

0210

The Writing Consultation: A novel mechanism for developing academic writing practices

Rowena Murray

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Background

A series of studies showed that while writing groups, writing retreats and writing courses have impact on publications, they do not solve the problem academics and researchers continue to report of prioritising writing (Murray and Newton 2008). This paper reports on a study that implemented and evaluated a novel method of addressing this problem.

Since there was no higher education literature on the problem of prioritising academic writing over other activities we accessed other literature that examined the process of changing priorities and behaviour (Bandura 1997). We found an appropriate model, the motivational interview, that allows people to change their priorities in ways that align with their values (Miller and Rollnick 2002). This model has been extensively used in various behaviour change situations, such as health promotion, where it helps patients adopt healthy behaviours through an Exercise Consultation (Loughlan and Mutrie 1995). Participants use goal setting, social support and weighing the advantages and disadvantages – for them – of different courses of action to achieve behaviour change.

We adapted this model for academic writing and created a Writing Consultation, which focused on prioritising writing. The Writing Consultation consists of a one-to-one motivational interview between pairs of academics, focusing on their writing goals, barriers they face in achieving those goals and strategies they plan to adopt for overcoming them. Furthermore, the Writing Consultation incorporates reflection and an opportunity to re-evaluate achievements and adjust goals. The theory for this approach, applied to the difficulty of prioritising writing was peer reviewed and published (Murray et al. 2008), but this is the first time that it has been implemented and evaluated.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer two questions:

1. Does the Writing Consultation initiate change in writing behaviours leading to prioritisation of writing?
2. Does taking part in a Writing Consultation increase motivation to write?

Methods

Funding was provided by the Nuffield Foundation. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Strathclyde. An external researcher was employed for this project. We selected fourteen writers currently involved in writer's group or writer's retreat – i.e. a sample of academics who were already actively trying to prioritise writing – and invited them to take part in the study. The study began with a briefing meeting, to explain the Writing Consultation. Paired participants then took part in a Writing Consultation, at the end of which they set dates for three further bi-weekly consultations. After eight weeks the researcher conducted one-to-one interviews with participants. At interview each participant was asked about the process of the Writing Consultation and any benefits they experienced from taking part in it. Thirteen of the fourteen participants (one dropped out for personal reasons) took part in a one-to-one interview. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy.

Frame

Using the framework of the trans-theoretical model of behaviour change, on which the Writing Consultation is based, transcriptions were analysed and coded for the core constructs: stages of change, decisional balance, goal setting and social support.

References

Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.

Lee, A. and Boud, D. (2003) Writing groups, change and academic identity: research development as local practice, *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2): 157-72.

Loughlan, C. and Mutrie, N. (1995) Conducting an exercise consultation: guidelines for health professionals, *Journal of the Institute of Health Education*, 33, 78-82.

Miller, W.R. and Rollnick, S. (2002) *Motivational interviewing: Preparing people for change*, 2nd edn. London: Guildford Press.

Murray, R. and Newton, M. (2008) Facilitating writing for publication, *Physiotherapy*, 94: 29-34.

Murray, R., Thow, M., Moore, S. and Murphy, M. (2008) The writing consultation: developing academic writing practices, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32(2): 119-128.

Research findings

All participants said they enjoyed taking part in the writing consultation and found it extremely useful. They thought the consultation allowed them to focus on their writing.

The main aim of the study was to evaluate the process of using the Writing Consultation. The structure of the Writing Consultation was found to be helpful on the whole, although there were suggestions for improvement. The timescale was well accepted, two weeks being long enough to get something done and short enough to maintain focus. The time commitment for Writing Consultation meetings – four hours in eight weeks – was seen as highly feasible.

The stages of change element of the consultation led to useful discussion at the first meeting, but was seen as repetitive at subsequent meetings. Decisional balance, which prompted discussion of the pros and cons of writing, was seen as 'a good outlet for discussion on the position of writing'. One participant found it 'helped to strengthen my values and beliefs about writing'. It too was most useful at the first meeting, but less useful subsequently, as the position of writing was unlikely to change in such a short period. Participants found that goal setting, and monitoring goals with others, generated a sense of achievement: 'being able to meet these goals put [me] in a better place, and that has a knock-on effect'. They said it was useful to identify potential barriers to achieving goals and to discuss ways of overcoming them. The main benefit of taking part in the writing consultation was social support; meeting someone regularly to discuss writing was very important: 'It was like having another conscience'. These meetings helped to 'share the guilt' and made writing less lonely: 'you know that the fears you have ... you are not alone'.

The results suggest that the Writing Consultation can promote positive changes in writing behaviour and enhance motivation to write. It also revealed a therapeutic value in discussing writing with a colleague. The Writing Consultation is neither expensive nor time consuming and can help academics prioritise writing. It contributes to knowledge about peer support for writing (Lee and Boud 2003) by suggesting how it can be a structured process.