

# Turning classroom assignments into published journal articles: What have we learned from these practices?



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## Abstract

This article will elaborate my successful endeavour in shaping students' assignments into published articles. This task was very demanding, since the students writing the assignments were at undergraduate level. No empirical research has been conducted and only the conceptual article has been discussed by Adamson and Muller (2014). These scholars argue that 'brokering academic writing' (p. 1), from assignment to publication necessitates that writing (following Bazerman, 1980) should be seen as 'dialogue' where other salient factors (after Lillis & Curry, 2006a, p. 3) such as 'literacy brokers' and (after Curry & Lillis, 2010, p. 283) 'network brokers' are important. Addressing this uncharted domain, I will elaborate two major steps I did in the publishing process, prior and post-submission to target journals. Moreover, I use Adamson and Muller (2014), Lillis and Curry (2006a) and Lillis and Curry (2006b) in discussing the article. Furthermore, I refer to Cargill and O'Connor (2006) to conclude with pedagogical implications that might be drawn from this reflection.

**Keywords:** assignment, publication, literacy and network brokers, brokering academic writing

## 1 Introduction

This article is a reflection of my successful experience of brokering undergraduate students' assignments into published journals, both at national and international levels. The students writing articles for publication enrolled in my two courses: Writing II and Discourse Analysis; the students at that time were in the second year and the third year of their studies. Detailed discussions on what I taught the students in the classroom can be found in my former paper (Wahyudi, 2013). I integrated the writing article for journal publication as the final project of the semester in the two mentioned courses. My major aims in teaching students journal writing were, firstly, the fact that I was motivated by the success I had in helping a fresh graduate student to publish his article in an international journal (Irfham & Wahyudi, 2012). After this success, I was thinking that I wanted to do it again, but the second time with the continuing students on the courses I taught. Another aim was to train students to write a journal because they were obliged to write a journal article at the end of their study (following the decree from the Directorate General of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (Santoso, 2012), in addition to a thesis (Wahyudi, 2013).

The students wrote the journals based on their own interests during one semester (four to five months), February to June 2013. I gave them the chance to do individual consultations starting from the selection of the topic, the process of writing a

draft of a proposal, and the selection of the theory used. After the semester ended in June 2013, I selected some students' submitted articles based on merit-based criteria. I told these students that their articles had the potential to be published in journals (national or international). Also, I said that if they agreed with the offer, I would be the second author as I would take on important roles in the publication process, including helping the students to respond to the reviewers' feedback. It was freedom for the students to proceed with the publication or not. This offer was outside our course objectives and there was no relation to the marks the students would receive at the end of the semester. But, once they agreed, I asked for their commitment to seriously undertake what we had committed to do. About 15 students from the two courses were interested in publishing, but as time went by, some students resigned or dropped out because they were no longer able to commit fully. The fact that these students took the offer under their own consciousness to publish and co-author with me shows that they really need the writing for publication skills. In that regard, it is based on their need that writing for publication can be classified into ESP (Hyland, 2002; Sifakis, 2003).

There were nine students left, six students from the Writing II course and three students from the Discourse Analysis course. Eight articles out of nine have been published and only one student's article is being reviewed in an international journal.

Among the eight published articles, five of them were published in international journals and the rest were published in national journals. In this paper, I will only discuss four examples of them, two from the Writing II course and two others from the Discourse Analysis course. The articles from the Writing II course are from students A and B, while from the Discourse Analysis class the students are C and D. These letters are used rather than the real names to protect the anonymity of the students as an ethical consideration.

It is worthy to note that, in July 2013, I started my PhD at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, so during the publication process, I helped students to provide the current journal resources not accessible from Indonesia. Furthermore, this PhD study also helped me to hone my research skills and critical analysis which I learned from doing PhD proposals, meeting with supervisors, joining cohort group discussions, attending workshops at the universities, etc. These helped me to provide feedback for the students' articles. This PhD study also exposed me to different academic networks (Curry & Lillis, 2010).

The followings steps are how I turned the students' articles into published journal articles. *The first step is prior to submission period, and the second is from submission to awaiting feedback or resubmission to another journal.*



## 2 Prior to submission period

As the students' final project (articles) varied in terms of quality and readiness for submission, I treated them differently. At this stage, I asked the students to develop their articles to the particular number of words for particular journals after I informed each student of the target journal. I also asked the students to check published issues of the journal for layout, including reference style needed, the number of words required for the abstract, key words, the structure of the article, heading and subheading rules, etc. In that regard, I implicitly encouraged the student to recognise the genre of the target journal.

Some students were not required to do revisions as I thought their articles were good enough to be sent to the journals. But I asked some students to revise their articles three to four times before I sent them to particular journals. There were cases where I asked certain students to proofread their articles with friends who had good grammar and writing skills before they submitted their revisions to me. This was particularly important for students who lacked clarity and had poor grammar. In that regard, the students have already been engaged in a network (Curry & Lillis, 2010). On my part, before submitting the students' articles to particular journals, I browsed different journals that may match with students' topics. At this stage, I made a list of different international journals, both indexed journals (those included in Scopus and other recognised indexes), and legitimate, but not yet having a particular index. My first priority was indexed international journals, and then the second priority was legitimate, but not indexed journals (those usually are the new journals) and the last choice was national journals. As time went by, I did not strictly follow the list of the journals I made, as along the way, I kept looking for new journals from the internet. While searching the journals, I was thinking about the possibility of the students' articles being published by looking at the quality of the published issues. I also looked at the trends of topics that had been published. After I was confident that the journals matched with the students' articles, I sent the articles which were ready to the particular journals.

## 3 From submission to awaiting feedback or resubmission

### 3.1 Two students' cases from the Writing II course

The first is the analysis of an article by student A. Here is the reviewers' final comment before A's article was finally accepted and published.

The paper is technically and *methodologically unsound*<sup>1</sup> in some places: The [name of] approach is not elaborated, the *research questions* are not discussed clearly in the final sections, and the *methodology used* is not clearly explained. There are also some points which should be *seriously taken into account* in terms of *mechanics of writing*, e.g., punctuation, grammatical structure, etc. The paper needs major editing (see comments in the manuscript).

As noted, there were three issues raised by the reviewers; the problem of methodology, not discussing the research questions in the conclusion section and the problems with the mechanics of writing. Before sending the article to the target journal, I did not critically see the issues raised by the reviewers. This was

partly because I did not have much time to carefully read the article in detail due to my busy study. Another reason was that I trusted this student, who had previously submitted good pieces of written work on my writing course. I considered that it was acceptable to do the revision based on the reviewers' feedback; the most important thing being that the article should pass the initial screening. In addressing the above feedback, we were given roughly one month for the revision; I gave A firstly one week to do the revision himself and encouraged him to ask me about the reviewer's feedback if he was still confused. My reason was to give him autonomy to revise the article. Once A submitted the revision to me, I asked him to revise it again because he had not addressed the reviewers' concerns. During this revision, our communication was constrained as we were in different countries. I was in New Zealand and he was in Indonesia, so communication occurred only through Facebook. So my instruction to revise was sometimes not well received. I gave A another week to do the revision and the result was not much different. I asked A for a third revision, but, this time, I gave him *very clear and practical instructions* on what to do, step by step. This time he did it better, but he still did not improve as much as I had hoped he would. There was one week left to submit the revision to the editor, I was stressed that A could not do it perfectly. I got emotionally angry with him and criticized him for 'partially claiming', especially in the methodological part and the analysis in the content. He asked me what was meant by 'fully claiming'. Then I took over and intervened. It took me several days to revise the article, including modifying the research questions and methodology section, as well as the content. I then submitted the revised version to the editor. I asked A to compare his final revision before I took over with revision. I asked him to see what the differences were in the revisions we made, as well as asking him to explain why I had made the revisions in such ways. Then he was able to guess why I criticized him and said that what he did formerly was 'partially claiming'. I asked him to do this so that he could learn what he was supposed to do. As there was no news from the journal for two months, I contacted the editor. Finally, the editor replied that our revised paper was accepted for publication. In this context, we benefitted from the reviewers' feedback from the 'professional academic', the scholars' working at the university or institute (Lillis & Curry, 2006a, p. 14). This was the first accepted paper among other students' journal writing projects. It boosted my confidence. I then provoked other students to be more motivated because one of their friends had already been successful.

Another example is student B; I sent B's article to a new journal in Asia. After several months waiting, we finally got the feedback. As the first two reviewers had two dissenting opinions, with one rejecting the article and the other accepting it with major revision, the managing editor sent the article to the third reviewer. The third reviewer highlighted the major weaknesses of our article, but let the editor decide whether to give us a major or minor revision. The managing editor then asked us to revise the article based on the three reviewers' feedback.

The reviewers' feedback was as follows:

- a. My recommendations would be to rewrite the paper bearing in mind the following aspects: 1. *Language and writing style* 2. *Organization of ideas* 3. *Present a convincing line of argument paying sufficient attention to theory* 4. *Clearly present research methodology and data* 5. *Place findings within the context of scholarly research*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Italics are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Recommendation from the first reviewer to accept with major revision



- b. The article *needs to be re-written in accurate, Standard English before resubmission*<sup>3</sup>.
- c. The paper *should receive revisions* in order to be published in your journal<sup>4</sup>. Whether they are *major or minor depends on the criteria you have*. I shall write here some remarks.
- (1) *I don't think RQs are answered sufficiently*. Examples are displayed in Appendix, which I find a little odd, but perhaps this can be acceptable for applied studies. (2) *Some expressions are grammatically incorrect and this makes the article weak*: I marked some expressions in the text in yellow. (3) *Examples in Appendix are, in my mind, not always [the topic under discussion]. Providing a linguistic definition and a more extended clear definition should solve the problem here*. (4) *The author is saying that X's and Y's categorizations are not sufficient, but the reader doesn't know what the grounds for this statement are*. In a way, this article may have a new aspect (in that the topic may not have been featured in the Indonesian context) but this is not made straightforward and strong in the paper.

The three reviewers' feedback above addresses complex issues, including language, methodology and content-related issues. Student B said that she was shocked to get the feedback. Similar to A's case, when I provided the feedback to Student B prior to the submission, in addition to my limited time, I might not have had critical sensitivity levels compared to the reviewers.

I asked B to revise the article by incorporating the reviewers' feedback. I encouraged B to consult me whenever she had a problem in understanding the reviewers' feedback. Student B revised the article without asking me for help. When she sent the revised version to me, it turned out that she did not fully understand the reviewers' expectations. Again, I asked her to revise a second time, but with clear instructions. She did the second revision and then sent it again to me. She did not seem to fully understand how to revise. I guessed that she did not examine the instructions in detail. In a later chat with me, B acknowledged that she did it at the last minute as she also had a tight schedule. At the same time, I was also struggling with reading professional resources and writing assignments for my PhD and doing step-by-step writing for my proposal. It was hard, both for me and the student, to juggle our own assignments in our study and, concurrently, revise the articles with the particular deadline given. But I decided to keep going, as I did not want to stop this publication project with no results. As I was not satisfied with B's revision, I then improved it and revised it in terms of both content and language. Then I submitted it to the managing editor. After some time, the managing editor sent it back to us for more revision as she thought that the revision still would not meet the reviewers' feedback. Again, I did the same thing, I asked B to revise and after she did it, I improved it again and resent it to the managing editor. The managing editor then with an *apology finally rejected our paper despite our hard struggles* due to the dissatisfaction with the quality of the revised article.

It was a painful experience for us. During my correspondence with the managing editor, the managing editor changed and so it took an even longer time than expected. The only benefit that we could get from this painful experience was to get the critical feedback, and that feedback had 'forced' us to improve the article. I asked B to carefully revise the article based on the

critical feedback along with my explanation. After that, I sent this second revised version to a national journal. This national accredited journal (run by one of the famous universities in Indonesia) accepted it with minor revision (in press now). Despite the first rejection in the first submission, we still gained the benefit of the professional academics' feedback in the process of improving the quality of our article (Lillis & Curry, 2006a) prior to the submission in the second journal. Both A's and B's articles indicate that scholarly publication is not individual competence, but the result of networked activity (Lillis & Curry, 2006b), where in the above context, the networks are at least students, myself, editors and reviewers.

### 3.2 Two students' cases from the Discourse Analysis course

The first example is C's article; I sent this article to the top journal based in the UK. After a year's wait and feeling frustrated not to have got feedback, I emailed the editor to withdraw the article. Shortly after this, the editor finally sent feedback from two reviewers, plus the editor's own summary of the reviewers' assessments. The following is the report of the editor's rejection, summarizing the two reviewers' feedback.

First of all my apologies for the delay in getting back to you – partly caused due to my move from (...) to (...). Despite several reminders, a third report has not materialized. So I have decided to move ahead on the basis of the two reports received so far (attached). As you will see, both referees voice concerns which include, among other things, *absence of focused research questions; poor contextualisation of relevant literature; a lack of integration and elaboration of theoretical and analytical frameworks; inadequate level of data analysis, including unwarranted claims, lack of clarity and poor style of presentation* (which is underscored by Ref C's brief comment). In light of the above, I am afraid the paper cannot be accepted for publication in (the name of journal). I hope that you are not too disappointed with this outcome and that you will be able to address the detailed comments outlined in the reports and consider a different publication outlet as suggested by Ref B.

As discussed before, I did not do much language revision before submitting C's article to the top journal in UK. This was because I was busy with my own study, and secondly, I trusted her writing and analysis because she also did excellent work in my former classes. I asked C to revise based on the reviewers' feedback above. Furthermore, I also sent C some references suggested by one of the reviewers. Before doing the revision, I told C what to do in the revisions. Student C mostly could address the reviewers' feedback. However, I found that C was not able to address the reviewer's feedback on the nature of qualitative and quantitative dimension of research, along with their justifications, so I addressed them by myself. Furthermore, I did language editing as it was also a concern from the reviewers.

After revising the article myself, I sent this article to another journal. This second target journal accepted the article with minor revision with no changes to the content. We were only asked to delete unreliable references. In that successful publication with the second target journal, we benefited from 'literacy brokers' (Lillis & Curry, 2006a, p. 3) namely, 'academic professional' (reviewers), the scholars working in universities or research institutes (Lillis & Curry, 2006a, p. 14) who provided feedback in our submission in the first target journal.

<sup>3</sup> Recommendation from the second reviewer to reject

<sup>4</sup> Recommendation from the third reviewer to accept with revisions



Another article was written by student D. The article was first sent to the top journal in the field, but was rejected because the article lacked focus. The good thing was that the editor provided constructive feedback.

The following is the editor's rejection letter:

Thank you for submitting your paper to our journal, unfortunately, this submission is not at present suitable for publication in (the name of journal), though it represents research with potential interest for readers of the journal. *You apply a whole series of analytic tools from the domain of X and Y (too many, really), but you don't address issue in X theory. In looking at so many different phenomena, you fail to focus on any salient issue significantly.* For a successful submission to (the name of journal), *you need to analyse appropriate data with the goal of contributing new insights to X theory.*

After asking D to revise the article by accommodating the editor's feedback, I decided to resend the article to the same journal. This time, the co-editor rejected the article again. Here is the rejection letter:

Thank you for submitting your paper to our journal.

Unfortunately, this submission is not at present suitable for publication in (the name of journal), though it represents research with potential interest for readers of the journal. The problems include: – *The whole approach, [the topic under discussion] according to (name of a linguist), needs to be justified to our [the name of discipline] readership. How does it fit into [the name of the discipline]? Why is it the best framework for the job? Also, the framework is applied in a rather mechanical, uncritical way.* – *This paper does not look at all like the kinds of papers that we publish.* If you look at the papers in our journal, you will see, for example, that *we have numbered section headings.* Moreover, *the structure of the paper is unusual.* For example, the research questions need to be stated much earlier, even in the introduction. – *The English needs to be checked throughout by a native speaker* (I noted problems with definite articles and some discourse markers). – *The images of participants need to be cleared for copyright or deleted.*

Before sending the article to the top journal, D did several revisions following my feedback. It might be that the quality of the feedback I gave to D did not help her to meet the high-quality expectation of the journal. That was due to the fact that I was a novice researcher myself. I asked D to revise the article based on the editors' feedback. After reading D's revised article, I asked her to have the article proofread by her friends, who are Australian native speakers. I emphasised to D to ask for a language proofread, not a content proofread. This is because her Australian friends are not experts in the area. After the proofreading was done, I sent the article to another target journal, but again failed due to the mismatch of the article with the type of article expected by the journal. Then I submitted D's article to the journal I had published my own article with. It was finally accepted with minor revision (with no content change). In the process of publication, we benefitted from the reviewers' feedback from 'academic professionals' (Lillis & Curry, 2006a, p. 14). This time, I asked D to proofread the article with Australian native speakers; we therefore benefitted from 'non-professional' brokers because the native speakers' contributions belong to 'personal relationship' (Lillis & Curry, 2006a, p. 14). In that regard, D's publication was facilitated by myself, the editor

and the co-editor who rejected the article in the first target journal and the Australian native speakers (Curry & Lillis, 2010). Student D's publication success confirms the previous study (Lillis & Curry, 2006b), arguing that scholarly publication should be understood in terms of 'networked activity' (p. 63).

### 3.3 The obstacles faced by the students and myself as the literacy broker

There are several difficulties found in the process of publishing students' articles.

#### On the students' parts

Most of the students faced both methodological and content issues, as well as the language issues, even though it varied from one student to the other. All the students had problems in addressing the issues raised by the reviewers' feedback, although the degree of their difficulties varied. Most of the students had to juggle doing activities/assignments from the campus so they did not fully concentrate on the revision required by the editor. Not all the students were tough when reading the harsh criticism from the reviewers' feedback.

#### On my part

I was not yet an experienced literacy broker and now I am. I learned to be a literacy broker by doing it, by benefiting from my former knowledge, my former limited publication experiences, from the reviewers' feedback and also from ongoing reading on writing for publication. As an EFL learner/teacher, my endeavour to improve students' language issues for some editors still could not meet their 'standard' which contributed to some rejections.

## 4 Conclusion

There are some insightful experiences that we can learn from. We learned to publish our articles through very long, complex processes, as noted in B's, C's and D's experiences. It is also not sufficient just to trust the undergraduate students' work on its own; I need to critically check the content, language and methodology used. Another important lesson is that the editor's/reviewers' feedback in the former rejection will be valuable to improve the articles in the subsequent submission, both in terms of methodology, content, and language-related issues as in B's, C's and D's cases. The successful publication of each student went through his/her own unique trajectory. It was also dependent on the target journal selection rank. Sending the article to the top journal may take time and be subject to rejection, but we may get very good quality feedback. As emphasized formerly that revision(s) is a key process to successful publication (Hyland, 2012), our experiences confirm this argument.

Our experiences also confirm that scholarly publication is a networked activity (Lillis & Curry, 2006b) where both I and my students engaged with literacy brokers, both professional academics (the reviewers) or non-professional (Australian native speakers) (Lillis & Curry, 2006a). In A's, B's and C's cases, the networked activity is focused on myself, students and the academic professionals as the literacy brokers (Lillis & Curry, 2006a). In the end, networked activity in writing for publication should be seen as 'conversation' (Bazerman, 1980; Adamson & Muller, 2014) where my students and I 'respond' and 'evaluate' the editor's and the reviewers' feedback.



## 5 Pedagogical implications

On reflection, journal writing for undergraduate students is better conducted after they have an adequate understanding of research design, a deeper knowledge of content courses and good writing skills. This will help to minimize the number of issues identified by reviewers. The students need to be introduced to the particular genre (Cargill, 2004) of the journals, following the structure and the tone of language used. It is also important to highlight the journals' possible expectations so that the students have more awareness when adjusting their articles to the particular journals. Furthermore, the students need to be explicitly taught to understand the nature of reviewer's languages, as, for instance, their suggestions, are not actually suggestions, but commands (Paltridge, 2015). It is also necessary that students should be given different examples of articles that failed to accommodate the reviewers' feedback and which made it unpublished. On the contrary, it is also essential that students be given examples of articles that successfully addressed the reviewers' feedback, which finally led it to publication so that the students can learn from both cases.

It is also important that EFL literacy brokers and students take advantage of broader networks, both academic professionals and non-professionals who can facilitate the publication process (Lillis & Curry, 2006a), especially when dealing with the recommendation of language-related issues where the journals necessitate that the articles should be proofread by a native speaker of English, such as in D's case.

Finally, I would like to highlight that Cargill and O'Connor's (2006) proposal is important to consider when training students to develop their capacity in publication through a curriculum design model, which covers the following aspects: the publishing process, research design for publication purpose, research article structure, writing the argument, English for publication purposes, manuscript editing, mentoring (manuscript preparation in English), author-editor negotiation for research publication, mentoring (publication strategy), and publication development coordination (pp. 88–89).

## 6 Limitations of this article

In the end, we should acknowledge the limitations of this article. As we did not record every moment in the process or our writing, there might be some aspects missing, e.g., the specific instructions I gave to respond to the reviewers' feedback, some data being erased or discarded (Lillis & Curry, 2006a), as well as the frequency of students' revisions. Another limitation is that we did not document how far our original voices changed after incorporating the reviewers' feedback, as documented in Lillis and Curry, 2006a. Having said that, this article is important to at least glimpse the empirical brokering process in publication (Lillis & Curry, 2006a), especially for EFL undergraduate students, which is absent in the previous studies.

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