



## **Writing to learn: creative LD perspectives for Learning Developers and students**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

Academic writing is a contested area, even more so in times of large language models and artificial intelligence (AI). This writing is tricky to navigate and master especially for newcomers – staff and students. Learning Developers almost uniquely play with writing as a practice of emergence and discovery. Academic writing is a process: we write to become academic. Students write to join their epistemic communities, and Learning Developers write to give birth to an emergent field.

Drawing on recent work by Syska and Buckley (2022) and Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield (2022; 2023), we argue that academic writing is an initiation into and participation in wider professional and academic discourses. We ‘write to learn’ rather than ‘learn to write’. In our practice with students, we know that we need to move beyond the ‘mechanics’ of writing and make the process meaningful, engaging, interactive, and fun. Similarly, Syska and Buckley (2022) have explored what makes Learning Developers ‘tick’ with respect to academic writing – revealing how, counterintuitively perhaps, academic writing can become an inclusive Learning Development space: our ‘happy place’. With this

presentation, we opened the discussion on academic writing for building the Learning Development community.

**Keywords:** writing; professional identity; collaboration; artificial intelligence; human intelligence.

### ***Community response***

This session was a celebration of the human experience of writing. It explored the experiences we have as writers and as writers in Learning Development (LD). It argued the *process* of writing is a valuable one: not only productive and generative but also connected to how we learn about our identities and professional contexts. With Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) offering a shift in the possibilities of this process, it is an opportune time for practitioners to reflect on, evaluate, and revisit their relationship with the process of writing.

The presenters considered what AI offers writers in comparison to human-generated writing (see Figure 1). They termed this human-generated approach 'human intelligence' (HI) and considered how HI impacts the writing process, and its associated experiences, feelings, and drivers. These two 'intelligences' offer different products, processes, and relationships between writer and writing. One delegate articulated a potential conflict between the two: 'a battle between artificial intelligence and human intelligence, or: AI writing vs HI writing!' The presenters suggested there were positives and negatives for each. AI is outcome focused. It can offer speed and ease, but it may be limiting in terms of depth and reward. HI is process focused. Although it can be challenging and time-consuming to create, it may offer greater satisfaction to the writer.

The presenters started the session by encouraging discussion about writing and process, writing and identity, and writing and Learning Development. Delegates were asked to experience the HI process in real-time by creating a 'collaborative story' (see Appendix). The story was written on a shared Google Doc, where participants were asked to respond to four questions focused on their LD journeys. The process of writing collectively was observable in this process, as the words appeared on the page as each writer contributed.

Pausing whilst considering what to write next, contributors could see how others were adding to the piece.

**Figure 1. A slide from Abegglen et al.'s presentation outlining the difference between writing with AI and writing with HI.**

Writing with AI  
(artificial intelligence)

VS

Writing with HI  
(human intelligence)

Writing with AI:

- Easy, quick, tempting, outcome-focused, shallow, convincing, predictable, linear, unrewarding, limiting

Writing with HI:

- Process-focused, sometimes hard, unpredictable, creative, deeply engaging, flow-inducing, satisfying, emergent, liberatory, time-consuming

How can we recognise and teach the value of HI writing in the age of AI?

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Delegates emphasised how much they enjoyed writing collaboratively and how they felt it would be useful for their own practice. As one delegate summarised:

I so enjoyed this session. I came away with practical ideas to use with students, and to suggest for our staff writing retreats. I loved the celebration of the human process of writing and the ways in which we can gain from, explore, and enjoy the effort, the process, and the learning which happens through it.

Enjoyment was a key intention for the presenters. One of their aims for the session was for participants to 'experience writing as an enjoyable social act ... and to introduce it as a teaching strategy'. The presenters emphasised how writing can be a positive – albeit sometimes challenging – endeavour. If HI enables us to enjoy writing, which seems to be the experience of the delegates here, would AI limit this emotional connection? Conversely, can AI remove some of the challenges and discomfort writers face?

Writing is a process with value. It enriches the writer. Drawing on Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield's (2022) concept of 'writing to learn', the presenters discussed how the process of writing enables the author to learn about their subject, rather than only demonstrate their

learning. This can be experienced by Learning Developers as writers, and by the students with whom we work. In concluding the session, the presenters emphasised that by writing with HI, the act of writing can be enjoyable and rewarding, support our learning, and create meaningful outcomes (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. The session’s concluding message emphasised the importance of writing as both an enjoyable and social act.**

**Conclusion**

We welcome your thoughts and questions

We argue that we can help our students to see writing as both enjoyable and as a social act – and we can see it that way for ourselves too.

If we apply the principles of meaningful and playful engagement to our own scholarship and more broadly to our own practice, we can build the community we all need and change the way we approach academic writing.

We can make writing fun, liberatory and a happy place for us and our students.

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### ***Next steps and additional questions***

Delegates were inspired to share their experiences of the process of writing. For example, Stephanie Larkin, from University College Cork, made connections with a project she had led:

When given a chance to write creatively, students write all sorts of wonderful things. I devised a ‘Future Self Project’ across three years of the academic programme I work with where students were given some prompt questions aimed at supporting them to link their past, present, and future selves in the form of a letter to themselves. Reading these helps keep us as teachers grounded in the hopes and dreams of our students and provides an opportunity for students to connect experiences and make meaning across time.

Writing encourages reflection. Revisiting past writing enables communication with oneself and with others. In this vein, do the presenters see a model being created to unpick and structure the HI writing processes they celebrated in the session?

## ***Authors' reflections***

It was a beautiful session. Participants engaged with energy and enthusiasm – and so much positivity. As people who regularly write collaboratively, we were keen to share the benefits we have gained from this practice. Writing is integral to how we see ourselves and how we relate to each other, and, for us, it is an affirming and sustaining activity. Our main goal for this session was to share some of that positivity with the conference. The community's response suggest that we achieved our aim.

This was not our only goal, however. We also believe that Learning Developers can help students see writing as both an enjoyable and a social act (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2021; 2022; 2023), and adopt this perspective for themselves. We see writing as 'knowledge in the making' (Badley, 2009). We hope to inspire others to see it not as a fixed representation of a static thought but more as a moment in time pursued by, integrated with, and contributing to innumerable others. We want colleagues to apply the principles of meaningful and playful engagement to scholarship and broader academic practice to change how we approach academic writing (Jandrić et al., 2023).

Above all, we encourage the community to join us in our mission to make writing fun, liberatory (Buckley and Syska, 2022; Syska and Buckley, 2022), and a happy place for us and our students. Our intention with our HI text generator (see Figure 3) was to bring these ambitions alive for participants by creating a space where writing could be personal, shared, exploratory, and incremental, but equally meaningful and rewarding. In doing so, we were able to give delegates a taste of what writing means to us, encouraging them to experience a technique they could also use with their students.

In exploring the connection between writing and professional identity, we found that it can act as a site of liberation and resistance (Buckley, Syska and Heggie, 2024). It is the process of writing that carries the power, not the finished product. Writing can be what we want and need it to be. It can be a part of the ongoing act of being and becoming ourselves. With this in mind, we developed our HI text generator to counter output-focused Gen AI. Reflecting on that process, we see it as being iterative, open, and cumulative, and the path to further writing. Formalising it as a model would be an interesting challenge! We 'write to learn' rather than 'learn to write' (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2022), so we should not give up this process – which we believe can be joyful and playful – to AI!

**Figure 3. The creative activity asked delegates to write with HI.**

Creative activity: *Hi, we're writing with HI!*

<p>Google doc link <a href="#">here</a></p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <span style="background-color: #ffcc99;">My journey</span> into Learning Development began when...</li> <li>2. <span style="background-color: #99cc99;">As a Learning Developer</span>, I've learnt...</li> <li>3. <span style="background-color: #99ccff;">I used to think</span> that writing...</li> <li>4. <span style="background-color: #cc99cc;">Now writing</span> for me looks like...</li> </ol>	<p>4 prompts 10 minutes</p> <p>Work with the prompts to create a collective story, with each writer building on the previous content, adding one word, several, or a sentence (but no more than one sentence at a time).</p> <p>Rule: you have to work with what's on the page, not change or delete anything; only add.</p>
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### **Further readings**

For those interested in learning more about 'academic writing', we recommend the following two publications we have co-written:

1. Syska, A. and Buckley, C. (2022) 'Writing as liberatory practice: unlocking knowledge to locate an academic field', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(2), pp.439-454.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2114337>

This paper argues that Learning Development struggles to be perceived as a distinctive academic field because it has not yet sufficiently written itself into existence. Syska and Buckley propose a model for writing as liberatory practice that facilitates scholarly conversations and the co-creation of an academic field. Through collective autoethnography, they build on their positionality in Learning Development to outline a framework for knowledge production and demonstrate that scholars in emerging disciplines need encouragement and support to unlock their practitioner knowledge and articulate what makes them a unique scholarly field.

2. Abegglen, S., Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2021) *Supporting student writing and other modes of learning and assessment: a staff guide*. Prism, University of Calgary.  
Available at: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca/items/0c06ff1e-a2d3-4225-b2b3-3ff9b98910bb>

Abegglen, Burns, and Sinfield's publication promotes writing-to-learn. It shows that if educators 'teach' writing differently, it can foster students' learning. Writing offers an initiation into wider professional and academic discourses. This open-access publication invites you to move beyond the 'mechanics' of writing – to make it meaningful, engaging, interactive, and fun. If writing is appreciated as developmental – and appropriately supported – it can spur students to write their 'best'.

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Abegglen, S., Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2022) 'Supporting university staff to develop student writing: collaborative writing as a method of inquiry', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 23, pp.1-14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi23.839>



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Sandra Sinfield is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Learning Development in the Centre for Professional and Educational Development at London Metropolitan University. She is a co-founder of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE). Sandra is interested in creativity as liberatory and holistic practice in higher education. She has developed theatre and film in unusual places and inhabited Second Life as a learning space.

Alicja Syska is a hybrid academic, combining the roles of Learning Developer and Lecturer in Education and History at the University of Plymouth. She has a PhD in American Studies. Alicja is a researcher, a co-host of the 'Learning Development Project' podcast, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal for Learning Development in Higher Education*, with much of her work focusing on facilitating writing and publication.

## ***Appendix: Collective story***

### **PROMPT 1: My journey into Learning Development began when...**

A mate convinced me it was a way to find sufficient part-time work to enable me to fund a PhD – in the very pub we are starting off in on Monday's ALDCon pub crawl!

I moved countries and randomly applied for a job at a nearby uni.

I was approached by the then Head of Learning Development.

I was invited in by the Head of Access: come and do some work with this new thing we're doing...

I was approached by a colleague who was already in the field!

I stumbled across a job ad that included all the bits of my academic job I loved without the things I wanted to escape! And also when I found out what it was...!

When I unexpectedly found myself with teaching duties ... an exciting learning journey was sparked.

Was when I failed every exam – had to have a rethink – and found you all.

I didn't even realise it had happened!

A job opportunity came up. I had no real idea what I was doing!

I started working with international students, preparing them for university entry.

I needed a job.

When I finished my master, did a bit of pre-sessional teaching and really needed a job!

Same as above!

## **PROMPT 2: As a Learning Developer, I've learnt...**

More about the individual student experience than I had access to when I was teaching. Definitely this. A whole new view on students' strengths and the barriers they face.

How powerful it is to ask: 'what have you already tried to address this issue?'

What individualised learning and support really looks like.

How important it is to listen and get to know the student's journey thus far, whether it is the process of writing the assignment or their educational journey, experience of learning ... and to join them on their journey. (that is very true! Thank you for adding that last bit! 😊).

That every student is different.

... a lot more about learning since I started supporting students as they learn.

That I wish I had access to learning development when I was a student. (And that that's always what people says when I tell them what I do!)

Ditto Ditto Ditto! DITTO. But also that I did and didn't realise it.

To meet students where they are at with an issue, listen, encourage, reflect back ...  
Everyone has a unique experience, and everyone wants to succeed.

That the landscape has become even harder for us now. Before we were the 'fix it' service – now we are the dreamers who believe that education is joyous and ineffable and belongs to the students instead of the Office for Students.

A sense of humour for all the absurdity.

And to never take anything too seriously!

That students lead you to provide them with the help they need, not what you think it is they need. Agree!!!

It is not easy to meet students' or even lecturers' expectations because they don't know what we do. Well, to a certain extent, sometimes we may not be able to clearly explain what our role is either.

To be more like a coach than a teacher.

Agreed – my coaching skills have developed so much.

### **PROMPT 3: I used to think that writing...**

Must always make sense (boring)! Be logical and for public consumption (assignment, report for work, email).

Was the weight of expectation, and had to be perfect. Sometimes the weight is too much to carry, though.

Was the quickest possible route to the 'right' answer – or that there was one right answer at all.

Was so so hard!!! And I still think it is. I also think it is often elitist and not liberating – especially if you are not already perceived as an expert.

Something that only happened in detention, like Breakfast Club?

... was something I'd get round to doing and sadly that's not the case.

Was difficult and we need to be good at playing around words, e.g., fancy words and synonyms.

My special skill, but now I see it as an ecosystem I live in.

Was something that other people did ...

Was something that the grownups did 😏.

Was a creative active act and that style was almost more important than the actual content.

Was so fuckin difficult (then again, I think I mibbes still dae?!)

Had so many rules.

## **PROMPT 4: Now writing for me looks like...**

Understanding, clarifying ... my thoughts take shape and meaning so I can process them!

Developing ideas, producing, editing, refining.

Just one of the ways that I communicate ideas.

Copying and morphing, experimenting and discovering, reading and listening.

Thinking and working things through, together, dialogically.

A way of understanding my own learning journey, one that never seems to end, which is perhaps the beauty of it.

Something that never ends.

A method of expressing ideas in the most concise and clear way possible to communicate with others and be understood.

Something I do with a friend.

Writing for myself, to understand myself, to make sense of the world and my experiences in it.

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