

Librarians as academic authors: Experiences of editing a themed issue of an academic journal



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This article recounts my experience of editing a themed issue of the peer-reviewed Taylor & Francis journal *New review of academic librarianship* and presents tips on writing for a themed issue of a journal and a short reflection on the process.

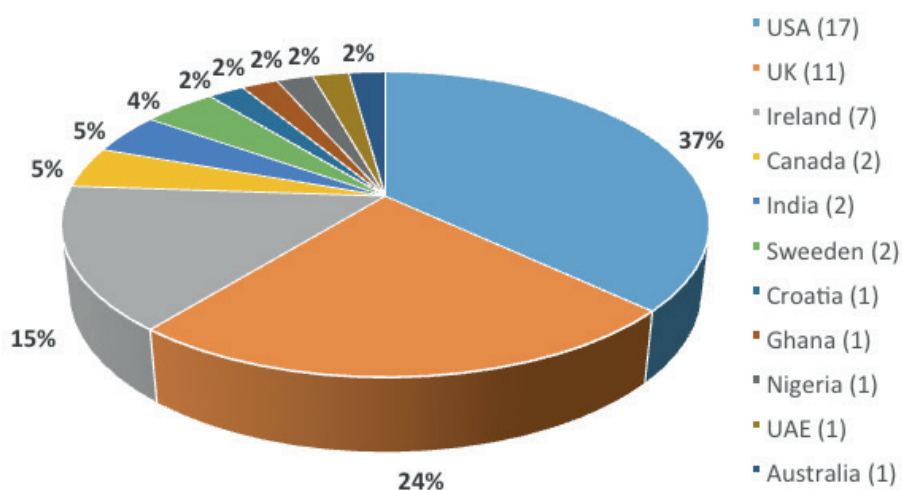
Background

In 2013 I published an article on librarians writing for publication in *New review of academic librarianship* (NRAL) (Fallon, 2013). I was pleased to be invited to be on the editorial board and subsequently to be guest editor of the 2016 themed issue of NRAL. There are four issues NRAL each year, and since 2014 the themed issue has been a double issue.

Call for abstracts

At the initial discussions with the editor-in-chief, potential topics were discussed. My initial thinking was to have the theme of librarian as researcher/academic author. Following consultation with the editorial board we concluded that this theme was somewhat narrow, so we broadened it to librarian as communicator. In May 2015, the call for 500-word abstracts was posted. It was publicised broadly via e-mail, social media outlets, listservs, Taylor & Francis's distribution networks and NRAL's editorial board members. I also posted the call to my academic writing blog academicwritinglibrarian.blogspot.ie

The pie chart shows breakdown by country of the 46 abstracts received.



Abstracts by country

Selection of content

The next stage was to send these abstracts out for peer review. Each one went to two reviewers, most but not all of whom were on the editorial board of NRAL. Reviewers were asked to rate abstracts based on the following criteria:

- relevance to scholarly communication and academic libraries
- clarity, coherence and organisation of writing
- likelihood that final product will be of high quality
- originality and innovation of the work

There was quite a variety of topics and methodologies. Those that made the final selection had to have the potential to make a significant contribution to the themed issue. Because NRAL is an international journal, it was necessary to ensure a wide geographic spread of contributions, and communication needed to be central to all abstracts selected. While case studies predominated, those that were selected had to have a research base backed up by evidence. Study groups for case studies were, in some cases, too small. Some abstracts

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covered very routine topics that were not new and/or were extensively covered elsewhere. Where research was planned but not yet carried out, the relatively short timeline – six months – made it unlikely that an acceptable article could be submitted within the timeframe. In some of the abstracts communication was a peripheral issue rather than a central theme. Where the topic of the abstract was deemed to be of potential interest to readers of NRAL but not significantly related to the theme of communication, contributors were invited to develop their article and submit to an open issue through the regular channels. English language was an issue for some of the authors. The majority of respondents were from countries where English is the first language and were likely to have access to an extensive body of literature, resources and expertise in their home institutions. I offered mentoring to two potential contributors who did not have this level of support, but whose proposals were deemed to be of significant value to the collection.

Twenty-five abstracts were selected. Sixteen contributors were asked to develop their abstract into a 5,000-word article and nine were asked to develop it into a 3,000-word case study. All contributors were notified in July and those accepted were given a December deadline for submission. The full timeline is given below.

Timeline

Call for abstracts issued *mid-May 2015*
Closing date for abstracts *mid-June 2015*

Notification of acceptance *17 July 2015*
Production of papers by authors from selected abstracts
July 2015 – 4 Dec 2015
Peer review and feedback *7 Dec 2015 – end of Jan 2016*

Final manuscripts due date *31 March 2016*
Proofs date *21 May 2016*
Publication month *June 2016*
Publication month for print edition *November 2016*

Peer review process

Contributors submitted via the ScholarOne system, which is used by a number of scholarly journals and is straightforward to use. Most met the December deadline. During the following two months articles went through a double blind peer review process. Most, but not all of the peer reviewers were on the editorial board of NRAL. Others were invited because of their known expertise in a particular area. The reviewers made one of the following recommendations:

accept
minor revision needed
major revision needed
reject

Where there was a difference in opinion between reviewers – i.e. one suggesting major revision/another suggesting minor revisions – I made the final decision.

None of the papers was accepted without revision. Fifty percent of the papers required major revision; one person did not submit; three papers were rejected or required such a level of revision that the author(s) decided not to resubmit. Between authors receiving their feedback and the final manuscript submission at the end of March, I answered a lot of questions from authors, most of which related to the feedback from peer reviewers. I reread all articles as they were resubmitted and the ultimate decision on what to include lay with me.

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After peer review Taylor & Francis make available the Accepted Manuscript Online (AMO), and this can be deposited in an institutional repository. Contributors are also given fifty free downloads of their article – where there were four authors that was a total of 200. This is useful for promotional purposes and was particularly useful for those institutions that do not have access to the journal.

Eighteen papers made the final volume, which was launched at Maynooth University on 20 October 2016 at a seminar called *Librarian as communicator*. A number of the contributors came and presented briefly (ten minutes) on their article topic. This gave a flavour of the issue to the eighty people who attended the event. The themed issue is currently going through the final stages of production as an edited collection and is due to be published by Routledge in October 2017, which is a nice bonus for all involved.

Reflection

This was a very positive experience for me and I learned a lot from the process. Reading articles across a wide range of topics and gleaning perspectives on topics from different countries was very useful. While regular professional reading is something I aspire to do, work and other schedules mean I rarely achieve this aim. Reading critically helped me develop my skills as a peer reviewer and as a writer. Managing the process, which involved eighteen articles, with over 40 contributors in total, was a really interesting and new experience for me. Most communication was via e-mail. I have never met most of the authors face-to-face.

Informal feedback indicated that the process was a positive one for the contributors. For a number it was their first peer reviewed article. Writing the article helped them to:

- develop their writing skills
- research and write about a topic and situate it in the context of the literature on the topic and their own data
- experience the peer review process and develop the resilience to deal with it
- become familiar with ScholarOne
- complete a piece of writing in a structured and supportive environment
- understand better the challenges and experiences of their lecturing colleagues who also grapple with the challenges writing for academic journals presents.

The opportunity to present at the seminar and publish the article as a chapter in a Routledge book was perhaps an unexpected bonus and a nice reward for all their work.

Overall this was a very positive experience and made what I hope is a significant contribution to the literature on librarians as communicators.

Ten tips for those considering contributing to a peer-reviewed journal

- 1 Study the call for abstracts carefully, noting the key themes/concepts and the date for submission. The length of abstracts for NRAL was 500 words, which gives an opportunity to clearly present what your article aspires to do.
- 2 Ensure your contribution relates to the theme of the issue. It may be more relevant to a general issue and possibly have a better chance of acceptance. Calls aren't issued for the two general issues of NRAL, so there will be fewer submissions. If you are not responding to a call for abstracts, send a query

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e-mail to the editor briefly explaining your idea for an article, rather than submitting the full article.

- 3 Study the general guidelines for submissions on the journal website and read a few articles from previous issues to get a flavour of content and style. The journal guidelines will tell you the target audience for the journal and its purpose. It's important you write the abstract with this in mind.
- 4 The abstract should have a title. This may not be the final title but it should be informative and reflect the content of the paper. If the paper is a case study, say so; and if it refers to a specific institution, say so.
- 5 Your abstract should distil the essence of the article you are planning to write. It is not a summary or introduction. It should give the objectives of your research, information on the methodology used and the main findings/ results.
- 6 Before writing the abstract, study abstracts of published articles in your target journal. They will generally be shorter than the abstract required but they will give you a flavour of approaches and language. Consider the verbs used in the abstract.
- 7 English has to be clear and to an acceptable standard in the abstract. If English is not your first language it is a good idea to get someone who is fluent in English to read your abstract before submitting.
- 8 Draft and redraft the abstract. Reread the call for abstracts and ensure it meets the criteria
- 9 If your abstract is accepted work closely with the editor to ensure you deliver what the journal is looking for within the stated time frame.
- 10 If your abstract is not accepted don't despair, review your abstract and consider whether it might be suitable for another purpose.

And, most important of all keep writing.

Reference

Fallon, H. (2012). Using a blended learning approach to increase librarians' motivation and skills to publish". *New review of academic librarianship*, 18(1), pp. 7-25 <http://eprints.maynoothuniversity.ie/4287/>

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