

Professional Advancement for Service-Learning Scholars: How to Get Published in Peer-Reviewed Journals

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Abstract

The professional advancement of university faculty members depends in large part on a record of publications reflecting research productivity. Junior faculty members or early-career academic researchers sometimes experience challenge and frustration in getting published in peer-reviewed journals. Employing document analysis, the research from which this paper is derived was essentially a review of pertinent journals – particularly the manuscript submission guidelines and peer-review criteria found in those journals. This paper draws attention to factors contributing to favorable peer reviews and offers 10 specific suggestions on how to get published in peer-reviewed journals.

Keywords: IJRSLCE, peer review, productivity, scholarship, service-learning

Introduction

Institutions of higher education generally require that their faculty members (academic staff) also conduct research and engage in professional service. Research and related publications serve as an essential measure of faculty productivity. Indeed, the advancement of faculty members (usually promotion and tenure in U.S. universities) is traditionally predicated on their publishing original research in their discipline. That is why “publish or perish” is an enduring clarion call in higher education institutions in the United States and other countries. Faculty members teaching service-learning courses typically use the pedagogy as a basis for scholarship (e.g., Buchanan, Baldwin, & Rudisill, 2002; Vernaza, Vitolo, Brinkman, & Steinbrink, 2013).

Peer review is one of the criteria by which scholarship is evaluated (O’Meara, Eatman, & Peterson, 2015); in some institutions, only peer-reviewed (refereed) work formally counts for the promotion and tenure dossier. The process of getting manuscripts accepted for publication in high-quality, peer-reviewed journals can be daunting. Junior faculty members or early-career academic researchers sometimes experience immense challenge, and concomitant frustration, in getting published. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the career advancement of service-learning scholars by offering suggestions and advice on how to get published in peer-reviewed journals.

Literature Review

In recent years, tertiary institutions in various regions of the world have embraced civic engagement as an element of vital reforms and innovation. In Europe, Australia, and the Americas, modes of university engagement with the wider society include engaged research and knowledge sharing (Newcastle University, 2009). Moreover, service-learning is one of the manifestations of university civic engagement in those regions (see, e.g., “A European Framework for Community Engagement,” 2018; Jacoby, 2015; McIlrath, Lyons, & Munck, 2012) as well as in Asia (Xing & Ma, 2010) and South Africa (Preece, 2013).

In the United States, institutions of higher education use the term *civic engagement* interchangeably with *community engagement*, both of which, by definition, encompass service-learning. Civic engagement is defined as “acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities through both political and non-political means” (Jacoby, 2015, p. 4). Community engagement is “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d., para. 1).

Service-learning is the pedagogy that integrates community-focused service into the curriculum. A form of experiential education (Jacoby, 2015), service-learning has provided a foundation for engaged research or scholarship (Arellano & Jones, 2018; Buchanan et al., 2002; Vernaza et al., 2013). By and large, publication is regarded as the best indicator of research, and faculty research productivity is typically measured by counting the number of publications over a specific period (Townsend & Rosser, 2007).

It is expected that aspiring authors will take time to evaluate journals as a potential publishing outlet. As Paltridge and Starfield (2016) suggest, prospective authors should seek answers to the following questions, among others: What is the standing of the publisher? How long has the journal been published, and what is its quality of production? Who publishes in the journal? What is the visibility and accessibility of the journal? A key consideration is whether the journal is peer reviewed (Paltridge & Starfield). Peer review is the process of evaluating scholarly works; it supports the integrity of scholarly publications by providing quality control. Further, peer review provides opportunities for improvement of a submission for publication (Nicholas et al., 2015).

Peer Review

An international investigation of the views and practices of approximately 4,000 academic researchers found that peer review was “apparently increasing its influence, despite the many potential (invented) threats posed by a rapidly unfolding and enveloping digital environment” (Nicholas et al., 2015, p. 15). Nicholas and associates noted that researchers wanted to be published in journals that have robust peer-review mechanisms, and researchers generally felt secure in citing peer-reviewed publications.

Peer review is not without its critics, however. Biased reviewers and conflicting reviews are among the criticisms. Perhaps the most common criticism is that the peer-review process tends to

be slow and long (Nicholas et al., 2015; “Publish, don’t perish!” 2016). Acceptance of the first submission of a manuscript is rather rare; even a seasoned scholar will get a conditional acceptance, if not outright rejection. In evaluating manuscripts, peer reviewers and journal editors place manuscripts in standard categories: (a) “accept”; (b) “conditionally accept,” which means minor revisions are required; (c) “revise and resubmit,” usually indicating that the manuscript needs major revisions; and (d) “reject.” Sometimes several revisions must be made to move the manuscript from “revise and resubmit” to “accept” (see, e.g., “Publish, don’t perish!”).

The high rates of manuscript rejection (Kalwij & Smit, 2013) can cause a significant decrease in scholarly productivity (Day, 2011). No wonder some researchers succumb to “predatory publishing” (Matumba et al., 2019, p. 83; Nicholas et al., 2015). Proffering the promise of low rejection rates and a speedy publication process, predatory publishing involves charging fees and providing minimal, if any, peer review.

Research-focused universities usually emphasize the importance of the impact factor of journals, which traditionally has been based on citations. Scholars sometimes use impact factors to determine what to cite and where to publish (Nicholas et al., 2015). There is growing acknowledgment, however, that citation measures provide an incomplete picture of a journal’s quality and full impact. As one writer has warned, confusing impact factor with real-world impact may be extremely detrimental to academic researchers (Wineburg, 2013). Furthermore, as argued in “Publish, don’t perish!” (2016), if a journal has a low impact factor, or none at all, it does not follow that its articles will not reach the target audience or make an impact.

Method

Information contained in the journals themselves is usually the most instructive for authors in the making. Therefore, the suggestions and advice to be offered to prospective authors would be based primarily on a review of the manuscript submission guidelines and peer-review criteria found in the target journals. A purposive sample of articles from those journals would complement this review. Document analysis was employed in this research. Combining elements of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009), the method entailed finding, selecting, and synthesizing information contained in the identified journals. For journals to be included in the final review, they (a) should be published in English, (b) should be peer reviewed, (c) should be published currently, and (d) should not be targeted primarily or solely to students.

A three-phase procedure was used to search for pertinent journals online, through the Google search engine and the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database. The first phase was limited to service-learning and civic engagement (or community engagement) journals; that is, journals with the terms *service-learning*, *civic engagement*, and/or *community engagement* in their titles. In Phase 2, the search was expanded to include journals whose titles contained the word *engagement* (without the qualifier *civic* or *community*) as well as journals in the field of experiential education. The final phase involved a search of peer-reviewed journals from various disciplines – notably business, education, nursing, political science, psychology, social work, and sociology – to determine which ones have published articles derived from service-learning research.

Each journal was skimmed for content; the journal’s aims and scope were checked; then the journals that met the inclusion criteria were selected. Next, the manuscript submission guidelines and peer-review criteria were reviewed and coded using keywords, and a sample article from each of the service-learning-specific journals was reviewed.

Findings and Discussion

With strict adherence to the inclusion criteria, the searches yielded 118 journals (categorized in Table 1), including six U.S.-based, peer-reviewed journals dedicated to service-learning: *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement* (IJRSLCE), *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning in Teacher Education* (IJRSLTE), *International Journal of Service Learning in Engineering*, *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, and *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*. The researcher also found three additional journals explicitly for civic/community engagement (listed in Table 2), including the *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education* (JCEHE).

Table 1
Journals that Publish Articles on Service-Learning

Categories of Journals	Number of Journals
Service-Learning-Specific Journals	6
Other Civic/Community Engagement Journals	4
Experiential Education Journals	2
Teaching and Learning (Pedagogical) Journals	13
Disciplinary Journals*	35
Other Journals	58
Asia-Pacific-Based Journals**	6

*Two service-learning-specific journals that also fit this category are not counted here.

** The Asia-Pacific-based journals are categorized above.

Student-focused journals are excluded from Table 1.

The research did not determine whether all journals are peer reviewed.

A list of the 118 journals identified in this research is available from the author.

The *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (launched in 1994) was identified as a long-standing, premier journal for service-learning scholars, as was the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (JHEOE, published since 1996). IJRSLCE was identified as an exemplar of an online, open-access service-learning journal for community-engaged

scholars globally. Like the other service-learning and civic/community engagement journals, IJRSLCE has required double-blind peer reviews (in which the author does not know the identity of the reviewer and vice versa).

Table 2
Journals Dedicated to Service-Learning and Community Engagement

Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement	Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship
International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement	Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education
International Journal of Research on Service-Learning in Teacher Education	Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning
International Journal of Service Learning in Engineering: Humanitarian Engineering and Social Entrepreneurship	Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement
Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education	

Note: Only English-language journals (not targeted to students) with the words “service-learning” and “engagement” are listed here. This is not an exhaustive list of such journals.

Other journals that have published service-learning articles include journals focused on pedagogy (e.g., *College Teaching*, *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, and *Pedagogy in Health Promotion: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*) and disciplinary journals (e.g., *Journal of Management Education*, *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, and *Teaching Sociology*). *Active Learning in Higher Education* and *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* are two non-U.S.-based journals that have published a considerable number of service-learning articles over the years.

A few of the journals stated their current impact factors. However, consideration of impact factor was beyond the scope of this study.

Common Elements and Themes

An examination of journal policies and submission guidelines indicated several common elements: manuscript types, submission format, word/page limit, reference style, and peer-review process. In its “For Authors” section, for example, IJRSLCE listed the five main types of manuscripts it accepts, provided a submission preparation checklist, and delineated authors’ responsibilities. A review of the submission guidelines and sample articles from various journals showed that the basic structure of manuscripts was as follows: (1) Abstract, (2) Introduction, (3) Literature Review, (4) Methods, (5) Findings and Discussion, and (6) Conclusion. Limitations of the study and implications of the findings might be included under “Discussion” or added separately.

IJRSLCE has created a review system (abridged in the Appendix) consisting of seven questions together with a five-point rating scale. Peer reviewers comment on their ratings based on criteria 4–7. Additionally, they comment on the literature review (e.g., its depth and its relationship to both the context and the theoretical rationale for the study); the appropriateness of the specific data collection and analysis methods; the limitations of the research; the organization of the manuscript; and the mechanics of writing. Each of the two or three reviewers of a manuscript recommends “accept,” “revise and resubmit,” or “reject.”

An analysis of the submission guidelines and peer-review criteria (drawn mainly from the journals listed in Table 2) revealed three main themes (presented with illustrative quotes in Table 3): (1) *utility in generating knowledge*; (2) *research rigor*; and (3) *effective, error-free writing*. The guidelines and criteria emphasized that manuscripts should show potential for producing knowledge; the research design and methods should be sound; the writing should be correct and clear.

Table 3
Themes Common to Journal Manuscript Review Criteria

Themes	Evidence (Excerpts) from Journals
Utility in generating knowledge	“significance in contributing new knowledge” (JHEOE); “systematic inquiries that produce new knowledge or understanding” (Michigan Journal); “studies should offer opportunities for replication, application, or adaptation” (Michigan Journal)
Research rigor	“Appropriateness of methods” (Michigan Journal); “rigor and appropriateness of the scholarship” (JHEOE); “articles should ... incorporate rigorous methods” (IJRSLCE); “should have a sound methodology/research design and well-developed analysis (data) section” (JCEHE); “submissions that are both rigorous and accessible” (Michigan Journal)
Effective, error-free writing	“Effectiveness of the presentation of ideas” (Michigan Journal); “readability and flow of the information and ideas presented” (JHEOE); “manuscripts should be written clearly and concisely” (IJRSLTE); “Clear and accessible language is essential” (Gateways); “Authors must carefully proofread their work before submission” (Michigan Journal); “adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements outlined in the Author Guidelines” (Gateways, International Journal for Service Learning in Engineering, JSLHE); “copy edited (for grammatical correctness) prior to submission” (JHEOE)

A review of sample articles from the six service-learning journals illustrated how authors complied with the guidelines and requirements of each of those journals. Many of the manuscripts had interesting titles and abstracts that compelled a complete reading of the articles. Such titles include “Why ‘Where’ Matters: Exploring the Role of Space in Service-Learning”

(Michigan Journal), “Seeking SOLE Food: Service-Learning and Sustainability in Honors Think Tank Courses” (Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education), and “‘I Am So Angry I Could . . . Help!’ The Nature of Empathic Anger” (IJRSLCE).

Implications and Recommendations

Numerous scholarly journals are available as outlets for service-learning research. A few of the journals identified in this study are explicitly for service-learning; some cover the broader field of civic/community engagement; a number of them focus on teaching/learning processes and outcomes; many of the others are journals for specific disciplines.

Fundamental considerations for scholars who want to get published include the need for their research to be designed rigorously and purposefully, and for manuscripts to reflect effective presentation. As indicated in the IJRSLCE submission review system, attention to results and evidence, as well as to conclusions and implications, is also important.

When revisions are recommended, authors are expected to respond appropriately to the reviewers’ comments and make it easy for editors and reviewers to see the changes made to the manuscript. It is defensible to disagree with reviewers, and it is important to provide reasons for any disagreement expressed. When the decision is “reject,” authors should remember that it is not the end of the world. It is not they who have been rejected; instead, reviewers have rejected the particular version of the scholarly work submitted for consideration.

What follows is a list of suggestions for emerging service-learning scholars and aspiring authors:

1. Read articles published in the journal of interest and keep exemplars at your fingertips.
2. Follow the manuscript submission guidelines scrupulously.
3. Make a good first impression with your manuscript’s title and abstract.
4. Write the literature review to contextualize the current research – to point out where much research has been done and where more research is needed.
5. Indicate the research design; elaborate on the methods of data collection and analysis.
6. Discuss the findings/results in detail and state their implications.
7. Connect the conclusions to the findings and to the purpose of the research.
8. Pay attention to grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other mechanics of writing.
9. Welcome and use critiques from peer reviewers to improve your manuscript.
10. Do not be discouraged by rejection; remember that persistence pays.

The above list is not intended to give the impression of a “tips-and-tricks” approach, oversimplifying the factors that facilitate manuscript acceptance. Rather, the list of suggestions is meant to reinforce the fundamentals of getting published, as discussed above.

Conclusion

In higher education institutions, the pressure to publish remains evident. Academics are required to demonstrate research productivity if they are to advance in their careers.

This paper provides information and guidance to early-career scholars interested in service-learning research. The findings and suggestions presented in this paper can effectively inform the preparation and submission of manuscripts for peer review and publication. Prospective authors should bear in mind that journal editors are looking for manuscripts grounded in rigorous research – manuscripts reflecting appropriate methodology, thorough data analysis, cogent conclusions, and clarity of expression.

In conclusion, service-learning scholars should strive for high-quality original research that will be disseminated through peer-reviewed journals. The research should be designed to produce usable knowledge that will have the desired impact in the context of community engagement. That kind of research is expected and should be rewarded.

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Appendix

IJRSLCE Manuscript Review Criteria

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<p>1. Contribution to the Literature: The manuscript has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the processes, quality practices, and/or impacts associated with service-learning and community engagement.</p>					
<p>2. References: The manuscript utilizes relevant and current references to the scholarly literature.</p>					
<p>3. Writing Quality: The manuscript is professionally written, easy to read, and free from grammatical or spelling errors.</p>					
<p>4. Theoretical Rationale: The manuscript is thoroughly grounded in relevant theory, models and/or conceptual frameworks, and the need for the study ... [is] explained.</p>					
<p>5. Methodology: The research methodology for the study is sound, appropriate, and applied properly. Samples are adequate/representative, instruments are clearly described and trustworthy (e.g., reliable, valid), procedures are appropriate. For community-engaged research, the relationship between the researchers and community is explained as well as how collaboration and reciprocity functioned within the partnership.</p>					
<p>6. Results and Evidence: For quantitative research, statistical tests were appropriate to the type of data collected, number of groups, and research questions. Rigorous steps were taken to control for threats to the soundness of conclusions (e.g., pre-/post-tests, controlling for confounding variables). For qualitative research, data analysis procedures are clearly explained, there is evidence of careful/in-depth analysis, and sufficient raw data is provided to see emerging themes. Validation is achieved through triangulation and confirming conclusions with insiders.</p>					

<p>7. Conclusions and Implications: The discussion of findings goes beyond simply reiterating the findings and interprets the meaning of the findings in light of the research question(s) and relevant theory/research. Conclusions are justified, given the findings and limitations of the study; implications for future research are discussed.</p>					
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Source: Abridged from the review system of the International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement.

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