

## **Editorial – TiLL Volume 8 Issue 2**

### **Graft, Draft, and Craft: The Almost Secret World of Writing Journal Articles**

This issue of TiLL is somewhat different from previous ones in that it is a special edition publishing four papers by project teams who were involved in The Education & Training Foundation's (ETF) funded Outstanding Teaching Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Phase 3 programme in the north-east and Cumbria. I had the privilege of being the evaluator for the programme and very early on I offered to publish papers in a special edition of TiLL, and I am delighted that five of the project teams accepted my invitation and submitted their papers for review. In this editorial, I want to cover three things: briefly introduce OTLA; make visible what is involved in writing a journal article; and tell you more about the four papers we are publishing.

#### **The OTLA programme: a search for the Holy Grail?**

It seems to me that OTLA has become the Holy Grail for all education providers inspected by Ofsted, the inspectorate in England responsible for inspecting early years, primary, secondary, and Further Education (FE), and Initial Teacher Education in universities. It is to be pursued at every opportunity and at almost any cost. As you would expect, the ETF sees one of its roles as a supporter of providers in search of OTLA and it normally does this by hosting events and funding initiatives; in this instance, it involved them allocating over £300,000 to a partnership led by Claire Collins Consultancy, who awarded £15,000 to teams of practitioners to undertake collaborative OTLA projects. Julie Gibbings-Garrett, who is Head of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, has written an introduction to the programme to tell you more about the OTLA programme.

#### **Making visible the grafting, drafting, and crafting of writing a journal article**

Sam Jones, an FE-based Teacher Educator who has hosted a number of #FEResearchmeet and LSRN meetings, and I co-convened a workshop on research and scholarship in FE at the Reimagining FE Conference held at Birmingham City University in June 2018. One of the most hotly debated questions we discussed was the process of getting your work published, so I thought it might be useful to tell you what is involved for those of you thinking about writing a paper for a journal. To do this, I will discuss some of the activities the writers and reviewers of the four articles were involved

in, and add to this some of my own experiences as a writer who is trying to get my work published. It seems to me there are five stages to getting your work published:

1. **Identifying your paper.** You need a piece of research that you have undertaken or a topic you wish to theoretically discuss as a basis for your paper. In this edition, the five papers that were submitted for review had all completed a piece of practitioner-research as part of the OTLA Phase 3 programme. TiLL and other journals will accept theoretical pieces too, though we are particularly keen to publish practitioner research.
2. **The graft, draft, and craft of writing a paper.** Doing your research requires particular knowledge, skills, and values, and writing it up requires another set of skills. Writing papers is a drafting and crafting process that is a product of your graft. All journals have conventions for presenting your paper and you should read them before you start writing, refer to them when you are writing, and as a last check before you submit your paper. The editor(s) – people like myself – will ask you to make any formatting corrections to your paper before they will publish it. In some ways, following the conventions for presenting your work is the easy bit; finding the time and energy to write is the hardest bit and requires self-sacrifice – it is the graft of writing. I was recently asked by a colleague how long it takes me to write a 7,500-word paper. My answer was about 12 days, which normally consist of the equivalent of about seven hours reading and/or writing per day. Almost all of my writing is done at weekends – normally four hours on a Saturday afternoon and three hours on a Sunday afternoon. At the start of the process, I spend most of my time reading about my topic to make sure I have the necessary background literature to support my line of argument. I make notes and perhaps sketch out my paper, though it will change as I begin to write. Even when I have started writing, I may return to a book or journal article to re-read it or may look for a new text to strengthen my writing. I reckon I need a day to proof read my work before I submit it to the reviewers and even then the reviewers spot things I have missed. When it is ready, I submit my paper for review. The four papers in this edition will have gone through a very similar process; the only difference being how much time each writer has spent on the grafting, drafting, and crafting of their paper.

3. **The review process.** This is perhaps the toughest stage of the process for a writer. You have invested time and emotion into writing up your research, often taking yourself away from those you love or what you love so you can write, and two reviewers will blind review your paper and tell you what they think of it and make a recommendation regarding publication. Most papers are reviewed twice. The first review gives you an indication of whether your paper might be accepted – revisions are normally required before publication – and feedback on how it might be improved. The second review makes a final decision regarding publication and may ask for further revisions to be made before your paper is published. Who are the reviewers? The editor normally chooses their reviewers based on the topic of the paper. They are normally very knowledgeable about the topic you are writing about and may have done research on it themselves. Reviewers are unpaid, though they will carefully read your paper and comment on it. The editor will send the reviewers' feedback to you – the TiLL reviews are normally completed in three to four weeks. Some of the TiLL reviewers will annotate your paper, too. The aspect of feedback you will be most concerned with initially will be the recommendation regarding publication. There are normally four or five possible recommendations: accept without revisions, which is highly unusual; accept with minor revisions; return for major revisions; reject but advise the author to submit their paper elsewhere; reject outright. It is very unusual for us to reject outright a paper, though TiLL does sometimes ask authors to make major revisions to their work before we will publish it. Now you have your feedback, you have to decide whether you are going to make those revisions or not. One of the authors who submitted a paper for this edition chose not to re-submit their paper for the second review. Editors are used to this and understand.
  
4. **More crafting.** Responding to feedback can be challenging because sometimes reviewers may not agree on what needs to be improved. This can be disorientating, though you have to accept it and make your own judgements and decisions about how you will respond to their comments. Recently I was disappointed with some feedback on a paper I had submitted for review. Once I had let my bruised ego have its say, I was able to look again at the feedback and actually found it really helpful as I edited and improved my paper. How long do revisions take to do? This depends on the comments your reviewers make, though I would normally

plan on at least one day and probably two days of your time, i.e. up to 14 hours of further crafting of your work, before your paper will be ready to re-submit. We aim to provide feedback and a final decision regarding publication within three to four weeks of a paper being re-submitted. The four papers re-submitted for this edition of TiLL were all accepted for publication, though it is not unusual for us to say that a re-submitted paper needs some further work on it. Where possible, we give authors a final chance to make revisions and then include the paper in the next edition of TiLL.

5. **Proof reading, permissions, and publication.** Assuming your paper is accepted, the journal will then get your paper ready for publication. At TiLL, we have a team who get the journal ready and they proof read the papers, obtain permissions from the authors for publication, and then format the journal ready for publication. One of the things we spend most of our time doing is ensuring the papers model to TiLL's readership examples of how to write up in an appropriate format and voice research undertaken within Lifelong Learning. This final stage takes about four to six weeks to complete as emails go to and fro between authors, myself, the proof readers, and the University of Huddersfield Press who publish the journal.

A final thought about publication: I would encourage you to look to publish your work, where possible, in open access, online journals like TiLL. The reasons for this are moral and ethical. Recently, I wrote a blog post for the University Press about open access journals and my latest thinking has been shaped by hearing Professor Milena Dragičević Šešić, of the University of Arts, Belgrade, speak about how her own students could not access her articles because they were often published in subscription journals which her university could not afford. Open access journals are democratic in the sense that they are available to everyone, not just a selective few.

### **Introducing the four papers in this issue**

These four practitioner research papers are all pieces of action research and reflect the diversity of the sector in a number of ways.

Judith Hunter and Alex Brown's research was undertaken at a community-based learning provider for learners who have missed substantial periods of mainstream education. Their research sought to make changes to the existing initial and diagnostic assessment model as it was considered not to meet the needs of their learners, many of whom were vulnerable and lacked confidence. Their work re-imagined initial and diagnostic assessment with the aim of growing the learners' mindsets at the same time. The paper highlights the tension between meeting the needs of your learners and the requirements and inflexibility of a funding agency.

Elaine Mattinson's research was undertaken in an FE college. Her paper looks at what happens when you induct vocational trainee teachers into the role of teacher as researcher and how they learned to become action researchers and research their own practice. What was significant is the account of the shift in identity of these vocational tutors as they realise that they can do research and how this supports their becoming a teacher. Significantly, Elaine reflexively discusses her own professional learning arising from conducting the research. You may notice that the name of Elaine's college is not included anywhere on the paper. This was a specific request made by her college and a condition of publication and we respect that request for anonymity.

Cath McPartland's research was also undertaken within an FE college and looks at how tutors and student support assistants/learning support assistants can more effectively work together to provide learner self-assessment address an important aspect of teaching, learning, and assessment that supports some of the most vulnerable learners. Significantly, this piece of research has resulted in practitioners better understanding their practice, working more effectively together, and making changes at an organisational level to the ways student support operates; it has illuminated an almost secret pedagogy of student support.

The final paper is by Vicky Meaby and was undertaken in a local authority setting. This paper explores how to empower teaching and learning communities to effectively promote equality and celebrate diversity by establishing professional learning communities. The paper suggests significant progress was made into championing and modelling equality and diversity practices for learners and plans for further work have been identified.

I had the privilege of hearing Cath and her team, Elaine and her team, Judith and Alex, and Vicky speak at the Collaborative Action Research Network's Annual Conference earlier this month where they presented their papers. I wrote them an email afterwards which said: "You, your colleagues, and your projects are bright lights of hope; shining examples of transformative, participatory action research in FE. Brilliantly well done!" You can now read more about the research that inspired me to write those words in this edition of TiLL.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr Lisa Russell, who has edited the journal with me since 2014, as she is stepping down from this role; the reviewers who give freely of their time to review the papers, and without whom there would be no papers, and to Becky Gregson-Flynn and Becky Ashwell who proof read the papers and get the journal ready for publication.



**Dr David Powell, Editor**  
*University of Huddersfield*  
HUDCETT