

Publish or perish: Death in the publication performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share a poem I wrote as I sought to publish findings from my PhD. The backdrop to the poem includes my experience of dyslexia, the neo-liberal university, and the emotive and perilous demand to publish or perish. The poem, which can be considered as a form of evocative autoethnography, expresses trauma incurred during childhood triggered by feedback accompanying a desk reject. The poem echoes internalised judgement but also seeks to provide hope that achievement is possible even in the face of what feels insurmountable.

Key words

Autoethnography; poetry; neo-liberal university; dyslexia

Introduction

I started writing poems as a child. As a mode of communication, it has always made sense to me. The fragmented, metaphorical, experiential and emotive writing has always resonated and resounded within me. The rhythms and spaces make sense. It is how I read the world anyway, filling in rightly and often wrongly the gaps that feature in my interpretation of the written word and the social and somatic world we occupy. Writing, including writing poetry, however, is a practice that has always been irregular in my life as words come fast and easy, or not at all. The purpose of this paper is to share a moment when the words came easy and fast, pouring out of me with anger, frustration and despair. These words, in the form of a poem, came after reading desk reject email that was accompanied with advice, advice that I had already been given, advice that I thought I had already negotiated and internalised. This advice was given first, after a critique at one of my conference presentations, and second, when I attended a conference session on publishing. However, the advice and my response to it, according to the editor, were not present in the work that had felt complete and right to me when I submitted it to the journal.

Poetry is an important feature to a field of academic writing I feel passionately committed to, autoethnography (Adams, Holman-Jones & Ellis, 2022; Bochner & Ellis, 2021; Kidd, 2018; Rinehart, 2018; Wang, 2021). While I tend to lean towards analytical over evocative forms of autoethnography (Piercy, 2022), I wish to continue to stretch and flex what is considered to be legitimate and valid as researching and writing practice in academia. It is with these intentions that I offer up my poem, “Writing for publication,” for consideration and reflection. Before I present the poem, I wish to describe and discuss the wider context or backdrop to the poem, the neo-liberal university, and in particular the demand to publish or perish and my relationship with dyslexia.

My struggle when I read the editor’s feedback was a personal response of course, but it is one located in a field of practice occupied by many (academics) and therefore is an experience that may or may not resonate. I want to start by encouraging reflection on a common saying that is part of the neo-liberal university (Pithouse-Morgan, Pillay, & Naicker, 2022). Publish or perish, words so often said that they seem trite – but words nonetheless that shape our profession of academia and our disciplines. It is a mantra spoken by PhD students, as publishing successfully are the symbolic keys to the institution, and for those on the inside it is the glue that keeps us in place. However, they are words worth reconsidering literally rather than figuratively as the word perish connotes with death. These words also require reflection in terms of the power relations they express and impose. Like the Sword of Damocles, they are words that discipline us with fear, fear of professional suicide, for should we not publish then we will be ejected from our institutions, our beloved disciplines and our careers. Such rejection is not death, in that we do not die, but are pushed out of our profession, away from our space of belonging, and parts of us will die. Parts of us, when considering this fear, when legitimising this fear, do die from perceived precarity and the heartbreak of not meeting the ever-changing standards of professional performance.

My gendered and wounded response to the publish and perish imperative ebbs and flows within my wider mental and physical health struggles now further complicated by marriage, step-parenting and elder care, and of course COVID-19. Burnout cannot even begin to cover the deep levels of exhaustion I feel. These are struggles that are real, common, and held by all the different professions that remain at the frontline adapting to the ever-changing uncertainties and restrictions of the pandemic.

There is a wealth of literature, challenging and resisting both the neo-liberal university and the publish and perish discourse from privileged (Sparkes, 2021), gendered, and indigenous perspectives (Iosefo, Holman-Jones and Harris, 2021; Pithouse-Morgan, et al., 2022). These autoethnographic stories outline the impacts of patriarchy, neo-liberalism and colonisation and provide ways to combat these hegemonic forces. However, it is hard to hold onto these stories when institutional imperatives are vocalised in workplace interactions that outline the ways in which you fail to meet these standards. For some, it is like water off a duck’s back – the words slide around and fade into insignificance. For others, including me, these words wound and re-open scars long buried. These re-opened wounds are constant companions to be managed and negotiated throughout the life course.

The words stick like burrs because I am neuro-divergent, and rejection within the education system began from the time I was five years old when my mother had to fight with my first teacher, who wanted to hold me back a year because I did not concentrate correctly. My mother won this fight, but it was just the start. My experiences were not all bad. One teacher, who I will adore until the end of time, saw me and simultaneously put me in remedial maths and advanced reading – showing me that, while I might need help I also was gifted. It was not completely smooth sailing. When joining the reading group, I was confronted by one of the

boys: “what are you doing here, you are dumb”. The teacher’s defence and challenge to these words protected me but the insult was still felt. The insult was resurrected a mere 18 months later, when unable to spell a particular word, a different teacher told me and the rest of the class that I was stupid.

It was not always words that wounded me though, body language may also convey judgement. The activities of my peers that seemed to come so easily to them did not for me. I was not able to master jump rope, roller skating and cartwheels. Aching to belong I lost count of the number of times I fell on concrete wearing roller skates. Playing jump rope was the worst though. That is when I first identified the stares – the angry and pitying eyes – that spoke volumes and told me without words that I did not belong. I would watch the ropes, trying to see what others saw, trying to guess the rhythm. Invariably I would jump in and to my surprise and frustration feel the ropes smacking against my calves and thighs, leaving me smarting with pain and welts. Judgement is not just words and tone, it is faces, bodies, sighs and huffs. It should be no surprise that I retreated out of my body and away from other children to my world of books and stories.

Over the years, my parents and I have tried to make sense of why I could meet high performance expectations in some ways, but be unable to perform basic tasks in others. According to one expert the left and right sides of my brain do not co-ordinate appropriately. The expert helpfully shared the words “see she walks like someone who is retarded, swinging her arms and legs the wrong way around”. When I was a teenager, it was a family friend who taught remedial reading and shared her understanding of dyslexia who gave us, that gave me, a way to understand my differences. She thought it highly likely that I was dyslexic. Younger generations of my family have been diagnosed and it is clear that dyslexia runs strongly in my family for both genders. I still have not been officially diagnosed. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the tests are prohibitively expensive and given that I was still ‘successful’ in the education system due to my coping mechanisms the decision was made to leave it. And I have still left it, instead I have read books and talked with teachers who specialise in teaching dyslexic children.

Reading explanations of dyspraxia and dyscalculia I have seen my own experiences and struggles come to life (Braun & Davis, 1997; Grant, 2017). For example, learning about dyspraxia helped me understand and make peace with why it took me three years to learn to ride a bike, and why I could not complete cartwheels. Dyscalculia is a form of dyslexia associated with struggles to learn math. Dyspraxia (a condition not always categorised as a form of dyslexia) is described as a form of chronic clumsiness stemming from distortions of balance and motion. Dyspraxia, also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), affects fine and/or gross motor coordination in children and adults to varying degrees. For example, dyspraxia manifests in children in terms of problems with tying shoe laces or riding a bike, and in adults as difficulties in driving a car and learning new skills around the house (British Dyslexia Association, n.d.; Grant, 2017; Farrell, 2021).

Dyslexia is a general term used to describe learning disabilities, or different orientations from those who could be considered neurotypical (Braun & Davis, 1997; Walker, 2021). Dyslexia is a label and as such it can be perceived in a deficit sense, as a word to reject, implying stupidity. For me, it was and it remains an empowering way to understand why my experiences were at odds with those of my peers in the education system. As such, I identify with the neurodiversity movement’s political and liberatory agenda to free those diagnosed with conditions including but not limited to autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, attention deficit disorders and dyslexia, from the negative connotations that accompany the deficit framing of these conditions (Walker, 2021).

Despite the gift of explanation and my desire to reject the deficit framing of dyslexia, I still have visceral memories of being called dumb and stupid, of not being able to participate, and of being isolated and alone. Significantly, Braun and Davis (1997) claim that dyslexic people have vivid imaginations, which resonates with me given the intensity of my memories visually, physically and emotionally. These memories are my companion when I seek to write sentences, knowing that I will struggle to implement grammatical conventions accurately and present ideas in a logical sequence. These struggles, as well as my historical wounds, were triggered by the email sent after a desk reject, which included the same advice I had already been given untempered by restraint and framed by impatience, which while understandable was hurtful and frustrating. The poem I wrote after letting in my feelings of anger and defeat is presented below.

Writing for publication

*Why don't I get this?
Why can't I do this?
I know, I say
I see, I say but enacting – well it doesn't happen
Dyslexia
I hear and hear and hear
Do I know? Yes I think so but the knowledge slips away*

*Dyslexia
It's like telling the time when I was 10
One day I knew
One day I did
The next day I couldn't, test day I didn't
Every time relearning, every time reaching, thinking, processing slowly
I do it and even now at 45 it slips away when I am tired*

*Reframe
Is writing like telling the time for me?
Always reaching, struggling, tired so tired
Tied up by my tiredness
Be a marathon runner - my supervisor said to me
So I plod, and clod along, clumsy, blunt, confusing, unclear
Dyslexia*

*Somehow, I have to find a way or it's curtains for me
I see and see and see
I hear and hear and hear
I try and try and try
It's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong
I still don't get it – Is it my dyslexia?
To move forward I need to mull and mull and mull*

*But I am so tired
Why don't I get this!?!
Why can't I do this!?!
I DON'T accept this!*

*Dyslexia is the problem and the solution
The solution is to forgive, be kind and remember telling the time
One day I knew, one day I couldn't
Every day I still struggle – time escapes me, all times haptic, numbers and ticking
arrows
It just is who I am
Do I just need to concentrate and remember?*

*Or is it like the Sevillanas?
Class after class
I saw and saw and saw
I heard and heard and heard
I moved and moved and moved
Never matching, never right
But one day I could, one day I did
Muscles doing what my brain could not*

*I will find a way to be in this world, gifted but dyslexic
I have got this
I can do this
Muscles and patience
Kindness and time – in short supply in the neoliberal university
I need to give them to myself*

Even in my wounded state I could not, would not end the poem in the hopelessness of not doing. I may not be publishing that paper yet, but nor will I surrender to the disciplinary-death of not publishing. Instead drawing on tools given to me as an adult in counselling I sought, as I wrote the poem, to reframe the narrative. Therapy may give us coping mechanisms to hold onto. Kindness and reframing are important tools I have been given through therapy, but the wounds remain, lurking partially healed or ripped open at the surface. I wish I had a solution, a form of Teflon so that the words don't still stick. But they do, so instead all I can do is continue to plod until I perish, pushed out of academe, or publish. Luckily, autoethnography provides room for a form of writing consistent with my values that lifts my confidence. In being vulnerable, real and transparent, I can find ways of writing that combat judgement (Jago, 2021).

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