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JUTLP

Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Editorial: Making Unstructured Abstracts More Concrete

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Abstract

The objective of this editorial is two-fold. First, to place the importance of clear abstract writing in the context of booming academic submissions. The editorial highlights the huge pressure on systems of review that have had the side effect of strongly positioning the abstract as gatekeeper to publication. Such emphasis on this short, hardworking text means that if the abstract is poorly written or does not effectively articulate its contribution to pedagogy, it falls at the first hurdle. Second, the editorial aims to give practical advice to scholars seeking publication of their learning and teaching research and scholarship by emphasizing the centrality of meaningful contribution at the heart of good research design, which is then further distilled into an articulate abstract. Not what was done, but what was found: the contribution of the contribution. Furthermore, the authors are aware of, and sensitive to, the many voices historically excluded from discussions of higher education and therefore also wish this editorial to act as an enabler for those researchers. As such, the editorial simply offers principles of effective abstract writing to ensure openness to different approaches and styles, resisting an abstract-formula beyond placing the meaningful contribution front-and-centre. On a meta level, this abstract attempts to articulate its meaningful contribution to the debate, by following these principles, while crucially retaining the voice and character of its authors.

Editors

Section: Developing Teaching Practice
Editor in Chief: Dr Joseph Crawford

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Introduction

Over the past ten years, research and publication has been linked to pathways for individual advancement and promotion, linked to professional development plans, and seen as a register of a department, faculty or institution's quality or 'excellence' (Andrew, 2024), evidenced by a considerable increase in the number of submissions to teaching and learning journals like the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* (JUTLP). Anecdotally, editors of journals internationally viewed as quality (through such lenses as SCOPUS ratings), report increases in submission numbers, but also increases in desk and process rejections. Steven Jones' notes in *Universities Under Fire* (2022) that the sector has both more journals and more articles submitted to them than ever. This is because pressure to publish exceeds the volume of material that can reasonably be assessed through any journal review system. Crawford's (2024) recent editorial in JUTLP shows the exponential increase in submissions to the journal, culminating in a staggering 596% increase over the last decade. Alongside this, the data also illustrates the acceptance rate of submissions since 2008 and the number of rejections for each year. In 2023, 578 papers were rejected out of 647 submissions, equating to a rejection rate of 89%.

While such figures may suggest the desperation of pressured authors, particularly those in developing nations, inexperienced early career researchers lacking in confidence, and those impacted by the hyper-unrealistic neoliberal expectations Jones (2022) decries, it also suggests the time poverty of editors—and the importance of making a good first impression through an articulate, well-reasoned and thorough abstract. As specialist educational practitioners attuned to the look, feel and sound of good scholarship, the Developing Teaching Practice section of JUTLP recognise the value of revisiting what articulate, well-reasoned and thorough abstracts look, feel and sound like.

Our key problem is that without a clear and logical abstract, it is difficult for editors to understand the paper's contribution and readily find reviewers. This paper draws a distinction between the more unstructured abstracts invited by JUTLP and templated structured abstracts. We do not propose that abstracts should follow a painting-by-numbers approach, such as that used by Emerald and other journals. Such formulae use syntactic functions to restrict writers to the orientation of: Research enquiry and question, Background, Methodology, Findings, Discussion and Conclusion, without affording emphasis according to the study and depriving authors of considerable agency. Good research cannot be captured in a box and ticked. We want to move away from a one-size-fits all abstract model to afford writers with creative approaches, for instance, access to generating abstracts accordant with their work. Rather, we propose a lateral and inclusive approach appropriate for authors submitting to educational journals, that opens with an engaging explication of topic, continues into an exploration of a problem, considers why others have not as yet sufficiently addressed this 'gap' in the way proposed, explains how the current study approaches the research question and how the author(s) set about answering or addressing it. In other words, it allows for thought processes about reflecting in, on and for pedagogic practice in a meaningful way. An abstract might, then, conclude with a sense of the work's impact and contribution to scholarship, knowledge, communities, disciplines/ interdisciplines/ cross disciplines/ transdisciplines.

Our aim is to support authors with abstract writing tools and to convey a sense of how we know when we have read a satisfying, not just satisfactory, abstract. We have labelled what we value in abstracts 'meaningful pedagogic scholarship'. This editorial undertakes to examine what a good contribution with meaningful pedagogic scholarship looks like, because without a clear articulation of the paper or article's contribution to knowledge or scholarship, publication cannot follow. Our editorial then discusses how this contribution might be articulated clearly in the abstract.

Meaningful Pedagogic Scholarship

The discussion above identifies some of the significant contextual factors that have led to the growth of educator engagement and effort in pedagogic scholarship publication. Rejected papers are disheartening for all involved in the process. As editors, and scholars ourselves, we understand the pain of receiving a rejection and strive to be constructive in this situation, offering feedback about how the work presented may be enhanced or developed. For authors, no matter how constructive the feedback, a rejection can lead to perceptions that their work is not being seen as valuable or worthy. A sense of wasted time and effort can also result.

It is important to note firstly that we are consciously using the term 'pedagogic scholarship' to refer to work submitted to JUTLP, as opposed to terms such as 'education research'. Papers submitted to JUTLP may well include those sharing education research; however, the majority, certainly in relation to our DTP theme, are from faculty engaged in pedagogic research under the banner of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Indeed, JUTLP's stated aims and scope implicitly articulate the journal's alignment to the advancement of knowledge through SoTL activity: "We encourage practice-based research situated in the local context..." (JUTLP, 2024). Those familiar with the SoTL field will know that debate about what activity is counted or defined as SoTL has been constant since Boyer first introduced us to the 'scholarship of teaching' concept in 1990. Those seeking to get a sense of this debate may like to peruse some of the following texts: Canning & Masika, 2022; Geertsema, 2016; Kanuka, 2011; Macfarlane, 2011. In the context of this editorial, drawing on the work of Stierer and Antoniou (2004), we are defining SoTL (and consequently pedagogic research) as the study of the processes and relationships of learning and teaching, conducted by Higher Education (HE) practitioners utilising, predominantly, the pedagogic and methodological traditions of their disciplines. In contrast, we follow Kanuka (2011) and view educational research as a discipline, conducted by researchers whose expertise lies in the traditions and methodologies of the field.

In making this distinction between SoTL and education research, we are recognising the value that practitioner research can offer to understandings about learning and teaching in HE. Like Kinchin (2023), we do not believe that SoTL should be the preserve of 'expert' researchers or viewed as a threat to the esteem of education research, as suggested by Canning and Masika (2022) and Kanuka (2011). A SoTL-rich environment, as Kinchin (2023) argues, allows for the multiplicity of practitioner voices to be heard, offering space for diverse ideas, alternative views, counter-narratives and innovative practices to be nurtured and cultured. However, we have to acknowledge the arguments made by scholars such as Canning and Masika (2022), Kanuka (2011) and Macfarlane (2011) that poor quality scholarship runs the risk of devaluing both the status of SoTL and the respect for educational research. Concerns raised by these scholars about the quality of disseminated SoTL activity include limited use of theory to underpin and frame

projects, minimal engagement with existing educational scholarship, and reporting of internal evaluation exercises that do not add to wider knowledge and understandings. Tierney (2020) identifies perceived quality of output as one of the barriers to SoTL-framed pedagogic research being included in the UK's Research Excellence Framework, which is a periodic review of the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. 'Excellence' is, on the other hand, a most contested concept (Andrew, 2023).

It is important to note that in referencing these concerns about the quality of published or disseminated SoTL outputs, we are not seeking to criticise authors or sit in judgement on their activities. The discussion earlier in this paper highlights the contextual factors that actively, or we may even suggest forcefully, compel faculty, particularly those on teaching or education-focused contracts, to pursue scholarly publications at a swift pace. At the same time, colleagues may receive limited institutional training, support, and resource to conduct such scholarly endeavours (Evans et al., 2021; Tierney, 2020). In recognition of the challenges and lack of support that faculty may face, we hope that this editorial will serve, in part, as an aid for authors and their scholarly contributions by considering what scholarship means from a publication perspective. In doing so, it is not our intention to provide an exhaustive discussion of this topic but to share instead some brief insights based on our editorial experiences.

Making a Scholarly Contribution

JUTLP's aims indicate that the journal seeks "well-designed and executed research and theory that changes how people think [emphasis added], and provides evidence-based theories, methods and findings to improve higher education learning and teaching practices [emphasis added]" (JUTLP, n.d.; Percy et al., 2021). Articles published within the Developing Teaching Practice theme will "contribute to improving how academics think about and practice [emphasis added] teaching" (JUTLP, n.d.; Percy et al., 2021). This focus on changing how people think and practice emphasises the role of the reader and the audience of scholarly works. In essence, it is only through their readership that published papers can ultimately effect change upon and within wider communities.

Underscoring this point, Glassick et al. (1997, p. 31) assert that "scholarship, however brilliant, lacks fulfillment without someone on the receiving end". We might argue then that the purpose of scholarship is to have value to and be used by others. Referring directly to pedagogic research, and echoing JUTLP's aims, Evans et al. (2021, p. 526) argue that excellent work in this area "give[s] us something new...challenges us to think differently, and fundamentally shows us how."

Communicating to and influencing audiences is commonly cited as a critical feature of the scholarship process (Evans et al., 2021; Glassick et al., 1997; West & Rich, 2012). These audiences may vary, however, depending on the purpose and type of scholarly investigation. Ashwin and Trigwell (2004) identify three levels of investigations: levels 1 and 2 are investigations to inform oneself or broader collegial groups (e.g., subject department, faculty or institution) and result in the production of personal or local knowledge. In contrast, level 3 investigations seek to inform broader audiences and result in the production of public knowledge, with implications that go beyond the context in which the study was conducted. Evans et al. (2021, p. 527) assert that "scholarship is more than evaluation of practice", which we might argue are the typical focus of level 1 and 2 investigations, as defined by Ashwin and Trigwell (2004). The Developing Teaching

Practice section of JUTLP welcomes contributions that “evaluat[e] the design and implementation of academic development activities, resources or programs”; however, as a scholarly publication, and in line with JUTLPs aims to change how people think and improve learning and teaching in higher education, the findings of such papers must have implications beyond their local setting and contribute to the development of public knowledge. It is this broader contribution that elevates evaluations of practice to level 3 investigations.

Many of the reject decisions taken within the Developing Teaching Practice section are a consequence of papers reporting results of evaluations of practice that are not located in the context of a level 3 investigation. In this situation, implications for wider audiences are less evident and the contribution being made to public knowledge is unconvincing. Glassick et al.’s (1997) set of standards to assess scholarship provides a useful conceptual framework to consider how the contribution of scholarly work can be enhanced. Of the six standards identified – clear goals; adequate preparation; appropriate methods; significant results; effective presentation; and reflective critique - we briefly explore three below.

Clear Goals

A scholar must be clear about the aims of [their] work...Goals precede all other considerations because to plan, carry out, and present any scholarly project, a scholar must know what questions to ask (Glassick et al., 1997, pp. 25-26). Often as editors, we see the potential of a study being unexploited because it is not asking the right questions. In this context, the ‘right’ questions refer to those that give “us something new...[provide] a new slant on an area” (Evans et al., 2021, p. 526) instead of questions that limit or constrain the larger value of a study. In a manuscript, limitations of the study are evident when the questions it is addressing relate to those useful mainly to the development of either personal or localised knowledge. As Ashwin and Trigwell (2004) note, the questions framing a level 1 or level 2 investigation are likely to be very different to the type of question that will be the basis of a study generating public knowledge with implications beyond its immediate or local context. We frequently see papers valiantly trying to produce public knowledge, but they are ultimately thwarted due to the study being framed and conducted around level 1 or level 2 questions. Earlier we highlighted the various factors that might compel faculty to seek publication through the write up of an evaluation of practice and we have considerable empathy for this situation; however, we also do not wish to see colleagues waste valuable time and effort on writing endeavours that cannot be taken forwards by the journal for lack of meaningful contribution. If scholarly publication is an outcome sought, we urge authors to consider prior to their investigation beginning, if their goal and questions are framed at the appropriate level. Study limitations are also apparent when the questions asked do not provide something new, but rather lead to data and conclusions confirming what is already well known and established. This situation speaks to Glassick et al.’s (1997) second standard.

Adequate Preparation

“Has the scholar’s preparation for the investigation adequately considered the state of the field? A project that does not speak to current issues of theory, fact, interpretation, or method is unlikely to contribute to its field, regardless of other virtues” (Glassick et al., 1997, pp. 26-27).

This quote connects to some of the critiques discussed previously about disseminated SoTL activity. Whilst Evans et al. (2021, p. 526) argue that pedagogic researchers must have a “holistic understanding of issues impacting the field”, scholars such as Macfarlane (2011) and Canning and Masika (2022) call attention to the limited engagement with relevant HE literature frequently demonstrated within published SoTL work. By not engaging in what Glassick et al. (1997, p. 27) call a scholarly “conversation” with prior work on the topic, a paper cannot make a compelling argument about how the study presented is building on and extending the field of knowledge. It also risks presenting work that simply repeats well-established findings.

This standard relates as well to JUTLPs aims and peer review process. Reviewers are asked to comment on how much a manuscript will interest an international audience. One way of demonstrating international relevance of a paper is connecting with theoretical, conceptual and empirical work that establishes the “relationship of the key idea to the wider field nationally and internationally” (Evans et al., 2021, p. 537). Connecting to work within the field as widely and holistically as possible enhances a manuscript’s potential to communicate its message to a broad audience. It shows that it is not only able to speak to current issues shared across populations but also how this knowledge is being used to inform the study design and questions asked. We also concur with Busby et al. (2023, p. 503) that works cited “create and shape fields as much as describe them” and so holistic knowledge can only be developed by authors engaging with works and scholars from different backgrounds and contexts. We encourage potential authors to see the interconnectedness between adequate preparation and the development of clear goals for a study so that contribution to the field is designed into it from the very beginning.

Effective Presentation

“The contribution made by any form of scholarship relies on its presentation...Good presentation involves a sense of audience and careful attention to the best ways of reaching each of its members” (Glassick et al., 1997, pp. 31-32). It is here that we come back to the importance of scholarly works communicating to and influencing audiences. Using Huber’s (2009, p. 3) ‘teaching travels’ metaphor, publication may mean that your SoTL activity is “out there”, but has it really travelled if it is not used by others to inform and improve their pedagogical work?

Effective presentation requires authors to understand the contribution that their paper is making. Clear goals and adequate preparation enable an author to frame and present a paper with their audience in mind. As editors, we see that successful manuscripts have this sense of writing for a reader, and the presentation of their scholarly activity is grounded in the preparatory activity that they undertook *before* any data was collected. Their write-up assures readers that the research design and questions asked are relevant and appropriate to extend the relevant field of knowledge, conclusions drawn are warranted and implications of findings for practice, policies or principles are salient.

Returning to the Abstract

However, no matter how effective the presentation of a paper is, its message to its audience will remain uncommunicated if the manuscript is not read. In this situation, its contribution to the field also lies unexploited. We might argue that this is as much a waste of valuable time and effort as is the writing of a paper that is ultimately rejected. As scholars, we all know the importance of an

abstract and its role in whether we subsequently choose to read or dispense with a paper. In an age of online journals, without the ability to quickly flick through a hard copy, the abstract plays an even more significant role in our decisions about whether we click through to access the full paper. As we suggest at the beginning of this editorial, an abstract provides a window into the soul of a paper. This brief 200 to 250 words of text should provide us, as editors and readers, not only a sense of the robustness of the study but the contribution it is making to the knowledge field. Too often we see poorly written abstracts, no matter how valuable the study presented in the manuscript, which can cause significant delays in the review process and may even lead to a rejection decision. Now that we have explored what a scholarly contribution looks like, from a publication perspective, the remaining part of this editorial will focus directly on abstracts. We will consider some of the principles of effective presentation and articulation of contribution for this crucial element of a paper.

Making Abstracts Work

We, as editors at JUTLP, are not alone in emphasising the importance of the abstract for a manuscript. The “mighty abstract” (Piedra, 2022, p. 475) has been the focus of many journal editorials and commentaries (e.g., Alspach, 2017; Ketcham et al., 2010; Kumar, 2018; Warren et al., 2019). Echoing our discussion about standards of scholarship, these texts stress the work that the abstract is doing in communicating to and influencing audiences. Importantly, they also highlight the varied audiences with which an abstract will engage, and must influence, across the submission and publication process. In line with these works, it is important to briefly outline the process here at JUTLP and the role of the abstract at each point.

The ultimate audience of an abstract is the readership community of the journal; however, the first reader will be the editor-in-chief of the journal. It is this editor’s role to decide if the manuscript appears to align to the aims and scope of the journal and has merit sufficient to send to a senior editor for closer inspection. As we highlighted previously, JUTLP received 647 submissions in 2023 alone (Crawford, 2024). This overwhelming number of manuscripts underscores the significance of the abstract at this stage for the editor to gain an initial impression of the paper. With so many submissions, and usually undertaking the role alongside their full-time academic position, an editor-in-chief must be able to quickly identify the potential of a paper to then send on for further scrutiny. A poorly written abstract may not necessarily lead to immediate rejection at this point but, as Alspach (2017, p. 12) indicates, a negative impression made by a weak abstract might “color expectations and adversely affect appraisal of the paper”.

If potential for scholarly contribution is identified, it will be passed to a senior editor and subsequently an associate editor for further in-depth review. It is these editors who will make the final decision about whether the paper is sent for peer review. As this process highlights, there are at least three points at which a paper is appraised with increasing scrutiny to reach the stage of being peer reviewed. At each point, the abstract is the first impression made regarding the quality and scholarly value of the work presented.

At peer review stage, the abstract becomes even more vital. Potential reviewers will only see the title of the paper and the abstract when a request for review is sent out. The full paper is available once they accept the request, but they must initially use only these elements to make their decision. Like most journals, JUTLP requires each manuscript to be reviewed by two reviewers

who have expertise in the topic of the paper and/or the methodology utilised. Reviewers, like editors, will usually be undertaking this role for academic citizenship purposes. That is, they are not paid but are volunteering their time and energy to support the development of knowledge and understanding within their disciplinary or specialist field. With many competing demands on their time and workloads, reviewers will not make the decision to review a paper lightly.

Our experience as editors tells us that an ineffective abstract, poorly conveying the goal(s) of the study and the contribution it makes through its findings, will lead to many review requests being declined. This situation causes significant delays in the publication process for a paper, which can be an anxious time for authors as they wait to hear news. In extreme circumstances, it may also hinder the contribution of a study as the knowledge field continues to develop through new publications whilst the paper sits in limbo awaiting reviewers. A weak abstract, therefore, runs the risk of turning a manuscript into an “orphan” (Piedra, 2022, p. 476), remaining unassigned to reviewers after numerous attempts and requiring editors to invest significant time and energy into soliciting reviews.

Before a paper is even available to the readership of the journal, it must pass through several stages that the accompanying abstract may either help or impede. As we discuss above, if accepted and published the abstract then becomes, in effect, the gatekeeper of the whole paper. It is through engagement with this element that readers will usually decide whether to read or abandon the full paper. The latter may be more likely with a weak abstract, leaving the contribution of the study unexploited.

Principles of Effective Abstracts

When we take all this information on board, what can practically make a difference to an unstructured abstract and draw attention to the key elements of a paper? A brief and clear outline of the contribution to level 3 scholarship is critical and should incorporate the following principles and practices.

1. As a writer in the SoTL space, authors need to clearly understand the key contribution(s) their paper is making prior to bringing stroke to keyboard. Time and reflection are required considering the original impact of the work and ensuring free and clear articulation of the contribution by the author(s). This will assure readers of cohesion with the paper, providing certainty about the methodology and findings (Ketcham et al., 2010).
2. Clarity and accuracy are essential for a well-articulated abstract. Longwinded or vague abstracts can lead to disinterest and rejection by an editor, reviewer, or reader due to perception of an unfocused paper that would not be a valuable investment of time (Piedra, 2022). Abstracts must be polished, shining the author's work through precise writing and highlighting necessary information to entice interest (Warren et al., 2019).
3. Hand in hand with clarity is engaging language and style – willing a reader to read your work. Starting with an effective title that provides relevance, innovation of the work, and clear focus can lead a reader to engage immediately if they see it meets their need (Kumar, 2018).
4. Abstracts must encapsulate the work, own its own space and genre. What is the work adding to the SoTL? What contribution does it make to other readers, applying relevance irrespective of country or discipline? If a reader can see relevance to their knowledge of

the topic and how this paper will advance their knowledge further, they will be drawn in and want to read your work (Warren et al., 2019; Piedra, 2022). What is your hook to draw the reader in? What key message can you present in the abstract that will mean a reader cannot turn this paper aside? And then complete the abstract with a perfect sentence; one that summarises your unique argument in one sentence, so the reader has no choice but to see the importance of your work (Dupree & Casapao, 2023).

Given that unstructured abstracts are what is expected for all submissions to JUTLP, we contend that they are to be written as a single uninterrupted paragraph without headings (as would be included in a structured abstract). An unstructured abstract must initially articulate the problem and then clearly summarise the research context. Key literatures used should be outlined, along with methods, findings and key implications of the research for practice for an international audience. To ensure readability and adhere to the format of an unstructured abstract, additional elements such as formatting of font and references are not to be included.

Conclusion

This editorial has sought to examine how meaningful pedagogic scholarship can be articulated in a way that demonstrates a purposeful contribution, and how that contribution can be showcased in the abstract. Our intention has been to facilitate smoother processes for authors submitting to JUTLP, and so we look forward to receiving high quality contributions with application to global audiences.

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