Book editing as a scholarly practice

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Drawing on concepts of academic sensemaking, career scripts and invisible work, we depict scholarly book editing as an under-researched and under-rewarded aspect of academic work. Our discussion is based on analysis of meeting minutes, spreadsheets and drafts generated as we coedited a multi-authored volume on gender and research funding in four countries. We also analysed an audio-recorded conversation among the three editors and short pieces written by each of us about the editing experience. In the paper we identify challenges encountered, variations in individual experiences and recommendations for would-be editors. Challenges included negotiation with contributing authors; changes in government research policies that affected multiple chapters; publisher requirements mediated through virtual communication; and importantly, country variations in often taken-for-granted career and institutional structures, funding arrangements, and acronyms and assumptions. Our editorial roles developed in relation to our individual strengths, career scripts and positionality. We conclude with recommendations gleaned from experience.

Full paper

Aims and objectives

Over the past three years, a trio of seasoned higher education scholars devoted many hours to preparing an edited volume on gender and research funding (Acker, Ylijoki & McGinn, 2024). This paper aims to contribute to the scholarship of (co)editing. Drawing on concepts of academic sensemaking, career scripts and invisible work, we depict scholarly book editing as an under-researched and under-rewarded aspect of academic work. Our discussion is based on analysis of documents generated during the editing process and our autoethnographic ruminations. We provide several suggestions for prospective book editors.

Conceptual framework

Individuals and organizations in academe use *academic sensemaking* (Degn, 2018) to produce meaning in circumstances of ambiguity and rapid change. Meanings are constructed in social contexts of national and institutional priorities, disciplinary and departmental expectations, and administrative and resource contingencies. Individuals also make decisions according to their *career scripts* (Whitchurch et al., 2021)

and competing responsibilities. Editing requires extensive *invisible work*, a category often associated with women academics (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Rao, 2024).

Literature

Like many edited books in the higher education field, our volume crosses cultures; unlike many, it focuses on just four countries and keeps a close watch on similarities and differences among them. Within the relatively sparse literature on book editing, advice is prominent, often combined with analysis (e.g. Guerin et al., 2024; Jalongo & Saracho, 2023; Thomson, 2013, 2017; Wulf & Meadows, 2016). Kumeran and Maddison (2018) vividly depict the extensive labour involved, while Kamboureli et al. (2016) approach editing as a cultural practice.

Methods

Our methods included documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) and autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013). Mined for emergent themes, documents spanned the voluminous archive of communications among the editors, the publisher's representatives and contributing authors; agendas and minutes from 24 Zoom sessions and five in-person meetings; spreadsheets, drafts and notes. Specifically for this paper, we audio-recorded a discussion among the editors, and each of us wrote a short piece about the editing experience. In considering the trajectory of our volume, we were able to identify challenges embedded in the production, variations in individual experiences and recommendations for would-be editors.

Findings

Challenges

Reviewing the documents and discussions involved in editing our volume, we identified several areas that presented challenges, including negotiation with contributing authors; changes in government research policies that affected multiple chapters; publisher requirements mediated through virtual communication; and country differences. Across chapters, country variations were both subtle and complex and included institutional, career and research funding structures; acronyms and assumptions; and ideas about gender equity and diversity. Additionally, we note that book editing is often an unclear or downgraded activity in the contemporary context where some outputs 'count' more than others (Edwards, 2012).

Individual experiences

Between us we had direct knowledge working in three of the four countries. Our roles developed as we proceeded and were related to our individual strengths, career scripts and positionality. Acker, benefitting from time created through retirement, initiated the project and kept it moving, with a hand in all stages. Ylijoki, despite juggling multiple projects, was most likely to notice contradictions and analysis issues. McGinn, while holding a university management position, was a meticulous and technically adept editor, important in a context where the publisher's editorial process requires many specific responses in certain formats. Often obscured but important for all of us were the competing demands of care responsibilities and unanticipated injuries and illnesses.

Recommendations

Given the hard work and uncertain rewards involved in producing a top-level edited volume, it may not be the best choice for newly minted academics or those in vulnerable positions (Thomson, 2013). Perhaps due to our relative security, we found the experience tremendously rewarding although far more intense than initially expected. We recommend working collaboratively with carefully chosen colleagues who bring different strengths to the production, as described above for ourselves, and, where necessary, to consult with experienced mentors in terms of topic and publisher choice (Jalongo, 2023).

Conclusion

Much of the work involved in producing a multi-authored volume takes place behind the scenes of academia and may not be readily visible or rewarded. Access to funding, as well as career stage and type, shape one's options. Our sensemaking led us to believe that our in-depth comparative approach, combined with the notion of understanding research as a social production and considering the role of gender, made for an unusual and creative output. Moreover, the pleasures of working together kept us motivated and interested throughout the lengthy period that such work requires.

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