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Joint, N. (2006) *Enhancing professional development by writing for publication in library and information science*. *Library Review*, 55 (1). pp. 5-7. ISSN 0024-2535

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Editorial

Enhancing professional development by writing for publication
in library and information science

Abstract

<i>Purpose of this paper</i>	To argue that enhanced professional development and writing for publication are related activities and are mutually beneficial.
<i>Design/methodology/approach</i>	An opinion piece, based on practitioner and editorial experience.
<i>Findings</i>	That by aiming for a more rigorous form of professional writing, greater insight into one's professional practice is possible.
<i>Research limitations/implications</i>	The examples of research scenarios sketched out in this editorial are pure suggestions which have not been carried out as real experiments. However, this would be possible and even desirable in order to prove the hypothesis outlined in the paper.
<i>Practical implications</i>	Contains useful hints and tips on how to start writing for the professional literature.
<i>What is original/value of the paper?</i>	The simple examples of the workplace experiment and case study that this paper briefly sketches out could help practitioners improve the type of "practitioner research" that they undertake

Keywords: Continuing professional development; Librarians.

This opinion piece is an attempt to give some insights into how the library and information workers' professional development can benefit from writing for the professional literature. Many mature library and information science (LIS) professionals are skilled at writing and have experience in the relationship between writing and professional development, therefore, to some extent the focus of this piece does not lie with such experts and already "converted" practitioners. The focus here is more on those, perhaps less experienced practitioners who are not so aware of the link, and who might benefit from developing skills in writing and self-enhancement. In targeting this group, it is also hoped to illustrate how the relationship between authorship and professional development works.

So to start with, it is fair to say that one of the essential concepts underpinning the link between practice and writing is the concept of "reflection". It is not always easy to reflect creatively on one's practice, but the novice author or aspirant professional can learn to do so through the act of writing. In this way writing can become a creative dialogue with oneself, drawing out the better professional within – and by doing so one can become a true "reflective practitioner". (1)

Reflection therefore involves cultivating the desire to understand one's practice in a new and compelling way. The true reflective practitioner discovers a need to pin down a truth about their practice, and by doing so they are often able to clarify an issue, not just for themselves but also for the larger community of practice beyond by communicating insights through writing and publication. Writing is thus not just a creative dialogue with oneself, it can become a dialogue with others, a way of connecting and interacting with the profession at large.

This dialogue with other professionals inevitably involves putting your practice "on display", something that exposes you to public scrutiny. This in itself is a tremendous spur to improving one's professional self-development: under the gaze of one's peers, you have a great incentive to shape your work more, inevitably resulting in a higher standard of achievement.

And on a more directly self-interested note perhaps, if we are to talk overtly about promoting one's ambitions, it is clear that writing and *career* advancement are also linked: by writing about your achievements your material is disseminated across a wider audience, you lay claim to those achievements, gain recognition for your work, and thus develop your profile and build up a reputation. And even before you start talking about your achievements, you will have to think about what you have achieved, so that the act of preparing for authorship involves active review of where you are and what you have done professionally (so if you find the question "What have you achieved?" hard to answer, then this is a very powerful spur to improving your professional development!)

When it comes to the practicalities of starting to write and choosing which type of article you would like to author, it is fair to say that most practitioners prefer to opt for the "softer" formats such as features, descriptive articles, commentaries and opinion pieces, all of which allow a fair degree of subjectivity and self-expression.

This is perfectly acceptable, but there is much to be said for practitioners writing in more rigorous ways about their practice and trying to produce true research articles, e.g. research reports, accounts of experiments and true case studies. By writing about practice in this way, it is possible to create a hybrid form of material, so-called "practitioner research" (rather than, on the one hand,

straightforward descriptions of practice, or, on the other hand, rigorous but abstract research with little connection with the realities of everyday workplace activity).

The essence of the experiment in workplace practice can be as simple as introducing some sort of change into the work context, and then noting what effect that change has caused, while also comparing it with a parallel situation which has not experienced any such change at all. If the change is effective, then some sort of benefit should be noticed in the first case, in contrast to the parallel, unaltered situation – the expectation is that because this second situation remains unchanged, no benefit is experienced in consequence.

A concrete example would be an experiment to examine the benefits of writing on workplace learning and professional development: two groups of practitioners could be compared, one of which chooses to engage in writing about their practice, the other does not. At the end of the experimental period, both groups could be asked by questionnaire or interview how they think their professional development has changed over this period. If they both think they have benefited to the same degree (scenario A), then clearly writing for professional development appears to have no more benefit than simply doing one's job well without the distraction of writing about it. If there is a different result (scenario B), in which one group enthuses about the effect of writing on their development, while the other, fallow group expresses a sense of having remained unchanged, remaining in a veritable state of professional inertia, then the positive effect of the change (i.e. starting to write) is demonstrated.

The value of the true experiment is that it shows what causes certain outcomes. Without the two experimental groups running in parallel, you do not know if the change you introduced into a single given situation has had the effect in question or not. In scenario A above, the outcome of improved workplace learning was caused by simply doing one's job well. If you looked at a single group with improved professional development outcomes, but which was made up of people who had both done their job well and written about their practice, you are not in a position to say which of these two activities has created that outcome of improved professional development.

True case studies can work in a similar way, but the contrast can be between "before" and "after" a change has been introduced – the two groups are not two separate groups compared in parallel at the same time, but the same group looked at sequentially, before (unchanged) and after (having experienced the change), that is, at different points in time. A case study is therefore not just a description of an unchanged workplace situation "How we do such and such at Library X" – there has to be change, an element of originality, innovation or onward momentum, not only to create a robust finding but also to make the situation come alive and generate interest for the reader. However, when two scenarios are separated in time, it is true to say that there can be a lack of strict control and experimental rigour.

It is hoped that these suggestions will give some idea of how the practitioner can engage in writing for publication with a view to enhancing their professional development and improving the quality of their learning in the workplace. These ideas are developed more extensively elsewhere (2,3). The interested reader might wish to pursue some of the above strands of thought by reading more. In this case, it is to be hoped that your interest in authorship and capacity for professional enhancement will flourish by doing so, and that you will prove for yourself how authorship and professional development are linked.

Nicholas Joint
Editor,
Library Review.

1. See: The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education. Entry on "Donald Schon (Schon): learning, reflection and change". "The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.", available at: http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm#_The_reflective_practitioner (accessed 30 September 2005).

2. Day, A. "How to write publishable papers", available at: http://www.emeraldinsight.com/info/librarians/How_to_get_Published/howto.htm (accessed 30 September 2005).

3. Joint, N. (2003), "Writing for publication in a library journal", SCONUL Newsletter, No. 28, pp. 61-6.