to write for publication. This approach comprised three aspects: namely, a one-day writing workshop, the formation of an online writing group that carried out a sequence of writing tasks, and two peer-feedback days.

3. Panelists and their Contributions

Hugh Samson: Welcome, Introduction, and Overview (Ten minutes)

Hugh Samson is a Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario; prior to beginning his Ph.D., he was employed as a freelance writer, learning strategist, library assistant, and writing centre instructor.

Hugh will open the panel with a warm welcome and offer a clear statement of its topic: *writing*. He will next present the literature review highlights outlined above, elaborating these to include discussion of barriers and motivations influencing Library and Information Science graduate students (Ondrusek, 2012), guidance contained within disciplinary research methods manuals concerning writing research questions and proposals (Connaway, Radford & Powell, 2016; Wildemuth, 2016), and formal writing supports for library professionals such as protected writing time and sabbaticals (Smigielski, Laning & Daniels, 2014). He will then introduce the panelists, each of whom will share a distinct strategy and vision for writing.

David Levy: Writing as a Contemplative Practice (Ten minutes)

David M. Levy is Professor Emeritus in the Information School, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, where he has explored how to bring contemplative practices and insights to bear on the problems of living in our accelerating, information-saturated culture. The author of *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (Arcade, 2001/2016) and *Mindful Tech: How to Bring Balance to Our Digital Lives* (Yale, 2016), he is completing a new book, *To Grow in Wisdom* (working title).

Writing goes better when we can establish and maintain a positive and fruitful relationship with our subject matter. After all, we write because we have something important to say, and to communicate both the content and its value to others. But as this panel acknowledges, writing is often hard work, and one of the potential barriers to writing well is our loss of connection with and enthusiasm for our content. In his panel presentation, David Levy will offer a contemplative lens through which to view this challenge and address it. Drawing a parallel between writing and breath meditation, he will propose a writing practice/intervention by which we can establish and maintain intimate contact with our subject matter, recognize when we have lost that contact, and subsequently re-establish our connection with and inspiration for it.

Bharat Mehra: Community-Embedded Critical Narratology (Ten minutes)

Bharat Mehra is EBSCO Endowed Chair in Social Justice and Professor at the University of Alabama; his critical and reflective perspective decolonises traditional American scholarship (and Library and Information Science writing) entrenched in Anglo/Euro-centricities toward fair, just, inclusive, and equitable representations (Mehra, 2021a; Mehra et al., 2018). Over twenty-five years, Professor Mehra's ethnographic, participatory, and action research has furthered social

justice and social equity in LIS to empower minority and underserved populations make meaning changes in their everyday lives. He has collaborated with racial/ethnic groups, diasporic communities, LGBTQ+ people, low-income families, rural communities, small businesses, and others in the design of inclusive community information systems and services.

Critical narratology provides a discursive approach to behavior communicated through a system of discourse (Fairclough, 2001; Gee & Handford, 2012). As a panelist, Dr. Mehra will share contemplative insights developed using community-embedded critical narratology in conjunction with motivational sociology of action to further PRAXIS (i.e. reflective action) in the LIS classroom (Mehra, 2021b). He will also discuss its operationalisation across core and elective courses where students integrate storytelling techniques to situate their own positionality and develop environmental relevance, organisational context, critical assessment, evidence-based evaluation, and strategic actions plans with and for collaborating community agencies. In the process, students acquire authority, 'voice,' and self-and-social empowerment as change agents in professional work settings, sharpening their conscientização (i.e. critical consciousness) in learning to 'perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1970, p. 9).

Jenna Hartel: The Thematic Narrative (Ten minutes)

Jenna Hartel is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. In the early 2000s, she studied ethnography and one of its written genres, *the thematic narrative*, at the Department of Sociology of the University of California, Los Angeles. Professor Hartel is a specialist and teacher of ethnographic writing (Hartel, 2021a) in Information Science. She has taught the thematic narrative to more than 200 students in her course, *Information Ethnography*; has produced a 14-episode video series, *Writing-Up Research as Thematic Narrative* (Hartel, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c); and has delivered multiple international workshops on the approach, as well.

As a panelist and representative of the ethnographic tradition, Dr. Hartel will explain how social scientific inquiry can be written-up as a *thematic narrative*: a gradually unfolding descriptive account that relates vivid pieces of field data to relevant concepts in the scholarly literature (Hartel, 2021a; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). She will introduce a rhetorical structure called an excerpt-commentary unit (ECU), and its four elements: an *analytic point*, *orienting information*, an *excerpt*, and *analytic commentary* – each with specific purposes. Importantly, this approach avoids pitfalls associated with the crisis of representation (Marcus & Fisher, 1986), since the informant's (emic) perspective is clearly distinguished from the researcher's (etic) interpretation, and balanced accordingly.

Mary Broussard: The Writing to Learn Movement (Ten minutes)

Mary Broussard is Arts and Humanities Librarian at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania. She is the author of a book on reconsidering information literacy through the lens of composition and

rhetoric (Broussard, 2017), and two short papers describing the application of this lens to librarians' professional writing (Broussard 2016, 2019).

Proponents of the Writing to Learn movement specify that wrestling through the difficult activities of synthesising information from multiple sources and preparing one's thoughts to be communicated to others can be deeply beneficial not only to readers, but also to writers themselves (Leist, 2006). Although much of the Writing to Learn movement's literature emphasises the design of research paper assignments for students, its potential for transformative learning applies to Library and Information Science professional writing as well. This section of the panel will focus upon how principles from the Writing to Learn movement can be applied to Library and Information Science writing, going beyond superficial writing advice and encouraging librarians to rethink their motivations for writing for publication.

4. Audience Engagement *(Fifty minutes)*

Subsequent to the literature overview and panelist's presentations, an interactive activity will be facilitated wherein contributions to questions including the following will be invited from the audience in writing: *How did you learn to write for Library and Information Science?, In one adjective, what describes good writing?,* and *What is a word that describes your own writing experience?* Employing the application (2024) Mentimeter, a word cloud comprising the contributions will be generated instantly, in turn offering a springboard for further discussion. The floor will next open for comments and questions generally, with graduate students and library professionals asked in particular to share their perspectives and reflections. Operating Zoom's whiteboard feature to document the process, the panelists and audience will then together brainstorm positive interventions in writing practice that benefit all writers in attendance. Finally, the panel's key themes and takeaways will be summarised and a bibliography of select, relevant works distributed.

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