

WRITERS' WEEK: A VEHICLE FOR COLLABORATIVE WRITING AMONG EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPERS

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Background

The original idea for producing this series of papers came about (as many ideas do) as the result of a conversation. The conversation focused on the difficulties, obstacles, problems and challenges associated with academic writing, as well as the importance of many of the interconnected themes in the area of educational development. All of us in the Irish educational developers group had witnessed the struggles associated with the role that academic writing plays within the walls of higher education institutions. In addition, we all had ideas to share about the practice of educational development, and were eager to find ways of disseminating these insights in ways that could be accessed in a coherent way by more than just the relatively small group of professionals we encountered at our inter-university meetings.

It was the combined motivation to explore and participate in the writing process more fully, and that associated with our collective sense of having something important to say, that fuelled the impetus for this project. The proposal was supported through funding by Ireland's Higher Education Authority, whose commitment to this kind of dialogue and output continues to be crucial as a supporter of change, development and collaboration in Higher Educational Institutions.

The educational developers' writers' week

Based on a professional development template that has been used at the University of Limerick for several years now (Moore 2003; Murray 2005), a writers' week experience was planned and subsequently took place in September of 2004. The planned project drew heavily from, but was also significantly different to the writers' 'retreats' that have been part of the University of Limerick's professional development landscape since early 2001. While the features of the retreat experience were very similar to those run at UL, this was the first time that colleagues had met together in the same dedicated space and time to produce a series of writings on similar and interconnected themes, with the aim of producing a single cohesive written output for dissemination.

Thus, the pressures on the group may have been more intense, but also the levels of possible collaboration and peer support were also stronger and more relevant than was the case with previous writers weeks where academics came from a wide range of diverse fields of expertise.

Rationale for a writers' 'retreat'

The rationale for a writers' week is based on previous evidence that people and the quality of their ideas can derive enormous benefits from a short-term intensive writing environment (Grant and Knowles 2000). Writers' retreats have already been found to facilitate the achievement of an exclusive focus on writing by creating an arena in which the normal distractions of work and life are temporarily removed (Moore 1995). This can serve to initiate, to nourish or to accelerate writing, even if standard writing habits need to be sustained in different ways during the normal course of professional daily life. Despite operating in educational environments, university faculty (including educational developers) report that it is often difficult to achieve an exclusive focus on writing in a way that can be facilitated by a retreat environment (Cameron 1998). Furthermore, given the dispersed nature of Ireland's educational developers network, we hoped that the logistics of collaboration, interaction and peer support would be much more easily achieved on this five day, residential programme.

Essentially, the retreat environment was seen as a context within which a community of practice could be created and enhanced, a set of concrete outcomes could be achieved, and a precedent for collaborative dialogue (both written and spoken) could be set. This rationale echoes the objectives originally associated with the UL writers' retreats i.e.: *'to create an atmosphere of trust and safety for productive writing; to help participants to learn from each other about the process of writing; to create a multidisciplinary community of writers who would provide support and advice to one another both during the retreat and beyond; to explore the important links between teaching, research, writing and scholarship; and to have a productive working experience in which each participant would commit to a specific writing goal and try to achieve it [within the time frame of the retreat]'* (Moore 2003:335).

The format of the week

Writers' retreats have been designed then to operate as temporary writing 'sanctuaries' away from the normal rhythms of professional life. Because it is still an unusual and unconventional way of working and collaborating, it often feels like a daring and somewhat complicated experiment and one that requires much planning and preparation both on a personal and a professional level. Despite these complexities, the format tends to be simple: Participants gather in a remote location equipped with ideas, data and literature they have gathered in order to be prepared to complete a piece of academic writing. Each of the five days is devoted to individual writing time, punctuated with opportunities for feedback from colleagues, group or paired meetings to discuss progress and opportunities to exchange shared writing experiences. Every day begins with a facilitated session that provides structured advice on writing. Participants gather in the evenings for social interaction and dinner in a central location, and for further discussion on the writing projects in which each of them is engaged.

All of these features were part of the educational developers writers' week that gave rise to this document. In order to gauge participants' expectations and goals and to ascertain their perceptions about the extent to which these were met, views were sought at the beginning and the end of the experience. These views were captured on pre and post writers' week questionnaires, which contain qualitative insights about the value and the impact of the experience.

Positive expectations

While existing research on the writers' retreat format shows that participants tend to express the need to 'get started', to 'hit the ground running' and to initiate a writing project (Moore 2003; Grant and Knowles 2000), the motives of the participants in this instance seemed to focus more on completing, on finishing and on pulling together many ideas in the form of a series of written pieces. This can be attributed at least in part to the pre-work and preparation in which members had participated in the months leading up to the writers' week. It may also be the case that the educational developers group is one that is characterised by a particularly strong need for space

and time in which to contain and articulate the many ideas and experiences that they encounter in the course of their professional lives. Indeed, the majority of participants specifically highlighted the importance of creating space and time in which to write, a function of the week to which they seemed to attribute the most value. In articulating their expectations, they talked about the importance of sharing wisdom, of getting feedback from their peers, of forging new links, of enhancing 'serious writing', and of the opportunities for creativity, collegiality, collaboration and enhanced commitment. In terms of more tangible outcomes, they highlighted the importance of producing a useful, experience-based set of papers/chapters that could be disseminated beyond the group and that could generally inform educational development and academic practice in meaningful ways.

Concerns

Like almost any new endeavour, the participants did not come without at least some concerns. They wondered if they would be able to write effectively without the normal framework of information access that they could avail of in their educational settings, they had concerns about building and maintaining project momentum, they worried that they might get side tracked by distractions, be unable to co-ordinate and integrate their writing and they had some concerns about the consistency of writing styles among the group. These concerns were subsequently discussed during the course of the week. This final product represents a negotiation of the different voices of the members and may also echo some of those concerns.

Outcomes

In addition to the tangible output, participants also expressed some behavioural and attitudinal changes in their approach both to academic writing and to educational development. They felt that the experience had reinforced the principles of inter-institutional co-operation, a dynamic that they felt needed nourishment and support. They sensed that they had developed new strategies for producing important written work within the field of educational development. They mentioned that the week had helped them to refine, to structure, to express and to display ideas in a way that was personally empowering. Several participants highlighted that the dialogue and writing that had occurred during the week had the potential to have a strong impact both within the educational institutions that were represented and beyond. Generally, a sense of group cohesiveness among educational developers was seen as an important 'by-product' of the week.

Conclusions

Recently, Grant and Knowles (2000) have argued that writing in academia needs to be reframed. It may be much more constructive to position writing as a community-based, collaborative, even social act, dynamics that stand in sharp contrast to private, isolated, individualistic processes that often prevail (Haines et al. 1997). Certainly, the educational developers' writers' week, of which this document is the first concrete output, demonstrated again the power and the momentum that can be derived from the creation of a collaborative community of practice. We believe that despite the temporary nature of the intervention, its impact has traveled back into the educational organisations that it represented, and there is a greater likelihood that dynamics to which it gave rise can in some way become embedded in academic practice across a range of different institutions.

This project has reinforced the importance for educational developers to be part of the dialogue of academic writing, to bring scholarship to their own work and to share that scholarship with others. Overall, we believe that the voice of the Irish inter-university educational developers group has become stronger as a result of this endeavour and we continue to endorse the collegiality and collaboration that it has strengthened.

References

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