

Supporting university staff to develop student writing: collaborative writing as a method of inquiry

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Abstract

There is a feeling in the Learning Development community – and in academia more generally – that discipline staff see the academic writing of students as a problem better ‘fixed’ by others. However, staff at a writing workshop held within a learning and teaching conference revealed positions that were more nuanced, inflected, compassionate and ‘responsible’ than this. Writing collaboratively around the words produced by staff at our workshop, led to new insights into ways that staff could support student writing as an emergent practice. We decided to collect and share the many ways that discipline staff might be encouraged to harness writing in their own curriculum spaces: a staff guide on supporting writing and other forms of learning and assessment emerged. In this paper we discuss collaborative writing as a method of inquiry as we explore the contested terrain of academic writing, challenge the notion of ‘writing skills’, and model a more emergent form of exploratory writing.

Keywords: collaborative writing; writing as inquiry; writing workshop; mark making; exploratory process; writing in the curriculum.

Introduction

Students these days – they can’t write...

The academic writing of university students occupies contested ground freighted with meaning – and controversy. This is particularly true for widening participation students, who may be discouraged to attend university by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers (Storan and Allen, 2005) – i.e., those who feel particularly unwelcome in academia. Arguably, the prevailing focus on ‘skills’, the disentangling of ineffably intertwined academic processes into reified things that people conceptualise, articulate, and treat as isolated practices that can be developed outside the formal curriculum, can become part of the problem for students (see also Len Holmes’ challenge to the notion of skills per se (2000) and Kate Hoskins (2008a; 2008b) on academic reading).

Treating a holistic practice like academic writing as a set of decontextualised skills – and the academic as a homunculus with a toolkit – arguably damages the ways that we as academics support students with their writing development, and thus contributes to both staff and students being disempowered (see also Lillis et al., 2015a). Change is necessary not just in reconceptualising ‘skills’, but also in re-thinking writing as an emancipatory academic practice – for our students, and perhaps also for us academics who find writing a struggle, and who find making space for research and writing even more of a battle.

We initiated our search for meaningful change with respect to writing development at a Learning and Teaching (L&T) Conference, where we held a writing workshop primarily for discipline staff who de facto teach students to write, and handle student concerns and fears with respect to academic writing. In the workshop we engaged in free writing and dialogue on the topic of academic writing. The staff responses were nuanced, revealing apprehension of writing per se as social practice, as initiation into epistemic communities, and as part of the work of becoming an academic. Our initial idea was to collaboratively write an academic paper on these different attitudes; what we actually did was to write a book, our staff writing guide: *Supporting student writing and other methods of learning and assessment* (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2021a), that suggests many different ways of integrating productive writing practices and projects into the curriculum.

Following on from the production of this text, we engaged in a meta-reflective activity, thinking, through collaborative writing and visual modes (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2021b), about the various processes which we had moved through to produce the text. We wanted to explore in depth the power of collaborative writing. The outcome was twofold: a recent Higher Education Research Group (HERG) webinar on the topic of collaborative writing as a method of inquiry (Gale and Bowstead, 2013) and this article. In both we hope to outline the benefits of taking a 'different' approach to writing, in terms of our own research and writing as academics, and in terms of integrating writing teaching within disciplinary practices and curriculum spaces. In this article we summarise the key arguments from our work and invite readers to take part in a writing activity. By doing so, we aim to inspire them to approach writing differently – more powerfully – and stimulate new collaborative writing projects for the Learning Development (LD) community.

What is academic writing?

Writing is mark making, an act of expression and communication (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2018). It is a sensory and physical experience (although less so online). It is also a metaphorical process, carrying something across from thinking to paper: making one's mark in the world – leaving a print or an imprint on the landscape. Mark making allows us to communicate with other people, helping them to understand our ideas or gain an insight into how we feel and what we know. Writing is not just a linguistic or semantic activity but a socio-political one, especially for those, like our students, who are typically placed as educational outsiders and definitely not invited to leave their mark on academia (Burns, Sinfield and Holley, 2004; Reay, David and Ball, 2005).

One could then argue that writing, and especially academic writing, is more than a means to an end: it is an engagement with your epistemic community; it is playing with ideas, theoretical concepts and research findings; it is finding one's voice. However, academic writing is usually conceptualised as something to master, culminating in a final text. Rather than fostering development, it becomes a gatekeeper, creating an obfuscatory and

exclusionary academia, shutting out those students not familiar with academic discourse and customs (Lillis, 2001).

In our teaching and research practice, we acknowledge that scaffolding academic writing is tricky. Especially, as Lillis (2001) argues, when student language is made visible and problematised but the language of discourse and the pedagogical practices in which they are embedded remain invisible, taken as 'given'. Thus, students need a powerful introduction into the writing of their epistemic communities, but also help to overcome their fear of writing, in ways that do not label them as 'deficit'. Students need spaces in which to experience that writing can be a learning process that gives them voice and agency, that places them powerfully within their own learning and within academia (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2017). It is a learning process that might even bring them rewards, pleasure and joy.

Arguably, all those that teach academic writing also benefit from embracing processes that enable students to positively discover the pleasure of writing (Murray, 1972). Sadly, as colleagues across different institutions attest, the typical experience of writing for academic staff themselves is as contested as it is for students. Thus, we argue that we need to challenge – disrupt – the way that academic writing itself is apprehended by academic staff and students alike (see Lillis et al., 2015a; Lillis et al., 2015b; *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 2019). We need to resist the too-soon focus on grammar and style, and highly prescriptive, formal, 'right answer' academic writing, and instead create curriculum spaces where students can write to learn rather than learn to write. In our guide, we include many activities for staff to use to encourage playful writing; in giving themselves permission to approach writing differently in the curriculum, staff, too, might (re)discover the joy of writing.

In the following, we outline an activity (adapted from a #creativeHE webinar) which acts as a synecdoche or metonym for a more exploratory approach to academic writing. The activity has two parts: Part A asks participants to find and use random words; Part B invites a revisiting of those words to develop an argument. It disrupts in a playful and embodied way the internalised notion that we need to 'marshal' our words before we start writing.

Undertaking the activity takes participants through an experience of writing as exploration –

as a journey towards emergent meaning – rather than a pinning down of the butterfly. Encouraging staff to write with ‘found’ words is designed to illustrate how writing may be liberating. It also acts as an introduction to the processes that we illustrated in our staff writing guide (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2021a). As you engage with this article, we invite you to undertake the activity also.

Activity: Part A

Prompt: If you can, please get up, move around and find 10-15 words – from book spines, in a magazine, by glancing at the detritus on your desk. (Two minutes).

Now using all those words, and only those words, compose a poem, a sentence or a paragraph on academic writing. (Five minutes).

If you write in a Google Doc (or a similar), you are creating a document that can be collaboratively edited and shared.

Challenging views of writing

In our staff writing guide, and in our work more generally, we used the work of Molinari (2017) on the threshold concepts of academic writing as a lens to explore the opinions shared by the staff in the L&T workshop which initiated our thinking about academic writing. We found that Molinari (2017) helped us refocus on the ontological and epistemological functions of writing that speak to all the aspects of the writing process. Her argument is that there are 37 possible threshold concepts of academic writing with the key, but perhaps the most surprising, ones being:

- It is a social and rhetorical activity involving knowledge-making.
- It speaks to situations through recognisable forms, representing the world, events, ideas and feelings whilst being open to interpretation.
- It enacts and creates identities and ideologies.

- It is not an end in itself.
- All writers have more to learn (Molinari, 2017).

Murray (1972), in the vein of Molinari, calls writing a 'process of discovery', a way to learn about and evaluate the world as well as a method of communication. Together, these conceptualisations of writing suggest that successful academic writing practices are more than showing what you have learned about the subject: they are a way of learning about the subject. For Molinari (2017) academic writing is essentially about knowledge-making; it is social and open to interpretation. It is not about closure. This was the starting point of our thinking, illuminating how 'writing to learn' differs from writing what you have learned. The latter is the typical view of assessment: it is a way of measuring what people know.

Taking these arguments forward, the teaching of writing, including by discipline staff, needs to move beyond testing and searching for the right answers. It needs to initiate students into their (new) epistemic community. The writing tasks and activities need to be challenging (Gossferich, 2016), provoke creativity, pique curiosity and encourage social activity. Writing is a process of investigation, discovery and thinking – as demonstrated by Molinari's (2017) threshold concepts of writing, as well as the arguments of writing in the disciplines/writing across the curriculum movement(s) (Murray, 1972). Ideas need to simmer before they are ready to be served (Elbow, 1981; 1998).

Collaborative writing

The threshold concepts of academic writing and the notion of writing across the curriculum underscore its dialogic nature. For us, the authors of this paper, (academic) writing has become a collegiate exploratory endeavour that we harness in our teaching and in our research. We argue for writing to be seen as a collective activity, disrupting the primacy in academia of the single author text and the single author perspective.

Farkas (1991) offers four definitions of collaborative writing:

- When two or more people jointly compose the complete text of a document.
- When two or more people contribute components of a document.
- One or more people modifying, editing and or/reviewing the document of one or more persons.
- One person working interactively with one or more people and drafting a document based on the ideas of the person or more persons.

We love these diverse but complementary ways of describing collaborative writing: collaborative writing offers a powerful transgressive alternative to academic silos and isolation. It resists the constraints, on thought patterns, on thinking, on linguistics, that the idealised single author/academic text both conjures up and creates:

It does feel that there's a emancipatory aspect to that concept that I found really exciting; I think it allows, or it allowed me in my own writing, not to feel that I had to follow this linear style of academic writing, it allowed me to follow the way the writing was taking me rather than me imposing a sort of linearity upon my writing. . . . the collaborative writing . . . allowed you to explore 'lines of flight' in response to each other's writing. (Bowstead in Gale and Bowstead, 2013, p.4).

These arguments are not new: Roland Barthes (1975) disrupts the notion of the auteur – the single author – and the single project. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) promotes heteroglossia and the power of the voices at the margins. Lev Vygotsky (1934) argues that through others, we become ourselves. Harnessing these notions proactively in our practice created the space for us to discover a variety of ways that we can help students to jointly develop confidence in their own writing.

Let us return to our emergent writing activity.

Activity: Part B

Prompt: Please go back to your creative piece on academic writing.

Make it more playful: highlight, underline, colour, add pictures . . . to deepen arguments and spark further ideas about academic writing.

If you are doing this as you read this article, respond to what you have just read about writing.

If you are composing in a Google Doc, share the piece of writing with other people and ask them to add their thoughts.

Debrief

The zig zag is the lightning bolt spark of creation and the 'cross cutting path from one conceptual flow to another' (Mazzei and McCoy, 2010, p.505)

This activity is designed to be collaborative, taking participants through a form of zig zag inquiry: an emergent, cooperative exploration of a topic. The point is not the gathering of individual responses, but creating the opportunity to be inspired and influenced by the thoughts of others. It is shared, collaborative writing in action. It acts as a live, embodied demonstration of what can be achieved when we approach writing as emergent, as exploration and as process. Even if undertaken alone, as you the reader might have done, it models a writing process that can start with the spark of creation: unpredictable, undisciplined, anti-disciplinary and non-static.

Our L&T workshop and HERG seminar participants, as well as our students, have really enjoyed this activity for the playful way it made them reflect on their attitudes and approaches to writing. Participants experienced writing as exploratory and creative; a far cry from the tightly constructed formal academic piece that might be an end goal but that should never be the starting point of 'thinking through writing'. This is illustrated by the word poems created by our staff participants, using words they spotted from their desks:

Universities are a garden full of secrets and insights about our planet, where you can discover your own story on the go - it's the spiritus and power of education, it's an orchestra, an opera!

Academic Writing: Ceremony, feeling lost between useful and vertigo, the experience of nonsense and the dominion aflame, visit the assassins.

I wandered lonely as a Salmon Bulgar Wheat Salad
Wondered lonely as well about academic writing
When all at once I saw a crowd
A host of golden Carry On dvds
Fluttering in the breeze of pages of books on 'How To' that were never read.

Drawing it all together

A special benefit of collaborative writing as inquiry (Gale and Bowstead, 2013) is that it is refractive rather than reflective. It disrupts the undisturbed, common sense and day-to-day pattern of thinking. This is the way we three write together. Whenever we engage in collaborative writing as part of our own action research processes, we open a Google Doc and plunge in. We 'free write' thoughts, ideas, observations, descriptions, opinions and references. We write synchronously and asynchronously. We return frequently to our document, going over what we have contributed, finding patterns, good quotes and key points; after a while, as Bowstead (2011) says, we go where the writing takes us, instead of finding what we were already looking for. We start to see what is emerging as a key theme or set of themes. We then edit – shift text around – cut and extend. We engage in sustained collaborative writing to produce a formal written piece on a given topic, based on our joint expertise and findings. Experiencing the power and potential of exploratory writing for ourselves so powerfully in our own work, allowed us to see even more vividly that the teaching of writing as a mechanical process usually addressed in decontextualised moments (sum up an argument – learn how to use a quote – use the spell check – avoid plagiarism at all costs) removes the point and the power of writing itself.

The proof of this is our playful staff guide, the HERG seminar and this case study, together with other creative and playful writing activities.

What next – or where next

We invite you, the LD community, to share with us your own writing experiences and your own writing tips so this may become a new piece of research – and potentially a collaborative guide on liberatory practice to promote academic writing by academics for academics.

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