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Learn It, Use It, Teach It
Teaching Journal Evaluation When You Are Not a Scholarly Communications Expert

As a subject and liaison librarian, I have learned about scholarly communication the same way I have learned about many things related to my position: in a casual, as-it-comes-up fashion. I think of this method as the Learn It, Use It, Teach It approach. I "Learn It" by researching, attending a webinar, or talking to a colleague. I "Use It" when I apply the new information to answering reference questions or during individual research consultations. "Teach It" is the phase where I integrate my newfound knowledge into an information literacy workshop or a research guide. In this article, I will describe how I used this approach to teach social work doctoral students how to select journals for publication, including how to recognize predatory and questionable publishers.

Subject librarians are knowledgeable of the scholarship practices of specific disciplines due to the relationship-building process with academic departments. Combined with a deep knowledge of student and faculty research needs and personal experience with publishing, subject librarians are abundantly able to apply scholarly communication concepts to questions around scholarly publishing. My Learn It, Use It, Teach It approach is an example of the scholarly communication coach model, where subject librarians assist with common scholarly communication issues.[1] My approach also dovetails with one of my library's new liaison model core competencies: "Promote and advise on the process of creating, sharing, and evaluating academic research and knowledge."[2]

In my role at the University of Kentucky, a land-grant research institution, I am the liaison to the College of Social Work and regularly consult with students in the Doctorate of Social Work (DSW) and PhD programs. I recently applied my Learn It, Use It, Teach It approach for a new type of workshop with DSW students. A social work professor requested that I teach a session on helping students identify journals in which to publish. My first thought was "That is easy! I can have students search for articles on their topic and take note of the publication titles as a starting place for evaluating journals."

From previous conversations with social work faculty, I was aware that open access (OA) is essential to social workers in the field. Joanne Yaffe, as editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Social Work Education*, stated in 2019, "open-access publication, by which publications are freely available to the public, holds considerable promise for making peer-reviewed, high quality research available to assist social workers in the evidence-based practice process."[3] I had a baseline knowledge of open access and journal publishing, but since I was going to lead a workshop on it, I needed more information. I gathered information about article processing fees (APCs), impact factors, author rights, and editorial decisions on manuscripts (which I

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called "recovering from rejection" in my presentation) and worked it into an overall explanation of the journal publishing process. But there was a surprise question from a student waiting for me at the workshop: "How can I tell if the journal is a real journal? I thought any journal that charges a fee is a 'fake journal.'"

Many students agreed with her assessment of journals that charge fees. This was a question I had not prepared for. Honestly, I did not know much about predatory journals beyond Beall's list,[4] which I knew was problematic for many reasons. I explained that predatory journals exploit the publishing process for profit and that the author does not receive the full complement of services, such as peer review and rigorous editing. I also told the students I have received solicitations from journal editors, and I know my work is not so special as to receive such attention. The social work professor agreed and added that other people in the field will recognize predatory journal titles on a curriculum vitae, such as when applying for a job.

Even while I said these words, I knew it was not a satisfactory answer and that students needed a more dynamic toolbox to separate the flowers from the weeds. How could someone brand new to the academic publishing world even begin to distinguish between ethical publishers and the not-so-ethical? Monica Berger, professor and instruction and scholarly communication librarian at the New York City College of Technology, effectively described the graduate student dilemma: "At a base minimum, a scholarly writer considering where to publish should be able to judge if they will receive meaningful and useful peer review as well [as] excellent copyediting, if their work will reach their desired readership, and if evaluators, as well as peers external to their institution, will respect the journal or publisher. This discernment process is one of determining publication quality: the significance and value of publishers, journals, and publications."[5] I knew I had work to do!

I consulted our scholarly communication librarian and brainstormed ideas with my fellow ACRL Education and Behavioral Science Section's Scholarly Communication Committee members, as we had recently started a new service called the Scholarly Communication Help Desk. Their sources gave me a foundation on which to build (see "Recommended Reading" at the end of this article). One question remained: how would I teach this concept to graduate students in the future? I did some more digging.

I located several great ideas for teaching students how to identify journal publishers that are predatory, questionable, ethical, and all the gray areas in between (see the "Teaching Ideas" section). Teaching the concept of selecting a journal to publish in is rich in connections to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, particularly the Scholarship as Conversation frame.[6] Part of becoming a new scholar (and entering the conversation) is keeping up with the literature in one's area, as well as avoiding predatory publishing and finding a good fit for a manuscript. The journal publishing process can easily be applied to the Information Creation as a Process frame, including tying publisher business models to the Information Has Value frame, and judging the credibility of publishers as an aspect of the Authority Is Constructed and Contextual frame.

The teaching ideas below can be combined with any of the resources in the "Directories and Rankings" and "Tools, Checklists, and Rubrics" sections—choose your own adventure. (There is literally a Choose Your Own Adventure–based lesson plan for journal publishing.[7]) Berger advises that it is best not to use a journal evaluation checklist alone, as they can be misleading, time consuming, and "cannot substitute for deeper thought and analysis related

to journal choice."[8] For maximum impact, consider partnering with another subject librarian, the scholarly communications librarian, or other units on campus (e.g., the graduate college) to teach journal evaluation.

Please keep in mind that some sources such as Ulrichsweb include all journals, regardless of quality, and that the Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA) list and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) may not include small publishers or their journals. Most of the teaching ideas can be customized for use with any discipline, focusing on the journal titles and most relevant tools.

Teaching Ideas

Inviting Discussion Among Students
Whole-class discussions are a great way to gain students' attention at the beginning of the workshop and build on their existing knowledge about scholarly practices. Toni Carter, director of the Kares Library at Athens State University, suggests discussion questions such as "Why do predatory journals exist?" and "What damage can predatory journals cause?"[9] Another discussion you can have with students is about their journal publishing goals (e.g., who do they hope to reach? Does the journal need to be well known?). Alternatively, use the discussion questions at other points in the workshop, even spacing them out between other workshop elements. Students' answers can be added to a physical whiteboard, on adhesive paper sheets hung in the classroom, an online shared document, or in an application such as JamBoard and referred to throughout the workshop.

Providing Context and Background Information
Providing context around journal publishing is an important part of a workshop on predatory journals because librarians are uniquely knowledgeable of the process. I had difficulty deciding *how much* context to provide, but luckily many other librarians have provided such guidance (uncited ideas are my own):

- A general overview of the publishing process, including submission, peer review, editor decisions, author rights, and making requested revisions. Consider using a graphic or flowchart to illustrate the process.
- Include examples of high-quality OA journals and subscription-based journals, including new OA titles and long-established publishers that utilize APCs.
- Explain various publisher business models: subscription-based, OA, and hybrid.
- Describe the OA publishing process, including benefits, drawbacks, what APCs cover, and why journal publishers use them. Situate predatory publishing as one aspect of finding quality publishers,[10] and note that there is a "continuum from deliberate and devious to low-quality, amateur publishing practices."[11]
- Provide information about journal publishing in countries outside of the United States: "In some countries researchers do not have access to a wide range of titles but face the same pressure to publish, so have few other options but to accept offers from predatory publishers if they want to share their work."[12]

Active Engagement with the Content
No matter what form it takes, active engagement with various aspects of journal publishing

is key to developing lasting skills and knowledge. The following ideas draw on deductive and inductive reasoning and evaluation skills. Where a specific directory (e.g., DOAJ) or tool (e.g., Think.Check.Submit) is mentioned, feel free to substitute a resource you prefer.

- Engagement with pre-chosen journal titles. I really like this "cold open" idea of choosing a scholarly journal. Create a scenario topic based on the discipline you are working with and two possible journals to which to submit. In teams of two, ask students to evaluate which journal would be the best publication venue and why.[13] This can be kept to overall impressions, or explore the websites of journals that are considered to be predatory. Ask students to brainstorm the characteristics of these journals and apply these characteristics to traditional journals and determine which characteristics can truly be used to determine whether a journal is predatory.[14]
- Engagement with directories. Flip the concept on its head: ask students to explore the DOAJ and OASPA websites. What does inclusion on these lists mean? What journals or publishers might be missing?
- Engagement with rubrics/checklists. Invite students to practice skills with quality checklists, such as Think.Check.Submit or Open Access Journal Quality Indicators, or preselect a series of journals, a mix of ethical and not-so-ethical titles. Use Think-Pair-Share to analyze the journals using the "Is It Predatory" checklist.[15]
- Engagement with email solicitations. Show students email solicitations you or discipline faculty have received from predatory journals. Ask students to identify clues that indicate the journal is not legitimate,[16] or use the Email Evaluation Tool.
- Engagement with the publishing process. Choose from four gamified instruction ideas from Clemson University Libraries: Publishing Family Feud, Perfect Match Game Show, Guess Who DIY Publisher Quiz, and Treasure Quest.[17]

Conclusion

Learning more about teaching students how to evaluate journal quality has been energizing and informative. I have been able to take scholarly communication topics about which I had previously only scratched the surface and organize them into a cohesive workshop plan. What I have learned has enriched my work as a subject librarian, and I am excited to apply these ideas to my other liaison departments, especially sociology and psychology. Please consider sharing your ideas about teaching journal evaluation with me; I would love to hear them. ✐

Notes

1. Todd Bruns, John Stephen Brantley, and Kirstin Duffin, "Scholarly Communication Coaching: Liaison Librarians' Shifting Roles," in *Partnerships and New Roles in the 21st-Century Academic Library: Collaborating, Embedding, and Cross-Training for the Future*, (ed.) Bradford Lee Eden (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 9–29. Author's accepted version at http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lib_fac/99.

2. University of Kentucky Libraries, "Liaison Model Core Competencies," in *Library Liaison Professional Development Toolkit* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Libraries), last updated January 23, 2025, https://libguides.uky.edu/liaisontoolkit.

3. Joanne Yaffe, "From the Editor—Predatory Journals in Social Work," *Journal of Social Work Education* 55, no. 2 (2019): 211, https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1622312.

4. Beall's List, "Beall's List of Potential Predatory Journals and Publishers," last updated December 8, 2021, https://beallslist.net/.

5. Monica Berger, *Predatory Publishing and Global Scholarly Communications* (Chicago, IL: ALA, 2024), 261.

6. ACRL, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago, IL: ACRL, 2015), https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

7. Christie Hurrell, "A 'Choose Your Own Adventure' Recipe for Teaching Scholarly Communications Concepts," in *The Scholarly Communications Cookboo*k, (eds.) Brianna Buljung and Emily Bongiovanni (Chicago, IL: ACRL, 2021), 229–32, https://dx.doi.org/10.11575/PRISM/39359.

8. Berger, *Predatory Publishing and Global Scholarly Communications*, 273.

9. Toni M. Carter, *Introducing Scholarly Research: Ready-to-Use Lesson Plans and Activities for Undergraduates* (Chicago, IL: ALA Editions, 2022), 127.

10. Monica Berger, "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Predatory Publishing but Were Afraid to Ask" (New York, NY: New York City College of Technology, 2017), 213, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs/141/.

11. Claudia Alvarado-de la Barrera, Santiago Ávila-Ríos, and Gustavo Reyes-Terán, "The Gray Zone Between Legitimate and Predatory Open Access Scientific Publishing," *Revista de Investigación Clínica/Clinical and Translational Investigation* 76, no. 1 (2024): 1–5, https://doi.org/10.24875/RIC.23000191.

12. Claire Sewell, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Research Support and Scholarly Communication*. 1st ed. (London, UK: Facet Publishing, 2020), 72, https://doi.org/10.29085/9781783303953. See Berger, "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know" for additional information about journal publishing in countries outside of the United States.

13. Carter, *Introducing Scholarly Research*, 127.

14. Carter, *Introducing Scholarly Research*, 127.

15. Berger, "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know," 213.

16. Carter, *Introducing Scholarly Research*, 127.

17. Jenessa McElfresh and Megan Sheffield, "Gamified Library Instruction and Predatory Publishing: Connecting Undergraduate Nursing Students with Trends in Scholarly Communication," Clemson University Library Presentations 127, October 25, 2018. https://open.clemson.edu/lib_pres/127.

Additional Resources

Recommended Reading

Association of College & Research Libraries LibGuides. "Scholarly Communication Toolkit: Scholarly Communication Overview." Last updated August 27, 2024. https://acrl.libguides.com/scholcomm/toolkit.

Berger, Monica, and Jill Cirasella. "Beyond Beall's List: Better Understanding Predatory Publishers." *College & Research Libraries News* 76, no. 3 (2015): 132–35. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.76.3.9277.

Buckland, Amy. "Open Access." In *Scholarly Communication Librarianship and Open*

Knowledge, edited by Maria Bonn, Josh Bolick, and Will Cross (Chicago, IL: ACRL, 2023), 85–128. https://bit.ly/SCLAOK.

Burton, Karen. "Keeping Up With Predatory Publishing." *Keeping Up With …* (briefs), January 2024. Association of College & Research Libraries. https://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/predatory_publishing.

Burton, Karen. "Predatory Journals and Publishers." Clemson University Libraries LibGuides. Last updated October 18, 2024, https://clemson.libguides.com/predatorypub.

Grudniewicz, Agnes, David Moher, Kelly D. Cobey, Gregory L. Bryson, Samantha Cukier, Kristiann Allen, Clare Ardern, et al. "Predatory Journals: No Definition, No Defence." *Nature* 576 (2019): 210–12. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03759-y.

Matsuuchi, Ann, and Elizabeth Jardine. "Scholarly Communications Guide for Faculty, Staff: Predatory Publishers." Library Media Resources Center, LaGuardia Community College LibGuides. Last updated December 16, 2024. https://guides.laguardia.edu/scholcomm/predatory.

Webber, Nicole R., and Stephanie Wiegand. "A Predatory Primer: What Every Librarian Should Know About Problem Publishers." Association of College & Research Libraries, May 25, 2021. YouTube, 1:00. https://youtu.be/5u20r9b-12w?si=trtjmiu970b0J1rM.

Tools, Checklists, and Rubrics

Compass to Publish, University of Liège, https://services.lib.uliege.be/compass-to-publish/.

Email Assessment Tool, Emme Lopez and Christine Gaspard, https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7342769.v1.

Is It Predatory? Checklist for Evaluating Journals, Megan Wacha and the Office of Library Services, The City University of New York, https://libraryguides.salisbury.edu/ld.php?content_id=41083097

Journal Evaluation Tool, Shilpa Rele, Marie Kennedy, and Nataly Blas, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University, https://scholars.lmu.edu/en/publications/journal-evaluation-tool

Journal Evaluation Workflow, Karen Burton, Clemson University Libraries, https://clemson.libguides.com/predatorypub

Open Access Journal Quality Indicators, Sarah Beaubien and Max Eckard, Grand Valley State University Libraries, https://www.gvsu.edu/library/open-access-journal-quality-indicators-144.htm

Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing, OASPA, COPE, DOAJ, and World Association of Medical Editors, https://doaj.org/apply/transparency/

Think.Check.Submit, cross-industry initiative, https://thinkchecksubmit.org/

Directories and Rankings

African Journals Online (AJOL), https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajol

Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) members (publishers and journal titles), https://publicationethics.org/

Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) journal titles, https://doaj.org/

Google Scholar Metrics journal rankings, https://scholar.google.com/

Journal Citation Reports (JCR) journal rankings and journals by discipline, https://clarivate.com/

Journals Online (JOLs), International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP), https://www.inasp.info/

Journalytics Academic, Journalytics Medicine, and Predatory Reports databases, Cabell's Publishing, https://cabells.com/

Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA) registered publishers, https://www.oaspa.org/

Public Library of Science (PLOS), open access publisher, https://plos.org/

Ulrichsweb directory of periodicals, https://about.proquest.com/en/