

## **The Writing Social: Identifying with academic writing practices amongst undergraduate students**

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### **Introduction**

Current academic writing support at undergraduate level in post-92 higher education institutions tends to see its role as remedial rather than best practice (Hardy, Murray, Thow and Smith, 2020; Quynn and Stewart, 2021). Thus, students are perceived as having a learning deficit when it comes to academic writing. It is assumed that they cannot write, rather than understanding that it is because they are struggling to learn how to write (Murray, 2015; Mitchell and Evison, 2006) within multiple learning contexts: module assessment, course discipline, level of study, academic success. This is perhaps reflected in a higher education culture where talking and thinking about writing tends to be the exception, rather than the rule (Quynn and Stewart, 2021; Mitchell and Evison, 2006). The process of writing is something 'secret', 'denied' or 'not shared', according to Murray (2015), despite academic writing being a professional requirement for both students and staff within universities (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006).

As a result, common writing practices amongst undergraduate students include binge writing and avoidance (Quynn and Stewart, 2021), both of which then become ways to cope with academic writing but do not improve students' confidence in their abilities to become better writers. For undergraduate students, who must maintain a writing momentum over a long period of time yet have the least experience of time management, this is how they manage.

The Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF) at our University provides an opportunity for us to challenge both these practices and assumptions by encouraging us to examine the ways in which students learn to become academic writers throughout their studies.

### **Writing as Social Process**

A social process approach to academic writing emphasises the context and culture of writing practices rather than cognitive attributes. A social process approach 'provides a way of constructing writing as part of being a scholar, of taking up that position and acting it out' (Murray, 2015:12). It gives students a role and a place for them to identify with and become effective academic writers.

Social writing acknowledges anxieties such as alienation and lack of confidence associated with the practice of academic writing by containing them within a communal structure, held by a facilitator, where writing is understood to be the primary activity (Murray, 2015). Social writing contextualises learning about academic writing by making it both visible and reflective (Wood, 2011; Mitchell and Evison, 2006;) while also equipping students with writing skills that will positively sustain them throughout their degree experience (Quynn and Steward, 2021).

With this in mind, a pilot programme of academic writing support was created for all students in the School of Architecture, Art and Design (AAD) during the academic year of 2020/21. AAD's own Strategy emphasises the role of art and design in social change, highlighting the importance of practice with regards to designing and making. This then enabled us to approach academic writing as social praxis, something that students 'do', not just 'produce' (bhagat and O'Neill, 2011). The pilot was an opportunity to introduce academic writing as an integral aspect of student experience, rather than as a specific example within a classroom (Jones, 2018). It gave AAD the chance to pedagogically explore the ESJF, in particular the value of Identity, Personalisation and Reflection which highlights the importance of belonging, confidence and self-exploration when it comes to having a rich and successful academic experience.

## Pilot Design and Implementation

The pilot was designed to provide a programme of ten social writing opportunities, entitled the *Writing Social*, from November 2020 to April 2021. The sessions took place online, using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), approximately twice a month and were scheduled to pre-empt summative assessment points. They were designed to be a hybrid form of a writing retreat and a writing group (Murray, 2015; Castle and Keane, 2016). Similar to those designed by Quynn and Stewart, each session included 'designated writing sessions', 'presentations' and 'facilitated group discussions' (2021:3). It was important that these sessions were led by a supportive, experienced facilitator (Castle and Keane, 2016) so were led by myself as an Academic Mentor in AAD and a trained writing retreat facilitator.<sup>1</sup>

The sessions encouraged students to join their peers online and spend time together writing on their own academic outputs. Every session started with an icebreaker, a writing warm up and/or writing goals. Students were encouraged to set writing goals for the sessions, which combined blocks of writing with breaks (see Figure 1). Every session ended with the opportunity for students to reflect upon what they had achieved followed by a 'bitesized' presentation on academic research skills, provided by our Specialist Subject Liaison Librarian. The sessions were called a 'social' rather than a 'retreat' in response to the pandemic and online delivery of teaching and learning. With everyone isolated at home, these sessions encouraged social interaction because the sense of belonging normally associated with being on campus was suddenly very absent in their educational experience.

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<sup>1</sup> I was able to complete the Writing Retreat Facilitator Training with Rowena Murray as part of my University Teaching Fellow award in 2019/20.



## WRITING SOCIAL PROGRAMME

**9.30 - 10am**

Welcome, set writing goals

**10 - 11am**

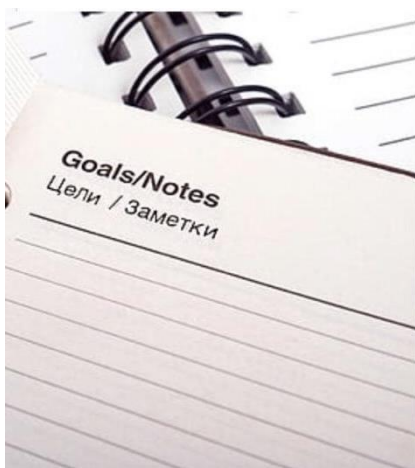
Writing hour

**11.00 - 11.05am**

Reflection + next steps

**11.05 - 11.15am**

Doing academic research - tips with Rachel Bickley



## WRITING GOALS

**Quantify the task**

e.g. 250 words, 4 paragraphs, 2 pages

**Describe the task**

e.g. Summarise what I know about this topic; describe my chosen object

**Define the quality of the task**

e.g. Write a rough draft of the introduction; Revise the conclusion based on feedback

**Experiment**

Try something different! Write what you don't want to say or write something that you know is bad!

Figure 1: Examples of facilitation slides used in the Writing Session

The *Writing Social* was a self-selection activity, open to all AAD students, approximately 1500 in total. It was decided that students should have the choice to participate because to compel them might further alienate them from the practice of academic writing (Jones, 2018). Participants were asked to complete a feedback form at the end of each session which asked them to identify how much the activity had improved their confidence about their writing skills, as well as the positive and negative aspects of the activity.<sup>2</sup>

## Main Findings and Discussion

In total, 173 individual students participated in the *Writing Social*, representing all levels of higher education study from Level 3 to PhD, as well as all three subject areas within the School – Architecture, Art and Design. However, most participants were undergraduate students.

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<sup>2</sup> Data collection involved completing a Google Form and the link was provided at the end of each session as well as via email using the School wide Academic Mentors organisation on Weblearn. Most questions involved using a Likert type scale with a few open-ended questions. Data collection and analysis certainly could have been improved, not least because it required more than one person to do this properly.

Despite so many individual students taking part, only 19 students completed the feedback questionnaire.<sup>3</sup> While their perspectives are not representative of all the students in the School, they do correspond with the wider literature on academic writing support, social writing and increased confidence in this area. These initial findings suggest that the pilot was successful with students.

Student feedback revealed that social writing had a positive impact on their confidence with regards to their academic writing abilities<sup>4</sup>. This impact can be organised according to three characteristics that Quynn and Stewart (2021) identify as being critical to writing more sustainably in an academic context: being part of a writing community, making writing an explicit practice (time) and positively identifying as an academic writer can have an impact on how we write (see Figures 2 and 3).

How confident did you feel about your writing skills before the Writing Social?

19 responses

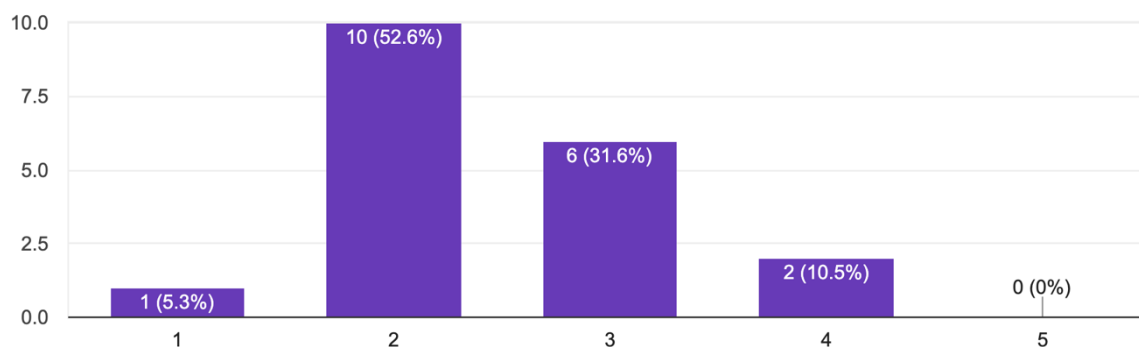


Figure 2: Graph outlining levels of confidence about writing skills before attending the Writing Social with 1 being unconfident and 5 being confident

<sup>3</sup> The low number of respondents is linked to the need for more support when it came to evaluating the pilot overall.

<sup>4</sup> Students were asked to rate how confident they felt about their writing skills before and after attending the *Writing Social*, using a scale where 1 represented unconfident and 5 represented confident. The results showed that most participants felt markedly more confident because of engaging with the Writing Social.

How confident do you feel after the Writing Social about your writing skills?

19 responses

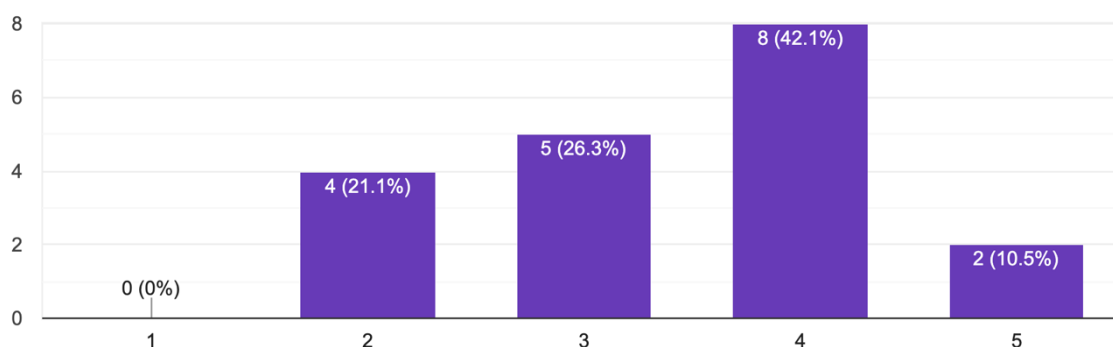


Figure 3: Graph outlining levels of confidence about writing skills after attending the Writing Social with 1 being unconfident and 5 being confident

### Sense of Community

Undergraduate students are just starting out on their academic writing careers so it is vital they have the opportunity to see how others learn similar skills and concepts. Many participants of the *Writing Social* identified the social aspect as beneficial, with reference to not feeling alone as well as being part of a group who are all writing at the same time. The *Writing Social* was described as a 'community-space-moment' where it was possible to 'share issues', 'receive different suggestions' and 'work on it in group'. This supports Moore's observation (2003) that when people write with others, sharing successes and failures, they learn more swiftly how to support themselves through the challenges of academic writing. It also highlights the ESJF's emphasis on a sense of belonging and the opportunity for students to share their academic experiences as a key value when it comes to designing future academic writing support across LondonMet.

### Making Writing Explicit

Comments from the students such as 'staying focused' and 'doing something productive in a certain amount of time' reflected the challenges associated with academic writing. Many of the students said that the benefit of the *Writing Social* was the creation of time to write or being able to see the relationship between time spent writing and writing outputs: *It helps to just start writing which for me is the hardest part; It's a great way to utilise time and also realise 2 hours of writing is a lot of time.* Quynn and Stewart (2021) observe that designated writing sessions model sustainable writing practices by encouraging students to create and value the time it takes to do the business of writing. This also reflects the emphasis put upon student 'capital' within the ESJF because the *Writing Social* is built on the assumption that all our students will engage with life-long learning as a result of having more confidence in their academic capabilities.

## Identifying as an Academic Writer

The positive impact of the *Writing Social* on the students' conception of themselves as academic writers was clearly expressed in their feedback. It suggested that they had discovered practices that they did not know existed and that they could use in the future: *To have the hour dedicated to just write freely and learning how to set goals for myself; the daily task of setting a goal and writing 250 words in an hour; helps to build understanding of our written communication work.* It seems that they were experiencing academic writing as something you can learn to do and become, in the sense of being an academic writer, where it builds upon what they already know about how to write at a university level. Kempenaar and Murray suggest that performing writing behaviours help to improve the writers' 'beliefs in their writing skills' (2019:116). The ESJF's emphasis on self-exploration and identity are also well-aligned with the intentions of the *Writing Social* because this kind of academic writing support encourages students to see themselves as reflective learners, capable of academic transformation over time.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this pilot suggest that taking a social process approach to academic writing support has a positive impact on students' confidence and sense of belonging when it comes to identifying as someone who is capable of becoming a good academic writer. At the *Writing Social*, not only does everyone believe they can write but they can also become better academic writers over time because they see themselves, personally, as an academic writer. The ESJF values of identity, personalisation and reflection are perfectly captured within the *Writing Social* because it provides a safe space for students to explore their capabilities and experiences of academic writing, in the knowledge that these will positively transform over time.

This pilot study also aligns with the work of Quynn and Stewart 2021, as well as Kempenaar and Murray 2018, but expands it in terms of supporting the case for institutional support of academic writing development activities at undergraduate level. This is, as far as we are aware, the first study that looks at undergraduate writing practices through the lens of writing as social process.

## Recommendations

Based on the above findings, it is proposed that:

- Social writing opportunities should be offered as a key form of academic writing development across and within undergraduate module curricula, online and offline, where the learning outcomes include academic literacy and critical thinking. This is so as to give students the best opportunity to identify, personalise and reflect upon themselves as successful academic writers.
- Students should be more involved in leading undergraduate social writing programmes. This acknowledges that they are already gaining experience as academic writers while understanding that positive experiences involve feeling part of a community. This might be through LondonMet's Peer Assisted Support Scheme (PASS), for example.

- Social writing opportunities should be offered to postgraduate students, and also research active staff, in order to encourage more sustainable writing practices across LondonMet. This would go some way to embedding the ESJF values across the whole University by acknowledging that improved academic writing emerges through a sense of community where reflection and exploration are highly valued academic skills.

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