Demystifying the publication process – A structured writing program to facilitate dissemination of teaching and learning scholarship

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This paper reports on a writing program to support academic staff to publish in peer-refereed journals. Nine participants completed a twelve-week program, which involved regular meetings, set writing tasks and peer feedback on drafts. A pre and post survey and follow up interviews were used to gather feedback. Participants especially valued the discipline of weekly sessions, and peer feedback. They reported increased skills and confidence in their writing, greater knowledge of the publication process, and intention to continue writing. Although five papers were published, a twelve month follow up revealed that original writing intentions were not sustained. Thus, while a structured writing program can be effective, the pressures academic staff experience trying to meet conflicting requirements of teaching, administration and research, must also be addressed.

Keywords: Academic writing programs; SOTL; Publishing

Background

Pressure to publish in refereed journals is felt across the Higher Education sector. Traditionally, publication of research in one’s discipline was considered the norm. More recently, concern about the quality of university learning and teaching, growth in student numbers and diversity, and increasing use of technology in learning and teaching, has led to a growing interest in pedagogical research as exemplified by the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) ‘movement’ (Bass, 1999; McKinney, 2007). It has long been recognised that SoTL is more than a scholarly approach to teaching (Boyer, 1990). SoTL delves deeper into the pedagogy of student learning through critical reflection, evidence-based investigation and review of the scholarly literature, and requires the results of these investigations to be disseminated through scholarly papers, conferences and journals. (Boyer 1990)

However, many academic staff do not have strong publication records in their own discipline for a variety of reasons, especially those from professional industry backgrounds who may have no previous research experience at all. But they do who have an interest in teaching and learning, and are likely to be in situations where relevant data collection is already occurring as part of institutional student feedback processes or faculty quality assurance framework, so SoTL offers a practical solution to mentoring non-research-active staff into research and publication. Engaging in SoTL can help academic staff reflect more on their own practice, and encourage and facilitate improvements in teaching practice. The SoTL movement

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provides opportunities to engage in SoTL through individual classroom projects or as part of larger
disciplinary or cross-disciplinary collaborations (Henderson & Buchanan, 2007). SoTL involves making
research public so it can be critiqued and built on by others. Thus publication is a key aspect of SoTL
(Murray, 2009; Weimer, 2006).

Disappointingly, it seems many SoTL projects remain unpublished (personal experience of authors
and colleagues) and as a result, dissemination and evaluation of learning and teaching innovations and
initiatives is limited. Furthermore, academics who do not publish miss out on professional and career benefits
that are associated with a publication record in peer reviewed journals.

In our experience, most academics are keen to publish but need support to do so especially if they have
not had previous experience in publishing in peer-reviewed journals. At the same time, a worldwide general
push to raise publication rates has meant more papers are being submitted to peer-reviewed journals
(Anderson, 2010). As a result, publication has become more competitive, especially in higher-rated journals
(Aarssen et al, 2008), and success rates tend to be lower (Anderson, 2010). To achieve professional
recognition, publications must be in reputable high impact journals, well-written and aligned to the journal
scope and target readership. Academics aspiring to publish need to be more strategic and focused to be
successful.

In order to support academic staff and advance SOTL, the authors identified an opportunity to design,
implement, and evaluate a ‘writing for publication’ program for delivery in the first authors’ faculty. A major
aim of the program was for participants to develop sustainable habits of regular writing in the context of their
everyday work demands, so a residential writing workshop was considered unsuitable for this purpose.

The first author is an academic developer located in a ‘satellite’ campus Faculty of a metropolitan
university and provides expert learning and teaching advice and practical assistance including support of
research in learning and teaching. The second author is an academic developer in a central teaching and
learning unit located at the central campus. The third author was the program facilitator and external mentor
with many years of experiences in SoTL, publishing, and conducting similar programs. All three authors
strongly believe in the value of SoTL for academic development - as a means of professional development for
those undertaking it and as a means of improving teaching and learning practices.

Writing Program

Writing Program principles

The writing program was designed to reflect research on the process of writing. Specifically, the program
focused on the development of self-regulation of writing including systematic planning, monitoring and
evaluating writing activities (Cho & Cho, 2007; Cho, Cho & Hacker, 2010; Hammann, 2005; Silvia, 2008;
Zimmerman, 1998; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997) and encouraged development of writing skills through
regular writing practise and constructive feedback (Kellogg, 2008; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009; Torrance,
found that all reported increases in publication rates. The authors concluded that interventions can be effective
in increasing confidence, skills and teamwork. They also noted that support groups were superior to other
interventions in terms of publication rates and that short didactic courses were least effective.

One key aim of the program was to support participants to develop habits of productive writers,
namely regular, preferably daily writing, separating the generation of ideas from critical (self)-review, and
seeking (and acting on) feedback on early drafts (Hartley, 2008; Hartley & Branthwaite, 1989); and to
encourage feelings, thoughts and actions associated with successful academic writing and publishing. The
program also incorporated features of effective writing and professional development programs, namely
setting clear goals and expectations including a statement of commitment from participants; creating social
support through peer encouragement and sharing of experiences and feelings about writing; requiring regular writing; providing feedback on multiple drafts; encouraging the monitoring of progress towards personal goals; and having a facilitator who acted as mentor and provided encouragement and support to participants (Boice, 1990; McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006; Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006).

The program used a workbook (Belcher, 2009b) as a set text. The book has received positive reviews (see for example, Gump, 2010) and is based on successful writing programs for graduate students and early career academics developed over a number of years by the author (Belcher, 2009a). The workbook was followed in terms of program length and the topics covered, and a number of suggested activities including developing a writing plan and competing weekly writing tasks. Additional resources and references were included to augment particular topics such as writing paper titles, or to address issues raised during sessions such as self-plagiarism and writing with co-authors.

Table 1. Weekly program topics (adapted from the chapters in Belcher, 2009b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Getting ready to write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Starting your paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Selecting a journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Developing your argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Reviewing the literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Deciding on the structure of your paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Presenting evidence to support your argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Opening and concluding your paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Peer reviewing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Responding to peer reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Editing your paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Submitting your paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the 12 week program, time was allocated to discussing strategies for overcoming obstacles to academic writing and publishing commonly reported by academics (Belcher, 2009b):

- loss of writing momentum,
- perceived lack of time often related to poor time management,
- limited support for academic writing for publication at the institutional level,
- a lack of appropriate role models and mentors,
- inadequate experience of publishing in refereed journals,
- previous writing experiences resulting in negative feelings leading to poor self-confidence as an academic writer,
- anxiety about peer review, and
- how to respond to journal feedback including rejection.

This program has been designed as a generic writing program, suited to any research discipline, not just SoTL, and so is transferrable to other contexts. Our topics were all in the field of learning and teaching, so we used the weekly discussions and readings to raise SoTL examples and customize the program to participants’ needs.
Local context

The program was conducted at a small ‘satellite’ Faculty of a multi-campus and cross-sectoral Australian university. The Faculty is multi-disciplinary, and began as a teaching institute before becoming absorbed with full faculty status. Accordingly, the Faculty has a limited research history, but is now under the same pressure as centrally-located faculties to increase research output with academic staff expected to become research-active.

The multi-disciplinary nature of the Faculty means that discipline groups are small, sometimes only two or three academic members, so opportunities for research collaboration and peer mentoring within the discipline are limited. Building staff expertise and research capability in the scholarship of their teaching provides an opportunity to develop local peer review groups, while at the same time building staff confidence in research writing, and ultimately improving research output in both SOTL and the discipline. Accordingly, research into teaching and learning was a key selection criterion for program participants, so that all participants could read and meaningfully review each other’s work.

The program was facilitated by the third author with the first author providing support in the form of advertising, recruitment, and room bookings. All participants were presented with a gift-wrapped copy of the program workbook (Belcher, 2009b), to create a positive and fun start to the program.

Selection of participants

All academic members of the Faculty were invited to join the program. Invitations were circulated by email, and included details on the timing of the program (dates and times of weekly meetings), selection criteria (participants were required to be writing about a teaching and learning issue), and a fair estimate of the expected workload (around five hours per week). It was made clear that this was a Writing program, not a Research program, so participants had to have data or ideas ready to write about, including any necessary ethics clearance from the institutional Human Research Ethics committee. Interested academics were asked to submit a one-page expression of interest, detailing their research data, and submit to their Head of School, who would then certify that this commitment was possible within the applicant’s current work load arrangements. All applicants who met these criteria were then offered places in the program.

In the first iteration of the program (discussed in this paper), twelve expressions of interest were received, and nine offers made, all of which were accepted. The remaining three included one who had not started data collection, and two who could not attend weekly meetings due to teaching clashes. All three joined the second iteration of the program conducted the following semester.

Examples of topics for papers included:
- Teaching creative writing to incarcerated students
- Providing effective audio feedback for off-campus students
- Facilitating active learning in a transnational context
- Teaching cooperative discussion skills to statistics students
- Student acceptance of a unit design for developing independent learning abilities

In all cases, participants had investigated an issue or innovation in their own teaching.

Program Evaluation

Aim

In an attempt to ascertain the effectiveness and long-term impact of the writing program, an evaluation was undertaken. The evaluation provided a good opportunity to model undertaking SoTL research. The program
evaluation received approval from the institution’s human research ethics advisory committee before commencing the data collection.

The following evaluation questions were identified:
1. Has the program improved participants’ confidence in their writing ability?
2. Has the program improved participants’ knowledge of the key stages in academic writing and publishing?
3. Has the program improved participants’ skills in key stages of writing and publishing?
4. Has the program resulted in submitted papers?

To answer these questions, a four-stage evaluation was conducted:
1. Completion of a paper-based entry survey by participants
2. Completion of a paper-based exit survey by participants
3. One-on-one interviews of participants (in the month following completion of the program)
4. Data on the number of papers submitted to journals (six months after program completion)

**Instruments**

The two paper-based surveys included questions about participants’ self-evaluation of their knowledge, skills and confidence in their academic writing ability. Survey questions were a mix of quantitative (using Likert-scale ratings) and open-ended questions for free-flow comments. The initial survey asked open-ended questions about the participants’ goals for writing, their academic writing and publishing history, and Likert-scale questions on their confidence and perceived competence in writing, obstacles they have faced to getting published, and knowledge of the writing process. The post-program survey asked the same questions as above, as well as questions about open-ended questions on future plans for writing, and Likert-scale questions evaluating the program itself – overall satisfaction, impact of different program components, and level of support provided.

Entry and exit responses were matched for analysis purposes, so these surveys required participants to be identified. In an attempt to preserve anonymity, the second author (not involved in the running the program and located on a different campus) matched the surveys and applied a code before removing participants’ names. However, it must be acknowledged that with such a small group, and in a small faculty where members all knew each other, survey respondents could be identified by the nature of their responses. Surveys were completed at the end of the first and final writing sessions, and were immediately placed in a sealed envelope, addressed to the independent researcher for compilation. The facilitator was not present during the completion of the surveys.

The same researcher conducted individual interviews with volunteer program participants, in the month following completion of the program. Interview questions aimed to elicit further information on the program itself and on the participant’s proposed publication plans. Interview responses were recorded as handwritten notes by the interviewer.

Both surveys and interviews were voluntary, and participants were free to participate in any or all of these stages. All nine participants responded to the entry survey (100% participation). Seven exit surveys were submitted (78%), and all could be matched to an entry survey. Six participants (67%) volunteered to be interviewed, five of whom had provided matching entry and exit surveys.

Twelve months following the completion of the program, a follow-up email was sent to all participants, requesting information on the progress of their submissions and a friendly query about their current writing habits, with an offer for assistance if required. All nine participants responded.

Due to the small number of participants, statistical analysis of quantitative data was not meaningful; however strong trends could be seen for some results.
Findings

Survey respondents all started the program with goals aligned with the program aims, for example ‘to gain recognition in the broader community and achieve promotion’ and ‘to develop sounder and more effective working habits in regards to writing academic papers’. Questions in exit and entry surveys and individual interviews aimed to investigate participants’ confidence in academic writing, knowledge of writing process, skills in producing academic writing and ability to submit a paper. Four key themes emerged from these questions; personal insights, understanding writing and feedback, strategies and outcomes. Additional questions on the exit survey and interviews elicited feedback about the program itself and participants’ future writing plans.

**Personal insights – the self as writer**

After completion of the program, participants’ overall goals had not changed significantly, but these were now more realistic and specific, and revealed greater confidence in participants’ own abilities, and insight into the processes of preparing for publication, illustrated by comments such as: ‘[My] goals remain similar, but I perhaps feel as though I have a better handle on planning for achieving these goals’ and ‘More confidence in writing & leaping to undertaking a PhD. [I am] writing more often, publishing more often’.

Participants’ metaphors of academic writing showed similar changes in confidence, with pre-program metaphors such as ‘like pulling teeth - I hate it but know I’ll feel better when it’s done’ and post-program comments such as ‘[I feel] like an owl on the hunt’ (these comments are from different participants).

Prior to starting the program, all participants reported that they had experienced obstacles to academic writing – lack of time or poor time-management, procrastination, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities. Confidence levels improved over the duration of the program, in all activities of the academic writing process, except for confidence in having something interesting to say (Table 2), with a strong improvement in confidence around completing a literature review.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Average response on pre-survey</th>
<th>Average response on post-survey</th>
<th>Average change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having something interesting/ significant to say</td>
<td>3.1 ± 0.4</td>
<td>2.8 ± 0.8</td>
<td>-0.36 ± 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting an appropriate paper type</td>
<td>2.7 ± 1.3</td>
<td>3.0 ± 0.6</td>
<td>0.3 ± 0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing a scholarly paper</td>
<td>2.0 ± 1.2</td>
<td>3.1 ± 0.8</td>
<td>1.1 ± 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undertaking a literature review</td>
<td>2.1 ± 1.1</td>
<td>3.4 ± 0.5</td>
<td>1.3 ± 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revising paper drafts ^</td>
<td>2.3 ± 1.2</td>
<td>3.5 ± 0.5</td>
<td>1.2 ± 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing the paper</td>
<td>2.7 ± 1.6</td>
<td>3.4 ± 0.5</td>
<td>0.7 ± 1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to peer feedback</td>
<td>3.0 ± 1.5</td>
<td>3.4 ± 0.8</td>
<td>0.4 ± 2.2</td>
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</table>

(^ n=6 for this item, as ‘Not sure’ responses were removed for statistical analysis)
When interviewed in the month following completion of the program, all interviewees expressed feelings of personal achievement in participating in the program and a sense of accomplishment in writing a paper ready for publication, illustrated by comments such as ‘This is the first paper I have been really proud of – even my colleagues thought my literature review was good!’ Key benefits of the program were identified as structure and timelines (promoting more self-discipline), feeling less daunted about the process after confronting it as a group, and exposure to a variety of typologies and audiences. Typical comments included ‘I had a very positive experience [with giving] feedback – it was very liberating, [and the] outcome has been mutual collaboration with someone out of my discipline who I had not worked with before’

**Understanding writing and feedback**

After completion of the program, survey respondents reported higher self-ratings of their knowledge about different stages of the publication process, with encouraging improvements in their understanding of how to prepare a journal submission, and how to respond to reviewers’ comments (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average response on pre-survey</th>
<th>Average response on post-survey</th>
<th>Average change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How to find a journal</td>
<td>2.4 ± 1.3</td>
<td>3.1 ± 0.7</td>
<td>0.7 ± 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to write an abstract</td>
<td>2.7 ± 1.4</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.5</td>
<td>0.9 ± 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to select keywords</td>
<td>2.1 ± 1.2</td>
<td>3.1 ± 0.4</td>
<td>1.0 ± 1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to cite and reference sources</td>
<td>3.1 ± 1.1</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.4</td>
<td>0.7 ± 1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to prepare a submission</td>
<td>2.4 ± 1.4</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.5</td>
<td>1.2 ± 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to respond to reviewer comments</td>
<td>2.3 ± 1.1</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.8</td>
<td>1.3 ± 1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, in post-program interviews, all respondents believed that they were better prepared to write a scholarly paper, and eager to invite peer feedback during the draft writing stages. Peer-feedback processes were viewed by many interviewees as an important component of the program for them. Participants felt that although giving feedback was difficult when the paper is not in your own discipline area, feedback they received was one of the most valuable aspects of the program. In addition, being required to provide feedback on others’ writing meant that their own critiquing skills (and hence, self-critiquing) improved. Typical comments included:

- ‘Feedback is more positive and formative [when] consulting on earlier drafts, rather than at the end as I previously did’.
- ‘The paired feedback helped me work out that I had packed too much into one paper, so could unpack it to produce multiple papers’
• ‘[The feedback was] brilliant – 5 or 6 people gave feedback and everybody identified different areas for improvement, all gave valuable advice.’

In addition, interviewees felt they had a good understanding of academic writing, and that the program had provided more insight into implications and priorities for academic writing for the university, and importantly, offered a structure and an impetus to write. Responses included:
• ‘The unexpected was being more comfortable with one’s own emotional responses to writing’

**Strategies in producing an academic paper**

When asked for self-assessment on their abilities to manage their own writing, including dealing with obstacles, respondents believed they had improved their abilities in all areas, and this was statistically significant for the practical aspects of writing an overview, and receiving peer feedback (Table 4).

| Table 4. Self ratings of skills to complete specific writing tasks. |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
|                         | Average response on pre-survey | Average response on post-survey | Average change |
| Get started on a writing task (e.g. journal article) with no difficulty | 3.2 ± 1.1 | 4.9 ± 0.7 | 1.1 ± 1.2 |
| Write a brief and informative overview of my writing project | 4.3 ± 1.4 | 5.1 ± 0.9 | 0.9 ± 1.5 |
| Use my first attempts at writing to refine my ideas | 4.1 ± 1.4 | 5.3 ± 0.8 | 1.1 ± 0.9 |
| Find ways to concentrate on my writing even when there are distractions | 3.1 ± 1.4 | 4.4 ± 1.0 | 1.3 ± 2.0 |
| Manage my time efficiently to meet writing deadlines | 3.1 ± 1.5 | 4.4 ± 1.3 | 1.2 ± 2.0 |
| Rewrite my wordy or confusing sentences to make them clearer | 4.6 ± 1.3 | 5.1 ± 0.38 | 0.6 ± 1.27 |
| Locate and review literature relevant to my topic | 3.4 ± 1.3 | 4.7 ± 1.4 | 1.3 ± 1.8 |
| Refocus my attention if I find myself drifting off the topic | 3.1 ± 1.1 | 4.1 ± 0.9 | 1.0 ± 1.6 |
| Break a large piece of writing into manageable parts | 3.6 ± 0.5 | 4.7 ± 1.0 | 1.1 ± 1.1 |
| Rewrite a first draft to make it more succinct and lucid | 4.1 ± 1.2 | 5.1 ± 1.1 | 1.0 ± 1.4 |
| Get helpful feedback on early drafts of my work | 3.1 ± 1.4 | 5.1 ± 1.3 | 2.0 ± 2.1 |
| Meet the writing standards of an academic journal | 3.7 ± 1.8 | 4.9 ± 0.7 | 1.0 ± 1.9 |
Ongoing issues remain with time and time management, with these expressed as a key factor affecting future writing goals. Only some participants felt they were self-motivated, with others feeling a need for more mentoring and ongoing support. Several also were concerned at the apparent mis-alignment of the institution’s expectations of academics’ teaching workloads with a need for publishing, especially now they have experienced the time involved in preparing a quality journal submission.

Typical responses included:
- ‘Without the pressure of the weekly reporting structure, [it will be] too easy to fall behind on schedule’
- ‘Sometimes I see research as an individual thing, but I now realise it is part of my job, but I will still have to do it in my own time.’

Submission outcomes

Nine participants completed the first program and all nine submitted papers - eight to reputable journals and the ninth submitted to an industry partner (government department) for approval prior to journal submission. Twelve months later, five of these submissions had been accepted and published, one was still under review, and three had been rejected. All three rejected papers are currently being revised for submission to alternative journals. The final paper was held up with the government department which collaborated on the research, and the academic author is considering splitting that paper into a report (for the external collaborator) and a smaller paper suitable for publication without collaboration.

Feedback on writing program

At the end of the program participants were also surveyed and interviewed on what in their view worked and did not work for them. For most, the structure and discipline of group sessions was a key success feature of the program. Being required to demonstrate weekly progress aided motivation and self-discipline. Tied in with that were the regular opportunities for peer feedback, which was the most popular aspect of the program.

Typical responses to what worked for participants included:
- ‘Receiving feedback from peers, although I am not good at giving feedback’
- ‘The support from facilitator & peers’
- ‘Interim deadlines :)'
- ‘How to research journals / structure arguments & make time to write.’
- ‘The structure - forcing me to work regularly on my paper. The group - lots of support, lots of peer feedback’

The program workbook (Belcher, 2009b) was rated positively as helpful by all 6 respondents in the exit survey (on a Likert-scale question) and very readable, and several participants reported in both the exit survey and the subsequent interviews that they intended to consult it in the future when writing papers.

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- ‘Very easy to read and understand, gave helpful examples and generally just made good sense.’ (Exit survey response)
- ‘I like this structured approach. I particularly like the 'split the day into 15 mins and use each 15mins' guideline’ (Exit survey)
- ‘Will refer back to Belcher for advice for planning my writing sessions etc’ (Exit survey)
- ‘The Belcher book was good at allaying fears and concerns, and grounding everything’ (Interview)
- ‘Belcher was excellent, exceptional, has lots of takeaways, the joy is I can now read the whole book on my own and learn’ (Interview)
When asked for suggestions for improvement, respondents asked for more time on peer review and discussions, and less on evaluation surveys!

**Future writing plans**

While all survey respondents expressed intentions to maintain their regular writing by the time interviews were conducted (one month later) several were doubtful they would be able to keep to this plan as other work pressures mounted.

- ‘To set aside regular time to write. To plan the article better at the beginning in particular the methodology. To be strategic about the papers I write (and realistic)” *(Exit survey)*
- ‘I had a good 12 week run [during the program], but haven’t been able to now take the whole process beyond and repeat it on an individual basis’ *(Interview)*

Twelve months later, these suspicions appear to have become reality. In response to an email enquiring about the progress of their paper, several participants volunteered that they have failed to maintain their writing output, despite a strong desire to do so.

**Lessons for academic development**

The first writing program was successful, in that each participant prepared a paper for publication, and eight out of the nine submitted their paper to a reputable journal. All participants reported improvements in both their self-assessed competence and confidence as academic writers, and reported a sense of personal achievement and pride about producing their paper. This achievement was recognised by the Faculty (with papers listed in the annual Learning & Teaching Report and mentioned at Faculty meetings) and in performance review objectives.

The publication output of this small Faculty continued to improve over the subsequent year, as the accepted papers were published. At the end of the program, we were optimistic that the improvement would be ongoing, as participants did not appear to regard their successful submissions as a one-off achievement, and expressed intentions to maintain their writing momentum. However, twelve months after completion of the program, only about half the participants have managed to sustain their writing. The remaining participants still claim they intend to ‘get back into it’, but have succumbed to other work pressures.

The experiences of this small sample seem to reflect those of their colleagues – heavy administrative and teaching loads (the Faculty teaches 52 weeks of the year, both on-campus, online and through international agents) leave little time for research, particularly writing. Yet the institution appears to value research output over teaching, as evidenced by the continued emphasis on research output in assessing promotion applications, and indeed, the reliance of institutions on global university rankings (assessed by research output, impact and reputation) for their prestige and major marketing campaigns. As Lee states in a recent online article, “...ask the majority of Australian academics why they do not put more effort into teaching and they will reply that they are under continuing pressure from their Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Heads of School to lift their research performance” *(Lee, 2012, Two Steps Forward section, para. 1)*. The facilitator of this program is currently engaged in conducting similar programs at several other universities, indicating the demand for such programs, fed by the pressure to increase publication rates. It is thus little wonder academic staff complain about receiving mixed messages!

This first group of participants was very motivated, attending every weekly session and completed all aspects of the program, including submitting their papers by the agreed deadline. Buoyed by the success of this group, we immediately conducted a second iteration of the program (within the same year) and found it much more challenging. The number of proposals received was lower than hoped, so to justify costs of the program, all applicants were accepted, including some who did not meet our selection criteria (for example,
had not begun data collection or analysis). Several less motivated participants meant a higher level of absenteeism at weekly meetings, (which was rare in the first group, and always preceded by an apology to the facilitator), one non-completion, and delays for others in finishing the papers. At the time of writing (twelve months after the program completion), two out of seven papers have been submitted, with the remaining four participants still struggling to complete theirs. Two of these are likely to proceed to submission, but the remaining two are unlikely to be completed.

Upon reflection, we believe attempting two programs back-to-back in a single year in such a small Faculty was overly ambitious. We would hesitate about suggesting tougher selection criteria, since we wouldn’t want to deny the program to anyone who was genuinely enthusiastic and likely to benefit from it, but perhaps reducing the frequency of the program will allow candidates more time to collect data, and to hear about the success of earlier participants, which might help increase motivation. In future iterations of the program, we will emphasise the importance of these criteria as prerequisites for participation in the program.

We suggest that academic developers conducting the program should be prepared to be proactive after the program completion, to explore a writing group community of practice or facilitate irregular get-togethers to encourage writing and peer-review, build confidence and self-esteem, provide additional support or advice, and share successes.

In summary, our key recommendations for an effective SoTL writing program are:

1. The relevant senior management must support both the program and ongoing time allocations for research and writing
2. Ensure participants are ready, motivated, and have the time to devote to the program (easier said than done)
3. Agreed regular progress is essential, so everyone is at the same stage to get the most from the peer feedback opportunities
4. Recognition of the outcomes by management will reinforce motivation for both program graduates and future participants.

Conclusions

Our experience shows that a generic structured writing program can be effective but maintaining writing momentum requires addressing competing work pressures academic staff experience. Struggles to maintain a discipline of writing reported by participants highlights a major issue of conflicting pressures on academic staff. Workload pressures from excessive teaching load and increasing administrative duties leave little time and energy for SoTL. For SoTL to flourish, universities need to recognise its value for improving the quality of learning and teaching as well as for increasing publication rates, and provide support for staff to engage in SoTL and to publish their SoTL projects.

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References


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