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Students and staff working in partnership: experiences from a collaborative writing group

Higher education institutions are striving to enhance student engagement in learning (Carini et al, 2006). Increasing the degree of student ownership of the learning process and offering an authentic situated learning experience (Brown et al, 1989) are possible ways to enhance student engagement. In response to this, participants on a postgraduate programme in Professional Education at Queen Margaret University (QMU), Edinburgh, were invited to set up a writing group in partnership with a member of staff from the programme team. Participants on this course were either lecturers at QMU, lecturers at other higher education institutions or health professionals with an educational remit. All participants were under differing degrees of pressure to publish written work related to their practice and only the member of staff from the programme team had published previously. Indeed, consistent with reports by Dixon (2001), many of the participants were not confident in their ability to produce writing for publication.

The 'Introduction to Education Research' module on the Professional Education programme aimed to introduce students to educational research methodologies through experiential learning methods. The tutor invited the students to take part in an action research project to evaluate the module, providing an opportunity for applied learning about research methodologies. The project also aimed to gather useful, authentic and student-centred evaluation data about the module. As is consistent with an action research approach, the students were given significant freedom to direct the evaluations and to take the project in the direction of their choice. At the end of the formal taught element of the module, students were invited to keep meeting to complete some further evaluation tasks, and as another stage in the action research cycle, the tutor suggested setting up a writing group to write about the experiences of being involved in the action research evaluation project. All 20 students expressed interest in being involved in the writing group, but due to various work and personal pressures, many students chose not to join the group when it was set up. The group started with 10 members but quickly settled to a regular six students and one tutor.

The writing group started by discussing the aims of the group. These were agreed after the first meeting and focused on publishing a journal article, trying to disseminate the work further through seminar or conference presentations and supporting each other through the publication process. After this first meeting, all members of the group went away with tasks to complete. These tasks included: one person drafting ground rules; one person exploring possible journals to target; one person drafting different themes for a possible paper; and in response to a desire to carry out some further evaluation, one person to draft a further questionnaire. Each group member then emailed all others with what they had drafted prior to the next meeting. At the second meeting, one month later, these first tasks were discussed and each member agreed to update their task or writing on the basis of feedback. Work began on drafting an abstract on the basis of the groups' ideas of what they wanted to write. The group was also reading examples of articles in the possible journals we had decided to target. By meeting three, a draft outline of structure and

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headings of a paper had been discussed and suggested word counts for each of these sections set. All members of the group agreed to work either individually or in pairs to draft sections of the paper. It was acknowledged that some sections would be more difficult than others to write at this stage, but that it was better for us to move from the blank page with some early writing, even if the work would subsequently be changed. On the basis of an amended abstract, the journal editor for the target journal was contacted at this point to see if they would be interested in the paper. By the fourth meeting, each drafted section was then commented on and edited by the tutor and another student member, and on this basis, each individual or pair, redrafted the next version of their section. The drafts were then amalgamated into the full paper structure and the members of the group took turns in editing the full paper and passing it on to the next member of the group. The group then sought feedback on the paper from colleagues. Gradually, over the course of nine meetings, the group crafted a paper that was ready for submission to a journal.

The paper was submitted to one journal and rejected but with very constructive comments. The paper was altered on the basis of these comments and resubmitted to a different journal. The editor of this journal responded with a very negative review which included many unprofessional comments and unconstructive feedback, but confusingly with an offer to collaborate in changing the paper substantially for publication[3]. The feedback indicated a fundamental difference between the editor and the writing group in their intentions and the group took the decision to take on board any useful comments but to submit the article elsewhere. This was a tough process for a group that were not used to publication. The tutor sought some further independent feedback from colleagues on the paper, which has suggested some other possible changes before resubmitting the article to a third journal.

Reflecting on the writing group, there were a number of interesting issues about the group approach and processes which are worthy of note. The writing group came together through self selection, which created a group that was diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity and age. To ensure that the group ran smoothly it was agreed to set group ground rules to provide clarity about expectations of each other and to assist the group in making decisions. These ground rules became invaluable when in the early stages of the writing group some members began to attend meetings infrequently. The writing group was open to all students who had taken the education research module and who were involved in the action research project, but this meant it was difficult to exclude anyone who was not fully committed to the writing group and did not turn up to meetings. The group were able to use the ground rules to review group membership in a transparent and equitable manner.

It was agreed that each member would take responsibility for a different section of the paper and this appeared to take place quite smoothly. Work was quickly divided up, although perhaps not enough thought was given to the potential overlap of sections or to the sequence in which sections needed to be written. For example, two sections – one on student experiences and one on project outcomes – had the potential for overlap. Whilst this overlap was acknowledged, not enough time was spent teasing out the differences between these sections before the first drafts were written and this led to duplication, which resulted in sections needing to change significantly in the next drafts.

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[3] It is important to note that in describing the second review as 'unprofessional' and 'unconstructive' that these were the way the review was described by experienced colleagues consulted by the writing group in the face of a lengthy negative review.

All members of the group were being encouraged to disseminate and publish their work by employers. Therefore, the group was formed specifically to write for publication: a remit that meets the criteria set for a task orientated group, (Heron 1999). When considering Tuckmann's model of proposed group stages that include 'forming', 'storming', 'norming' and 'performing' (cited in Rogers 1999, p10), the dynamics did have a reasonable forming stage where the group remit and boundaries were established. However, there was no visible storming stage, although there was open discussion and clarification of roles, responsibility, rules, and personal purpose. On reflection, not having a storming stage may have been due to one of the aims of the group being to support each other through the writing process. This aim perhaps created an unwritten agreement that group members would try to avoid conflict and not waste time where tight deadlines had been set. Whilst storming can be seen as time consuming it is an important and healthy stage for groups to function well (Rogers 1999) and therefore the group may have avoided difficult discussions that might have enhanced group performance.

The action research project had aimed to enhance collaborative working between tutor and students including a change to the traditional power relationship from one where the tutor controls what happens to the students. However, it is interesting to note that the tutor took on the responsibility of being group leader, and this may have led students to expect the tutor to address issues around process and potential conflict. This group leader role was adopted by the tutor perhaps because she was seen as the person with more writing experience, and as the 'teacher' working with the students. Jaques (2000) states that groups function best when they function democratically, and this was certainly something the group tried to emulate once confidence was gained and as the writing progressed.

During the life of the group it appeared that some members adopted greater responsibility than others. This may have been due to varied understanding or confidence in carrying out the task or because some group members were more extrovert and dominant than others. This wasn't directly discussed within the group. The tutor was keen to ensure that all group members were able to contribute to the best of their ability and within their particular time constraints, whilst also ensuring that everyone was considered to be contributing. This was a difficult element of the group to manage as it is impossible in groups for people to contribute equally (Clarke, 2007), and therefore the tutor aimed to ensure all members contributed in a meaningful way to the group task, whilst acknowledging these contributions would be different. Levin (2005) promotes open discussion around group dynamics and individual perceptions as a means for each group member to re-clarify their roles and contributions. This was a key area of learning for the group, and this transparency and clarification of roles would have been helpful. Despite this, the group did manage to move into Tuckmann's performing stage in terms of producing an article ready for submission within a relatively short timescale of seven months from first meeting to first submission of the article.

The experiences of those who have been members of this group have been predominantly positive. Group members have reported that they thought the writing group was a valuable learning experience and there were many comments about how well the diverse group managed to work together. Group members have also specifically commented that they have gained confidence in their ability to write for publication:

"It has given me confidence to write for publication and has therefore contributed to my professional development."

"[I] intend to collaborate on at least one, perhaps two, papers this year."

"The group provided a supportive approach to the publication process which has inspired me to consider publishing in the future. I felt I gained more confidence through peer support than I would have if I had gone through it alone."

"The experience has made a huge difference in the way I judge journal articles I read and how I write."

Other feedback from group members raise some interesting questions for those involved in setting up collaborative writing groups. For example, one member of the group questioned whether they would attempt to write with so many authors again, presumably reflecting many of the challenges of collaborative writing including for example, the logistics of regular meetings and compromises over the aims of the paper. Another group member commented that they didn't feel that they had ownership of the complete article because they had only worked on some parts of the paper. However, one of the key challenges faced by any collaborative writing group working on the same piece of writing, is to balance the different contributions of members of the group in such a way that although they may never be equal, all group members recognise the different and valuable contributions made by others. This has been a valuable learning process for all involved in the group and we have learned many lessons that will inform our future writing for publication and working in groups.

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