Reflection, Speed Dating, and Word Clouds

Evaluating a writing group for early-career researchers

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Writing groups have been espoused as a means of supporting early-career researchers as they face the challenges of establishing research profiles, attaining job security, gaining funding, and collaborating with other researchers. This paper presents an evaluative study of a writing group in a central learning and teaching development unit at a metropolitan Australian university. The group is unusual because its membership includes both non-academic and academic staff from multiple disciplinary backgrounds. A participatory action research strategy was adopted to develop and evaluate the writing group, incorporate critical reflection, collaborate using a wiki, analyse qualitative data ('speed dating'), and produce word clouds to triangulate results. Discussing both the process of establishing the writing group and the evaluation strategy has value for departments, centres, and faculty-based groups wanting to develop the scholarship of teaching, support academic and non-academic staff in becoming active researchers, build cohesion, foster interdisciplinary dialogue, and create communities of practice around writing for early-career researchers.

Early-career researchers face particular challenges establishing profiles, attaining job security, gaining funding, balancing workloads and collaborating with other researchers (Pat Bazeley, 2003; Gerlese Åkerlind, 2005; Grit Laudel & Jochen Gläser, 2008). Supporting early-career researchers to develop confidence in publishing is one of the keys to successful engagement with and appreciation of academic practices. A wide range of self-help literature is available to support novice academic writers (Keith Punch, 1998; Bryan Greetham, 2001; William Johnson et al, 2006), covering, for example, work flows and processes that produce a piece of writing, as well as the critical reflection and work of the self that underpins writing ability. Although the tone of these articles is both rational and companionable and the examples intimate and illuminating, the literature is usually aimed at students, and the writing experience is presented primarily as solitary and private.

This paper presents the findings of an evaluative study of a writing group in a centralised learning and teaching development unit at a metropolitan Australian university. The writing group differs from those described in the scholarly literature in that membership includes both academics and professionals from multiple disciplinary backgrounds with a teaching and learning research focus. Professional and administrative staff are increasingly called on to write in academic contexts as research assistants and project managers - whose tasks include conducting literature reviews, drafting grant and ethics applications, and
preparing annotated bibliographies and writing reports to funding bodies – and, in our writing group, as higher degree research students. A participatory action research strategy (consistent with the approach of Bone et al., 2009) was adopted in developing and evaluating the writing group, incorporating critical reflection, collaborating using a wiki, analysing qualitative data ('speed dating'), and producing word clouds. The triangulation of the data highlights the tensions between the philosophy of the writing group process (evident from the speed dating activity) and the practicalities emerging from the word clouds.

This paper outlines the processes for establishing the group and addresses the strengths and weaknesses of implementing and evaluating writing groups to support early-career researchers. One such challenge is the need to recognise the meetings and tasks of the group as authentic and valuable work, which can pose a significant obstacle within the context of a cross-functional group of academic and non-academic staff with several line managers. The discussion of the processes of the writing group and the evaluation strategy utilised have value for departments, centres, and faculty-based groups wanting to build cohesion, develop the scholarship of teaching, foster interdisciplinary dialogue, support academic and non-academic staff in becoming active researchers, and create communities of practice around writing for early-career researchers.

Context

Writing groups have been espoused as one method of developing research capability and building a community of practice to support doctoral students (Allison Lee & David Boud, 2003; Claire Aitchison & Allison Lee, 2006; Carly Lassig et al, 2009). The literature has explored the history of writing groups for student learning, pedagogies of writing groups (peer review, writing to know and knowing how to write, and working together to write for others), and principles for effective operation—including identification as writers, a focus on peer review, community building, and establishing the business of writing as everyday work (David Boud & Allison Lee 2005; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Aitchison 2009; Aitchison, 2010). Many of these studies have focused specifically on how writing groups offer alternative pedagogies for research training and supervision. Peer learning is presented as a way to "reconceptualise research education pedagogy as a set of distributed practices and relationships" (Boud & Lee 2005, p 501). While writing groups encourage peer learning, they are still confronted with challenges such as "small group dynamics, issues of continuity and regeneration, leadership and purpose" (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p 276). Despite these issues, empirical studies have demonstrated the positive effects of writing groups for doctoral students and their contribution to the creation of knowledge (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). The changing requirements of doctoral education have sparked an increasing awareness and support for writing development; however, there is still limited empirical data about "how learning occurs in writing groups where non-assessable feedback is discussed and contested between peers" (Aitchison, 2009, p. 914).

Although the literature on writing groups for early-career researchers is rather limited, there is some alignment between the developmental needs of doctoral students who are engaged in academic work experience (Nick Hopwood & Kathryn Sutherland, 2009). Definitions of early-career are fluid in the literature; early-career researchers may include all academics in an apprentice phase of their research career (Laudel & Gläser, 2008). For the purposes of competitive research funding, however, the definitions are rigorously applied and typically refer to between five and seven years post-PhD (Laudel & Gläser, 2008). Bazeley (2003) upholds the Australian Research Council (ARC) definition of five years post-PhD with a caveat: it applies in the context of “uninterrupted stable research development,” a possibility Laudel & Gläser (2008) dismiss as "too optimistic." A pragmatic approach recognises that uninterrupted, stable research is rarely possible at any career stage. Donna Pasternak et al. (2009) note the value of writing groups for those seeking tenure and their usefulness as a model
of effective writing practice for students. Participating in a writing group is one way to write regularly and receive support and development from colleagues.

Broadening the definition of early-career researchers to encompass doctoral students as well as academic and professional staff engaged in research, this study tests the adaptability of writing group pedagogies and addresses significant gaps in the literature. To date, there is no literature on the evaluation of writing groups with such a mixed membership and, as Zelma Bone et al. (2009) note, there is also limited research on writing groups focused on learning and teaching scholarship. So far, the research of this writing group has encompassed a broad range of topics: graduate attributes, research ethics, policy analysis, and technologies for learning and teaching. Utilising an action research approach, the writing group engaged in critical reflection on and evaluation of how learning occurs with the participation of all members.

Establishing the writing group

The writing group was established in 2010 as part of a wider program of initiatives to raise the research profile of a centralised learning and teaching development unit at a research-intensive metropolitan Australian university. In response to an open invitation to thirty academic and non-academic members of the unit, eight participants volunteered. These participants included three academic developers, three research officers, and two educational developers, with lengths of service at the university varying from ten years to just a few months. Many disciplinary backgrounds were represented, including sociology, cultural studies, education, engineering, and music, with seven females and one male. All members have postgraduate qualifications, with some currently completing or having completed higher degree research studies. All identified themselves as early-career researchers, highlighting the limitations of the dominant definition of early-career as those within five years post-PhD (Bazeley, 2003), particularly for the purposes of research support and development.

The initial meeting was facilitated by a leading scholar in the field of academia, research, and writing who guided the group toward literature on the practice of writing groups. A number of ground rules were established, including meeting frequency, length of writing pieces, and number of written pieces to be addressed per meeting. Methods for giving constructive feedback were also discussed, as was the need for privacy and confidentiality. Unlike other writing groups that continue to be maintained by an expert group facilitator (Lassig et al., 2009), after the initial session the writing group was made up exclusively of early-career researchers in a peer-mentoring network.

The group operated on a fortnightly rostered cycle. One week before the meeting, two members would circulate a piece of writing (up to 5000 words each) via email, with details of the type of feedback sought and a short context for the piece of writing, for example:

This paper is an extension of a final report for a grant committee. At this point, I haven't collected the survey data so I can't write up the findings, but I am almost done with the literature review. Can you tell me if I have enough for a journal article (and, if so, make suggestions for which journal) or if it is better suited to a conference paper? I also have specific questions throughout the paper indicated in red.

During the meeting, members of the writing group (or reviewers) provide verbal feedback to one writer at a time, generally taking turns to discuss their responses to the piece with minimal interjections from the writer. At the end of the session, reviewers pass their hand-written or electronic feedback to the writers, who choose whether to incorporate the suggestions. The overall feeling of the sessions is positive and uplifting, with plenty of constructive criticism and support provided. Writers who subsequently have a paper accepted in a journal or at a
conference frequently circulate the final version and acknowledge the contribution of the writing group.

From the initial meeting to establish these rules of engagement, members were encouraged to reflect on their motivation for joining the group and their individual objectives for participation. Another two reflections were scheduled to capture the members’ experiences of the process and outcomes after the first round of writing (roughly one semester) and at the end of the second round (a further semester on). A central wiki was established to capture these and ongoing reflections, and some members chose to continue other journaling or blogging ventures already underway.

Evaluation strategy

Given the two main constraints of time-poor individuals and the number of researchers involved, determining a feasible strategy for evaluating the success of the writing group was a challenge. An action research process, in which participants were active in a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Yolanda Wadsworth, 2011), meant that all writing group members collaborated to design the questions that guided the reflection. They collected and analysed the data, and contributed to the shape of the final discussion (John Creswell, 2007). This repositioned the size of the group to be an advantage rather than a barrier to timely research. From inception, participants engaged with the scholarly literature and reflected on their individual objectives, experiences, and expectations for the writing group, a model that has been effective in previous studies (Lassig et al, 2009). The guiding questions for the reflection were: Why do you write? What is your writing experience? Why share your writing with the writing group? What have you enjoyed/gained from your participation so far? What would you like to change? What have you struggled with? What do you want to achieve? The responses to these questions and the literature review informed the collaborative development of a coding schema for data analysis using a wiki, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: ‘Speed dating’ analysis process

As the writing group is still active, the beginning and midway reflections of each member are included in this formative evaluation. All the reflections were collated into a single document that was circulated in a ‘speed dating’ session with members in pairs using the coding scheme to analyse the reflections for seven minutes. The coding scheme contained three categories: individual objectives, strengths and weaknesses of the writing group. It also included subcategories around broad themes of individual development of writing skills, collaboration, networking, and confidence/scholarship. This speed dating session was informed
by literature on speed mentoring, an innovative method that allows academics to be matched as mentors and mentees (David Cook et al., 2010). During the speed dating session, comments and meta-analysis were included in the coding scheme to capture themes as they emerged during analysis and discussion.

Along with the themes from the literature review, a word cloud of the top 100 terms in the reflections was used to triangulate the data from the speed dating exercise. In word or tag clouds, the size of a word demonstrates its frequency and acts as a proxy for its relative importance as a concept. Word clouds are increasingly used as a data analysis tool (Marti Hearst & Daniela Rosner, 2008), with a significant advantage being their ease and speed of use. The reflective data word cloud was compared with the results of the speed dating exercise to see where the two sets of analysis matched and where they differed.

Results

After the speed dating session, responses were collected into a single document to enable analysis of the most frequent themes. Table 1 shows the results of the coding schema (note that some people mentioned items more than once).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intentions</th>
<th>Times Mentioned</th>
<th>Times Achieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and working with peers (synergy, community, etc.)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team building and networking across different disciplines and research interests</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of self as writer/scholar – confidence, identity, etc.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement of writing objectives</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing writing outputs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesising ideas through social interaction</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review/giving feedback as building writing skills</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing writing skills needed to be a journal or conference reviewer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing different disciplinary/individual perspectives</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about writing process/scholarship/developing writing quality</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making time to reflect on writing/scholarship</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being supported/motivated to meet deadlines</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 Coding schema responses*
Teambuilding, development as a scholar, sharing different perspectives, and learning about scholarship of writing were mentioned most frequently. Indicative reflections include,

[The writing group] generates the sense of being part of a scholarly community. This is a feeling which is frequently lost in the administrative mire.

I absolutely relish the opportunity for collaborative professional development. The group composition is a delight.

I enjoy the intimacy and interdisciplinarity of [the] writing group. Our varied backgrounds, experiences and roles demonstrate a broad definition of writing (and writers) in higher education.

Developing a scholarly identity as an outcome of writing groups is consistent with the findings reported in the literature (Bone et al., 2009; Aitchison, 2010), as are the opportunities for "professional dialogue about writing, peer learning and review, and developing a supportive peer network" (Lassig et al., 2009, p 1). Comments relating to community, collaboration, and working with peers included the importance of building relationships and getting to know others from different areas in the learning and teaching development unit. The unit is a large and diverse group compared to similar centres across Australia, and the comments indicate that collaboration across the different work areas is a high priority for many individuals. Interestingly, collaboration, the first item on the coding schema, was not most highly rated in terms of mentions, but it was the item that received the highest achievement rating. Perhaps simply joining the group meant that members got to know more about the people, roles, and responsibilities from other sections of the centre. The role of the group as a community of practice encouraging academic and professional staff to work together was also significant, and distinguishes this writing group as an approach to research development.

The affective aspects of the group dynamic are evident in the reflections above with the use of words such as "feeling", "relish", "delight", and "intimacy", which represent an important component of feeling supported and belonging. The use of the term "intimacy", in particular, and the discussions about privacy and trust during the planning stages of the writing group are consistent with questions raised by Pasternak et al. (2009) about the personal and intimate nature of writing and the risks associated with sharing writing. Interestingly, an increase in writing output was not mentioned as often as would be expected in reflections, especially since this was one of the catalysts for establishing the group, but perhaps it is implicit in the achievement of writing objectives. The practical skill of reviewing was mentioned fewer times than the other items; this may be a reflection of the early career stage of participants and the limited opportunities for journal and conference reviewing so far. The second section of the coding schema relates to the strengths and challenges of the process. These results are included in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Things</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and working with peers (synergy, etc.)</td>
<td>Time for regular meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing different disciplinary perspectives (Aitchison, p. 97)</td>
<td>Lack of confidence in knowing where to start in writing and in providing feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team building and networking across different disciplines and research</td>
<td>Lack of acknowledgment of writing group as work by line managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>Workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement of objectives</td>
<td>Workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesising ideas through social interaction (Aitchison, p. 86)</td>
<td>Lack of opportunity for research within professional staff role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review as building writing skills (Aitchison, p. 91)</td>
<td>Competing demands of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing skills needed to be a journal or conference reviewer</td>
<td>Time and needed to establish the rules of engagement and then changing group membership–trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of self as a writer-confidence</td>
<td>Getting started/procrastination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Strengths and challenges**

Indicative comments include

I now regard reading and writing and reflecting as an integral part of my work, not something to catch up on outside of work hours.

I have struggled and am still struggling with my own writing. This has to do with finding my place in a new context and, as a result, finding something to write about independently and with authority.

Sharing with the writing group has a number of advantages: looming deadline forces overcoming of procrastination; having constructive criticism from people with different backgrounds and different points of view is very helpful; it’s a safe environment as there is tacit recognition that none of us is perfect. While some members are more experienced than others, nobody is so experienced that they are intimidating, and we don’t have to feel embarrassed about exposing ourselves. The chance to read and comment on other people’s work encourages reflection upon what works and why, which encourages critical review of your own writing.

Teambuilding was seen as important in answering the question about members' intentions for joining the writing group, and was an area that many considered to be the strength of the writing group process. Teambuilding can be conceptualised as a process of developing “relational agency” or the capacity to give and receive support that enhances engagement (Hopwood & Sutherland, 2009, p 211). Developing confidence and feeling supported were also mentioned in many of the reflections. Comments included in this section of the schema were related to the success of the initial setting of rules of engagement and improving a sense of belonging. Members successfully negotiated with their line managers to have their participation in the writing group recognised in their workload, which is an encouraging recognition of the objective to increase the research profile of the centre, even when (in the case of non-academic staff) not all individuals had research writing as a performance indicator. The lack of time felt by members was the challenge mentioned most frequently in this section, the second most being a lack of confidence in writing ability.

While teambuilding, development of self as scholar, sharing of different perspectives, and learning about scholarship of writing were mentioned most frequently in the speed dating activity, some different issues emerged as prominent in the word cloud, as shown in Figure 2.
As well as ‘stop words’, the dominant terms ‘writing’ and ‘group’ were removed from the word cloud in order to better analyse the emerging issues. ‘Work’ and ‘time’ are key focuses in the word cloud, consistent with the earlier findings. Worth noting is the prominence of the word ‘academic’ despite the mixed constitution of the group. This prominence may reflect the emphasis on improving proficiency in academic writing. Similarly, ‘feedback’ has a higher importance in the word cloud than indicated in the speed dating results, but is consistent with the processes and function of the group. The word cloud also represents the priorities of generating and thinking differently about ideas, and encouraging an enjoyment of writing—a positive response to the challenges that were raised in the reflections.

Conclusions

The writing group is an ongoing activity. A total of six journal and conference articles have been published by individual group members, including, one that was rated as excellent in every category by one of the reviewers. Further, two papers are currently under review, and other writing goals have been achieved, such as successful award and grant applications. Of the members of the group, two have been awarded doctorates, another is near completion, two have commenced doctoral study, and another two are currently writing proposals for PhD research. This paper represents the achievement of one of the collective objectives of the group: to publish about the process and outcomes of establishing a successful writing group. One of the reflections from a group member raised concerns about this paper. This individual was concerned that this effort on researching and writing about the process took some of the focus away from the more individual intentions of improving writing, and while it was valuable, it added pressure in a time-poor work environment. This individual decided not to contribute to this paper although did continue to participate in reflection. The prominence of ‘time’ in the word cloud above reinforces this issue for all participants in the writing group, although the benefits of collaborating on a piece of writing were seen to outweigh the challenges associated with multiple authors collaborating on a single piece of writing (Catherine Bovill & Katherine Roseweir, 2008).

A number of members have had to withdraw from the writing group as a result of workload issues and changes in role or institution, but the group is continuing with just four members. As a consequence of the evaluation process and the increasing closeness of the
group, we have decided against recruiting new members for the time being. This has had several positive outcomes: meetings are shorter; the schedule revolves more frequently so that members submit a piece of writing every two months; and there is an increasing focus on collaborative writing and action research as a team. The reflective practice of the group will continue and we expect that as the needs and roles of participants change, our group will adapt and our writing will thrive.

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References


http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/25478/


