



Credit: Caspar van Genuchten

Why publishing should be a pleasure, not a pressure

The need to publish should not lead to despair. Based on her personal experiences of great mentorship, bioethicist Anke Snoek argues that early, supervised involvement in the publication process can spark a love for publishing that alleviates its pressures.

When I arrived in Australia from the Netherlands to work on my PhD, I noticed that publishing was not actively encouraged by supervisors. They advised their students to focus on their thesis, since publishing was such a time-consuming process. Yet supervisors warned their students: it is publish or perish! Many PhD students viewed publishing as having an axe hanging over them. They saw publishing as a chore, a burden, and would postpone it as long as possible, which would only increase the pressure. Many students would finish their PhD with almost no publications, spending the years after in low-paid jobs, because most postdoc positions required them to already have many publications. They would be working on papers in their spare time and rejections or negative reviewers reports could be devastating since so much depended on getting published. Publish or perish.

I had the luck during my career to meet some great teachers, who taught me the joy of publishing and helped me to gradually get used to the publishing system.

I was encouraged to publish early in my career: already during my master's at the University of Humanistic Studies. I remember that I once submitted a paper for an assignment, called 'God or complexity'. My teacher proposed that I submit my paper to a journal. It never got published, and the reviewers made me rewrite it so many times that I felt that it lost its meaning. Yet I vividly remember what initially I felt back then: a great spark of joy, the realisation that

through my hard work, something emerged that was worth sending out into the world. For me, that is the joy of publishing, and it has been a strong force in my career. It's a terrific feeling when you have a good idea to crystalize it in a paper.

This would be my first advice to supervisors, teachers, postdocs and anyone working with students: teach them the joy of publishing; the thrill of getting a good idea, based on solid work, out in the world. Supervisors should teach their PhD students the joy of writing and publishing instead of the message 'publish or perish'. Acknowledge good ideas, and suggest to students that they try submitting their paper to a journal. Show students that publishing can be a pleasure, rather than presenting it as a chore or a necessary evil.

At the end of my master's, I met another great teacher and became his research assistant. He would call me up and say, "Anke, I'm having trouble meeting my deadlines, could you help me out?" and then he would engage me in writing papers: "Foucault has written something about *x* in book *y*, could you look it up?" "Could you make a summary of this novel to see how it supports my theory *z*." The longer I worked with him, the more responsibility I got. He let me write sections for his papers, and eventually he said, "Well, I think you deserve to be co-author on this paper due to your input." That was my first publication.

This would be my second advice to supervisors and mentors: involve students early in the process of publishing. Try to make

this a win–win situation: supervisors can benefit from students doing research for their papers, and students can learn a tremendous amount about how to navigate the publishing process. If supervisors encourage students to contribute to their papers, students have a safe place to learn how the sometimes brutal publishing system works. In this safe place, early in their career, way before they experience the pressure of publish-or-perish, they can develop a thick skin for the aspects of publishing that they find hard.

I learned a tremendous amount from my teacher when he involved me in his publications while I was still a research assistant. I learned that good papers do not solely depend on good ideas, but also on hard work. I learned how to collaborate on a paper. I learned how the game of revisions was played, and that review decisions could be unfair or even ridiculous. I learned that even established professors could get negative review reports. I was very fortunate to learn these lessons early in my career. And thanks to these great mentors, publishing has always been one of the aspects of my work that I most enjoy. □

Anke Snoek

Maastricht University, Maastricht, the Netherlands.
e-mail: a.snoek@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Published online: 10 October 2019
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0668-5>

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.