

CONQUERING THE PUBLISHING SILENCES OF BLACK ACADEMIC WOMEN

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Abstract

Introduction: Although women fulfil and play meaningful roles in the academic life of universities, their contributions have seldom been acknowledged. The voices of women outside of the dominant western context of knowledge production, such as women in South African historically black universities (HBUs), remain largely marginalized. Women at these HBUs have indicated a need for mentoring and support to assist with their scholarly endeavours.

Objectives: The objective of the present study was to determine the participants' views on the ways in which the mentoring process was used to overcome the challenges of publishing their academic work.

Methods: Using a qualitative method and a focus group discussion to collect data.

Participants: Lecturers who attended an academic writing skills development program.

Setting: University of the Western Cape.

Intervention: Academic writing skills development program.

Results: The findings of this study indicates that dedicated time, learning to write, a supportive network and a culture of publishing in the institution was needed to assist black academic women conquer their publishing silences.

Conclusion: A mentoring process can facilitate academic publication output.

Key words: mentoring, women, university, publication.

Introduction

Although women fulfil many responsibilities and play meaningful roles in the academic life of universities, their contributions have seldom been acknowledged and supported by their institutions (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Dines, 1993; Evans, 1996; Henry, 1990; Kaufman, 1978; Mabokela, 2002; Park, 1996; Williams, 2000).

Gender relations have shifted over the last few decades and women are now employed in greater numbers and their voices more represented than in the history of patriarchal academia (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Bagilhole, 2000; Cooper & Subotzky, 2001; Harper, Baldwin, Gansneder & Chronister, 2001; Morley, Unterhalter & Gold, 2001; Park, 1996). Although men continue to predominate in senior positions, women are largely represented in the lower ranks of the academia (Evans, 1996; Kaufman, 1978; Morley et al., 2001; Park, 1996; Subotzky, 2001). Experiences of black female academics emphasize how their academic careers are disadvantaged by the intersect of race and gender which render their voices 'silent' (Mabokela, 2002). Therefore these women are especially disadvantaged in relation to their publishing endeavours, which are integrally linked to their promotion.

Additionally, women especially black South African women are often referred to as "silent". This preconception must be examined in order to contextualize the 'silence' by recognizing that silence is usually associated with power and powerlessness. During the examinations of the concepts of silence, there must be a recognition that dominant social groups often control the channels of communication and that the notion of 'silence' may, in fact, result in women accepting subordination

and/or submissiveness. It may also be argued that when academic women do not challenge andocentric cultures, which often dominate academies, they may, in fact be accepting their subordinate status. It is therefore conceivable that academic women's 'silence' may contribute to their lack of confidence and vigour in claiming their full membership as academics who contribute to knowledge production in academia. Mama (2000) explains that women need to realize that writing and publishing offers them an opportunity to maintain their sense of identity by retaining self-respect. Through writing women may be able to challenge the paradigms of the patriarchal social order and dominant ideology. She continues to assert that many voices are surfacing in these times of shifting boundaries and changing subjects. However, in contrast to the verbal cacophony, the written space remains exclusive, retaining boundaries that ensure writing is produced as unevenly as it is distributed. The printed word continues to be largely monopolized and mediated by a Western- and male dominated international intelligentsia (Mama, 2000, p.20).

Greater effort is needed to assist women to be involved in research, theory development and academic debates. Institutions of higher education, especially historically black universities (HBUs), thus need to implement mentorship programmes and provide training in research and publishing skills (Mabokela, 2002; Mautin -Cairncross, 2003).

The Mentoring Process at the University of the Western Cape (UWC)

To address this need all female staff at the UWC was invited to attend a workshop at the end of 2002, coordinated by the Staff Development Office related to mentoring. Subsequent to this workshop it was

decided that a mentoring process would take the form of monthly workshops in 2003. These workshops were to take place on the first Friday of every month, each with a duration of four hours (09h00 – 13h00). This process would last for six months and participants had to commit to attend every workshop. Initially there were twelve participants but only four participants completed the course. The reasons for the attrition are not within the scope of this paper and will therefore not be discussed.

Each workshop was divided into two broad sessions, with the first session focusing on writing styles, grammatical and technical issues while the second session allowed for participants to engage with their own manuscripts that were being drafted for publication. These sessions were structured to include peer revision and editing. UWC supported this process by employing an external consultant to facilitate the workshops. The aim of the present study was to determine the participants' views on the ways in which the mentoring process assisted to overcome the challenges of publishing.

Methods

Using a qualitative method of a focus group discussion, data for the present study was collected. Everybody that completed the mentoring program was invited to participate in the focus group discussion to determine their view on the mentoring process thus convenient sampling was used. Three out of the four participants in the mentoring program as well as one of the co-ordinators of the course participated in the focus group discussion, which lasted 45 minutes. The role of the co-ordinator was purely administrative and she also went through the mentoring process and was thus included in the sample. The participants met in an office in a time

agreed on by all the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants and confidentiality was assured. By common consent, the focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed, verbatim by an independent person with experience in transcription. Prior to the tape-recorded discussion the participants conferred that the discussion would be structured into three broad research questions, namely time as a dimension, challenges and benefits. The analysis of the focus group discussions started with transcription of information from the audiotape recordings to produce a manuscript. A comparison was then made with the notes taken during the discussions, to verify accuracy. The researchers' role was then to focus on extracting meaningful ideas from the different participants opinions. Afterwards, transcripts were read through several times by the researchers, and emphasis was put on the emergence from the ideas of themes. Notes were made throughout the reading of the transcripts. Thus data was coded in themes. To ensure credibility in the present study notes were taken during peer debriefing sessions and member checks were obtained from the participants to verify the research findings and actual words of the participants were used to represent themes where possible.

Results

The themes that emerged from the focus group discussion were: dedicated time, learning to write, developing a supportive network and institutional culture.

Dedicated time

Time was considered as a major challenge to the process. Participants felt that time constraints often posed as a problem when having to commit to the

stipulations for inclusion in this process. Since a central criterion to inclusion was a personal commitment to attend all the sessions for the stipulated period, many participants initially felt that this type of commitment was a 'tall order'. This sentiment was expressed by participants in the following quotations:

...The other challenge is the time to be able to write and to give feedback in the next session... (Voice 1).

...Time management is a problem... (Voice 2).

Commitment to the group was also expressed as a challenge for the participants. The following quotation illustrates this.

...You came in February with the knowledge that you are now part of this journey and that there is no way of jumping off this boat... (Voice 1).

The group felt that the time periods that were used in vacations for intensive writing and editing for the completion of the articles were beneficial. Participants agreed that for future writing exercises the first few days of vacations could be productively used to focus on writing for publishing. These sentiments were expressed as follows:

... Using the first few days of the holidays before you get into a holiday... (Voice 3).

... If you can take four [days] out of every holiday... and get together, people will be able to produce something within that holiday... (Voice 1).

It is clear from the above quotations that the participants found that predetermined time slots assist with the completion of an article.

Other strategies focused on ways to ensure dedicated time for writing.

...So if you really close your office door for the next hour you can do a lot... (Voice 2).

...Not only closing your door to students but to colleagues as well... (Voice 1).

Learning to write

Language was considered a major challenge to a number of the participants because often, English was not the participant's mother-tongue but rather a second or third language. Thus, the problems were related not only to writing as an activity, but also to writing in a second or third language. The following quotation illustrates this:

...I'm worried about being Afrikaans (speaking) and the writing is in English... (Voice 2).

...I think there were some tips on using a language book, a dictionary and about team writing... that was an exciting session... (Voice 3).

Another challenge that was identified was pressure of 'self' and self-concept. Given the language concerns as well as the lack of publishing skills, participants expressed their concerns on the publicizing of their work that they were not confident with. These challenges are illustrated by the following excerpts that the participants expressed during the focus group discussion:

...It shows that your challenge was actually within yourself... (Voice 4).

...When I first started writing I just wanted to keep it to myself because it is so embarrassing... (Voice 3).

Participants also identified language 'tips' during these sessions. These 'tips' assisted the

participants to develop the skill of writing and reflecting on what they had written as is illustrated in the following excerpts.

...I can now use my dictionary. I never used a dictionary before even though English was not my first language but now I am like a dictionary person and there is a huge difference... (Voice 2).

...write forward or write down when you remember things... (Voice 4).

The overcoming of multiple challenges as reported by the participants was encapsulated by the following quotation:

...So you have to overcome this personal struggle as well and not just the language. It is making yourself vulnerable... (Voice 1).

Developing a supportive network

Participants felt that being part of a group created pressure on their ability to produce an article. They felt that pressured to fulfil their commitments to the writing process and to progress as agreed on by the group in the previous session. Failing which, they felt that they would be impeding the progress of the group. This challenge is succinctly expressed in the following excerpt:

...If we look at the dynamics of working in a group it actually puts a lot of pressure on you. You can call it pressure, because you will be letting the group down if you don't feel like doing it. Even if it is a group that you work well with... (Voice 1).

Furthermore the participants also felt that these sessions had assisted them in understanding the process involved in writing an article as is indicated in the following quotation.

...The session about the conversation and the importance of the literature review you have to sort of check up what people have said about their topic before you can say your little bit, you know... (Voice 2).

Many of the participants made reference to the support of the group to their development as 'authors'. The excerpts below illustrate the value and security of belonging to a supportive writing group:

...people felt comfortable and [secure]. When one thinks on how we actually finished each others' writing... Nobody felt that it was a personal attack ... (Voice 3).

...You never felt threatened and I think that feeling safe was a big benefit. I mean feeling safe to express yourself and giving valuable input... (Voice 2).

Clearly, the participants valued the support of the safe environment where they felt they could express themselves and develop publishing skills. This group provided a 'space' where the participants felt that their opinions were valued and respected. Participating in this group also made participants comfortable with each other's constructive feedback relating to their writing in order for them to develop and mature in this process.

Participants also felt that the process also contributed to their ability to work and develop interdisciplinary writing skills, as outlined in the excerpts below:

...To do inter-disciplinary research is not just group work and group writing... (Voice 4).

...I have developed a comparative mentality and also see how the biomedical sciences are doing their thing because I interacted with physiotherapist and social workers. I then become aware about the different conventions and I could also give my input from my perspective ... (Voice 4).

Participants also felt that being part of this group was the incentive to complete a publication, as was expressed in the quotation below:

...I think it has a lot to do with motivation. If you can walk out of a two day workshop and you can go write an article now...I think after that six months of one day a week, one day a month, you can also write an article. I think you were talking about the continuous inspiration... (Voice 1).

It is therefore evident that belonging to this group assisted in providing and exposing participants to situations, which enhanced their publishing skills. These skills may not have been developed to this extent had they not belonged to such a grouping. This process improved their relationship with publishing.

From this discussion it is evident that the participants experienced challenges but that many of the challenges were resolved by being part of this mentoring process. This illustrates that the process offered benefits to the participants at many various levels.

Institutional Culture

The participants expressed that it would be beneficial if publishing were focused on as an academic activity in the staff induction programmes at UWC.

...I feel that research and development office should tell us, 'people this is the amount of money that we should bring in this year, here is the support that we can offer ... (Voice 2).

...I think that every department needs to do an audit in terms of junior staff and with regards to publishing ... (Voice 4).

Institutional leadership should be more actively involved in mentoring staff especially their publishing endeavours. This is reflected in the excerpts below:

...There are people out there with magnificent publication lists... (Voice 2).

...We have to change the culture as a collective and as individuals in order to enrich the research culture... (Voice 1).

Group members expressed the need for a Faculty Research Day where research of faculty members can be presented as an exercise to stimulate debate and to provide opportunities for joint research. They articulated it as follows:

... I want to come back to a thing such as a research day for faculties... My master's students did a poster ... and it attracted a lot of attention in Zambia. I did a poster in Greece. A colleague did a poster in Australia, but nobody knows about it ... We need a sharing space... (Voice 2).

... sometimes you feel like telling someone that [you] had an article published... (Voice 3).

Participants were in agreement that accreditation of faculty journals should be sought and in this way UWC's research status and research output could be enhanced. The excerpts below attest to this:

... Education has ... a faculty journal. ADC used to have journal... (Voice 1).

...when I look at the journals and their addresses, there are quite a number of those that are at universities. ... Why can't we have an accredited faculty journal...? (Voice 2).

Discussion and conclusion

As academic women, especially as black South African academic women, we are required to take stock of our lives, view circumstances and positions in the academy and in society, and go on to develop strategies to enable us to make sense of our available resources in order to 'create' time for publications. We need to take seriously Mama's position that writing is a political, subversive and transformative act (Mama, 2000). We, as South African women, are thus urged to contribute to the global economy of knowledge production and our own empowerment by our publications. The women in the present study expressed that, allocating a dedicated time to write, developing writing skills, a supportive network to assist with writing and a culture of writing at the institution would assist with their publishing endeavours. Time was also mentioned as a challenge to conducting research which leads to publication by a group of females in a study by Schulze, (2005). Working in a group which assists with the development of publication skills was mentioned by females locally as well as internationally (Singh et al 1995, Schulze, 2005). The need to develop a culture of research and establishment of opportunities for mentorship has also been recommended by females of another South African institution of higher education (Mabokela, 2002). The mentoring for publication process, implemented at UWC should therefore be continued as it could be used as a tool that could

facilitate academic publication output of female academics at this institution.

Editor's note: Consequently the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape publishes a peer reviewed journal bi-annually and is attempting to get the journal accredited.

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Computerised District Health Information Systems: An Intermediate Course
Using Field Trials In Health Systems Research: 2 Weeks
Survey Methods For Health Research
Alcohol Problems: Developing Multi-Faceted Programmes For Communities Living With Alcohol
Motivational Interviewing
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Equity In Health: Its Importance And Ways To Achieve It
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Computerised District Health Information Systems: An Advanced Course
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Use Of Information For Hospital Management
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