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The sorrow of the struggle or joy of the journey? Seven lessons from an education research writing group

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Abstract

Writing for scholarly higher education journals can be difficult to accomplish for many staff. The academic writing groups has been acknowledged as a successful method to increasing both the quality and output of research publications. In this Viewpoint paper, the authors share their experiences and insights, which are distilled into seven key lessons.

Keywords

writing group; academic writing; community of practice; effective teams; research outputs

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The sorrow of the struggle?

Let's face it, whilst expected of academics, writing for scholarly higher education journals can be a bit of a struggle and a chore. However, on the flip side, once accomplished you feel a real sense of elation – akin to opening a well-anticipated birthday present – when a journal editor endorses your ideas with the words *would like to accept*. To see the fruits of your hard labour, doubts, changes of direction and research validated in a journal is immensely satisfying. But why does it have to be so difficult? And what can be done to make the journey less painful?

In this Viewpoint paper we would like to share our experiences of how working in a writing group greatly contributed to our journey as more confident and productive writers in education research. Overall, our experiences concur with emerging evidence on the impact of such groups (Bosanquet et al., 2014; Wardale et al., 2015). Whether you are at the very start of your writing journey or have already published some papers, it is valuable to take stock and to reflect on your motivations as well as the context of your writing environment. For us, the writing group offered numerous opportunities and, whilst some groups can be hard to sustain, the dynamic was such that it became an enjoyable experience. As good things often appear to come in sevens (Covey, 2004), presented below are our own seven 'habits' gleaned from our story so far.

Lessons for the journey

Lesson One – find the right people to work with. Whilst we are experienced lecturers from quite distinct disciplines, we share a genuine passion for the enhancement of the student experience. Like all good things, the seed of our writing group began with conversation as we quickly recognised the similarities in our goals and aspirations, even though we were

at different stages in our academic writing. In short, if you are contemplating a writing group, find space to talk to other colleagues, get to know them; it's helpful to work with people you are likely to get on with.

Lesson Two – be open to learning from other members of the group. This follows on from the previous lesson as, in our group, we all brought different skills and experiences to the table. Whether this was in the writing up of results or project research skills (particularly around organising) the consequences were enduring and powerful, for we quickly established a method of sustaining the group. This was most evident when new skills emerged in each of us, at different times, meaning that each of us was capable of manoeuvring into the driving seat when needed. Personal development was therefore a shared experience – underpinned by mentoring and communication. Overall, it became apparent that the process of writing was one that is never perfected and never ends.

Lesson Three – channel your ideas in a project. We were successful in securing funding for an institutional Curriculum Enhancement project and were confident it would make a positive contribution to the student experience in our respective disciplinary areas. For us the project gave us a structure and was time-bound, so greatly focused our attention; we saw dissemination as a key part of the process. The weight of the project, especially in terms of access to good data, the 'task identity' and meaningfulness gave us confidence to approach respected journals and, once published, we recognised we could contribute to work in the area. In a recent paper on 'a framework for collaborative writing groups', Bruce McFarlane (2017) observes the importance of 'performativity', and working together to increase research. This is greatly supported by notions already

touched upon in the previous two lessons, which Mcfarlane notes as: intellectual generosity (“ideas are shared for the advancement of the subject and for the common good”); mentorship (“supporting less experienced colleagues”); and communication (“disseminating knowledge across platforms”).

Lesson Four – it’s OK, and sometimes natural, to change group membership as you go along. In order to bring vitality, fresh ideas and a different lens on your work and approach, new members should be welcomed. However, the very nature of university work and competing deadlines and priorities can throw a curve ball and some members may have to step back from the group. Managing such change can be a sensitive process but as long as the core members remain in place, there’s no reason why the group can’t go from strength to strength.

Lesson Five – embrace feedback.

Feedback needs to be seen as part of the process. Feedback starts as written work begins to pass between members of the writing group. However, this in itself can be a moment of vulnerability for the writer. We quickly overcame this and accepted changes to each other’s work, often without complaint. If there was doubt, we discussed it and this gradually became a fun part of the exercise.

Lesson Six – agree rules for authorship order beforehand.

This can be a thorny issue but we overcame this by adopting a simple ethical code – authorship order reflected the effort put in by individual members of the group. In our experience, leaders for each piece arose, not by conscious decision, but by emergent practice. It was also not unusual for our work to splinter off into different papers and group members took it in turns to lead

on these or share responsibility. It is worth stressing that the leader is not necessarily the first author; in our experience, the leader kept the paper moving and authorship order reflected effort.

Lesson Seven – be patient. Drafting an article takes time and patience. We were always attentive in ensuring that the article we produced remained focused, paid attention to detail and underwent several drafts before submission. Overall, the best way to ‘short-circuit’ the time to publication is to submit a manuscript that is relatively well done.

The joy of the journey!

So, was it worth it? The answer is, a resounding, yes. We set challenging but achievable goals and were rewarded with publication in a well-respected journal (Nixon et al., 2016). Throughout our journey we became strategic and realistic, never losing sight of what we were trying to achieve at each stage or step towards publication. And, above all, we remained positive, realising that the likelihood was high that our writing would develop and the fruits of our labour would be realised.

We leave you with our own feelings about the lessons we have learned:

For me this has been a positive learning experience, a safe place to discuss ideas and good fun. Both of the co-authors are excellent writers and crafters of information and from them I have learnt to develop some flair in my writing and be less rigid in my approach. I can now see how to frame an article in terms of originality and significance and not be afraid to tell the reader why the information is important and where it fits within research in this area.

Working in the group has meant I have worked to the timescales so as not to let them down and stepped out of my comfort zone to develop my own skills. As a group we have dealt with low points together; I

have never felt on my own as we are a team and we have taken feedback on the chin.

Going forward we are now looking at funding opportunities and are now confident of undertaking a large-scale systematic review of research into teaching and learning.

- Sarah Nixon

The value of collaboration and peer mentorship was reinforced for me during this exercise. In my experience, because of the multiple agendas and aspirations of staff members in a typical university, we work within many “teams”, which all have different identities. For staff members with a strong interest in pedagogic research, owing to competing demands, the ability to develop a “team” can be more of a challenge.

This exercise has enabled me to work with experienced colleagues who are also interested in developing the student experience, whilst also contributing to evidence informed practice as a scholar of HE. The ability to draw upon experiences from across disciplines has been helpful to us all. Led by Sarah, we came together with a common interest (pedagogic practice and research) and brought different ways of thinking. In an honest and truthful collaborative venture, we have embraced our different ways of thinking and have mentored each other, successfully, towards a common goal.

- Rebecca Murphy

On a professional level I enjoyed working with colleagues who feel the same way about education as me – not exactly the same – but who want to do things better. Legal education tends to be over-concerned in its practical value to the professions and often ignores the student experience and the broader value of obtaining a law degree. Working with colleagues in other disciplines has allowed me to bring their disciplinary experience to my own – particularly with the aim of focussing on law students who are often ignored in educational development. It has also allowed us to contribute to the wider education community.

In terms of publication, I have no doubt that I would not have been able to achieve the volume of output – different perspectives revealed aspects to our data that I would not have spotted alone. I think I was able to bring something to writing – but I learned so much from the others about how to keep things moving! We have complimentary skills, which the group dynamic has allowed to flourish.

On a personal level, I feel very fortunate to have been lucky enough to work with such positive people who want to make a difference. I continue to enjoy their company - they have a natural respect for others and share collegiate values. Above all, I looked forward to our meetings, enjoyed the writing experience and feel that the quality of our work improved through collaboration.

The context of higher education is uncertain but working together with people sharing similar values has acted as a great motivator for me at a time when you can often feel that your work isn't truly valued or appreciated.

- Simon Brooman

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