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'Writing my first academic article feels like dancing around naked': research development for higher education lecturers working in further education colleges

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"WRITING MY FIRST ACADEMIC ARTICLE FEELS LIKE DANCING AROUND NAKED:" RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LECTURERS WORKING IN FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES

The growing emphasis on research output has resulted in the emergence of initiatives to enhance writing practices, often targeted at specific groups who are less familiar with the research practices of academia. This paper discusses a collaborative writing group project for higher education lecturers working in further education colleges. Participants were drawn from a group who had previously undertaken funded, pedagogic research projects. We present an analysis of the writing that participants' produced during the initiative, alongside with data from a subsequent questionnaire to review the design, operation and impact of the writing group. We discuss how we sought to challenge established preconceptions and normalise the practice of writing within the group. We conclude by considering the role of academic developers in supporting HE lecturers to develop their writing practices, and identify recommendations to promote the longer-term impact of such work.

Key words: Academic Writing, Collaborative Writing, Peer Learning, Academic Development

Similar to developments in the US and Australia, universities in England have developed partnership arrangements with community-based colleges to promote accessible provision in line with government agendas for widening participation and lifelong learning (Parry, 2009a). In England this has resulted in considerable numbers of further education (FE) colleges developing higher education (HE) provision in collaboration with a partner university; with an estimated 9% of HE now delivered in this way (Parry, 2009b). Many who teach these programmes entered FE colleges through professional routes. Prior to teaching HE courses, many were (and may still be) engaged in teaching post-compulsory, vocational courses below degree level (Turner, McKenzie & Stone, 2009). Although they have successfully made the transition from a professional setting to FE, for most their role as HE lecturers engaged in research is new.

Plymouth University has a longstanding partnership with a network of FE colleges. In order to respond to this agenda the University made a successful application to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) initiative (HEFCE, 2005). This initiative had two main goals, (i) to reward excellent teaching practices, and (ii) to invest in that practice in order in increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community (HEFCE, 2004: 10). An additional ambition of this initiative was to encourage individuals to promote a scholarly-based and forward-looking approach to teaching and learning (HEFCE, 2004: 3).

Plymouth University successfully bid for resources to develop its HE in FE network. Goals developed by the newly created Higher Education Learning Partnerships (HELP) CETL were designed not only to meet the aims of the CETL initiative, but also simultaneously, to address the guidance provided by HEFCE (2003) to universities and colleges to support them in developing their HE provision. Consequently core aspects of the HELP CETL's activities were focused on providing opportunities for engagement with scholarly activity and research. These activities were facilitated through the HELP CETL Award Holder Scheme, which over the five years of the CETL initiative supported 75 individuals to undertake robust, practice-based research projects. The funding of these projects supported deep and extensive study of student learning, critical examination of teaching and the development of research into their professional practice.

It has previously been recognised that broadening of the academic workforce has resulted in a growing population of lecturers arriving through non-traditional routes (Boud, 1999). Academic developers working with teacher and nurse educators have previously identified the process of engaging in practice-based research as easing their transition into a new identity as academics who research, write and seeks publication (Harrison & McKeon, 2010). Therefore, alongside their research projects these academics were provided with support to develop their research skills. These development opportunities were designed by Rebecca, the manager of the Award Holder Scheme, to introduce the knowledge and practices associated with research. This included guidance to assist them in disseminating their findings at national and

international conferences, to obtain further research income and connect with the wider academic communities beyond their own institutions. These opportunities varied in their format, ranging from face-to-face workshops, the development of bespoke, context-specific, resources and one-to-one professional guidance sessions. Overall the college lecturers embraced these developmental opportunities, yet writing for publication remained an on-going challenge.

This position is not unusual; within the academic community writing is cited as difficult (e.g. Cameron, Nairn & Higgins 2009), with words such as 'exposure' and 'fear' used to describe their experiences. It was not surprising that these college lecturers struggled with the idea of writing for publication – as the title for this article indicates, HE in FE lecturers had the same emotive responses to writing for publication as other new researchers. Skill acquisition in respect of writing is often not wholly integrated into the broader range of skills new researchers are supported in developing (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Lee & Boud, 2003). For many, writing development slips to the periphery (McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006). Rebecca had observed this, therefore in the third year of the HELP CETL, a yearlong writing initiative was formulated with Tony, the then Director of the UK Education Subject Centre for HE, to offer enhanced opportunities to develop the practices of academic writing, to ten of the lecturers who had completed their research projects. The structuring and design of this initiative was informed by the experiences of Moore (2003) and Grant (2006). In particular the decision taken to limit group size was not due to the availability of resources (for once these were not a determining factor), rather with the intentions of; setting potential participants at ease, permitting Rebecca and Tony to provide intensive support and enhancing cohesiveness within the group.

This paper reviews the writing group as a site for academic development. The paper initially draws on Rebecca and Tony's reflections on designing a writing initiative sensitive to the context in which HE in FE lecturers operate, as well as supporting the development of knowledge, expertise and confidence to write. The paper then presents an analysis conducted by Andrew, which draws on the narratives and questionnaire responses produced by participants of the writing group. The paper considers the participants' perceptions and engagement with the emotional,

procedural and technical aspects of writing for publication, before discussing the longer-term impact of this initiative on participants' development as academics. The paper concludes by considering the role of academic developers in supporting similar groups, particularly in terms of enhancing research practices.

Initiating writing and forming the writing group

Richardson & St. Pierre (2000) present writing as a method of inquiry where meaning is constructed from past events as social knowledge. The process of writing is intended to prompt reflections and questions, situating writing within different areas of an individual's life. Richardson & St Pierre's (2000) conceptualisation informed the approach taken to structure the writing group. Participants' experiences of undertaking research were captured from loosely guided free writing of their initial applications for membership to the writing group, supplemented by later writing produced for publication. Their diverse backgrounds with regard to the disciplines represented precluded a single writing activity that would do justice to the diverse demands of the academic areas represented. Instead, discovering their research interests and their experiences as professionals, allowed for the identification of common professional concerns and needs which the writing workshop could address, and a subject to which potentially they could all write.

The writing workshop was conceived as a collaborative venture in order to mitigate against some of the challenges faced by novice academic writers, thereby offering an easier entry point to the genre (Cameron *et al.*, 2009). Rebecca and Tony regarded the communities of practice model (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as a useful theoretical base in which to locate this professional development initiative and chose to work in a group setting, to foster an environment of peer learning, where facilitators could learn from group members, and they from one another (Boud, 1999). Trimble (2001) emphasises the need for writers to comprehend the social implications of their writing, and to perceive it as a conversation with the wider world. Trimble (ibid) states that writers should be aware of what it is that they have to communicate that is worthy of the attention of their readers.

The choice of activities was based on the Rebecca & Tony's intention to incorporate

peer review, discussion and collaboration. These were intended to build participants' confidence in their own writing and also familiarise them with salient features of academic writing. Academic authors need to develop resilience and robustness in respect of ruthless peer review and likely rejection of a significant proportion of papers sent to journals for publication. Rebecca and Tony took the view that informal disclosure of early writing outputs – in the form of brief readings to the group - within a closed collaborative setting would offer opportunities for experiencing exposure to a critical audience, and help participants perceive the creation of a cycle of tentative writing, critical reading and response, editing and re-drafting. It was judged by Rebecca and Tony that this starting point would help participants establish the resilience necessary, and support increasingly confident rebuttals of peer dissent where it occurred. This cycle of 'safe exposure' to the views of others acting as 'critical friends' was judged to be a valuable experience that could provide early steps towards the publication and peer review processes.

The writing group was structured around a number of interventions that took place over one academic year. Given the geographic spread of teaching locations it was not feasible to bring participants together for regular meetings as many writing groups advocate (Moore, 2003). This group met four times: initially for a day of writing activities (October 2008) which introduced them to a number of different writing styles, allowing them to get to know one another and engage in writing within a few minutes of meeting. In November 2008, a two-day writing retreat was held, followed by a further one-day reading and feedback workshop in January 2009 and a final meeting to mark the formal end, and reflect on, the writing group in July 2009. The purpose of each of these meetings was to provide dedicated time to focus on their writing, discussion on writing practices and also to build up the collaborative approach to writing.

The writing retreat was held in an isolated coastal location with no mobile phone or Internet access. This venue was selected to remove them from the everyday activities that inhibit writing (Moore, 2003) and provided a stimulating environment, which allowed for thinking, reflection and writing within a loose, informal structure (Grant, 2006). On day one everyone was expected to spend time writing and thinking about writing. However, participants were encouraged to determine how they used the time

and to mix work and leisure activities. Space and time was made for discussion and sharing of writing in a single large group. On day two we considered what the participants desired to write and how they might achieve this. It was at this point the writing group took on a life of its' own. The participants made the decision to collectively work toward a publication, that captured their shared experiences as research-active HE in FE lecturers. Discussion at this meeting included lots of personal disclosure, with participants reflecting on their experiences and their professional development. Individually and collectively they began to reconceptualise their roles within the varied educational settings in which they worked. They were keen to give voice to their experiences through their writings, and for this to shape subsequent writing activities. Peseta (2007) is among those who have argued for greater use of such auto-ethnographic writing. Rather than treating them with caution or seeing them as individual narratives of limited value, such writings can convey the complexity and richness of individuals' identity and the spaces they occupy (Peseta, 2007). When focusing on the lecturers experience Rebecca and Tony were careful to construct them as experts in the field of HE in FE, arguing that they could demonstrate this through the production of scholarly reflections. This style of writing draws attention to the diverse forms of knowledge that professionals possess. Their challenge was to develop their own writing style in a way that would allow them to communicate effectively with an audience of immediate peers, then subsequently and more remotely, with colleagues in the sector and beyond.

Collectively the group determined a schedule, which would ensure writing remained a priority and prevent it being overshadowed by other commitments; a problem noted elsewhere (Grant, 2006; Murray, 2002). Following the retreat Rebecca remained in regular contact with participants, offering informal advice and to helping to maintain cohesion and momentum between the face-to-face meetings.

Creating, critiquing and reviewing

In working toward a collaborative publication we created a writing task that would take a number of months to complete. At the retreat participants expressed anxieties about sustaining writing. Concerns were aired and strategies for managing the difficult business of integrating writing into their working practices discussed. They also had to consider how they would develop and refine their writing. They were

encouraged to explore the literature, searching for writers who expressed similar thoughts or ideas and to draw upon their work. Rebecca and Tony sought to reduce participants' feelings of isolation by suggesting they read authors who express similar concerns. They also suggested ways in which participants could enhance the critical rigour of their writing for example by key words in Google Scholar searches as a means to identify bodies of published literature that would demonstrate the validity of their key words through their presence in published academic texts. These activities formed part of a strategy to introduce participants to the community of academics with whom they were seeking to identify themselves. Intentional use of words such as 'peer,' 'common interest' and 'shared ideas' was made in order for them to perceive themselves as contributing to the discussions of established knowledge communities.

Although discussion became a central feature of meetings, for logistical reasons this had to be continued by email in the in-between times. However, we designed the approach to reflect that associated with journal submissions, whereby two people would review their writing, with "reviewers" feedback collated and returned, leaving the author to determine how to respond. This process allayed fears about this technical aspect of writing for publication and it introduced them to the practice adopted by the majority of academic journals. This made the initial experience as real as possible for them.

In January 2009, part way through the process of creating and revising their work, we brought the writing group together to share their work and collectively provide feedback. The timing of this meeting was intentional, held soon after the peer-reviews were received. Rebecca was aware that reviewers' feedback can sometimes be contradictory and careful decisions have to be made when responding (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Emotive responses to reviewers' feedback have been suggested to reflect the personal nature of writing, associated with a period of skill development (Fiske, 1992). Therefore the secondary function of this meeting was to provide participants with the opportunity to discuss their feedback their peers and Rebecca and Tony. Following this meeting they then completed the final revisions to their writing, and it was prepared for publication.

Evaluating the writing group initiative

One year after the academic development initiative, the ten college-based participants were invited to contribute to a loosely structured open-ended questionnaire, which used a series of prompts to stimulate writing. The prompts revisited themes that had emerged from the earlier writing group sessions. Prompts were designed to elicit data on the extent to which participants had integrated the writing into their academic practice. Rebecca and Tony felt this was an appropriate timescale on which to follow up on the impact of this academic development initiative, as it has been recognised that for sustainable change to occur it has to become embedded within regular practice (Elton, 2003). Nine participants responded to this writing activity. Subsequently, the Rebecca and Tony could draw on three data sources (application to join the writing group, writing group outputs, questionnaire returns) as sources for thematic analysis using the constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This stage was overseen by Andrew who had not participated in the writing group.

Facing fears, questioning worth and breaking through barriers

> *"About writing - Fear of the unknown? Fear of criticism? Of not being taken seriously or just looking stupid."* (Questionnaire: Karen)

For experienced professionals the transition into an academic role has been identified as challenging, with individuals doubting their credibility and competence (Boyd & Harris, 2010). Whilst the above quotation from one of the writing group participants could be read as a reflection of this position, it also echoes the sentiments expressed by experienced women writers (Grant & Knowles, 2000) and research students (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Cameron *et al.*, 2009). Rebecca anticipated that participants would have concerns and fears, and might need assistance in overcoming these. However, Rebecca and Tony had not expected to encounter such strength of feeling and lack of confidence in their abilities:

> *"I was not confident to write about the things I knew about, there was no environment that suggested or stimulated me that I might have anything to contribute by writing."* (Questionnaire: Elaine)

At the time this was expressed, this participant had already completed a research project, presented at a national conference and been invited by others in the university partnership to speak about their work. They had developed in-depth knowledge of the subject of their research, and, as stated, they *knew* about their subject. However, they still questioned whether they had anything worthwhile to contribute!

Environmental conditions are acknowledged as inhibiting writing (Moore, 2003), and in the case of these participants they were working in FE college environments where teaching is prized over research and scholarship - activities which were not common practice (Anderson, Wahlberg, & Barton, 2003; Gale, Turner & McKenzie, 2011). This does not mean they were working in an environment devoid of inquiry; rather research in an FE college was interpreted differently to research in a university (Child, 2009). Research activities carried out with the support of a university are likely to receive limited recognition (Mason, Bardsley, Mann, & Turner, 2010). In FE colleges, heavy teaching timetables and bureaucracy are common barriers that prevent staff from prioritising their research activities:

> *"It was hard to focus on any aspect of my career outside directly focused teaching issues when the demands on my time are so high."* (Questionnaire: Helen)

> *"[…] finding the time to write when faced with what is often a punishing schedule of teaching and managing the course."* (Questionnaire: Brain)

On a daily basis they had limited opportunity to draw on their knowledge and experience as researchers. This meant that the peer validation and recognition essential in the development of academic identities were largely absent (Henkel, 2000). Given the pressures of time and their teaching responsibilities, research activities and writing easily slipped to the peripheries.

The early writing activities were designed to address these concerns by introducing different ways of writing (Lee & Boud, 2003). Although time is a widely recognised barrier (McGrail *et al.*, 2006), Rebecca and Tony, were not in a position to help with

this issue. Strategies were identified to overcome time constraints and to build their confidence as writers. Free writing activities in which participants were encouraged to write for a short period of time (e.g. two minutes) on a topic they *knew* about, (e.g. I teach because… I learn when…), were used in the October meeting. Participants read out their writing, sparking off discussion around areas of common interest or shared experience. These activities made participants write, they were not allowed to procrastinate, and by being given a starting phrase, overcame the initial barriers associated with having to choose a topic for writing. By sharing these newly created, un-critiqued pieces of writing, they had almost no time to worry before exposing their work to others. In reflecting on this experience the participants highlighted this as both empowering, and the subsequent discussion allowed them to consider how *they* might develop their initial ideas into critical narratives. This demonstrated the value of gaining early feedback (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000).

Such techniques also illustrated that writing could begin in a short space of time:

"I find that [the 'writing zone'] easier to call up when I need it now, and don't have to put aside such long periods of time to write." (Questionnaire: Karen)

In challenging their established preconceptions, such as the amount of time or level of knowledge needed to write, we were able to introduce new behaviours to support their writing, making them consider where they could make time for their writing and integrate it into their everyday working life (Murray *et al.*, 2008).

"…the principle of assigning time without guilt to think and plan is something I continue to do." (Questionnaire: Fiona)

Going public

"It was also very satisfying to see the outcomes of the group published. I think it gave me confidence in my capacity to write, I suppose because there was recognition for what we wrote…" (Questionnaire: Annie)

Prior to the retreat the participants acknowledged fears, questioned whether they could write for publication and what they could contribute. In designing this

academic development activity, Rebecca and Tony sought to challenge these preconceptions, introduce alternative writing practices and discuss their expert knowledge, leading to them deciding collectively to write for a public audience. This was an important step; together they had overcome many of the recognised inhibitors of writing (Moore, 2003). However, rather than conforming to the established media associated with academia, they took the decision to create their own publication, entitled: *Putting the I into Identity and Other Stories* (Turner *et al.*, 2009).

By sharing their experiences of being research-active, they wanted to give voice to the HE in FE sector; an area they felt was underrepresented within the published literature:

> *"Dissemination at conferences raises the profile of HE in FE teachers generally, as we are sometimes looked down upon by our university peers."*
> (Narrative: Heather)

Indeed questioning the representation of HE in FE was a legitimate position for these individuals to adopt. Although there is a growing body of research relating to policy and practices in teaching outside of university settings, little attention has yet been paid by the research and academic development communities to those working in alternative environments. Therefore the publication also served the purpose of promoting recognition for research activities undertaken outside of universities.

The HELP CETL and Education Subject Centre were two national bodies whose remits included promoting the HEFCE initiative of supporting HE in FE (HEFCE, 2003). The national reputations of these two organisations were important to the participants. They felt it was appropriate that the book was edited and published in-conjunction with these two national bodies. The publication provided access to communities previously perceived as hard to reach.

The final meeting of the writing group was a book launch, where they both reflected on their experience and publicly celebrated their writing at the university, to which senior academics were invited. This celebration was particularly important, as the presence of senior university staff contributed to a sense of recognition and

appreciation from the partner institution. It also served as a point of reflection, where participants considered their future research plans and, perhaps more importantly, their achievements as researchers:

> *"I feel I have successfully 'crafted' my job since the writing group. I have been involved in preparing an article for publication, producing bids for future projects and actively using research within my role."* (Questionnaire: Barbara)

Impacts of the writing group

For these HE in FE lecturers the writing group represented a significant milestone in their academic development with a sense such as courage and confidence characterising their reflections of this development opportunity:

> *"It was very liberating to be able to just write in such a supportive environment"* (Questionnaire: Annie)

> *"The confidence gained through working in a positive and uncritical environment, was inspirational in taking further work to the publication stage."* (Questionnaire: Heather)

Increased confidence is a commonly cited outcome of writing interventions; Cameron, *et al.* (2009); Grant (2006); Moore (2003) all refer to growth in participants' self-belief in their abilities as writers. This develops from their enhanced knowledge of the process and practice of writing. It is also a consequence of writing in the company of others. As this academic development initiative was designed to address the emotional, procedural and technical aspects of writing (Cameron *et al.*, 2009), it was anticipated that the participants would become more confident, perceiving it as within their ability to write for publication. Indeed this was supported by examples of the writing participants made reference to in their questionnaire responses:

> *"I think it gave me the courage to participate in another collaborative writing event."* (Questionnaire: Annie)

Writing interventions can benefit academics' teaching practices. Murray (2001) documented examples of writing activities that were successfully incorporated into teaching. Not surprisingly, this was also the case with a number of the participants:

"*The impact of the writing group on my role was more indirect in terms of confidence and techniques to help students with their writing*." (Questionnaire: Pauline)

However, five participants demonstrated their increased confidence by actively considering how they could share their experience with their immediate colleagues in order to support academic development within their own peer groups at their college:

"I might consider running a seminar or staff development day session, perhaps with colleagues who have been writing, so that we could encourage other colleagues." (Questionnaire: Pauline)

"In my teaching I encourage HE in FE practitioners to develop their engagement with scholarly activity and research." (Questionnaire: Annie)

Moore (2003) questions the impact of writing group interventions, viewing them as only having real benefit for participants. With these HE in FE lecturers, as well as integrating writing further into their professional practice, the participants also actively considered how they could transfer their experience and newfound knowledge to their colleagues. Given their relatively new status as researchers, and the limited recognition afforded to their research activities, this represented a significant development. Where possible they were proactive in seeking ways of transferring the culture of peer learning fostered through the writing group into their workplace.

"I do feel that I have been successful in supporting people in my own team so that they have some space and time to engage in scholarly activity." (Questionnaire: Barbara)

"I have asked a colleague from the college to write a chapter in a book that is

being commissioned for the Open University. This is because I have confidence in my ex-colleague's knowledge base, but also the commitment to make sure that an FE colleague gets the opportunity to write for public audiences." (Questionnaire: Elaine)

Two participants were engaged in writing up their doctoral studies and saw the writing group as timely in assisting them in making progress, helping them plan their future publications. Three others completed and published a collaborative research project; several made successful applications for research funds, committed to research projects or further study (Masters / Doctoral level). In addition they all considered how they could further disseminate the findings of their original research work, both in their colleges and also externally through relevant publications and conferences. Rather than fearing the publication process they began to embrace it, regularly sharing ideas and experiences with members of the writing group long after the formal meetings ceased. As the following participant reflected, the writing group remained an important stimulus, which continued to have an impact into the future:

"*I still try to analyse the experience in an attempt to understand the energy and power that existed there*." (Questionnaire: Brain)

Developing the writing practices of HE lecturers

The changing profile of the academic workforce has had considerable implications for academic development and the support developers are expected to provide. It is often assumed that new academics (e.g. teacher-educators / nurse-practitioners) typically work in universities (e.g. Boyd & Harrison, 2010); however the growth in the delivery in other educational settings means that alternative practices of academic development have to be explored. Academic developers have repeatedly emphasised the situated nature of their work, and the need to contextualise development initiatives (e.g. Taylor, 2010). HE in FE operates under very different contractual and managerial conditions to traditional HE settings, whereby the HE in FE lecturers are teaching on university accredited courses but contractually employed by an FE college. The writing workshop initiative had to pay attention to this context. It had to use activities, systems and structures that could be integrated into participants' work environment, their professional and their personal spaces.

Boud (1999) advocated the application of a peer-learning framework with such groups to enable this contextualisation. The peer-learning framework used in this writing group allowed individuals to take responsibility for their development in a fashion suited to their context and also allowed them to develop a wider network of peers, both inside and outside their college. This emergent community echoes what Lee & Boud, (2003) referred to as mutuality, whereby by working on a common project participants recognised the need for wider cultural change, which manifested itself in the on-going collaborations they developed with one another, and through the transfer of their academic development experiences to their immediate colleagues.

Following on from this, although writing groups may be perceived as a resource-intensive form of academic development, especially if they seek to incorporate an element of retreat, these initial costs need to be balanced against the longer-term benefit for the participants and the communities in which they interact. Indeed, by the end of the process, the participants had themselves begun this process of contextualising this academic development initiative to their own settings, and in doing so, were considering ways away some of the more practical limitations such as costs.

A key theme emerging from research into the application and development of writing groups is the need to build participants' confidence in their ability as writers. We cannot over-emphasise the importance of this, especially when working with individuals new to HE whether their professional history in other academic settings (such as FE or schools) is long or short. This is part of the changing remit of academic development, whereby our activities are increasingly extending beyond the realms of teaching and learning. For academic developers working to enhance individuals' research expertise, particularly for newer lecturers not engaged in a programme of higher study, it is important to consider the whole process of research, from design to dissemination, demonstrating the integrated and complementary nature of academic activities. Making connections between this and their current expertise, gives them an accessible subject, which can then form the basis of their early forays into research and subsequently academic writing. With appropriate support activities can be used to model the practices they need to develop in order to become published.

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