

Reasons to Write in the Sudanese Academia: a Hard Sciences Perspective

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Abstract

Writing is a tool of constructing and disseminating knowledge and thus, it plays a central role in the academic and professional development of academics. Given this general understanding of the function of writing in the academia, this study intends to explore the specific reasons underpinning the writing attempts made by Sudanese researchers affiliated with academic fields generally labelled as hard sciences. An interview was used to collect qualitative data from ten faculty members who were in the service of Alazhari University located in Khartoum; the participants were four professors, four assistant professors, and a lecturer in the fields of biomedical sciences, applied statistics, social forestry, petroleum and civil engineering. The interview centred on different motives to write, the rewards they gained from writing and the writing challenges. The results showed that the majority of the interviewees had reported that they would write to share knowledge. While the professors reported recognition as another important reason, the junior faculty reported career development as an important motive for writing. All of the interviewees reported the huge challenges they had to deal with in order to conduct a research, writing up and publishing their findings.

Keywords: writing, academia, writing rewards, motives to write, writing challenges, writing for, publication, recognition

المستخلص

الكتابة هي أداة لبناء المعرفة ونشرها، وبالتالي فإنها تلعب دوراً رئيسياً في التطوير الأكاديمي والمهني للأكاديميين. بالنظر إلى هذا الفهم العام لوظيفة الكتابة في الأوساط الأكاديمية، تعتزم هذه الدراسة استكشاف الأسباب المحددة التي تقوم عليها محاولات الكتابة التي قام بها الباحثون السودانيون التابعون للمجالات الأكاديمية التي تم تصنيفها عمومًا على أنها علوم صلبة. تم استخدام المقابلة لجمع بيانات نوعية من عشرة من أعضاء هيئة التدريس الذين كانوا في خدمة جامعة الزعيم الأزهري الواقعة في الخرطوم. كان المشاركون أربعة أساتذة، وأربعة أساتذة مساعدون ومحاضرين في مجالات العلوم الطبية الحيوية والإحصاء التطبيقي والغابات الاجتماعية والبتترول والهندسة المدنية. ركزت المقابلة على الدوافع المختلفة للكتابة والفوائد التي اكتسبوها من الكتابة والتغلب على تحدياتها. وأظهرت النتائج أن غالبية من أجريت معهم المقابلات أفادوا أنهم سيكتبون لإنتاج المعرفة وتبادلها. في حين ذكر الأساتذة أن التقدير هو سبب مهم آخر، ذكر أعضاء هيئة التدريس المبتدئين أن التطوير الوظيفي هو دافع مهم للكتابة. أبلغ جميع من أجريت معهم المقابلات عن التحديات الهائلة التي كان عليهم التعامل معها من أجل إجراء بحوث وكتابة النتائج التي توصلوا إليها ونشرها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة، الأوساط الأكاديمية، مكافآت الكتابة، دوافع الكتابة، تحديات الكتابة، الكتابة من أجل النشر، الاعتراف

Introduction

Writing is one of the most important practices in the academic community. It is the place where thinking becomes alive and organised, knowledge constructed and academic identity created and negotiated (Henning et al, 2010; Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014). Traditionally, writing has been viewed as mere mental and cognitive activity. However, another view considers writing as a collective social practice in the academic discourse community. During this practice, the writer engages in a conversation with a community of readers, who will be able to recognize the knowledge and claims created through the text (Rahimivand & Kuhi, 2014).

Writing is widely conceived to play a central role in the academia. Both the faculty and the students need it to achieve myriad academic, professional and personal goals. Academic goals pertain to knowledge production, contribution to the disciplinary conversation and gaining inside into the disciplinary culture, to mention but a few (Bazerman, 2010; Hyland, 2009). As to the role of writing in professional development, it is held that writing for publication weighs heavily in decisions about hiring, promotion, and tenure in academic settings (Boice, 1991; Rocco & Hatcher, 2003). On personal level, researchers are argued to “enjoy the power they derive from writing and the power derived from subsequent publication” (Rocco & Hatcher, 2003, p.3). Also, writing for publication helps to construct “an appropriate author persona” so that researchers could qualify for membership of a disciplinary community (Swales & Feak, 2012, p. 2). These goals ultimately enhance the visibility, ranking and reputation of the academic institutions with which researchers are affiliated. What is more, power emanating from writing for publication is enormously foregrounded in Hyland (2004) as manifested in the high frequency of three keywords; these are authority (58 times), credibility (33 times) and reputation (22 times). At a higher level such power-related terms could “mean Nobel Prize, Royal Society Fellowship or greater access to grants and commercial consultancies” (Hyland, 2004, p. 168). It is apparent therefore that “what academics principally do is write: they publish articles, books, reviews, conference papers and research notes; ...” (Hyland, 2004, p. 2); and that “the modern research lab devotes more energy to producing papers than to making discoveries ...” (Woolgar, 1979 as cited in Hyland, 2004, p. 2). Owing to these growing roles as summarised above, academic writing has received huge scholarship in the last four decades. According to Ezza & Drid (2020) efforts made to proliferate academic writing culture included the production of encyclopaedic resources, publication of top-tier journals and organization of international conferences. These efforts are intended in part to enculturate novice scholars and postgraduate students into the discourse conventions of their disciplines.

Despite the huge rewards brought by writing for publication as reported above, academics find it a most challenging task, and many of them would choose to avoid it (cf. Widdowson, 1983; Ezza et al, 2019). As such, they are conceived as struggling writers in the same manner as their own students. This claim receives support for the observation that globally 85% of publications are produced by 15% of faculty (Boice, 1991); however, compared to the students, academics suffer from writing challenges that are caused by

different factors, most notably distractions, self-doubts, procrastination, and rejections (ibid). In other words, writing attempts made by academics are distracted by other academic activities, the lack of confidence that they could write for publication, the feeling that they are not ready to write and the series of rejections of articles submitted for publication.

Method

Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the study data. The interview questions were collectively brainstormed by the researchers. After careful discussion, the interview was emailed to five experts along with the study questions and objectives to judge their face validity. Few amendments were proposed by the referees. Most importantly, referees proposed additional reasons for writing in the academia, including building CVs, and job-related writing tasks. They also proposed deletion of the reason pertaining to “solution for a given problem in industry” as it does not belong directly to the academia. The interview questions centred on the rewards and challenges of writing for publication in relation to the number and type of publications, language of publication, and publication contexts (i.e., local, regional or international). For example, there were questions about the relationship between the language of publication and recognition; if the publication contexts would enhance promotion opportunities, and publication challenges, to mention but a few.

Participants

The study participants were nine academics who were teaching at different (hard science) Departments at Elazhari University in Khartoum: biomedical sciences, applied statistics, social forestry, and petroleum and civil engineering. They were randomly selected from a total of 67 faculty members of whom 24 were non-tenured professors with regular research record. They represented different academic ranks (i.e., four professors, four assistant professors and one lecturer). The basic criteria for selection were the active participation in writing for publication and writing a thesis for a degree. These criteria reduced the number of potential participants because many assistant/associate professors ceased writing after promotion to the next rank. Also, many teaching assistants were enrolled in postgraduate programmes with no written component; i.e., the programmes were wholly offered by courses. The participants' publication rate ranged from 6 to 115 articles. The majority of publications were journal articles (94.3%) that had been written in English and published in local and international journals.

Procedure

It took almost two weeks to complete the interview for a number of reasons. First, most faculties were not located in the main campus, which required the researchers to shuttle between campuses to get the job done. Second, most participants had no rigid system of office hours to facilitate meetings. Thus, the researchers had to make frequent visits and

phone calls to arrange for interview sessions. Third, most participants had tight schedules because they were involved in many administrative and academic committees. However, most interview sessions took place in a friendly atmosphere at the participants’ offices and staff rooms. Part of the reason for this positive atmosphere was the participant’s familiarity with the topics, which remarkably facilitated the interviews. They even proposed points that were not part of the original interview questions, e.g., the institutional recognition of publishing in the University journals.

Results

Producing and sharing knowledge

Participant	Status	Statement
1	Professor	Publishing is a most important source of knowledge dissemination.
2	Professor	Writing for publication is the most effective way to share new scientific facts.
3	Professor	Writing is important for documenting lab work and make it known to other scientists in the field.
4	Professor	Scientific discoveries are useless if they are not shared with others through published research.
5	Assistant Professor	Writing is the only way to report the knowledge production process that takes place in the lab
6	Lecturer	Thesis writing trains postgraduate candidates in the techniques needed to produce knowledge and share it with other PhD students.

Recognition

Participant	Status	Statement
1	Professor	Publishing brings many rewards, including high level appointments, invitations to speak at local, regional and international conferences, and citations.
2	Professor	Writing for publication means membership of university and ministerial-level committees.
3	Professor	Publishing is an important recognition tool inside and outside the academic institution.
4	Professor	Publishing qualifies academics to hold gate-keeping positions.
		Writing for publication increases one’s connections locally and internationally.
5	Assistant Professor	Writing makes my voice heard among frequently published scholars.

Funding

Participant	Status	Statement
1	Professor	Frequent publishing assists in accelerating proposal funding processes.
2	Professor	Publishing increases academic credibility, and thus it facilitates funding.

Promotion

Participant	Status	Statement
1	Professor	Were it not for writing, I wouldn't achieve any career advancement.
2	Professor	Writing was my only gate to promotion to different statuses.
3	Professor	Writing for publication was only means of promotion to the professorship per se.
4	Professor	It is impossible to develop professionally without writing for publication.
5	Assistant Professor	I'm now under pressure to publish to establish myself as real academic.

Almost all statements were made by participants who were in the professor status. This tendency is quite natural since most activities pertaining to knowledge production, funding and recognition are associated with academics who are in this high status. The statement made by a participant in assistant-professor status that ‘Writing makes my voice heard among frequently published scholars’ attest to this understanding. Recently Elzaem Elazhari University Administration released an ‘appreciation note’ that has subsequently been widely circulated in the social media, in recognition of quality research produced by faculty that enhanced the ranking of the University. The honour list included researchers who were in the Professor status. This recognition hint not motivates researcher to produce more quality research, it also puts more pressure on other researchers to publish and thus to establish themselves as academics as mentioned by a participant in the assistant-professor status.

Discussion

The permanence of written word makes writing a powerful vehicle for shaping thoughts and method of communicating ideas and sharing knowledge, (Nielsen and Rocco, 2002).The majority of our interviewees adopted this general concept in their writing. “I write to share knowledge and to conserve the scientific heritage in forestry for the next generation.” Further, an assistant professor in microbiology added “to foster professional

Knowledge and establish national database in my discipline". Storer (1966) described science as "nonservice profession" in which the scientist servicing the lay public indirectly while his main interest is servicing his colleagues through contribution to the existing body of knowledge. This contribution is rewarded by professional recognition by his colleagues and their subsequent contribution to his field. In our study, recognition was another reason that motivates professors in particular to write. Ivanic (1998) stated that the self-representation in relation to a community of readers is seldom made explicitly, it is almost at the heart of every acts of writing. While the hard science in particular has been related to impersonality (Storer, 1966) where the scientists "prefer to downplay their personal role to highlight the issue under study" (Hyland, 2002), it could be said that this self-representation is not about representing the person-identity through the text, but rather through positioning oneself as a researcher on the field through the act of writing and subsequent resulting publication. It is important to point out that recognition is not just self-serving, it also impacts the placement of the individual in a power position. This position in turn assists him personally by allowing him to have more influence and impact in the world.

As has been shown in this study, the young faculty have the passion to share their knowledge so the society could benefit from their work; however, it is notable that their motives are more concentrated around the area of self and career development which is a natural process given their need to move up the career ladder compared to the participants who are in the status of full professor. Accordingly, their selection of topics is based largely on these needs or the needs of the professional community to attract more attention and hence "make the publication easier". Hangel's (2017) a study of the motives behind publishing among academics and researchers in different career stages reports that the incentives of postdocs and junior professors were strongly career-oriented and it is also derived by their desire to become visible and positioning themselves within the scientific community. Interestingly, the article showed that one of the motives of senior academics is to educate young generations of academics and promote junior researchers through co-publishing or "sharing symbolic capital of recognition." It is unfortunate that it was not the case in this study. None of the professors interviewed in this study mentioned developing capacity of junior faculty among their reasons to write and despite their awareness of the language barrier and the need for training in academic writing skills among junior faculty. These findings highlighted to some extent the invisible gap of communication between senior and junior academics in the Sudanese institutions.

In collaborative sciences the motivation of professors to conduct research is fulfilled through their roles as principle investigators, chairs or supervisors (Hangel, 2017). Among our interviewees, three professors were also researchers in research institutions, while the fourth's only reason for writing was promotion; however, most of his publications drew on his on his students work. That is, he develops research assignments written by his students into studies that could be published in peer-reviewed journals. This practice however is not uncommon among Sudanese scholars as the research process is hindered by a dozen of obstacles and challenges including "lack of encouragement and supportive institutions that are not appreciating research which is not related to degree acquisition. Furthermore, the need to get a tenure or job promotion poses a great pressure on academics to publish which

at the end may also discourage production of new works following promotion (Rond and Miller, 2005). In addition, this situation likely targets number of publication needed for promotion rather than the quality of the work as commented by some interviewees. This notion of “publish or perish” (Coolidge and Lord, 1932), places great pressure on scholars to publish and leads to decreasing in the value of resulting scholarship. Moreover, it raises ethical questions especially when it leads to the inclusion of the professor’s name on the paper even if he did not contribute to the research article, (Rawat and Meena, 2014).

It is worth to note that, the academic writing for those from hard sciences background is usually considered as a general skill and endpoint of the research and publication process, and even its impact is seen within this context. Accordingly, when we asked about the challenges and rewards it was linked more to the technical aspect of research rather than the writing itself, contrary to the belief that writing should play a central role research development process and that it should be considered as the initial activity rather than the endpoint of this process (Lee and Boud, 2003). This reasoning receives further support from the view that writing is a means of active learning, (Russel, 1997). This concept of integrating writing as a viable tool of disciplinary knowledge construction could bridge the gap between writing, doing and knowing in different disciplines (Carter, 2007). It could also help in capacitating the next generations of Sudanese Academics to become recognised writers within their fields.

Conclusion

This study has been an attempt to explore researchers’ view of academic writing in their personal, academic and professional lives in contexts that generally viewed writing as a peripheral activity. The basic rationale of the study was to practically persuade researchers in the hard sciences that writing plays a central role in the academia in that it is the only gate for personal, academic and professional development. This role has been widely reinforced by the belief that writing is a powerful tool of constructing, sharing and distributing knowledge; and a vehicle for shaping thoughts and building communities. Qualitative data collected from the study participants showed that they were aware of the need to develop academic writing conventions to participate in the disciplinary conversation through their published works despite the fact some participants still associate writing with a peripheral role. Generally speaking, the study findings inform that there are differences in young and seniors academics in writing motives which could be attributed to their personal, academic and professional objectives.

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