

ACHIEVING GREATER PRODUCTIVITY WITH A PEER WRITING GROUP

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KEYWORDS: academic writing; peer support; academic career development

ABSTRACT

As an academic you rise and fall based on your publication record. For science academics moving from their original discipline to publish educational research outcomes there is a risk of decreased publication rates and an associated reduction in perceived self-worth. This paper examines the experiences of the authors who established a cross-institutional peer writing group to enhance writing productivity. Over a two-year period, we communicated regularly by telephone and email, committed to specific writing tasks, discussed publishing plans, challenges and outcomes, and wrote reflective journals to document our journey. This paper discusses the positive and negative influences on productivity highlighted by the journal entries and recommends four strategies for optimising the effectiveness of peer writing groups.

Proceedings of the Australian Conference on Science and Mathematics Education, University of Sydney, Sept 29th to Sept 30th, 2014, pages 140-148, ISBN Number 978-0-9871834-3-9.

INTRODUCTION

A recent Australian study showed that publication output was strongly linked to factors such as time spent on research and researcher self-confidence (Hemmings & Kay 2010). The authors argued that professional development associated with research and writing self-confidence was critical for both early-career researchers and mid-career researchers needing renewal, and emphasised the importance of programmes based on the support of colleagues (Hemmings & Kay 2010). Supportive relationships were also shown to have a positive influence on the publication output of individuals adjusting to a second career in academia (La Rocca & Bruns 2006). The La Rocca and Bruns study reported on a group of individuals transitioning from being experienced practitioners to academics, but the idea of a second career in academia could be equally applied to academics who change research disciplines mid-career.

It is well documented that peer writing groups create opportunities for academics and graduate students to support each other in their writing endeavours (e.g., Lee & Boud 2003; Aitchison & Lee 2006). The recent publication of a book focussing exclusively on peer writing groups (Aitchison & Guerin 2014a) is testament to the growing recognition of the value of such groups. Writing groups create communities of writers who are drawn together by a diversity of factors: common institutional and work contexts; shared life and stage-of-life experiences; common location; or common research interests (Aitchison & Lee 2006). Writing groups not only socialise writing through the process of peer review, but also through their organisation; where individuals connect with others (either physically or online) and write together (Aitchison & Lee 2006; Grant 2006; Mewburn, Osborne & Caldwell 2014). Individuals participating in writing groups learn from each other as they work on individual or shared writing tasks and participate in the review of the work of peers (Aitchison & Lee 2006). Participation in a peer writing group thus has the potential to increase an individuals' time spent on academic writing, develop expertise and self-confidence in writing and ultimately increase publication output.

In this study we examined our experiences as three academics who, as friends and colleagues facing common challenges, voluntarily agreed to meet regularly as a peer writing group to focus on enhancing the publication productivity of each individual. We were all biological scientists, with PhD qualifications in differing fields (two in zoology and one in microbiology) and all with established careers conducting research and teaching in higher education. All three worked in different universities in different states within Australia, and all had moved from researching within our discipline to being scholars of teaching and learning. Although each participant brought different areas of expertise to the group, leadership was distributed.

In this paper, we investigate the question: *'What role can a peer writing group play in increasing our writing outcomes and improving our writing habits?'* The purpose of this study is not to measure productivity simply through the number of manuscripts published, rather, to capture the broader aspects of professional and personal productivity.

METHODOLOGY

In this study the three authors met regularly using telephone (audio only) conference calls. These calls occurred initially every 3 weeks but reduced to every 4 to 5 weeks over time. The calls were limited to a maximum of sixty minutes and included updates on current life-issues as well as professional topics. Additional communication also occurred through email conversations and the occasional sharing of journal entries – where each of us committed to keep a written (electronic) journal as reflective practice to monitor our publication experiences in relation to our peer writing group. The data sets of this study included the reflective journals we kept during the study, our final meta-reflections, and a subset of emails exchanged in the sharing of the plans and outcomes of our group. These data were collected over a two year period by all three authors who were participants and researchers within this study and will be referred to here as researchers. All three contributed equally to all aspects of the peer writing group process and remained engaged throughout.

The analysis of all data sets involved a thematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). We identified themes across the data sets using an approach that was inductive (where we looked broadly across the data and made generalised conclusions) and iterative (where we read, and re-read the data seeking themes that were repetitive). Initial coding of the data was carried out by one researcher, and auditing of the coding was performed by the remaining two researchers. The data sets were coded using *Nvivo 10 for Windows* software and a consistent approach was used to identify themes within the data through reading and rereading, allowing the data to suggest names for the themes. This was not a linear process and instead was achieved using a thematic analysis involving the steps of: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining/naming themes (Braun & Clarke 2012). This was then followed by an audit and review by the remaining two researchers leading to an agreed, consistent analysis owned by the three researchers. Whilst acknowledging the debate over rigor in qualitative research (Krefting 1991), the attention to consistency, review and cross-checking in this paper by the researcher-participants provides a high level of rigour and trustworthiness to the analysis.

The thematic analysis presented below indicates the breadth of the themes revealed from the data. Although we began with a research question of *'What role can a peer writing group play in increasing our writing outcomes and improving our writing habits?'* our analysis was not strongly influenced by the literature and our themes were not limited by the question. Thus the analysis can be seen to be inductive (not deductive). Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee, University of Queensland (Ethics approval: 2014000228).

RESULTS

Analysis of the data sets revealed patterns of comments which related to our writing and publishing productivity. These patterns ultimately formed 10 sub-themes which we grouped into two overarching themes: positive factors (which increased productivity) and negative factors (which decreased productivity). Within the overarching themes of positive and negative factors influencing productivity, subthemes were identified to be either internal (intrinsic or personal) or external (being extrinsic or outside of the individuals' control), as shown in Figure 1. Detailed explanations of each theme, and how these themes illustrate the benefits derived from a peer writing group, are found in the following sections.

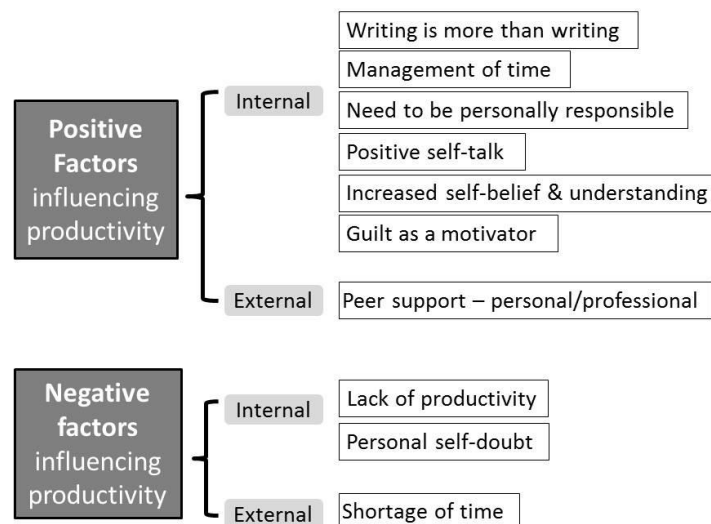


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes which emerged from our data.

POSITIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING PRODUCTIVITY

We identified seven factors which positively influenced productivity and which were internal (intrinsic or personal). Three of these (*Writing is more than writing*, *Management of time* and *Personal responsibility*) encompassed ideas relating to the realisation that we needed to change our behaviour to increase writing success. The remaining three themes (*Guilt as a motivator*, *Positive self-talk* and *Increased self-belief and understanding*) demonstrated the influence of motivation on productivity, and were strongly linked with evidence of the value of a seventh, external positive factor, *Peer support*.

1) *Writing is more than just writing*

This theme comprised comments which acknowledged that often we allocated time for writing, only to discover that tasks other than writing needed to be completed first. The emergence of this theme from journal entries is an acknowledgement of our realisation that writing could legitimately include a range of activities related to publishing such as writing, planning, reading and thinking. Our reflective comments clearly demonstrated a change in our understanding of this concept as we became comfortable with recognising that ‘non writing’ activities also progressed a piece of writing. Calls to acknowledge the legitimacy of these additional activities appeared in journal entries as comments about time spent planning when writing should be done, making lists about the order of necessary tasks, arranging and having meetings with co-authors or even rereading that one vital journal article:

‘I am coming to see myself that writing DOES include a number of tasks that aren’t actually writing, but which must still be done either before or during the writing itself.’

These pre-writing activities should, in future, be acknowledged as valuable, rather than as potential barriers to progress. ‘Non writing’ should be incorporated into any time management plan in a positive way, as a variable over which it is possible to have some control.

2) *Management of time*

The management of time was a positive sub-theme about making space for writing. We found that while management of time was under our control, there were many habits that needed to be broken to allow us to allocate more time to writing. There was a need to overcome the obligation of always being available to others before ourselves, and there were genuine feelings of guilt associated with prioritising writing when there were other deadlines to be met. While it was easy to say we would spend more time writing, we discovered that this was not usually enough. Time for writing was often rapidly consumed by other obligatory tasks such as teaching and administrative responsibilities:

‘THIS IS IMPORTANT so don’t compromise on allocating time. I like to write so I will do more of it for me.’

'You would think that since you have control over 'time' then it shouldn't be an issue but my reflections show it constantly was.'

The reflective data indicated that we all struggled to give ourselves permission to prioritise writing. We all tried multiple strategies to allocate even small periods of time to writing, including saying it, putting it in the diary, closing the door, or getting prepared by doing plans, lists, or pre-writing tasks so that we felt ready to write when the time came:

'Think carefully about my week and my natural rhythm of the days – schedule in writing time that is practical (i.e. less chance of being taken over).'

'I am starting to get out of my rut, I can see a way forward now, and am much better at setting smaller, more realistic goals to make use of smaller amounts of time and not having to start from the beginning every time I sit down.'

3) Need to be personally responsible

Another theme which emerged from the data was the need to become personally responsible for our situations, and that the solutions to the challenges of improved writing and increased productivity were within ourselves. It was apparent in the journal entries that we were each seeking techniques which would improve writing outcomes. We were all willing to try different ideas to find the strategies that worked best for us. Some comments indicated that we each entered this study with a preconceived idea of what might work, only to discover that it did not necessarily give the results we were hoping for:

'The bottom line is you have to actually 'write'! Planning is great and putting time aside is great but you know you actually have to write for writing to get done...'

'Sometimes that allocation of time hasn't worked... I have done other work during this time and that is entirely of my doing. That is something that hasn't worked.'

It was apparent from the data that personal commitment was a critical element of achieving writing goals and worked alongside the strategies we trialled for writing. We spoke in our journals of learning some hard lessons during the project, and of realising that prioritising time towards writing came at a genuine cost to some other aspects of our work. We continue to work through the process of reconciling ourselves to this.

'I think I am getting much better at blocking out chunks of time, and even closing my office door or working elsewhere sometimes, but it took a LONG time to reach that point, the guilt was huge.'

4) Guilt as a motivator

Participation in the peer writing group made us answerable to other group members via email contracts on writing tasks, and so guilt became a motivator to increase writing output. The group grew from its naïve beginnings into a safe space within which we could discuss the broader issues of worked-related successes and challenges. This environment was safe because we each knew that the group would be genuinely pleased for us when we were successful, and never negative or critical of our perceived failings. The guilt was internal, coming from each of us as individuals and directed only at ourselves. From within our safe space, we sought to harness this guilt to give ourselves permission to prioritise time for writing:

'I'm hoping that once I do get started, having those deadlines, and the expectations of others that I'll have something to show will be motivation enough to get those little things done.'

Some comments suggested that group members sometimes almost delighted in being answerable to the group, suggesting that successfully doing some writing brought a reward bigger than just the alleviation of immediate guilt:

'I remember feeling ashamed and demoralised when I had to report I'd done none/little, and feeling exhilarated when I could say I'd done heaps so the emotions that go along with the declarations were important motivators for me.'

Ironically, our tendency to feel inadequate and lack confidence about writing contributed to our feelings of guilt. This then motivated us to produce an outcome that would be regarded positively by the group.

'The regularity of the phone conversations made me work more consistently because I needed to report back to the group on my progress. It felt much better being able to say 'I've done this much' than '...I didn't do any/make the time to do some ...' and that inspired/drove me to actually make time and do the writing.'

5) Positive self-talk

We each used our reflective journal to encourage ourselves, to speak motivationally to ourselves, and to acknowledge and praise ourselves when we had achieved any small win. Positive comments appeared to play a key role in building confidence in our *ability* to write. After participating in a writing session or phone discussion with the peer group, we recorded an improvement in mood and used words such as pleased, happy, excited, and hopeful, to describe the type of emotion experienced.

'Have to admit that when I do sit down to write ... it feels so fantastic I actually don't want to stop!!'

Other positive self-talk took the form of motivational statements and focussed on achieving writing goals: we expressed feelings of relief, satisfaction, and a recognition of the need to stay positive and focussed on the task of writing in order to be productive. We used positive self-talk as a way to initiate and maintain motivation to write, to encourage ourselves to keep trying, and to reflect on the associated feelings of reward that we came to know would follow these achievements:

'But the basic answer is to WRITE. Don't write perfectly. Just write.'

'Pleased to have something positive to report in up-coming phone call also. Really feeling very relieved.'

This type of positive feeling served as a foil to feelings of negativity, which sometimes accompanied day-to-day experiences in which writing attempts had been less than successful, or to feelings of guilt that we had prioritised a seemingly selfish activity (writing) over tasks in which we were answerable to others.

6) Increased self-belief and understanding

During the period that we participated in the peer writing group our self-belief developed. During the latter part of the study, we generated numerous, more strongly-worded journal statements which expressed the belief that we now felt we had gained something that we had not known before, which represented a sustainable change in writing practice. As time went on, it became clear that our thoughts about writing were developing in response to learning about and doing writing. Increased belief in ourselves was demonstrated firstly through an increased perception that writing was achievable. This change in perception resulted from individuals changing their approach to writing:

'I now know that there is an alternative strategy I can try, such that this lack of big blocks of time should....it should take away the power of that excuse. I think I've been making a lot of different types of excuses and blaming my circumstances, and now I am hoping to be able to knock those myths down one by one, and maybe actually write something in the process.'

'Make a plan, commit to it and then stick to it! I like the idea of thinking like the 'new me'.'

Concurrently, our thoughts about the value of our writing in the area of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) were developing in response to active participation in the writing group. A shift in focus for all group members from scientific research and discipline-specific publishing to the SoTL arena meant that we had new literature to understand, new research methods to learn and embrace, and new, non-scientific writing styles to develop. Initially, a lack of confidence in our abilities as new-to-field researchers and writers led to feelings of uncertainty. Expressions of growth in confidence emerged from the journal entries:

'I have started to feel much more like I have something to contribute and can actually be useful (pull my own weight instead of just riding on coat tails).'

'The group has made me feel more comfortable within that ed research skin so that I don't waste time worrying that I'm doing the right thing and just getting on and doing it. Ongoing support and recognition from my peers has resulted in greater confidence.'

7) Peer support (personal and professional)

Peer support provided by other members of the writing group was a common and consistent theme, which linked all our other experiences and comments, right from the group's inception. Our regular group telephone conversations began with a 'catch up' session, in which we celebrated, sympathised or commiserated with each other on events in our lives as a way of orienting ourselves to the peer group process each time. Through these more personal interactions, existing friendships deepened, genuine respect grew, and the environment developed in which we could provide not only productive support as friends but as professional colleagues mentoring and advising each other. Reflective journal comments gave evidence of support and advice, and also of the positive outcomes of hearing about the struggles of others:

'I wasn't expecting it but actually to hear ... from other group members that it was ok if I hadn't written anything this time, or if I'd had to prioritise something else in my writing time, ... was actually really helpful.'

'It felt good – nurturing, positive, comforting, encouraging – to be part of that circle.'

We also commented reflectively that we sometimes felt isolated and that our peer writing group helped us to feel better connected. It was perhaps because group members were from different institutions that a level of sharing occurred that isn't normally possible in the workplace:

'I should be able to have these conversations with colleagues at ... (and I do) but my conversations with [the co-authors] are different probably because we all have an interest in teaching and learning.'

We described friendships that existed before the group formally began and later acknowledged that those friendships had deepened due to the sharing that occurred:

'I knew them before but that friendship is deeper now just through time and sharing low points and definitely high points. The peer mentoring has remained constant. We could have stopped, we didn't. I think it is interesting to see that ways that I recall 'giving' as well as 'receiving' and I think that is what is special with Peer Mentoring.'

In addition to these aspects of personal peer support, interactions between group members took on several more tangible aspects which improved writing outcomes over and above enhancing self-belief, and countering negative emerging themes such as *Lack of productivity* and *Personal self-doubt* (discussed below). We provided feedback on drafts of written work, including manuscripts, shared resources such as relevant journal articles and suggested real and achievable changes to professional practice. In particular, after discussions about the benefits of writing retreats, we have all attended several such retreats and workshops.

'I participated in a week long writing retreat after the other members both advocated/had good experiences – this resulted in a complete redrafting and passing to co-author of a science MS.'

These outcomes were as a consequence of our participation in the writing group, which created a safe and supporting environment for peers.

NEGATIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING PRODUCTIVITY

Analysis also identified three themes which we regarded as having a negative influence on our writing productivity. We categorised two of these (*Lack of productivity* and *Personal self-doubt*) as internal or personal factors over which we had some control, and we interpreted the third theme (*Lack of time*) as an external influence, acknowledging of the reality of day-to-day life in Academia.

8) Lack of productivity

Comments from our reflective journals indicated an unquestionable awareness of the expectation to publish research, and demonstrated how the pressure generated by it can manifest. We discovered that there are many ways in which to feel unproductive including laments by group members that the reason for feeling unproductive was a lack of time in which to *be* productive. However, group members also reported feeling unproductive *whilst* writing, because writing time was not being used efficiently or effectively:

'We all want to write more. We all know this is the 'currency' for success.'

'On the extremely rare occasions when I do get to start, there are such huge time intervals before I get the chance to return, that it's like having to start all over again just to remember when I got up to last time, so that time seems basically wasted.'

Even the very *nature* of the productivity was called into question, suggesting a far more diverse and complex situation than expected:

'Because SoTL is not high on the Faculty of Science agenda, sometimes I feel like I'm spending time doing secret, unimportant research.'

9) Personal self-doubt

Comments coded under this theme spoke strongly about the fear of a lack of ability to write. This was in the face of clear evidence to the contrary, as all group members have had numerous papers published, and regularly write reports, talks, lectures and other pieces, often under significant time pressure. The fear mentioned was largely a fear of failing, sometimes expressed as a fear of not being able to write appropriately for the SoTL audience, as compared with something more discipline-specific:

'But here's the thing. I AM worried. Worried that I'm setting myself up to fail, yet again, at writing... Worried that failing again will completely demolish the last shred of any confidence I still have in my ability to write...to critically analyse... to communicate something of value.'

The fear of failing also manifested itself more covertly in comments about feeling low or inadequate from time to time.

'I am really pleased that there is a [peer group] meeting today because I am at a low point; I was doubting my ability to be an academic, in all aspects, despite numerous awards/validations in other aspects of my position, all because I wasn't being productive on paper, in publications, and these seem to be the only metric that matters to anyone/everyone.'

10) Shortage of time

This theme focussed on the external time demands which existed, over which we had no control. These demands competed for the finite resource which *is* time and took us away from the plans we had for writing. We perceived *Shortage of time* as a negative external factor which detracted from our opportunities to be productive:

'With a pile of marking sitting on my desk, I don't ever feel I can justify putting my own writing first, so it simply never gets started.'

Gradually, through a type of subconscious personal time audit, and with the ongoing support of the peer writing group, we each came to acknowledge that there really were times when we just could not expect to have time to write. We encouraged each other to accept that our reasons for not writing *were* legitimate and reasonable, and that we were sometimes being unreasonable to expect productive writing time consistently during the year:

'February: accept that little will be achieved this month due to teaching.'

The increased awareness which came from a more clinical consideration of our circumstances, and the week-to-week pressures on our time, flavoured by an ever-improving ability to accept the support

of the peer writing group, allowed us to offset some of the negative feelings to which we would otherwise have been susceptible.

DISCUSSION

The goal of our peer writing group was to improve writing outcomes and our writing habits. We were productive writers during this period and the fact that we were published significantly increased our self-belief as academic writers. The challenge will be to maintain the momentum throughout the peaks and troughs of academic work cycles. Our situation is not an isolated one and our model of a peer writing group is one that worked well across institutional and state boundaries. The basic elements included committed individuals with similar goals and someone to make conference telephone calls to enable monthly, post-writing discussions. A group size of three worked effectively for the conference call environment. We recommend four strategies for optimising the effectiveness of a peer writing group based on the findings of our research.

STRATEGY 1. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WRITING IS MORE THAN JUST WRITING

We discovered early on in our peer writing group that it was important to acknowledge that scheduled 'writing time' could be used to complete 'non-writing' activities which progressed a research paper. Once we decided as a group to value these non-writing tasks as much as the writing, the relief was palpable and we reduced the need for negative feelings if only non-writing tasks were achieved in a session. Haas's (2014) typology of writing groups clearly identifies the many and varied activities which occur within peer writing groups and is an excellent reference for acknowledging and valuing all the work that contributes to a publication.

STRATEGY 2. BE PREPARED TO EXPLORE AND ESTABLISH NEW WORK HABITS

Negotiating and building writing time into workload agreements is a well-documented struggle for academics who participate in peer writing groups (Aitchison & Lee 2006). Lee and Boud (2003) argue that time for writing should be scheduled into the 'normal business' of the daily life of the academic workplace. We explored a range of different strategies for being more productive writers (as highlighted in these four strategies) and discussed the effectiveness of these strategies as a group. Trying new approaches as a peer writing group connected us in a common purpose and our understanding of writing processes gained momentum as a result.

STRATEGY 3. MAKE YOUR WRITING GOALS PUBLIC

The peer writing group facilitated greater productivity because of the structured nature of the sessions. The monthly schedule of a writing session followed by a phone meeting created a manageable framework. The joint commitment to make writing goals public (by emailing them to other group members) and then report on progress at the next meeting influenced our writing behaviour and encouraged greater productivity. The guilt associated with not writing was used as a motivator by all members of the group. Being answerable to others about the writing goals we set, irrespective of the goal itself, drove us to write more. Regular participation in structured writing sessions builds the capacity of individuals to develop self-regulatory skills in writing because they learn and practice behaviours which result in good writing outcomes (Murray 2014).

STRATEGY 4. MAKE THE MOST OF THE SUPPORTIVE NATURE OF THE GROUP

Peer writing groups create a community of writers who learn from each other as they work together on their own or shared writing tasks (Aitchison & Lee 2006). Learning from each other and sharing our ideas and experiences resulted in not only deeper understandings of writing and greater productivity, but also resulted in a shift from being colleagues to friends. The companionship of the group creates a sense of connectedness and belonging to an academic community (Aitchison & Guerin 2014b; Murray 2014). This sense of belonging was important to all of us because we were emerging as writers in the SoTL discipline after being trained in a science background. Our identities as writers of SoTL developed as we worked together as a group, made progress on our writing, received favourable reviews from peers and journal editors, and had papers accepted for publication. This change in identity was similar to the one identified in postgraduate writing groups as an individual transitions from identifying themselves as a 'non-writer' to 'writer' (Murray 2014). We resided in disciplinary departments or units in our home institutions but all, at some time, felt out-of-place because we were choosing to write about education rather than science. The support of the peer writing group was instrumental in our growing self-belief that our writing had something valuable to add to the conversations being published in the higher education literature.

SUMMARY

In summary, the peer writing group helped us achieve our goal of greater productivity through peer support, a sense of community and guilt as a motivator. We encountered several hurdles which hindered our productivity at times (the need to realise writing is more than writing, personal self-doubt, shortage of time) but through participating in the group we came to a better understanding of the writing process and made progress on our tasks. The value of feeling connected to a group of academics with a similar outlook and sense of purpose cannot be understated and was, for us, an important outcome of our peer writing group.

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