

Chapter 10. Pitch Mode: Acquiring Reflexivity in Scholarly Journal Editing

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First Things First

- I am an educated white man with tenure at my R2 institution.
- I am a first-generation student—my father and I graduated from college at about the same time. I live in a slightly less red region of a deeply red state.
- I have most of the correct politics for the academy.
- I have three children, who I raised with my wife of almost twenty years. My kids are teenagers, so it was (mostly) easy to make time to write this chapter.
- We have serious chronic illness in the family. We also have great health insurance.
- I'm the chair of my English department. I'm busy. We're all busy.
- My PhD is in technical communication, and I teach and study online writing practices and technical communication university programs.
- I'm a co-managing editor (alongside my other co-, the brilliant Erin K. Bahl) at the longest continuously running open-access scholarly multimedia journal, where I've worked for more than a decade.

I like bullet lists—which sounds like a silly aside, but they're a good symbol of all the weird intersections in my identity. Accessible design is important, but so is efficiency. Hierarchy doesn't matter so much to me, but that's easy to say when you're in the empowered group. I acknowledge that I have an immense privilege to choose what I work on, when, and where. I am self-reflexively aware that because of the things that I am, and not just the manner in which I do those things, I have considerable influence and direct, institutionally-backed power to make decisions about other people's experiences, learning, and careers. I keep a paper journal—most of the time—to help me reflect on my preconceptions, and try to intentionally seek out collaboration to ensure that my own assumptions are not the only ones I hear. I also have to work extra-hard, I've found, to be reflexive, to self-check and find where I enact invisible, unintentional, but oh-so whiteboy agendas.

Be Quiet and Listen

It's February in Chicago, Illinois. It's cold and snowy. (I'm from humid, grungy coastal Texas; I'm used to winters around 65 degrees and sunny, though I do

appreciate the opportunity to use my winter coat for more than an afternoon or two.) It's late, and conference goers are off doing the variety of things we do in the evenings. (Anything after 7:00 pm is questionable in my comfortable middle agedness.) I pass quietly through the multilayer lower level of the Hilton Chicago's conference area—through the lobby, into the silent main auditorium, through a side door, then back out and around the corner on the lobby level because that was wrong, then around more corners, down a half-flight of stairs, through a foyer jammed with tables usually populated by event staff and sticker-wielding groups through the day but empty now except for discarded flyers and poster tripods, and into the echoing chamber that is Continental C.

Michael Faris and I have volunteered to represent *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* at a Cross-Caucus/Cross-SIG Engagement Event at the 2023 4Cs Annual Convention. As framed by the invitation email, this was to be a mingle and network and pitch event for a loosely-structured set of groups from Caucuses and Special Interest Groups who would come to brainstorm projects and research proposals. Invited journal editor representatives would act as “judges” for proposals that we might be interested in mentoring through conceptualization.

When I described my conference plans to another colleague earlier in the year, he jokingly referred to it as “Academic Journal *Shark Tank*” and the idea had, for good or ill, kind of stuck in my brain. And so mental leviathans circled below the surface of my imagination as I met Michael at the bottom of the stairs to the overly large banquet room where this social event was scheduled. Were there even a dozen of us in a room set up for hundreds? It was sparsely attended as only an academic conference event can be, with a few micro groups of people who sort of knew each other, a few pairs that knew each other well, but little overlap. The original organizers ended up having to cancel their trip to 4C's, and so the event was being run by another colleague willing to stand in: someone who knew the original plan but wasn't over-committed to it. Some of the other editors that appeared on the convention program were, well, no-shows. Noting the sparse attendance (representatives from four journals, and five attendees from caucuses), editors decided to flip the script and just have an open, round-table style mentoring conversation about scholarly publishing. We circled up chairs and tables, introduced representatives from journals, and invited folks to talk about their ideas and experiences with publishing in rhetoric and composition. I can see now in my memory what I didn't see then: journal representatives on one side, caucus attendees on the other. Giant gutters of space between journals and scholars.

During the round of introductions and the usual editors' patter about what each journal focuses on and what each person's role is there, one participant characterized scholarly publishing in composition and rhetoric studies as a love-fest, using warm, almost familial terms to describe a more-often-than-not inclusive set of publications and experiences. Insert the requisite nodding from other journal representatives. Almost immediately, three other attendees (ones not attached

to the journals represented there, all women from identity caucuses and visually presenting as from marginalized groups) disagreed, pushing back against that version of the discipline and dramatizing through sharing various clipped acquisition and peer review stories that scholarly publishing—even in our beloved writing studies—is exclusionary of authors, cultures, methodologies, and modes of research that don't fit within traditional limits of writing studies scholarship.

Perhaps primed by the event's description but certainly inhabited easily by the mentality of an acquisitions editor always seeking a great new piece, myself and other editors in the room snapped quickly into pitch mode. "If you did that at *Kairos*, you could include these stories, and work with digital photos in this way, and we just expanded our editorial board in these other ways to combat just the kind of unjust reviewing you've been describing." Around the room we went, describing the different angles that could be highlighted inside our different publications. Nearly shaking, another participant held up a hand to stop us. To speak up and remind us something important: that her colleague wasn't telling us her story because it needed to be published. Instead, she was telling us because—clearly—we needed to hear it. I won't share those women's stories here—not because I don't remember them, but because sneaking their stories in as my own publication isn't the point. Because they're not my stories to tell. A hush fell on the room. Recognition. Listening?

Pitch Mode

As an editor focused on the acquisitions, intake, and review end of a scholarly journal, and one who is committed to mentoring authors and drumming up new authors and interesting ideas for scholarly work to the journal, it can be exceptionally hard to get out of what I've come to call "pitch mode." Pitch mode is a sometimes-useful state of mind where anything and everything is a cool idea for a publication. Someone tells you about a course project they did. Oh, if you did X, Y, and Z you could totally turn that into an excellent scholarly text. Give a good presentation at a conference? Hey you should totally submit that as a webtext for *Kairos*. Someone howls about something on Twitter or shares an idea for a side project they've been holding on to a long time and haven't seen a good outlet for yet? Hey, wouldn't it be cool to turn that into a *Kairos* piece! And so forth.

Pitch mode is necessary for facilitating research and scholarly excellence in our field. As editors of research publications, it's our job to amplify scholarship, to facilitate and help bring conversations into being, to connect communities, to help authors crystallize ideas and guide them through the publication process. But as with all organizations, there's another, more pragmatic way to describe this necessity: it's our job to fill journal issues, to be expedient consumers of ideas. And pitch mode helps with that, too.

Pitch mode is a great mode to slip into at the (mostly) regular *Kairos Open House* sessions we held throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Open Houses were

Zoom-mediated hours where we were trying to make ourselves accessible and inclusive, with an explicit turn to mentoring named as one of our journal's goals following the fall 2020 Technical & Professional Communication journal editor's Listening Sessions on inclusivity in scholarly publishing (Ball, "Logging On," *Kairos* 25.2). In our Open House sessions, potential authors, new authors, and just the webtextually-curious were invited to ask questions about journal practices and policies, pick editors' brains about the viability of research ideas or how to frame something specific for publication, or even make pitches for ideas they're working on. The editorial staff in each open house, a rotating cast of senior and section editors drawn from different parts of the journal staff hierarchy, is invited to respond, providing ideas, encouragement, and in-the-moment mentoring. Because *Kairos* publishes multimodal webtexts that center design and interactivity in ways that traditional journals don't, potential authors often ask questions about how to create arguments that demand or necessitate interactivity and seek feedback about their conceptual ideas. We encourage questions like how to get started with creating a webtext or what makes particular sections and genres in our journal distinct from one another, and we often share examples of pieces in our responses. First-time authors often want to know how to write a query letter to an editor, and are concerned about how design requirements can be a high bar; they also come in with questions about how to shape their pieces. I've definitely learned how to listen for when authors indicate they're receptive to our ideas, and when, as editors, we can push a little too hard on how we might design a piece ourselves and need to settle back into encouraging rather than generating. That's one of the tricky components of the open house—balancing the author's ideas with the editors'. Ultimately, these meetings are designed around pitch mode, where any idea, no matter how weird or unconventional or unformed, is a good one. I adopt the pitch mode mentality a lot when I'm responding to email queries for the journal (and though I can't speak for my co-editors and collaborators, I think they do, too): authors with a rough draft and ideas for a webtext who just need some advice and affirmation before they really commit to the laborious process of authoring (not to mention multimodal digital authoring) an entire scholarly work. "Hey, do you think this will work?" Pitch mode answers with an emphatic yes!, suggests three ideas, asks a question, and definitely encourages you to follow up with any questions or issues.

When I recall how easy it was on that Thursday night in February to slip into acquisitions instead of having a first reaction to sit, listen, and take ownership, I think about the conflicted identities and representations of editors in our scholarship. Robert Connors referred to editors as "gates." Melissa Ianetta wrote about the behind-the-scenes nature of editors' work and has characterized the editor as mostly invisible—she describes lots of fantastic and colorful characters in the variety of roles editors inhabit, but invisible sticks out to me the most. I've always edited the journal at a distance. *Kairos* is an independent and fully-digital journal that doesn't live at a specific institution with a press named after a state

university or anything like that. It's always been email, Yahoo! Groups, Google Groups, Slack, Zoom video, and probably Discord in the future, but always and again yet more email. I don't meet authors very much, personally, and am happily unseen in my quiet editing cave. Editors are behind the scenes folks and, in my experience, largely expect to be that way. Invisible, we acquire and consume the work and stories of others. For me, personally, when editing is so much correspondence rather than the scents of rooms, the coldness of the weather, the stares of not-potential authors, it's easy to slip into pitch mode, to let it take over. I forget myself, and thus let myself run rampant.

One important tool among many that we've added to our publishing inclusivity toolkit at *Kairos* to push back against just these sorts of tendencies is the "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices" heuristic for editors and reviewers; it has played an outsized role individually for me and is proving to be so organizationally for the journal.

Working with and Responding to the Heuristic

Over the last five years, the journal has been intentionally working on our inclusivity practices and actions, including forming a task force, a committee, and a public-facing Inclusivity Action Plan. Each of these pieces (they're published, you can read about them at the journal's website, so I won't overspend my time on all of them here)—along with our long-formed editorial habit to team up and work through most everything collectively or collaboratively—plays a significant role in ensuring that (we hope) the journal is not just effective but also inclusive.

I've found that for me—always expediency-minded—one of the hardest things to move past is a long-engrained desire (bound deeply in my sense of busy-ness) to say "we're ahead of the game, because I can identify how we do these things already." When you're volunteering and teaching and writing and all the other things, being efficient and spending just enough time on tasks to meet due diligence is a siren call. I love that phrase—siren call. It suggests a duality, connoting both something that distracts you from a goal by calling you away and also something that pulls your head up and tells you to get out of other people's way.

Taking up the authors' calls to endorse, adopt, commit and use the heuristic, in January of 2023 the journal's newly-formed DEI committee (a mixed group of review board members along with senior and newer editors) formally adapted the document as a reflexive analytical tool. Each week, committee members identified a section of the heuristic to reflect on and comment individually in a shared Google document; as a group we would come together on Zoom to discuss each item in turn. Each subsection, made up of 5-12 bullet-listed active verb commitment statements, promotes self-examination on multiple layers of the editorial workflow. Looking back at my comments as I write this, I notice that nearly all of my additions are "we do this, we do that, we do it already." "Reviewers and editors frame reviewer comments to support author revisions." *Check*. "Editors

proactively contact reviewers to offer deadline extensions or new deadlines.” *Check*. “Editors send all reviewer feedback and editorial framing of reviews to authors and reviewers, while applying anti-racist editorial judgment on if and how to send the feedback in cases of racist reviews.” *Check, check, check*. Moving on.

Thankfully, my voice is not the only one doing this work. With each “We do this” is a follow-up from someone else on the team: How? Where? Are you sure? Along with the heuristic, that’s the second (maybe the first) most important tool: collaboration and community on everything. As an academic, as a technical communicator, and as a parent, this is—and has to be—a running theme. All of my most memorable and exciting research projects, publications, and program-building events have been collaborative, often in a large team. My first publication as a doctoral student was co-authored with 12 people; when my peers voted to put me in charge of managing everyone’s assignments and helping to ensure all the individual pieces were composed in a connected way was an important lesson in considering discovery, drafting, and editing as a massive task of “co-”. Another important moment in collaboration was as new faculty member at my current institution. In that first year, the writing studies faculty started a project to design and develop an innovative new graduate program. My new faculty mentor pulled me in as a co-editor of the proposal and application, and I was introduced to writing and working with eight other faculty members at an array of positionalities on and off the tenure track as well as a range of partners across the university (from the provost’s office to the library). I was particularly invested in course design and naming the program, but I had to quickly learn as a shiny new PhD in Technical Communication that my vision could not only be my own. Even working with my daughter’s medical care partners (16 different specialists in 6 different fields over 16 years, along with uncountable nurses, technicians, and office staff members) has taught me the value of many hands. Working as co-managing editor, instead of the sole arbitrator of authority on any given text, means I must be open to feedback and correction and sharing of vision, whether it comes from one of our senior editors, my co-managing editor Erin Bahl, or folks on the journal’s team of section editors. I must be open to another point of view. Self-reflexivity alone is not enough—the good will of individuals is important, but working against systematic oppression requires collective action.

Pitch mode is a tricky component of an editorial mindset, one factor in the delicate balancing act between authorship, collaboration, and editorship. Editing is entrepreneurial—it’s looking for value in ideas, balancing the risk of time and resources and completion and expectations about how peer reviewers will, won’t, or might act against the author’s career needs and visions for their work, against the author’s desires to contribute to conversations and say their piece. The pitch mentality is important for sustaining submissions and ensuring research projects get wider impact through publication. Simultaneously, pitch mode can be oblivious and even white supremacist in its desire to relentlessly gobble up stories for future tables of contents. It is easy for editors and reviewers to red-line their way

through a submission with perspectives and feedback that ultimately turn the author's piece into the reviewer's piece—when we ask authors to straighten out a crooked passage, or when we pile on suggested citations and ask for significant revisions that depart from the author's original vision. Editors work within ecologies of reviewer and editor guidelines, journal editorial policies, workflows and procedures, staff hierarchies, and disciplinary networks. Within all of that, and hidden behind signature lines in correspondence, it's vital that editors—that I—get out from behind the pile of documents and emails, talk to authors, and most importantly, shut up and listen when they wave their hands in my face and say “wait, that's wrong; no, this isn't for you.” The work is not your own, in more ways than one.