The role of publishing: support for action research

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ABSTRACT. This short Paper reports on the costs involved to subscribe to an academic journal in the face of some journals offering free open access while others are up to \$1353 for three issues per year. It is found that more conservative publishers charge more than others, and here an introduction to Lockwood's ladder of publication is useful for readers and prospective authors. Then a brief coverage is given of what constitutes quality in research. Finally some suggestions are made for universities to shoulder publication costs for promoting free open access to research.

RÉSUMÉ. Ce court texte évoque les coûts impliqués dans l'abonnement à une revue scientifique : de l'accès gratuit en ligne jusqu'à \$1353 pour trois numéros par an. On remarque que les éditeurs les plus traditionnels proposent souvent les abonnements les plus chers. La présente introduction à l'échelle de Lockwood sera utile pour les lecteurs et futurs auteurs. Elle est suivie de considérations sur ce qui fonde la qualité de la recherche, puis de suggestions pour la prise en charge par les universités des coûts de publication afin de faciliter l'accès gratuit en ligne aux travaux de recherche.

KEYWORDS: academic journal, publication, subscription, open access, quality and research, Lockwood's ladder.

MOTS-CLÉS: revue scientifique, publication, abonnement, accès libre, qualité et recherche, échelle de Lockwood.

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Introduction

Education must become a universal activity for each individual from birth until death. To achieve this, education-related publishing must thrive at all levels from in-house presentations to books. Publishers have the knowledge and expertise to support people to produce (and continuously revise and update) the essential content required, and publishers can provide services to individuals and organizations to ensure that the widest possible inclusion and diversity are achieved and sustained.

How to get published

There are many guides in the market on how to get published. For academic researchers the best is by Fred Lockwood, and is free of charge (Lockwood, 2003). Lockwood describes in detail the step-wise development for researchers to move from being a complete novice to a book author.

At the outset it is clear that publishing must be nurtured throughout society, and each step on the ladder must have diverse and wide range of publishing options to suit the various contexts and community needs. Government regulation should be avoided, while national and transnational policies should be formulated to develop enterprise and synergy from the grassroots. Different business models should be offered at every level for cost-recovery or for-profit, as well as culturally sensitive support services to authors. A key and target population for publishing services must be pre-service and in-service teachers. They should be reached and offered incentives to engage action research and publishing.

The publishing industry is currently in the midst of a financial crisis. Libraries at most universities cannot afford to keep up the very high subscriptions to thousands of serial journals. One issue costing \$50 for three articles in the issue is very expensive – amounting to one quarter the annual salary for a professor in Vietnam or more in other countries. The business model therefore must evolve – perhaps dramatically. Certainly pay-per-view would mean that unused journals can lead to saved costs. But how would this impact scholarship? It is well recognized that young researchers browse journals in the library and reflect deeply on what they read. There are several distinct stages in doing research; – first with reflection to own experience, to frame an area and review previous research; second to identify some gap or inconsistency; then, third to occupy this gap with research designed to gather data and fill the perceived gap. While this is a simplification, it does illustrate the usefulness of reading widely in the initial stage. Indeed, researchers are well advised to continue reading widely across their own field and if time can allow across other disciplines too. We need to encourage business model experimentation for publishers, because there are no clear ways forward at present. Publishers are trying free online access for one month, followed then by email to encourage expensive subscription. This could be likened to drug dealers giving the first few fixes free to hook users. Others may put abstracts only into the public domain.

The only model endorsed by this author is the new business model of free content online and asking universities to donate cash to support free-access online journals recommended by their senior faculty. That said, universities themselves should post up online their own journals with free access. As Lockwood (2003) has suggested, in-house publishing provides a starting point for young researchers onto the lower rungs of the ladder of publication.

Lockwood's ladder of publishing

Fred Lockwood has proposed a ladder for publishing – a step-by-step guide to help a young researcher develop to become well published. This ladder is designed for helping prospective authors become published and Lockwood suggests seven steps or rungs on the ladder. These are lowest (i) seminars and workshops, (ii) in-house publications, (iii) conferences, (iv) professional bodies/organizations, (v) chapter writing, (vi) journal paper, (vii) book or book series. These are described in tones that serve to encourage researchers and teachers to self-organise and develop.

Concerning publishing monographs, the ladder encourages the researcher first to get articulate – to test out one's ideas in a safe environment such as small group seminar in-house – or if this is too intimidating then go over to a nearby college and give a short presentation on one's own research topic. Preparing the slides, text, handouts, discussion and feedback should help become better organized. The next rung up the ladder is to publish the research work in a safe non-peer reviewed journal such as a departmental in-house journal. If there isn't one, then starting a newsletter is recommended. The third rung follows the same process of the first two steps – get articulate and try writing. The third rung is therefore to participate in a local or international conference. Here you can note that international conferences often accept all presentations – to get your conference participation fees, which in turn help to pay the exorbitant honorariums to the famous keynote speakers who must travel all the way by plane from the ivory tower to Hawaii, Bali or wherever the conference is being held. The quality of English at such international conferences ranges from incomprehensible to elegant, so one is not going to be out of place. Many participants will be first-time presenters too. As a consequence, the point score of publishing through proceedings of a conference has now fallen to zero (journals being scored 1-15 on quality). Conference organizers already do deliver free access online. However this appears not unrelated to the assessment of conference presentation now reduced to zero value. Some papers presented at conferences are cutting edge and very high quality. So there are various forces to be factored in here. Most conferences publish previous years' proceedings online to encourage researchers to participate next year. And conferences have in turn become very expensive for participants. Not only in conference fees, society membership fees and airfares, but in carbon costs. We must address carbon costs if we are to develop a viable and accessible model. Leading conferences sponsored by international organizations or governments generally produce print-based proceedings, with an

ISBN number, which certainly helps accreditation. The next step upwards is the chapter in a book. This is somewhat close to the upper level of preparing a paper for top-level conference proceedings, and indeed at about the same word length too – 6000 words. Following this, Lockwood suggests publishing in a journal, as the last rung before the uppermost of authoring a book.

Journals vary tremendously in their readership. Those with free access can usually expect their citation rate to go up (not unexpectedly) and thus improve their impact factor. However local or regional journals can be used more for background reading around a topic, rather than citation. This is often the situation for lower level journals which publish simple case descriptions with new data and without analysis. Indeed a good article on test results from a novel technique was refused by a mid-range research journal on the grounds that one single case does not constitute research.

What counts as research?

What constitutes research is important. The quality of research in open and distance education is defined in terms of originality, significance, and rigour. Of these three terms, significance is expanded to cover the various types of research – basic, strategic, and applied. The third rigour is expanded to cover reliability, validity, and utility – and all the types of reliabilities and of validities.

The three terms of ‘originality’, ‘significance’ and ‘rigour’ are clearly defined by the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, 2006, pp.32-34), and these definitions are worthwhile examining and bearing in mind at all times.

“Originality is a characteristic of research which is not merely a replication of other work or simply applies well-used methods to straightforward problems, but which engages with new or complex problems or debates and/or tackles existing problems in new ways. So, for example, a review of existing research can demonstrate originality if it analyses and/or synthesises the field in new ways, providing new and salient conceptualisations. Originality can also lie in the development of innovative designs, methods and methodologies, analytical models or theories and concepts.”

“Significance can be judged in different ways according to whether the research is basic, strategic or applied. Research has, or has the potential to have, considerable significance if it breaks new theoretical or methodological ground, provides new social science knowledge or tackles important practical, current problems, and provides trustworthy results in some field of education. These results might be empirical or analytical and theoretical, providing new (and sometimes challenging) conceptualisations, and evidence for audiences ranging from academics to policymakers and practitioners. Ways of evaluating the significance of research include its effects or potential effect on the development of the field, examining contributions to existing debates, and assessing its impact or potential impact on

policy and practice. The nature and degree of immediate impact on policymakers or practitioners will provide some useful indication of significance in terms of ‘value for use’. However, there may be reasons for high impact that are not dependent on research quality; and, equally, in many cases the observable impact of high quality research is achieved only over the longer term. Theoretical and more analytical research can also be of high significance if it takes forward the state of current international knowledge in its field, and has influenced, or has the potential to influence, the work of other theoreticians. In education it is possible that such significant theoretical advances also influence practitioners and/or policymakers, although it will probably need a deliberate strategy to ensure that this happens.”

“Rigour can be judged in many ways, and can helpfully be associated with methodological and theoretical robustness and the use of a systematic approach. It includes traditional qualities such as reliability and validity, and also qualities such as integrity, consistency of argument and consideration of ethical issues. It certainly entails demonstrating a sound background of scholarship, in the sense of familiarity and engagement with relevant literature, both substantive and methodological. Different dimensions of rigour will be important in different types of research but rigour can best be assessed on a case by case basis using whichever dimensions are most appropriate. In the case of outputs that are primarily directed upwards utility, it is still the rigour of the underpinning research work that will be assessed and will need to be evident.”

At what cost?

Most is an important factor, not only in dollar terms but also in time to re-write one’s own personal style into bland anonymous prose often unrecognizable to its own author. There is also the carbon cost. Most researchers these days are concerned about all these three costs; cash, time, and carbon.

A brief review of costs for leading journals reveals that single articles of about 6 pages sell at about US\$30 each. In open and distance education, costs are in the range of \$100 per issue of 3 articles, (or US\$300 for 3 issues per year). Personal subscriptions are generally one-third the cost of institutional costs. And there is a further division of institutional subscription into online-and-print versions, or online-only version. We should consider the carbon footprints in terms of the trees needed plus papermaking process and inks, and brick-and-mortar buildings to manufacture the journal, followed by wrapping and postage, air fuel and so on. The amount of water needed to make paper is surprisingly high – about 400-times more water than paper, kg for kg, <http://www.paperonweb.com/A1015.htm> . In other words a single issue of one journal weighing 500gm would need 200 kg of water to make the paper. This does not include other chemicals such as bleaching agents, or the ink manufacturing processes. The cash cost of journals varies. One journal for teachers in Asia costs up to \$800 per issue of 8 articles, although some articles are for sale online at \$30 each.

Choosing the online-only version not only saves carbon costs but generally saves you about 5-10% in cash; – e.g. \$350 for both print-and-online versions, or \$325 for the online-only version. A search on poverty found a journal on Africa at \$359 for print-and-online versions and at \$342 for the online-only version – thus saving you \$17 and no doubt help saving the poor in Africa into the bargain. Journals on business sometimes cost more than journals on poverty; one was \$788 for online-and-print and \$748 for the online-only, saving \$40 or about the same saving rate 5% as the poverty journal. A journal for social workers has 7 articles per issue and 8 issues per year for only \$1353, one thousand three hundred and fifty-three dollars, which might suggest social work is very well funded these days. A journal on ethnicities (the often poor minority people) with 6 issues per year sells for online-and-print at \$1112, or for online-only at \$1056. This means for every \$1000 you spend then you can save yourself \$50 if you want to save the trees.

Implications and suggestions

While we could take a backseat and see what new business models the academic publishing houses bring out, perhaps universities should partner more actively with them to develop practical models valued by the universities. A two-way interaction and conversation will be fruitful for everyone: publishers can get cited and survive, universities can learn what journals their faculty want and save money on unnecessary journals, and publishing companies can help young researchers through providing publishing support, guidance and scaffolding to authors. Accordingly, publishing consortia should be inaugurated with ten or twenty universities and one publishing house.

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