

On learning, lecturing and publishing

by Anthony J. Frendo, B.Phil. (Gallarate); B.Th. (Frank.-on-Main); L.anc.Ori. (Rome); LSS (Rome); D.Litt. (Rome); Ph.D. (Lond.),
Senior Lecturer in Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta

ONE'S IDEA of what a university is all about is bound to change with the passage of time; however, there are some factors which are a *sine qua non* for the existence of a university. In this essay I would like to concentrate on two of these factors, namely learning and teaching, which are in fact two sides of the same coin.

Nowadays, the academic members of a university generally work under the prodding of the 'publish or perish' principle. In practice, this principle is often misunderstood; it is taken to mean that one must churn out as much printed material under one's name as possible, if one wants to survive in the academic field. In the process, many scholars are wont to forget that they should be seeking to know the truth (in whatever field of knowledge) and to transmit it to their fellow human beings.

In reality, the 'publish or perish' principle leads them to publish for the sake of publishing rather than to publish because they think that they have something to say. Besides, these scholars end up by identifying the transmission of knowledge with the act of publishing, thereby overlooking the importance of the spoken word. Moreover, the desire to publish for the sake of publishing obscures the notion of learning in the sense of a relationship between the knowing subject and the known object.

Finally, the 'publish or perish' principle leads to haste, with the commonplace result of errors in references, bad composition, imprecise statements, generalisations, and a host of other errors which ought to be anathema to the real scholar.

In the opening paragraph I mentioned learning and teaching as two interrelated essential factors without which a university simply cannot exist. Today the misunderstanding of the role of publication is the greatest enemy of a university. It is obvious that there should be publication; what is not obvious is that our notion of publication should be mistaken, thereby thwarting the very essence of learning and teaching.

In his preface to the Greek translation of the Hebrew text of the book of *Ecclesiasticus*, the grandson of Ben Sirach wrote: "It is the duty of those who study the scriptures not only to become expert themselves, but also to use their scholarship for the benefit of the world outside through both the spoken and the written word."

Ben Sirach's grandson is aware that there should be a serene interplay between research (and therefore learning) and the transmission of knowledge via both the spoken and the written word (and therefore via lecturing and publishing). The 'publish or perish' syndrome, that is to say the misunderstanding of the role of publication in a scholar's life, breaks up the harmonious relationship between lecturing and publication. The spoken word has its own dynamics, and it would be a pity if

we were to stifle it.

The aforementioned syndrome also breeds haste, which is in fact the enemy of learning. Learning is a long and tough process which is incompatible with haste, because the latter hinders one from acquiring wisdom.

To be wise one should reflect a great deal about one's conclusions, and one cannot reach conclusions in one's area of research without analysis of the data at hand — and to do this properly one needs a long time.

It is no haphazard thing that the word scholar is etymologically linked with the Greek word *scholè*, namely "spare time, leisure, rest, ease", and "that in which leisure is employed", especially a learned discussion or a lecture (Liddell and Scott 1889, 788).

How far removed this is from the maddening speed (often purely mechanical, and without any real understanding of the data) with which many articles are being produced! Learning is a process which the scholar should undertake in an atmosphere of peace.

Tranquillity (which can be erased by speed and undue pressure) is a condition for the possibility of learning and therefore also for the possibility of the transmission of knowledge via both the spoken and the written word.

If real scholarship is to survive, then we have to learn how to get back to that same atmosphere which Michelangelo felt when he began his apprenticeship to Lorenzo the Magnificent and to Bertoldo in the Medici sculpture garden: "Take your time. Don't make haste. We have only one mission here: to learn. We have nothing to sell but training, nothing to push to completion but your own skill and artistry. You have only to grow. *Calma!* Prepare yourself for a lifetime of sculpturing." (Stone 1961, 67).

Precision is a scholar's hallmark. Yet the 'publish or perish' syndrome tends to destroy even this noble quality. The next step follows: the scholar risks losing his lucidity and his conciseness. If one tries to keep up with the overpowering flow of new articles and books, one can see for oneself that speed is generally won at the cost of accuracy, lucidity, and conciseness. In this day and age, a scholar is tempted to go commercial: how many summaries are produced and are then launched as new publications? The wise man's words, "Be brief, say much in few words, like someone who knows and can still hold his tongue" (*Ecclesiasticus* 32:8), are often forgotten.

I am not claiming that a scholar should not get on with it and publish. What I am pleading for is the quest for truth in a professional manner, the exercise of caution and precision, the need to be intellectually honest, the need to think long and hard before putting pen to

paper, and the correct understanding of the role of publication, an understanding which should lead to an appreciation of the spoken word as it is exercised in lecturing, in dialogue, and in tutorials.

Many a pseudo-scholar who might have impressed a number of people with the *sheer number* of his publications would have failed to give a decent public lecture in his own field because most of what he

held together by dialogue between scholars themselves, and between scholars and students. These are, I think, the conditions for there to be a university. And in this context, namely that of a community of those who are ready to learn, Mary Midgley's words make a lot of sense:

"At present, anyone writing a reference for a person applying for an academic post is warned to concentrate their attention solely on the applicant's 'research record', that is, on the sheer number and technicality of learned books and papers they have managed to publish, quite regardless of their teaching and pastoral work among students, of the quality of their original ideas, and of the need there is, with any difficult problem, to think long and carefully before ever starting to write. Except in the few areas where visibly useful information does quickly emerge, this bizarre flood of paper can surely serve only to discredit further the whole enterprise of learning" (Midgley 1989, 63-64).

A university is at the service of this 'enterprise of learning', and learning itself and teaching (both via the spoken and the written word) should allow us to show how true the old maxim is: *amicus Plato, amicus Socrates, sed magis amica veritas*.

If this is so then the role of publication has to be appreciated within the context of the overriding desire of learning the truth, and not that of being prodded on by the fear of 'perishing' as envisaged by the 'publish or perish' principle. No real scholar will ever allow himself to be the person to whom Samuel Johnson referred when he said:

"I never desire to converse with a man who has written more than he has read" (see note below).

References

The texts of *Ecclesiasticus* quoted above are taken from *The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*, Oxford and Cambridge: University Press, 1989.

Liddell and Scott, 1889, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Midgley, Mary, 1989, *Wisdom, Information and Wonder: What is Knowledge for?*, London: Routledge.

Stone, Irving, 1961, *The Agony and the Ecstasy: a biographical novel of Michelangelo*, London: Collins.

Note: I found Samuel Johnson's saying in a secondary source which simply referred to Samuel Johnson, *Miscellanies* vol ii, 6; there was absolutely no other information given. However, further research showed that the aforementioned reference is probably that of G.B. Hill, ed. *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, 2 vols. 1897. Unfortunately, this work was not available to me.

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wrote would (on analysis) turn out to be a series of ill-digested sayings.

Learning, lecturing, and publishing simply cannot exist independently of each other. They blend and mix, and the balance between them can only be maintained if the scholar means what he says and says what he means, and if he is ready to do this both by the spoken and the written word. In this context, I would also plead for a more frequent use of the literary genre of the essay, where thinking holds pride of place.

To learn, to think, to teach, and to publish are all important activities

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