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# Wolfgang Klein as Don Quixote [Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development]

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**Abstract:** Wolfgang Klein's paper *Writing or reading, but not both, or: a proposal reintroduce cuneiform writing using the hammer and chisel* is a great example of *ex absurdo* reasoning to introduce very serious questions about the exponential increase in the quantity of publications in our field and the impossibility of keeping up with everything. The proposed solutions to limit output and enhance its quality are humorous and absurd as they are inoperable. Wolfgang Klein adopts the position of Don Quixote charging windmills in Cervante's *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* published in the early seventeenth century. I argue that researchers are free to read and write as much as they want about any topic that fascinates them. Doing so judiciously will allow them to thrive.

**Keywords:** reading; writing; creativity; humour; quantity versus quality

Wolfgang Klein's hilarious text has a picaresque feel. It looks humorously at the impossibility in academia of keeping up with the incessant torrent of publications appearing in an ever-growing number of journals and books and how to control or regulate academic logorrhoea. How can researchers write if they are constantly buried under a mountain of things to read? Wolfgang Klein proposes a solution akin to Don Quixote charging windmills, which he mistakes for giant knights, on Rocinante, his old horse. Don Quijote, the seventeenth-century Spanish literary character has become the archetype of a person pursuing idealistic goals in an impractical way ("quixotic"). I laughed out loud when reading the very funny opening paragraph about the need to force authors to abandon their computers in favor of a hammer and chisel to inscribe their words in clay or rock. It would certainly generate enough dust and blisters to extinguish the enthusiasm of the most prolific writer, and raises questions about how the text would be transmitted to the reviewer and editor. The next suggestion is equally bonkers: rationing academic output through local decrees in order to force authors to be concise and

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selective runs counter to the sacred principle of academic freedom and is unimaginable in today's world. Researchers are free to write whatever they want, in whatever quantity and about any topic, and getting in published in venues of their choice (avoiding pirate journals and publishers). Researchers are of course also free to read whatever they want but this has potential pitfalls. The proliferation of (pirate) online journals with dubious peer-review systems means that the amount of material available to readers is magnitudes higher than when Wolfgang Klein wrote his paper 35 years ago. Students and early career researchers may struggle at first to distinguish the chaff from the wheat. They need to realise quickly that not everything that is published is worth reading. Don't waste time with the chaff.

Wolfgang Klein's *ex absurdo* proposals bring to the fore the never-ending debate about quantity versus quality. Researchers are faced with a choice that is falsely presented as an almost binary one. It is based on the mistaken assumption that researchers only have a fixed amount of good ideas and have the choice to pour them all into a single magnificent publication, or spread them more thinly over several publications. Just like a baker entering a competition with just one kilo of flour and having to decide to go for one big impressive piece, or for a larger amount of well-crafted smaller pieces. My view is that imagination and creativity grow as they are called upon. Every piece of research raises new questions, new insights, new efforts to create better methods, better results, better interpretations.

Wolfgang Klein was perfectly aware of this dilemma facing all (young) researchers and of the fact that they had relatively little choice in an academic world shaped by publishers who realise that money can be made from more publications in an ever-increasing number of books and journals. The authors work for free, the reviewers work for free, the editors are happy with modest fees (if they are lucky enough to get something) and the lay-out and printing of the work can be outsourced to the lowest bidder. Moreover, the authors (or their institutions if they are wealthy enough) pay for their papers to be available in Open Access. This is a perfect business model for the publishing industry. To say that it is less than perfect for those who do the actual research, the writing and the reviewing, is a massive understatement. Authors have little choice because without publications, chances of finding a job in academia or get promoted are bleak.

I believe that researchers, like artists, should have absolute freedom to pursue their goals in ways that they see fit – as long as it is ethical, integer and original. Overregulation risks asphyxiating the creative spark. Researchers and artists need a unique combination of creativity, skill, courage, resilience, playfulness, independence, humour and self-belief. Although there are plenty of books on how create good art and write good research papers, there is no simple recipe for creating something original. It may take a while for a product to be judged good enough for an

exhibition or for publication in a journal or an edited volume. Rejections are inevitable. Researchers and artists learn to develop a thick skin.

The act of creation is joyful. The amount of joy is not linked to the size or shape of the output, nor to external recognition it gets. Jorge Luis Borges illustrated this perfectly in his short story *El milagro secreto* (The secret miracle) from 1943 in which the protagonist, a playwright, is facing a firing squad and regretting not having been able to finish his latest play. He prays to God to give him one year to finish it. As the rifles are aimed at him, time stands still and he understands that God has allowed him to finish his masterpiece in his mind. He completes it in a year until he is fully satisfied, at which point the bullets fly. The point is that creation is intrinsically motivating and that it can exist without an audience. Some people doodle during meetings and enjoy the intricate patterns that they will toss in the bin when leaving the room. I used to write poetry in French, which gave me profound satisfaction and had the added social benefit that it created the impression that I was actually taking notes rather than being terminally bored. I never published the poems despite the fact that I'm quite pleased with them. I realise that I have a poetic voice that shares some characteristics with my academic voice. Like my published papers, my poems have something original and slightly subversive in them. As we create texts, we follow conventions up to a point and we try to push the boundaries by bringing in new perspectives, new ideas, new images or metaphors. In fact, the latter would be the first victim of Wolfgang Klein's rule of not publishing more than 30 pages a year. Even without that rule, many reviewers object to anything playful, insisting on dry academic text. I totally disagree with this. Good academic writing, like Wolfgang Klein's polemical text, needs to follow academic conventions but not slavishly. In addition to rigor, clarity, purpose, it can have sparks of inventiveness, humour, surprise and cultural references. It adds oxygen to the text. It grasps readers' attention and may help them remember the text because of it. There is a more serious point to the insertion of something a little light-hearted in an academic text: while we live by the rules of the ivory tower in our professional work, we acknowledge that there is a messy, fascinating and complex world outside it. Referring to it helps position us as academics in touch with reality rather than boring, pompous intellectuals who look down on the rest of humanity.

On the perennial question about quality versus quantity, I believe that both can be combined and that the choice depends on the individual researcher. Having been part of many hiring panels, I also know that the candidate with longest publication list does not necessarily get the job. Quantity of publications is only one of the many aspects that characterise a candidate. The committee will look at the titles of the publications, the places where they were published, the names of co-authors and they will judge the fit in the department. The central question is always: does this candidate have the profile we need? Many publications in the "wrong" area from the

committee's point of view might thus not help the candidate. As a rule of thumb, a couple of book reviews, conference presentations, a couple of papers (especially one or two in really good journals) allow the candidate to reach the publication threshold. The thinking goes that if a researcher has managed to publish a few papers in mid-tier journals and at least one paper in a really good journal, he or she has the balance right between quantity and quality and possesses the necessary skills to become a good researcher.

I have always been a prolific writer, starting in departmental journals and working my way up to established journals. It is my strong belief that nobody is born with a special gift that makes them a good researcher and writer. Doing research and academic writing are skills that develop over a life time. Every project for a paper or a book presents a fresh challenge. With experience comes an awareness of what makes a good and solid product. I like reminding my PhD students that it all comes down to good academic story telling. It does not overly matter what the topic is but the text needs to reach out to the potential reader from the opening paragraph and draw him/her in. As editor, I consider desk rejecting a paper if the opening paragraph is a cliché and fails to whet my intellectual appetite.

Having now published over 400 papers and chapters, eleven blogs, 40 book reviews, and around ten monographs and edited books, I realise that my output is above average. I was rather flattered when I was told that I made it to third place in the Stanford rankings 2024 for Linguists (Ioannidis 2024). The ranking includes (applied) linguists with a c-score that puts them in a percentile rank of 2 % or above in Scopus. The c-score is a composite measure based on citations (excluding self-citations), Hirsch h-index, and co-authorships. The c-score reflects impact rather than productivity. I could argue that the quantity of my output did not negatively affect the quality (if we agree that citations reflect this). I guess my most cited outputs are the ones that came out at the right time, responding to a need in the discipline at the time, in collaboration with brilliant co-authors and a whole community of like-minded students and colleagues. They are not necessarily the papers I'm happiest or proudest about. I guess the same happens to authors whose bestselling novels are not necessarily the ones they consider their best. Looking back at my early papers I cringe sometimes but then remember that I had to start somewhere and then improve gradually. Papers and PhD dissertations are not works of art. No divine inspiration is needed, just some good insights, discipline and resilience. I joked that a PhD dissertation can be the equivalent of an ugly little car. This usually drew surprised looks from students. What I meant was that it needs to satisfy the basic criteria to be called "a car": it needs to be able to drive from point A to B, which means it needs an engine, a seat, brakes, a steering wheel and at least three wheels. Roof, comfortable suspension and paint are optional. The same applies to the PhD dissertation: it needs to reach the threshold expected of a PhD. All the better if it is

well above the threshold but not essential. Similarly, authors should do the best they can at that particular point in time. There is no absolute, inaccessible norm to be reached. They need to convince reviewers that the work is original, meaningful and deserves to be published. And hopefully, they won't be expected to deliver the final version in cuneiform on a slab of granite. That would be too quixotic.

Jean-Marc Dewaele is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.

## Reference

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