

Interview with 2011 Distinguished Educator Mary Jo Hatch

Written by Joel Gehman

Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:17 - Last Updated Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:29

In San Antonio, [Mary Jo Hatch was named the 2011 Distinguished Educator](#). This is only the second time this [biennial award](#)

has been given out. In this two-part series, we talked with Mary Jo about some of her contributions to teaching OMT, tips on writing for scholarly, managerial and student audiences, and some of her latest projects and insights.



First, congratulations on winning the 2011 Distinguished Educator Award. This is only the second time the award has been given out. According to the OMT Division, the award is intended to highlight the importance of good teaching in OMT and to stimulate discussion on how to improve our impact on business students. But rather than recognizing excellent teaching, per se, the award is a tribute to individuals who have positively influenced educational practices within the broader OMT field, such as through the design of new OMT-related courses, the authorship of widely used books or cases, the creation of new conceptual frameworks, and/or the development of innovative and widely-used educational techniques (e.g., management simulations). Given that remit, what was your first reaction to learning you had won the award?

Surprise and delight. And, of course, gratitude for the acknowledgement. It validates a choice made early in my academic career to write a textbook. When I began that project, most of my colleagues and advisors told me that it would be a waste of precious time, a foolhardy distraction from more important work, namely publishing journal articles. Finding out that the book has been notable for OMT colleagues, many of them teachers of organization theory, therefore means a great deal to me.

At the risk of asking you to sing your own praises, would you mind reflecting on the contributions you've made to teaching OMT that are most meaningful to you? Looking back, what are some of the places where you feel you've made a difference?

Interview with 2011 Distinguished Educator Mary Jo Hatch

Written by Joel Gehman

Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:17 - Last Updated Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:29

My textbook [*Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives*](#) was no doubt the reason people thought of me for this award. I can pinpoint one or two aspects of the book that might be regarded as important contributions – at least they seem so to me. When the first edition was written, most textbooks focused mainly on US-based research done in the mainstream quantitative tradition of modernism. It seemed to me there was a glaring need to include work from the symbolic and postmodern perspectives of organization theory as well. By including symbolic and postmodern perspectives alongside modern, I tried to represent authors from different parts of the world while introducing students to the multiple perspective approach.

[Burrell](#)

[and Morgan](#)

(1979) had done this before me, of course, but not in a way that worked in undergraduate or MBA classes because their book was written at too high a level, at least for the US market. In addition to highlighting multiple perspectives on organizations and organizing and underscoring how international our field is and has always been, I stated the nationality of each author mentioned in the textbook. A minor point perhaps, but I felt I was on a mission to broaden the base of OMT by making my textbook more inclusive than most of its competitors were at the time.

In general then, I would like to think my work has contributed to teaching by making organization theory more accessible for students, more internationally oriented, and also more fun for everyone. I worked hard to make the writing in the textbook clear and simple without simplifying the ideas, and my articles on jazz, humor, and painting (I hope) have put a little fun into learning OT.

As someone who is just about to graduate, my sense is that having an impact in terms of both research and teaching is a tall order. How have you managed to succeed at both? What advice might you offer to others who would like to succeed in both areas? For instance, have you found synergies between your research and teaching?

Writing the textbook turned out to offer some unexpected synergies between teaching and research. I started writing the book early in my career, 4 years after earning my PhD. Ordinarily that would be a very bad idea according to the unwritten rule of “tenure before textbooks” but tenure was granted me after 4 years of teaching, so I cleared that hurdle fast. At the time I was teaching a 4/4 load (i.e., 8 sections of OT each year). The challenges of simultaneously teaching so many sections of the same course forced me to devise a notational system to keep track of who had heard me say what, and these notes developed into a pretty detailed outline for the course. A commissioning editor from Macmillan saw my notes on his annual campus visit and signed me up to write the book practically on the spot. For me, writing the textbook was a natural extension of my teaching activities so it made a lot of sense to do it, but the project also showed me some significant gaps in the literature, which subsequently informed and inspired

my scholarly work.

Although received wisdom says do your research first and worry about your teaching after you have published enough to earn tenure and full professor, the opposite approach worked fine for me. I am not so sure I would go so far as to advise anyone to seek out a heavy teaching load, but writing a textbook certainly is not the worst thing that ever happened to my research. I think the advice I would give is to find ways to make your teaching speak to your research, and vice versa. For example, talking to your students about what makes you passionate about your subject matter and listening to their responses will give you insights you can translate into better teaching, and in some cases, research projects. It makes no sense to me to try to divorce research and teaching, even though much of the way our profession is structured encourages us to do just that.

There is one other aspect of my academic success that should be mentioned. I have consistently been asked throughout my career, “How did you manage to get THAT published?” Although I understand the implicit criticism this comment carries, the answer reveals a secret ingredient of any success I can claim – writing well. Having the ability to write is at least partly the product of my undergraduate training in journalism and creative writing and all the practices those contexts demanded. Another part lies in being perhaps overly perfectionistic about my prose. Every article I have ever submitted to a journal has received at least one review that began, “This article is well written.” We are trained to do many things in our discipline, but writing well is not typically one of them. So another piece of advice might be to work on your writing. Many books have been written about this, but nobody’s theory about writing will substitute for practice. For most of my career I wrote every day. During my most productive years it was not uncommon for me to write for 4 or 5 hours a day, even when I was teaching. So again, for me at least, research and teaching are not natural enemies.

You’ve been a prolific author – both in terms of papers, but also in terms of books. In fact, you are one of the few authors I can think of who has published books aimed at researchers, students and managers. What are some of the tricks to translating your insights from one audience or domain to another?

Thanks for noticing that! Few people before you have remarked on this aspect of my body of work and it is probably what, as a writer, gives me the greatest sense of accomplishment. I don’t know if there are any tricks to it, but I can mention a few things that led me in this direction and tell you about the journey I took from research and teaching to writing for practitioners.

Interview with 2011 Distinguished Educator Mary Jo Hatch

Written by Joel Gehman

Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:17 - Last Updated Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:29

One thing that might be important here was that I remember noticing fairly early in my career how Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Jeff Pfeffer, and Bob Sutton, whose work I greatly admired, had moved from the rigorous scholarly writing of their early careers into writing for practitioners later on. Most importantly, I saw that they carried their theories with them, though they did so lightly; only if you knew the theory could you see how theoretically grounded their arguments were. So maybe one “trick” is to present theory without making it the focus of argument. Kanter, Pfeffer, and Sutton showed me how to use rich case examples to communicate theory that frame experiences for readers without overwhelming the excitement of discovery. And, all three of them write incredibly well.

Not to keep dwelling on writing, but knowing how writing and reading work is a big part of answering this question. I have long been a student of the writing process, since before I considered a career in academia. I chose to study creative writing and journalism as an undergraduate which taught me early on that if you cannot anticipate the experience of reading what you have written, you will never be an accomplished writer. You need to get to know the people for whom you will be writing. Don't just assume they are all just like you. Develop intimacy with them, their foibles, their expectations and desires. You don't necessarily give them what they *say* they want, but rather what you *think* they need to hear.

Finally, my profound respect for the practical implications of organization theory may also figure in here. I always found the implications sections of research papers the most daunting to write. It seemed to me you had to put an idea out there and observe what happened to find out what the implications were, and at the idea formulation stage, the implications seemed impossible to know. To compensate for this inadequacy, I based my theorizing on field observations. The idea to theorize based on observation was facilitated and inspired by learning ethnography during my PhD years. But it was probably equally influenced by the fact that I had earned an MBA and worked in business prior to starting my PhD. The confluence of all these factors was that as I started my dissertation, I thought of my research as using theory to speak to academics about the “real world” rather than using it to tell practitioners how they should behave (i.e., reflecting my problem with implications). This was almost the reverse of what I had been taught. (If you have not done so already, [read Murray Davis's old article](#) , *That's Interesting*, as was recommended to me when I began my PhD.)

After graduation, I began teaching and I quickly learned that my students expected examples from the real world, which they hoped would illustrate a theory's meaning and application in practical terms. I remember years of frustration as I searched for examples compelling enough to justify teaching organization theory. The cases other professors used to teach strategy and OB seemed too thin and simplistic to match the complexity I had observed in organizations. Ethnography, based on rich description, had somehow spoiled the case teaching method for me. I wanted more, but I did not find it for many years. As I wrote the textbook, my hope was

Interview with 2011 Distinguished Educator Mary Jo Hatch

Written by Joel Gehman

Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:17 - Last Updated Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:29

that I could make theory accessible by using uncluttered and colorful language and discussing how theorists theorize, which would allow me to engage student readers without providing the cases and anecdotes that most other textbooks relied upon. Despite vociferous complaints from my publisher that my book did not look like its competitors, it sold enough to give me the credibility to stick to my way of writing about OT.

It was not until I studied [Wolff-Olins](#) (a corporate identity turned corporate branding consulting house) while living in the UK that the theory-practice connection finally kicked in for me.

[Majken Schultz](#)

and I spent substantial time onsite in the mid-90s, and we struggled to find theory to put behind the brand management practices we were observing. We debated with Wolff-Olins consultants on topics like the relationship between strategy and branding, or between organizational identity and corporate branding. This period was extremely important to us, but not in the way we intended. We thought we would write up our experiences as research, but instead

[what we learned ended up in a Harvard Business Review \(HBR\) article](#)

Writing an article for *HBR* allowed me to experience firsthand how writing for practitioners is done, at least for that widely admired outlet. It offered the insight I needed to transform myself from being an academic writer into someone who could write for practitioners. The years of writing the textbook no doubt figured into this part of the story in that writing for that purpose freed me of the jargon-laden academic style and taught me to use simple, yet not simplistic ways to express ideas. But there was still more to learn about writing for practitioners; rich descriptions of life in the real world were still missing.

The *HBR* article became a calling card that allowed Majken and me to hold a series of workshops for corporate brand managers from major companies including LEGO, Johnson & Johnson, Nissan, Novo Nordisk and Telefonica. Following the managers as they led their companies' corporate branding efforts gave us the empirical foundation for explaining what theory offers to practice and for illustrating the practices we were advocating. It was only then that I found myself able to write in the way Kanter, Pfeffer, and Sutton had pioneered by putting theory to work, so to speak. And though it was a long journey, writing for the practitioners who had long ago been the inspiration for my research was a nice homecoming.

It is important to note that, for me at least, writing for different audiences has come at a cost. It took me around 5 years to switch from having one audience in my head to another. Finding the

Interview with 2011 Distinguished Educator Mary Jo Hatch

Written by Joel Gehman

Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:17 - Last Updated Thursday, 06 October 2011 10:29

nuances of voice, content and form that work with a particular audience just takes time, and the transition periods can leave you adrift. Doing more than two kinds of writing at the same time has proven impossible for me. The textbook writing was sandwiched in the middle of my transition from scholarly to practitioner audiences and it did not seem to interfere with writing for either audience. But once I fully transitioned to writing for practitioners, I found it extremely difficult to publish academic articles any longer. Now, my writing is either classed in a special category as big picture articles that don't require the same kind of reviewing my work formerly received, or I rely heavily on co-authors to give my writing the proper academic tone. If you, like I did, find you have to switch something fundamental about your writing to speak to different audiences, then you need to plan your transition process so that it does not conflict with your career goals.