

Creating an undergraduate academic journal: A Message from the Editor

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I am pleased to present the first issue of the online *Journal on Best Teaching Practices*. This journal is created by pre-service teacher candidates for pre-service teacher candidates, teachers, and anyone else interested in “Best Teaching Practices.”

Authentic teaching

As an instructor of introductory level teacher education courses it is my responsibility and privilege to help students decide whether entering a career in teaching is right for them. One of the greatest obstacles I face in introducing undergraduates to the teaching profession is providing them “authentic” opportunities to experience the life of a teacher. Scholarly writing about teaching is one such opportunity.

Additionally, one of the greater adjustments undergraduate have to make in transitioning from high school to college is the kind and level of writing they are expected to achieve. The five paragraph essay they are used to writing is not as useful when undertaking technical writing, email correspondence and memos, and other writing they will use in “the real world.” In teacher education there is a hope and expectation that students will become adept at academic writing and engage in research and writing throughout their teaching careers.

In an effort to better prepare students as competent writers and to give them a meaningful and authentic experience as writers, the idea for this academic journal took root.

Finding teaching resources

It is common for pre-service teacher candidates to express that they have always wanted to teach. While the reasons for entering the teaching profession vary the desire to make a positive impact on children is one constant. Many of these students plan to replicate what they have observed from outstanding teachers in their own experiences in the classroom without giving much thought to empirically “proven” best teaching practices. Part of the problem lies in the lack of access to good resources about teaching. An online search will reveal a lot of teaching blogs and editorials on teaching but finding proven strategies is a little trickier. Many of the best articles on teaching are included in journals that students either don’t have access to or don’t know how to find. So many resources are password protected and require purchase but teaching doesn’t seem to attract the financial independent so those resources often go untapped.

The online *Journal on Best Teaching Practices*

This writing assignment requires students to do a somewhat detailed literature review—something many of them have never done before. Additionally, it introduces them to the research, writing, and dissemination process that many teachers engage in. Finally, it gives them the opportunity to critique others work and participate in real-world collaboration which results in a product that is useful to them as well as others.

Creating and maintaining an academic journal for pre-service teacher candidates makes a lot of sense because it addresses each of these issues. It engages the students in an authentic writing experience for a real audience that can benefit from their work. It introduces them to

the scholarly writing process expected of them as teachers and puts them temporarily on the “other side of the desk” as they review and critique the work of others.

How it works

Students enrolled in our Introduction to Education course (TED 120 and TED 155) are introduced to the concepts of “white papers” – short papers written to sell a product or service, most often used in business and government. We frame the writing assignment with white papers to encourage students to find answers to real teaching problems while writing in a concise manner. The expectation is that they (and others) will be more likely to read a two page paper that is useful than a twenty page paper that is filled with unfamiliar academic language.

As a class we discuss online research strategies, including the use of our university library, Google Scholar, and other academic databases. Students self-select topics from a list of potential “best teaching practices” or come up with an idea on their own. They are required to find at least four academic papers that address their topics and to take notes on each of those papers. They then construct a first draft that they bring to class and workshop with their peers. With peer feedback they continue to research, write, and revise until the final draft is due. Each student submits three blind hard copies which are then distributed to students in other sections of the course, resulting in each student receiving three different papers to review. They complete a blind review just as reviewers for any other academic journal would: making notes on the article, completing a rubric, and assigning a score to each paper. I enter each of the scores into a rubric and rank order them. The top twenty are identified and letters are sent with the reviewed copies back to the original authors requesting a revise and resubmit. The remaining reviews are also returned to the other students. The top candidates then have approximately six weeks to consider the feedback given to them and to revise and resubmit. As managing editor I review the final submissions and select ten for publication in the journal. The students who are chosen receive a congratulatory letter and a request for final revisions, an author’s biography, and a release form. Once those are all submitted I put them all together and upload them to the website.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect for me in creating this journal has been relinquishing control to the students. At the end of the day it did not matter which articles I felt were best suited for the journal, the initial decisions regarding publication were made by the students through their blind reviews.

Where do we go from here

Creating an academic journal has been no small undertaking, especially given the relatively short timeline from inception to publication (less than one year). The students at UWRF have been supportive and enthusiastic about the project which bodes well for the long term sustainability of the publication.

This journal is a work-in-progress and we are learning as we go. We will continue to tweak the process in order to improve the product. I expect that the submissions will improve from semester to semester as expectations are made clearer and the writing, review, and editing process is refined. Once a few issues are available we plan to market the journal to other institutions and teachers so that the resource can be useful to its intended audience. Ultimately we expect to open submissions up to students at other institutions as well as practicing teachers. We hope you find this publication to be a valuable resource in your quest to become an outstanding teacher.