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Mary Jo Hatch

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# WRITING FROM TEACHING: A TEXTBOOK WRITER'S TALE

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Mary Jo Hatch  
*Copenhagen Business School*

*A textbook author tells of her early struggle to become a textbook writer, the long journey and the many detours she took along the way to getting her first textbook published. Having identified early in her career that writing a textbook was her chosen way to have an impact on her field of organization theory, she encountered many obstacles to realizing her ambition. She ultimately found a way to use her teaching to facilitate getting her book published. To those others who also aspire to author texts as part of their scholarly endeavor, she offers her lessons learned with the hope that they do not have to follow the roundabout route that she took.*

**Keywords:** *textbook; authoring; writing; organization theory; writing advice*

Teaching and writing can be complementary activities. For me, they had to be. A heavy teaching load early in my career enforced discipline that allowed me to write a textbook for my field (organization theory) while simultaneously maintaining a respectable record of academic achievement. In my case, teaching what might seem like way too much organization theory fed the writing of a textbook, which in turn helped me to identify and theoretically frame multiple streams of research that led to journal publications. But let me tell you the story before trying to extract its lessons.

## California Dreaming: From Student Days to Early Tenure

The goal of writing a theoretically sound yet accessible and interesting textbook for management students was among the strongest motivating forces behind my decision to accept admission to the Stanford PhD program in 1981. My MBA training had taught me that business textbooks in general

are not written with their audience in mind and that the field of management provided some of the worst examples. Having studied creative writing and journalism as an undergraduate, I realized that I might make my mark by showing business students how interesting academic subjects could be.

However, it became crystal clear on arrival at Stanford that aspirations to write textbooks were not taken seriously. Though Hal Leavitt and Dick Scott had both written important textbooks in their fields, these potential role models always strictly and sometimes painfully focused on research. In this environment, my attention quickly shifted to academic publishing—in particular learning to write articles for *Administrative Science Quarterly* (*ASQ*) that demand greater complexity but also permit more obfuscation. Amid the challenges of coauthoring my first *ASQ* article (Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983), which appeared while I was still a PhD student, thoughts of textbook writing drifted away.

A personal relationship kept me in California, and, on graduation, I found myself teaching in the California State University (CSU) system. With a second *ASQ* article under review, this one based on my dissertation, much of my time was now directed at learning to teach. This was something I had never tried because Stanford's Graduate School of Business never let PhD students anywhere near its MBAs. There was plenty of opportunity to learn now, however, as my teaching load was a daunting four and four.

My first teaching assignment was to deliver four sections of organization theory every semester. Imagine you are a freshly minted PhD who has never taught. You move from the relative bliss of full-time dissertation writing to the trial by fire of teaching two classes a day, 4 days a week, for two 15-week semesters. The first crisis you face is being in a state of continual confusion over which class has progressed to what point in the syllabus. Day by day you learn to flag the point in the class discussion at which each section stopped, and for this you need to make some follow-up notes because classes have a way of diverging from one another, which is difficult for a novice teacher to control. Even this strategy repeatedly fails because your classes are back to back in different rooms, and on a given day it slips your mind to mark the first class's ending point before going into the second. This is no nirvana.

More out of desperation than according to any plan, I turned to my research training for help. Disciplining myself to record how the conversations in each class progressed each day, I learned to seamlessly pick up where I had left off at the prior meeting instead of looking like the idiot who had no idea what she is doing. In time, my ethnographic approach to teaching began to include notes about how the students engaged with the subject and observations about what went over well and what didn't. An immediate benefit of the note taking was that it allowed me to correct problems encountered in Monday–Wednesday classes before meeting the Tuesday–Thursday groups. I was learning organization theory alongside my students, and this began to influence my writing.

Eventually, I developed a set of highly sophisticated course notes that evolved as I fixed whatever the students could not grasp. This entailed a lot of rewriting. My undergraduate writing major and journalism minor taught me that rewriting is the crux of great writing; if this is so, then my writing at that stage should have been near perfect. Through round after round of revision, the outlines developed plot and enough detail to more or less read as texts, some reaching 20 single-spaced pages in length. Thus, the textbook began to take shape *through the act of teaching* without much notice on my part!

Though mine may sound like a horrible first teaching experience, I had nothing to compare it to. I enjoyed my students and managed to survive the ordeal in very good spirits. It was fun to learn as you do only when you start to teach a subject, and the students appreciated my efforts to listen and respond to them and my enthusiasm for the subject matter. Only later did I find out how wicked it was to demand so much teaching of me. Combined with my sense of professional duty to produce A-level journal research, these conditions put the kind of pressure on me that causes far too many academic careers to fail. What did I know? There were classes to meet, papers to write, and conferences to attend. I kept my head down and worked.

It was through a series of conversations with publishers' sales representatives that I began consciously thinking again about the textbook. The rule in academia is "tenure before textbooks," and without tenure I knew it was best to keep my ambition a secret. But book reps are always on the lookout for textbook writers because they get a bonus when one of their contacts signs a contract. Reps came by during office hours, and we would strike up conversations. In some cases it seemed safe to take out my growing packet of outlines and show them off. I knew, or hoped, that sales reps wouldn't rat me out to the senior faculty, and they always seemed impressed—by the sheer bulk alone!

In the meantime, I transferred to a different campus within the CSU system. One consequence of the change was a lighter teaching load (three and three), and even though my teaching was now directed to MBAs, I managed to get that second *ASQ* article published (after three grueling major revisions that took 6 to 9 months each). Organization theory remained my only teaching matter, so once again a single prep allowed some time to write. New papers gained admittance to Academy of Management meetings, where I began to develop as a scholar. In addition, my classes were all in the evening, which meant that I could work on research and writing during the day. My school even allowed me to concentrate my teaching on two nights per week, which meant one class of 3 hours one night and a 6-hour marathon ending at 10 p.m. the other. But being a morning writer, this schedule allowed me to be fresh in the mornings. The writing started to flow. Forgoing weekends and holidays, a steady stream of papers took shape.

Based on the two *ASQ* articles and several promising papers, combined with a highly competitive academic market and a local economy that was impossible to afford without at least an associate professor's salary, I went

up for and was awarded early tenure. The CSU system could not at that time give a faculty member a raise without a promotion, so after only 4 years as an assistant professor, I found myself in the position of having satisfied the requirement of “tenure before textbooks.” I was now a tenured associate!

Around this time, a visit to my parents unearthed a box containing some of my best predissertation writing. The comparison with my two *ASQ* articles shocked my self-concept as a writer. In the place of once flowing and lively prose stood tortured sentences filled with abstractions that nobody but the ivory-tower bunch would read, even if they could. The style that I had so painfully developed as an undergraduate had been silently snuffed out. It occurred to me that my ambition of writing a textbook might offer the means of recovering my voice. This fanned the flame of my ambition.

The book outlines continued to develop during this period, changing to accommodate the more pragmatic tastes of MBAs. Fortunately, my evening students, who worked all day, were pretty docile, so they put up with a required class that was rooted in theory. Of course they pushed me to give them examples, and as I didn't have many from the business world (I had conducted research in only three companies to this point), I developed examples based in my own experiences of theorizing. For some reason, the students took to an approach that taught them to theorize while they learned theories. This, too, was incorporated into my outlines.

## **The Trials and Tribulations of Textbook Publishing**

One day a dapper gentleman, an editor from a major publishing house, wandered into my office. He talked about textbook writing and the importance of organization theory to the business world and said he had heard from his sales rep that my classes were earning unusually strong teaching evaluations for a theory course. I had been teaching all the sections of organization theory that were offered at my school, so there was no direct comparison for me to make with other instructors. My evaluations seemed pretty average in comparison to those around me who taught strategy, organizational behavior, and other management courses. Though skeptical, I was flattered by his praise. His company would happily entertain a book proposal, he announced, and left me to think about it. A few days later he called to ask what I thought about writing a proposal. Convinced the book would mostly write itself from my notes, I asked him if it would be okay to just write the book. He thought that was a splendid idea, and the next week he sent me a contract and a check for \$3,000, never having asked to see a single written word! The contract stipulated there would be another pot of money when the manuscript was completed. I immediately went to work.

The book in fact *didn't* write itself. Producing the manuscript took an additional 2 years beyond the 1 specified in my contract, during which time,

one by one, the chapters became the main texts in my class. Working 2 weeks ahead in my syllabus, week by week I produced prose from one of the outlines, rushed it over to Kinko's where the students had copies made, which they then read for the following week's class. Almost always they would come with corrections, complaints, and suggestions; the points they raised started to frame our class meetings. The next year their advice was combined with feedback solicited from academic colleagues pressed into similar service; yet another version of the manuscript was produced for the new class. I went through pretty much the same revision process a second time, and then a third.

When the manuscript was finally submitted, a call came through telling me that my editor had been promoted. His successor said that I could keep the advance—and the book. They were no longer interested in publishing it! It seems that by this time organization theory had started to disappear from the core curricula of most major U.S. business schools, and they did not see the sense in supplying a dwindling market with a new text. They said they hoped that I would have success finding another publisher. Disappointed but not too discouraged, bolstered by a few successes publishing in academic journals, I moved to Europe to pursue my passion for interpretive organization studies. There, I put the book manuscript out to European publishers.

To my surprise, four different publishers immediately sent contracts. Every conference attended found me pursued by editors. During this time two editors captured my imagination because they were the last of what by then I recognized as a dying breed—editors who take a developmental approach to working with authors. Fortunately, I chose the one who did not leave her job a year later to write her own book, and I got an education in European approaches to organization theory at the hand of David Musson, whose own education in the social sciences gave him loads of insight into my project and a long list of interesting people to whom he could introduce me. My debt to him is great (and to my first editor, who managed to get me to sign a contract—something it turns out I really hate doing). As it was now several years on from all those revisions, however, the manuscript had to be updated.

This revision turned out to be another major undertaking. By now my experiences in Europe were changing my views of the field, and the three perspectives of modernism, interpretivism, and postmodernism crystallized into the structure of the textbook. Framed by my new identity as a foreigner, the international complexion of the field stood in high relief, causing me to introduce the national heritage of the authors whose ideas were being presented. Last, there was the issue of my use of the English language. Prior to moving to Europe, my proudest moments had been when students congratulated my command of language or admired my vocabulary. Honed in my undergraduate years as an English literature major, this was about as good as it got for the writer in me. That this very source of pride would become a burden to my teaching is something I never expected.

During the years spent teaching at the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) in Denmark, my language became more and more simplified in response to the need to communicate the abstract topics of organization theory to students for whom English was a second language. One of the reasons for hiring me at CBS was to encourage the use of English among Danish business students, and so there was mutuality around figuring out how to explain concepts and theories in language that was simple yet full of the nuances and complexities that make the subject interesting. Each chapter of the textbook was painstakingly rewritten to make the language accessible and the concepts and theories as clear as I could make them. In the process, I dropped a considerable portion of my once-prized vocabulary. I later learned that the plain language of the textbook is as attractive to those who are native English speakers as it is to those who are not.

One benefit of all the revision for the textbook was that my academic writing improved. One improvement came from the broad view of organization theory that my textbook writing demanded. The many ideas organization theory embraces suggested topics worthy of study and enhanced my ability to frame papers in ways that reviewers could appreciate. Another improvement came from rediscovering my style. This has had a hand in many of my publishing successes; of this I am convinced by numerous reviews that have started with "This paper is extremely well-written." And the sensitivity to one's audience, trained into me as a young writer, blossomed through the practice of writing from teaching. Even if the textbook would have never appeared, the efforts that went into writing it would have paid off.

Finally, in 1997, after nearly 10 years of revising, the first edition of *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (Hatch, 1997) was published by Oxford University Press. At first the book was an oddity. No one before had offered an organization theory textbook comparing modern, interpretive, and postmodern perspectives on the field, and no other organization theorist had written a textbook using both the first- and second-person voice, which allowed me to incorporate narratives about theorizing. Though many did not realize that the rhetorical devices I had learned through creative writing and ethnography classes lay behind the attractions this book held for students, it is to these things that I attribute much of the success the book has enjoyed. The first edition sold more than 45,000 copies in English worldwide and was translated into five languages.

There were some surprises from the U.S. market, however. At first, the book did not go over well in the United States, in spite of expectations based on my ties to home. As the Academy of Management pressed to internationalize, however, the book came to have a following in the United States, coming from two surprising sources. The book was most popular among practicing managers in executive programs, particularly those doing executive doctoral work. Because in my experience MBAs were the hardest sell for this



topic, it was a shock to find practitioners who were so appreciative of the book. PhD students from mainstream business schools were also using the book, but in a surprising way: to help them pass their field examinations. Thus, a small but appreciative following for the book in the United States began to grow among students who, like me in an earlier time, struggled to learn the basics of a complex and abstract subject and had ambitions to become theorists. I heard the same message from both the mainstream and executive PhD students: "Thank you for making theory accessible."

Whatever credit the textbook deserves for promoting organization theory in the worlds of academia and practice belongs to all those students who patiently helped me learn to write for them. Without that audience, my career would have turned out very differently. The second edition of *Organization Theory* has now appeared with the help of Ann Cunliffe (Hatch, 2006). I asked Ann to join me in writing the second edition because she impressed me with her use of her experiences teaching in a public administration program in the same CSU school system that gave me my initiation by fire. Though she, too, has now moved on to another university, our combined teaching experiences stand behind whatever success the second edition of the textbook enjoys.

There have been other benefits of writing a textbook. One is an adjunct professorship at the Copenhagen Business School, where I was teaching when the first edition appeared and where I have continued to collaborate on research projects focused on organizational culture, identity, and corporate branding with Majken Schultz. We have a book project in the works on these topics that will most certainly benefit from the writing skills the textbook forced me to develop. Many invitations to visit schools where *Organization Theory* is used have taken me all over the world, meeting new research partners and engaging with practitioners. A few years ago, the textbook caught the attention of two Poles who were in search of a coauthor for a book that became *The Three Faces of Leadership: Manager, Artist, Priest* (Hatch, Kostera, & Kozminski, 2005). So textbook writing has been remarkably generative for me. Most recently, the leadership book led to my involvement in designing and implementing a new leadership program at the University of Virginia. It seems that writing from teaching has come full circle.

## Lessons Learned

My story ranges across 20-some years of being an academic. Thus, its lessons will vary for those of you who are new to academia, for those in midcareer, and for those who, like me, are regarded as senior faculty. Recognizing that yours may very well be different, the lessons I learned by looking back over the experiences reported here are these:

- Taking teaching seriously can turn into something that will advance your career.
- Preparation and follow-up are every bit as important as teaching itself.
- Things that appear to undermine your progress can be more helpful than immediate success.
- Success takes time to develop. Openness to unexpected opportunities along the way can reveal its path.
- Responding to the expectations, demands, and ideas of others does not have to mean abandoning your dreams.
- Textbook writing can be a means of framing your academic contribution and cultivating your writing skill!
- Writing a textbook can enhance your reputation as an academic if you write a book that challenges or advances the discourse in your field.

My own journey was far too long, and I do not wish to leave you with the sense that writing a textbook is destined to be this tortuous. The important thing is to be purposeful. Try to find an institution that is compatible with what you truly want to do. If you have not yet answered that question, figure out what you can make of the situation in which you find yourself. Recognize that you can make something significant from any opportunity you have to teach others. Whether that is a long-dreamed-of textbook, research done with your students, or studies of the act of teaching itself, there is always some way to intertwine teaching and research. In fact, based on how much I have benefited from this practice throughout my career, I have learned to question the advice I initially received—to take the job at the best institution that would have me. Had I done that, I would have emphasized research and ignored teaching, and I think that both would have suffered as a consequence.

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