

Elaine's experience

Publishing and attending conferences

I The suggestion

I am a 29-year-old research student studying for a part-time EdD in the School of Education. I am half way through my first year of study at the University of Barchester. I have a full-time job and am fitting my studies around it. As a way of focussing my thoughts on my chosen subject it was suggested by my supervisor that I should try and publish a paper out of the reading and work I had done so far.

Q1 Discuss this suggestion and how Elaine should respond to it

Q2 If you agree that she should go ahead, how should she go about it?

2 Submission and the response

I decided to pursue the idea but found the process of formatting my writing in a style fit for publication painful. I went through several major revisions of my article in response to feedback from my supervisor. My research was written in the style of a student thesis, describing the methods that I had used in detail with justification for why I had chosen them. This format was totally inappropriate for publication. In articles it is assumed that you know what test to use and none of the explanation is necessary. I also found that I had to interpret my data over and over again before I really teased out what it was telling me. I had to reword some of my explanations of findings after my supervisor pointed out ambiguous meanings, sentences that didn't make sense and claims that I had made without evidence to back them up.

I went through so many revisions that I got to the point I was totally fed up of working on the paper. Eventually, after a steep learning process I got it into a format ready for submission and sent it to a journal for publishing.

The editor got back to me quickly with so many comments on why they were rejecting it that I became totally disheartened. The comments could be broadly classified into three areas:

1. The research was too institution specific (they wanted findings based on more than the University I was based at)
2. The findings were not original enough
3. The conclusions that I made were not in line with what the research data was telling me.

I had worked on the paper for so long that I found it difficult to bring myself to look at it again. At that point I felt like giving up. I didn't believe I had it in me to create something that was worth publishing.

Q1 Comment on what has happened so far and the lessons to be learnt from this

Q2 What should Elaine do now?

3 Next step

In fact, I left the paper for six weeks before beginning to tackle the comments that were made on it. The catalyst for this was the possibility of submitting it to a conference in my area. My supervisor and I both set a deadline of the submission date of the conference for me to make the changes to my paper. It was hard at first but as I began looking at the data and the comments I really started to understand what the editor's comments had been getting at. Taking a break from the paper and looking at it with fresh eyes helped me see where I had been going wrong. I determined to make my changes in time to submit to a conference and I achieved my goal. To my great relief the paper was accepted and I was invited to present.

As the conference neared I became very nervous. I was going to present my findings in front of all these academics who knew infinitely more about the subject than me. I began to worry about my data, what if I had made a mistake that they would instantly see? What if they asked questions about the subject that I couldn't answer? Colleagues regaled me with horror stories of members of the audience questioning the whole value of their research.

Q1 Comment on Elaine's decision

Q2 How should she prepare for attending the conference?

4 Preparation

To try and tackle some of these fears and also as a practice exercise I arranged to do my presentation in front of a group of friends using a projector. This turned out to be a valuable experience as seeing the presentation enlarged on the projector was very different from seeing it on my computer screen. I was able to spot slides that did not work as well as I had anticipated. In addition my friends were able to give me constructive criticism in a non-threatening environment. As well as commenting on the content they commented on my pace which was too fast for them to absorb what I was saying and take in the information on the slides. Doing this practice and making the changes on the advice of my friends gave me a lot more confidence in how my presentation would come across at the conference.

On the day I arrived a little after the registration start time and found quite a queue of people waiting to register. If I had been scheduled to talk in the morning this could have been a problem but I was scheduled to talk late in the afternoon so I had the whole day to be nervous. I went along to the keynote talks and to some of the other talks that looked interesting. Some of the people presenting were gurus in my subject area. People whose books and papers I had read as part of my research. However, remembering the advice from the “Starting your full-time or part-time PhD” course I actually went to speak to some of them after their presentations and got their contact details. It turns out they were perfectly nice, ordinary people who were willing to talk to a lowly nobody (I’m not sure what I was expecting!). I felt very humbled to be in the same line-up as these people and felt sure that my research would be heavily criticised.

Q1 Discuss Elaine’s use of a practice session prior to giving her paper at the conference

Q2 Is there anything else she should do to prepare for her session?

5 The outcome

When my turn came I felt sure that my nerves were showing. On the advice of a friend I had some water with me in case my mouth dried up and thank goodness I did because the nerves made my mouth dry up very quickly! I was a bit shaky at the start of my talk but as I progressed I found I relaxed. I was pleasantly surprised by the audience who seemed to laugh and show interest in all the right places. When the time for questions came I waited for the killer questions to come but I found the experience totally different to what I expected. Instead of tearing my research apart, in fact, people were interested in finding out more about it and suggesting ways in which it could be taken forward. It was a much more supportive environment than I could have imagined.

After my presentation several people came forward to tell me they had found the research interesting. My supervisor, who had sat at the back through my presentation for support, was really pleased although she mentioned my pace was still too fast which is something to work on.

The best part was the networking opportunity it gave me. Having broadcast my interests to the audience a few people came forward with names of people I should get in touch with working in similar areas. This is a much better approach than trying to network while just attending conferences.

This has encouraged me to try and be a part of conferences rather than just attend them. It is possible to do a range of activities from a poster right up to a paper. A poster outlining what you are working on does not involve the same effort as a paper but still attracts the attention of people interested in your work. One thing that I hadn't really appreciated about preparing to tell others about your work is that it really forces you to focus and make sense of your research which is valuable in itself even if you are not asked to present.

Team task

On the acetate provided list the key issues that should be discussed between postgraduate research students and supervisors in connection with publication and conference participation.

Epilogue

Elaine's advice for students presenting at their first conference

- Dress smart, it will give you confidence and make others have confidence in you.
- Make sure you arrive early for registration
- Take several copies of your presentation on different formats, USB pen, CD and disk if you can.
- Practice your presentation with a projector in front of friends
- Make sure you have some water ready for when your mouth dries up.
- Take business cards with you to hand out to all the interesting people you meet.
- Take a pad and pen to note down the details of the interesting people you want to get in touch with after the conference.
- Be prepared for things to overrun, make sure your travel arrangements take account for the possibility of the conference ending much later than expected.
- Don't be afraid to talk to the big names, they are people too.

Elaine's advice for postgraduate supervisors

- Give lots of encouragement and positive reinforcement as well as constructive criticism during the drafting process to prevent your student feeling overwhelmed and de-motivated.
- Take an active role in helping students find appropriate journals and conferences for their work.
- Explain clearly how the publishing process works
- Prepare your students not just for rejection but also for the numerous comments that will be made on their submission and be prepared to give them lots of confidence boosting following a rejection.
- Give your student the opportunity to practice for a conference in front of you and other students using a projector.
- Give lots of detail about what will happen at the conference, what level to aim the talk at and what questions people are likely to ask.
- Be prepared to offer a lot of support in organising your student's first conference including being a friendly face in the audience during their presentation if necessary.

Good Luck!
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