Learning from Experience

The AuthorAid mentoring scheme in action

Dr Daniel S. Korbel, 2010

Asking the right questions is a crucial part of effective research, however, there is more to it than simply questions and answers. Research needs to be shared and that means knowing how, and being able, to express your findings is essential. This includes everything from making effective presentations, strong writing and summarising skills and knowing the audience you wish to reach. The AuthorAID project seeks to help new researchers build on these skills . This case study examines Dan Korbel's first experience as an AuthorAID mentor.

When I started my career as a researcher in life sciences, I realised very quickly that the scientific knowledge and technical skills I learned in university would not be enough to become a successful scientist. Of course it is important to be able to ask the 'right questions' and to get robust answers to these. However, you also need good scientific writing and summarising skills. These skills are absolutely vital for both junior and senior academics. Ultimately, your skills at presenting research findings and future plans to varied 'audiences' – be it reviewers and readers of national and international scientific journals, funding agencies or policy makers – will determine your future within the research community and also the impact your research will have.

When I was a student, and later a junior researcher, there was little emphasis on the skills required for successful publication of scientific work. Equally, the need to understand funding structures and the fact that different 'audiences' require different presentational approaches was never addressed. It can be very difficult to establish yourself as an independent researcher if you do not understand precisely what these audiences look for. From discussions with colleagues from across the world, I have learnt that the need for training in these skills is even more acute in developing countries which often lack training capacity and well-established support networks.

I was, therefore, very pleased to learn about the AuthorAID project, which aims to tackle this need through a mentoring scheme and open access resources. I immediately signed up as a mentor because I recognised that this scheme was a practical way for me to support junior researchers from developing countries. When I had first signed up in 2009, the project had only recently gone past its inception phase, the web interface had just gone live and the scheme had not yet been advertised widely. I was, therefore, very surprised to see how many people were already members – it seemed that the interest in the scheme was considerable and the demand for mentoring high.

At this point, understandably, I was full of worries and questions. What would I need to do? What was expected of me? How would I go about finding mentees? Would I

be able to make a useful contribution? Would this remote mentoring setup actually work?

Fortunately, my feeling of uncertainty did not last long. Within a few weeks I was approached, through AuthorAID, by a West African student enrolled in a PhD programme at a university in Eastern Europe. She had found my details by browsing through the already enormous directory of AuthorAID members who were interested in becoming a mentor, trying to match her research interests with theirs. When we exchanged CVs via the AuthorAID system it became clear that there was a considerable overlap in our scientific interests. This proved to be a fruitful starting point for our ensuing mentor-mentee relationship. To formalise this, we worked out a learning agreement that would aim to ensure communication until she finished her PhD. This learning agreement turned out to be a very useful point of reference that guided us throughout the mentorship experience.

My new mentee was in the final year of her PhD and was looking for assistance in getting her work published. The local guidelines for her PhD programme required a minimum of two published scientific manuscripts before she would be awarded with her degree. At that point of her doctoral studies, however, she had spent most of her time generating data in the laboratory and had had little time spare to devote to writing up her results. With so much focus towards her research, I realised there was little time and emphasis placed on planning her final year. I was also surprised to learn that most of the drive and initiative about publishing her work in reputable journals came from the student herself. My mentee felt that while she had previously presented some of her data as conference posters, there were few guidelines and little preparation for getting her papers accepted and published. She was very aware of the importance

of disseminating research findings in peer-reviewed publications but expressed concern that this may not be manageable in her current situation.

We began to use the AuthorAID website and email to exchange documents, swap internet links and keep each other up-to-date. We decided, however, that, for us, the best and most convenient way of communicating was through Skype. With a computer and internet connection, phone calls were free and that allowed us to have in-depth discussions in an efficient and intuitive manner. This was not without problems, however. Agreeing on a convenient time proved to be challenging and we sometimes had to cancel our Skype meetings at short notice. Mostly, however, our Skype calls – which tended to last for about an hour – were very successful. To make the most of this, we would decide on an agenda beforehand and write up a brief summary afterwards.

We spent the ensuing months discussing how best to structure and present her data, and how to approach the daunting job of putting the first words on paper by breaking down the task into smaller portions. A large part of our communication focused on identifying the 'right' journal for the kind of data she had generated and on figuring out the importance of journal impact factors in her field of study. These discussions were very enthusiastic and it was exceptionally satisfying to see my mentee's quick progression in producing a quality manuscript – a goal that, at first, had seemed ambitious.

In addition to the immediate needs of publishing her data, we also discussed how she could approach writing her PhD thesis, stressing the need for tight deadlines and achievable sub-goals. I felt that our conversations about her future career plans in academia and finding research funding were very fruitful. We also compared our views on what we thought was important when establishing yourself as a researcher from and in a low- or middle-income country compared to the situation in the North.

Personally I thought that one of the main challenges was trying to fit my 'extracurricular' activities as an AuthorAID mentor into my day. It was an important step for me to recognise that I had taken on actual – not simply 'virtual' – responsibilities towards my mentee. I therefore had to force myself to plan ahead in order to cope with bouts of 'mentoring activity' which turned out to be an excellent exercise in project management.

I found this and our cultural exchange to be the most rewarding and enlightening parts of my mentoring experience. In that sense, it far exceeded what I had initially stated in our original learning agreement as my main goal as a mentor: "I hope to [...] be able to provide a valuable contribution to the mentee's academic development". In other words, being an AuthorAID mentor goes beyond a conventional teacher-student relationship – it is a really stimulating and worthwhile learning process for both mentee and mentor.

From a Mentee's Perspective

I registered on the AuthorAID website in April, 2010 with the goal of finding a mentor to help me improve and guide my writing skills. For a long time I had wanted to have my work published but I didn't get guidance through the process. When I got to know about AuthorAID, I was happy since I knew the realization of my dream was at hand. I took time to look for mentors whose interests matched mine.

Since then, my experience with AuthorAID has been great! Through the AuthorAID website, I met my mentor Jackie Goodrich – a PhD student at the University of Michigan. Jackie has been very dedicated in offering me guidance on how to improve my writing skills. For instance; giving insights, ensuring my objectives are SMART and flow of sentences and many more. These, she has done despite her busy schedule, always reviewing my work and providing comments in good time.

I got in touch with Jackie when searching for a mentor on the AuthorAID database. After introductions, I sent her my initial draft of papers which we sent back-and-forth several times with comments and changes before they were finalized. In addition to comments on my papers, she gave me tips on data analysis and obtaining access to journal articles outside of those available through INASP, among other things. We have been working on two papers together which I have sent to different journals. I have since received reviewers' comments from one of the journals, and I am currently working on addressing these comments. I have shared this with Jackie, and she is continuing to offer guidance until my papers are published. We also have plans of working on a joint paper in the future.

I feel lucky to have met Jackie through AuthorAID as our partnership has made my writing experience much more interesting. With this kind of capacity building, I believe my writing skills will continually improve such that one day; I will be a very good writer. My advice to young researchers is that there is help out there, go look for it; it will not come knocking on your door. Register with AuthorAID and seek out a mentor to help improve their writing skills and to become better researchers who can make a difference.

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