STAFF DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR PUBLICATION IN THE FACULTY OF COMMUNITY AND HEALTH SCIENCE AT UWC: A SHORT REPORT

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Abstract

Introduction:
Strategies for improving the publication output of academics are an essential component of research directives at tertiary institutions. The aim of this report was to highlight the effects of a writing retreat as an intervention strategy used by a university faculty to improve academic publication output. The strategy used included a structured programme over a period of three days guided by a facilitator.

Methods:
The report uses a qualitative design to report the effects of the writing retreat on the participants.

Results:
The major themes that emerged were reviewing and critical reading, writing for publication, personal growth and confidence, dedicated time, peer mentoring, programme structure and facilitation, and future directives.

Conclusion:
From the feedback obtained, it is evident that strategies such as a writing retreat, provide academics with an opportunity to produce articles that are a benefit to the authors' career trajectories as well as the institutional publication profile of their university.

Key words: scholarly publication, writing strategies, writing retreats, UWC, tertiary institutions, Community and Health Sciences

BACKGROUND

Developing a research 'track record' is imperative in the academic world. One of the key indicators of a research track record is an extensive publications list. "This can influence job satisfaction, promotion opportunities, rating as a researcher and success in obtaining grants and consultancies" (Harrison & Herbohn, 2010). Research productivity which includes publications is one of the most important means by which researchers in universities and research institutions are evaluated (Frantz, Rhoda, Struthers and Phillips, 2010). Writing papers is a critical task for researchers. According to Harrison and Herbohn (2010), "some researchers are 'writerholics' who write through compulsion; others are strongly disinclined to 'put pen to paper' and will always find something else pressing to do rather than write up their research". Academics at university level need to shift from primarily teaching to finding a balance between teaching and research. Currently the proportion of the publications published by authors in the allied health sciences is assumed to be insignificant (Ncayiyana, 2006). While success in research is to a large extent an individual experience, a number of strategies may be employed to increase effectiveness (Rhoda et al, 2006).

The research output of academic departments has been under scrutiny at the University of the Western Cape. The number of articles published in peer-reviewed journals has been low relative to academic rung, years of experience, the number of papers presented at conferences, as well as the number of postgraduate theses supervised to completion (Frantz et al, 2010). This discrepancy suggests that many of the academics have experienced difficulty publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals. Often research presented as conference presentations at conferences is never subsequently converted to a publication (Scherer,Dickersin, & Langenberg, 1994; Weber et al., 1998). Numerous barriers to publishing have been cited in research, and these commonly include lack of time (Dyson & Sparling, 2006; Oermann, 2003; Sprague et al., 2003), training (Grzybowski et al, 2003), and mentoring/ peer support (Grzybowski et al., 2003; Stepanski, 2002).

The Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape has established a policy of providing support for staff in all aspects of research productivity including providing opportunities for writing for publication. These opportunities were based on the demonstrated value of peer support (Grzybowski et al., 2003; Tudiver et al., 2008), and dedicated time. A writing retreat was conceptualized as an intervention providing dedicated time and support for staff in the faculty. In addition mentoring relationships were established for novice authors Each participant was required to act as a reviewer or critical reader for other participants. In this way, participants had the experiential exercise of giving and receiving feedback which simulated the review process editors follow at journals. Thus this study aims to highlight the effects of a writing retreat as an intervention strategy used by a university faculty to improve academic publication output.

METHODS

Research setting

The Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape is one of six faculties. It currently hosts the departments of Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Social Work, Human Ecology, Dietetics and Sport recreation and exercise science. In addition, the schools of Public health, Nursing, and Natural medicine are also located within the faculty.

Participants:

A general invitation to participate in the writing for publication intervention was extended to staff members from the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences. The only eligibility requirement was that interested staff needed to have completed the following pre-workshop tasks: a) have collected research data b) identified a journal , c) collected related articles. Interested staff submitted a 500 word abstract evidencing that they have met the above criteria. A total of 20 places were reserved for the retreat. However, only 14 responded voluntarily with the common goal of needing time out to write an article. All 14 applicants were selected for inclusion in the intervention.

Intervention:

A 3-day structured writing retreat was facilitated during the June 2009 vacation. As stated before, participants were requested to report for the intervention with analysed data, related articles and the authors' guidelines of the journal they wish to submit their article to.Table 1 below illustrates the basic format that the workshop took. Each day of the retreat is reflected in a column whilst sessions are reflected in rows. Each cell summarizes the content of a session with its corresponding action plan.

RESULTS

Participant profile

Table 2 below summarizes the demographic data of the participants including the departments represented (n=14). These participants were a highly self-selected group in that they shared common goals around writing for publication. The large majority of the participants were novice authors.

Table 1: Format for writing retreat

Day 1	Day 2:	Day 3
Session 1: Introduction Participants received information regarding guidelines for writing an introduction **Action plan** Wrote an introduction	**Session 1: Reviewing** Participants submitted introduction and methods section to another critical reader in there group **Action plan:** Read and write feedback Consultation with others	**Session 1:Reviewing** Participants submitted corrections and discussion section to a critical reader in the group **Action plan:** Read and write feedback Peer discussion
Session 2: Editing Participants submitted an introduction to a critical reader in their group and received an introduction from another participant **Action plan:** Edit introduction as a critical reader. Start thinking about the methods section	**Session 2: Feedback** Participants gave feedback to the person whose article they read and discussed possible recommendations and received feedback on their own article **Action plan:** Evaluate feedback	**Session 2: Feedback** Participants gave feedback to the person whose article they read and discussed possible recommendations Participants received guidelines for writing the conclusion and reviewing this section **Action plan:** Write conclusion and add references. Submit full draft of article to your original critical reader
Session 3: Feedback Participants gave feedback to the person whose article they read. Identified and received feedback on their introduction **Action plan**: Evaluate feedback	**Session 3:methods & editing** Participants corrected the introduction and methods section. Participants received guidelines for writing results and reviewing these sections. **Action plan:** Write the results section and make corrections	**Session 3: Reflection and outcome** Participants had: - Reviewed an article - Gone through the process of writing an article
Session 4 Integration Participants corrected their introductions. Received the methods section guidelines **Action plan:** Write the methods section	**Session 4: Discussion** Participants submitted the corrected sections and the results section to critical reader. Participants received guidelines for writing the discussion and reviewing these sections. **Action plan:** Receive and give feedback on the sections submitted Write the discussion	

Table 2: Demographics of participants

Departments represented	Nursing Physiotherapy Social Work Sport, Recreation and Exercise Science Core Courses
Gender	2 Males 12 Females
Academic Status	2 Associate Professors 2 Senior Lecturers 10 Lecturers
Qualifications	2 PhD's 12 Masters
Author status	11 novice authors (< 3 publications) 2 developing authors (3-10 publications) 1 established author > 10 publications

Workshop Evaluation

The writing retreat was formally evaluated by the participants. Overall, the feedback was resoundingly positive and participants reported that the writing retreat facilitated personal growth of the participants as well as skills relating to writing. The feedback has been subjected to a rudimentary thematic analysis and 7 themes were identified namely reviewing and critical reading, writing for publication, personal growth & confidence, dedicated time, peer mentoring, programme structure & facilitation, and future directives (Table 4).

One year follow up information

At the end of the writing retreat each participant had completed a draft article from the introduction to the references. The status of the articles following the writing retreat (12 months later) is illustrated in Table 3 below. Of the articles completed at the writing retreat, 75% were submitted to a journal for review and consideration for publication. Of those submitted, 42% (n=5/12) were submitted to accredited journals of which three were published, one accepted for publication and the other was asked to revise.

Table 3: Status of articles 9 months after the writing retreat (n=14)

Status of article	No	%
In progress	2	14.3%
Asked to revise by journal	2	14.3%
Peer reviewed	1	
Accredited journal	1	
Accepted for publication	1	7.2%
Peer reviewed journal	0	
Accredited journal	1	
Published	9	
Peer reviewed journal	6	
Accredited Journal	3	64.2%

Discussion and Conclusion:

The findings reported above is consistent with the literature where dedicated time for academic writing is extremely useful and necessary for consistent publication output (Grzybowski et al. 2003; Steiner et al 2008). The resounding positive feedback from participants suggests that at a summative level the writing retreat was successful in fostering greater confidence in academic writing, building capacity in academic writing & publication, as well as assisting staff to overcome internal barriers as is evident by the 12 articles that have been submitted for consideration in a journal. These findings are

Table 4: Themes and comments of participant evaluations

Theme	Category	Comment
Reviewing & critical reading: This theme summarized participants' thoughts and experiences about participating in a review process that aimed to develop their skills in critical reading, as well as giving constructive feedback and receiving feedback in a non-defensive manner.	Acquire critical reading or reviewing skills	" learnt to read my work more critically" "The sharing and reviewing of different peoples work helped to broaden my perspectives"
	Learnt to give constructive feedback	"Gained confidence in giving feedback as a critical reader" "Reviewing others work was good and the group support was great"
	Receive feedback non-defensively	"I am now more open to the writing process and less afraid of showing others my work" "I have learnt to take criticism positively from the other readers"
Writing for publication. This theme summarized the reflections of participants about their ability to engage in academic writing for publication.	Augment their knowledge about the writing process	"I gained valuable insight re: writing process" "Able to grow in understanding of the writing process"
	Produce a draft article	"I came with nothing and had to start from scratch and now I have a draft article." "My article is ready for final editing"
Personal growth, professional development and confidence. This theme summarized participants' feedback about how the retreat contributed to their development.	Personal development.	"This was a major contribution to my personal development" "I have been able to pay attention to my own personal development"
	Increase mastery and goal achievement	"I have been able to pay attention to my own goals and I've achieved what I intended during the 3 days"
	Increased confidence	"I have gained confidence from this retreat – the group was supportive and I felt accepted within the group"
	Overcoming internal barriers	"So many internal barriers were overcome by being exposed to this process"

Dedicated time. Participants unanimously stated that the dedicated time was beneficial.	Time and space	"The luxury of having all the time to focus on writing only is definitely conducive to the process" "Creating the space for writing is appreciated" "The dedicated time out was what was needed to accomplish the task of writing an article" "Dedicated time and the resources of established authors guiding novice authors was good"
Peer mentoring & supportive relationships. The theme summarized the feedback from the participants that the peer mentoring relationships at the retreat were	Conducive to learning Supportive.	"The experienced authors assisted in building the confidence of the novice authors" "Allowed people at different phases of their writing career to compare notes and to give tips" "The spirit within the group was supportive " "I appreciated the non-judgemental approach of all involved" "I felt like a member of the group and the dynamics was good"
Programme structure & Facilitation: This theme summarized participants' evaluation of the programme structure and facilitation style.	Programme structure	"Although this retreat involves intensive writing it allows one to meaningfully contribute to others work and also add value to your own" "Discussions during and after sessions were informative" "Excellent – able to use time effectively to produce draft article"

	Facilitation style	"The approach of the workshop was very effective" "The informal pace and flexibility yet focussed design is excellent and should be maintained" "Very relaxed facilitation approach thus making me comfortable to work at my own pace but still be productive"
	Future directives. This theme captured the participants' sentiments about future interventions.	Should intervention be repeated? "An endeavour that needs to be repeated" "Follow up sessions needed" "Need ongoing support for editing, critiquing etc" Benefits to the university "Endeavours such as this should happen more often as output will be beneficial to the university "

similar to those of Steiner et al (2008) who reported that writing workshops can help junior academics in developing in the process of scholarly writing. The value of a supportive environment has previous been noted by several authors (Bryan 1996; Grzybowski et al. 2003). It is thus evident that peer writing groups and the motivation to working with others can play an important role in helping academics acquire the skills needed for publication.

Of the articles submitted for publication, 6 articles were published in a peer reviewed journal, the opportunity provided for novice authors by local peer reviewed journals cannot be mistaken. The peer review process offers authors the opportunity to be evaluated by their peers and to be subjected the scrutiny of ensuring that the published work is relevant and acceptable. According to Ware (2008), academics are committed to the peer review process, with the vast majority believing that it helps scientific communication and in particular that it improves the quality of published papers. In addition, three of these articles have been published in accredited journals which translated into funds for the university and the respective authors.

Thus it would appear that it would be beneficial to consider how the principle of dedicated time can be adopted at various levels of the university in formal and informal ways. At a formative level, the structure of the writing retreat proved effective and useful in familiarizing staff with the writing process, building capacity and strengthening peer relational or mentoring ties or expanding their knowledge of and insight into the aforementioned processes. However, these initiatives do not necessarily have to have major cost implications but can be designed for small groups in a department or in the faculty (Frantz et al 2010).

Implications for future staff development endeavours

It is suggested that the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences consider the following recommendations to improve publication output:

– Strategies for staff should focus on strategically dedicating time for academic writing
– Providing infrastructural support for writing retreats as a strategic staff development initiative
– Target submissions to accredited journals to

increase the potential income from publications and to offset costs associated with the facilitation of such interventions.

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