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How can we facilitate developing Scholarly Writing?

Dr Pam Parker City University London

This article discusses the activity undertaken for a SEDA funded project in 2011- 2012 and how this project has enabled the activity to continue beyond this. I work within the Learning Development Centre (LDC) at City University London and at the time of the project starting there were eight academic team members (seven academics and one research assistant) of staff. As a team we were good at the many practical aspects of our work supporting colleagues to develop their teaching through workshops, seminars, our MA Academic Practice programme and mentoring but we rarely seemed to have time to undertake the scholarly work that provides the evidence to support our practice and develop personally and, we were all concerned about the expectations that we would publish (McGrail, Rickard & Jones 2006, Morss & Murray 2001 & Murray & Newton 2009). Even finding time to read regularly could be difficult and whilst we were all very active in presenting our work at conferences, we often failed to write these presentations up as articles hence missing an opportunity to publish when much of the initial work had been done for the presentation.

We had discussed this issue on many occasions in our team meetings and felt that other than time being an issue there was a lack of structure to support this and, a need to share ideas with peers (McGrail, Rickard & Jones 2006 & Morss & Murray 2001). Some of the team had published previously but in one of our meetings we chose this as a main issue to address and agreed we would all choose a topic that we wished to explore in more detail and develop some scholarly work which could be disseminated both within our institution and beyond. It was at this point I submitted the bid for the SEDA funding.

We agreed we would work on our individual topics for six months but that we all had to have some form of output at the end which could include a conference presentation with an opportunity to submit to the conference proceedings or an article for a journal such as our Learning at City Journal or another peer reviewed journal. The funds from SEDA were to be used for a one day, off site meeting where we could share what we had produced at this point and provide feedback to each other. We also agreed to update each other on our progress at our monthly meetings.

I had undertaken the writing for publication course which Gina Wisker runs and found that having peers to discuss the work with was very helpful but had not really acknowledged that the need to write for the assessment for this module was probably what had made me achieve this aim. As a group although we had our commitment to each other we did not have the same incentive and continued to be busy so when we met we tended to give a brief update but there was limited sharing of actual writing and this had not been formally introduced as part of the process. On reflection developing a "buddy system" would have been useful and part of this approach could have been an agreement to share some writing before each meeting and report back for each other (Morss & Murray 2001).

We did however have a whole day event at the end of the six months to share what we had done and so there was a point at which we had to produce something. Some of the group had drafted their article prior to this meeting and had asked peers to provide feedback. On the day when we met everyone was able to share what they had been doing and what their intended output was but only a few had actually reached this point, again perhaps there could have been a formal agreement sharing work prior to this day. Following discussion at the end of the day about how to proceed we agreed a further deadline of a few months and eventually the outcome was reasonably positive with one of the team submitting to an international peer review journal and subject to amendments the paper has been accepted, a further member of the team had their article published in the peer reviewed in house

journal, two developed a workshop for a conference and then had this published in an international journal attached to the conference and two developed conference presentations. It appears that this was a reasonably successful approach for us but we have learnt lessons from this.

The group completed an online survey about this activity and there was a general agreement that working as a group made us more committed to meeting deadlines but also producing something that others could read. This is clearly illustrated by this survey statement from one person *"I thought that undertaking the writing activity as a group provided the added incentive to produce something that could be read by other people. Otherwise I might have produced something that lacked structure and coherence (and so could only be understood by me!)"*. There was also a view that we should have been clearer about expectations as one person noted *"... next time maybe we should all submit our writings a few days before we have an away day to create more engagement of the work"*. One of the survey questions asked how people they planned to meet their objective and the majority did identify time to write and block this out. One person said they would like to write every day and others have noted the value of planning specific times to write whether that be daily, or in blocks (Morss & Murray 2001). When asked about barriers to this activity as expected time was the key one with workload mentioned the second (Morss & Murray 2001). Whilst we were all committed to this activity we still did not feel able to identify writing time in our busy diaries which was a tip given to me on the writing course and one I still need to learn to do.

The last question on the survey asked if people would like to undertake another activity as a group. In the eighteen months since completing this project the academic team has reduced to six but with two periods of maternity leave the team has at times been only four which has impacted on our time to engage in this. However, we have all been conscious of the need to continue to write and that working together does help us. We therefore planned a project that we could all be involved in focused around an evaluation of our MA Academic Practice programme. The project has several areas we are interested in so is a three year minimum plan for us. This project is eighteen months on and three of us have produced a literature review focused on some common issues for our programme as well as some areas we feel are given only limited attention in the literature. This has been submitted to an international journal for review and now needs some amendments but working together each taking a section helped us structure our time and provide feedback to each other (Bone, McMullen & Clarke 2009).

We have continued to focus on this project and two more members of the team as well as one of our professional staff have been working on another article which also includes some empirical data from documents related to *"Why staff undertake parts of the MA Academic Practice programme?"* particularly progressing beyond the first year when this is not compulsory. This article will be finished in the autumn term and will then be submitted to a peer reviewed journal. There are other areas members of the team who are interested in exploring aspects of the programme but some of these need data collecting from the beginning of the new academic year and so will commence in 2013-2014.

It is acknowledged that for many of us working in education development our roles are varied and busy and so finding time to write means prioritising this and we do not always have common projects. Some of the team have developed articles related to their study and all of us have focused on trying to ensure we write up our conference presentations for publication. Over the last year the Centre has been part of a review of professional services and this has provided a change to some aspects of our work as well new opportunities however, as the new academic year starts we need to ensure that we continue to keep up the momentum of writing and supporting each other through collaboration on writing and /or giving peer feedback.

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Details

Dr Pam Parker, Associate Director, Learning Development Centre, City University London.
E-mail contact P.M.Parker@city.ac.uk