Professional Development for Established Academic Staff: The Effectiveness of a Writing Programme

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Presentation for 2016 INORMS Congress, Melbourne, Australia
Introduction

- New role at Unitec
- One key responsibility: To support staff capability development in the area of research output production and dissemination
- A key priority in 2016: To facilitate writing productivity for staff members who are research active, yet require support to achieve a PBRF rating in 2018
- This presentation describes a targeted initiative to this end for a group of staff members at Unitec. Work that is in progress
Overview

- Situate the writing programme in existing literature
- Describe participants and programme content
- Present some initial findings
- Review planned programme evaluation
Situating The Initiative in Existing Literature

- Difficult to design the programme based on existing scholarship in this area
- Existing literature documents the effectiveness of writing courses and writing groups for boosting publication rates (see Wardale et al., 2015)
- But most of these programmes are designed for new or early career academics (Gibbs, 2016). Research in this area for established academic staff is lacking (see Murray & Thow, 2014). Report of findings will begin to address this gap in the literature
Situating The Initiative in Existing Literature

- A decision was reached to merge two different approaches for this initiative: a highly structured series of workshops on writing productivity, and unstructured but dedicated writing time for the group, to take place not long after the workshops.
- As Wardale et al. (2015) suggest, both approaches have been effective for boosting researcher productivity.
Situating The Initiative in Existing Literature

- A second decision was reached to invite staff participation from across a range of Practice Pathways (formerly Departments) at Unitec.
- One of the strongest indicators of success for writing programmes is multidisciplinarity (Gibbs, 2016; Waitere et. al, 2011. See also Bosanquet et. al, 2014).
Programme Participants

- 15 individuals were invited to participate, and 12 were able to take up the programme
- Fields and disciplines represented: Architecture (2); Landscape Architecture (1); Communication Studies (2); Language Studies (2); Cognitive Psychology and Osteopathy (1); TPA (scholarship of learning and teaching) (1); Sociologist (1); Social Worker (1); Computer Scientist (1)
Programme Participants

- Strategically chosen: strong publication record since 2012, and yet not necessarily likely to rate in the 2018 PBRF round without a publication ‘push’
Programme Content


- The first is open to all-comers: ‘Turbocharge Your Writing’. An accessible, cognitive-behavioural approach to overcoming writing blocks and cultivating effective work habits for writing.

- The second is ‘12 Weeks to Publication’. Maps out a specific writing plan and follows up with weekly e-mail coaching, a 6-week review, and a 12-week report and finishing plan.
Programme Content

- Finally, a 4-day residential (and fully catered) writing retreat
- As mentioned previously: the retreat provides unstructured but dedicated writing time for the group. It also aims to foster collegiality via shared experience, informal communication (during meals and breaks), and (optional) shared writing space. See Mewburn et. al (2013) on the benefits of such informal learning structures for this purpose
Current Status

- At this stage, the two half-day workshops are completed, and we are near the 6-week review mark (following weekly e-mail coaching)

- Workshops very well-received, with the majority of participants rating them as ‘excellent’, and citing specific helpful tools and skills learned

- However programme evaluation is still under way. Finish with evaluation plans; first, some initial findings
Initial Findings

- Participants found the two workshops to be very effective for promoting specific strategies and tools in support of writing productivity.
- The small multidisciplinary group (12 participants), meeting together over time, constituted a powerful and dynamic context for learning and mutual support.
- A two-day gap between workshops allowed participants to try out new behaviours and ways of thinking, which were then reported in the second workshop. Reinforced their value. Examples:
Initial Findings

- One principle: ‘chunk down’ a writing task into bite-sized portions, or even ‘nano’ steps. Crucially, identify ‘TNT’ (the next – small – thing to be done. Workshopped during Part 1). ‘I did my one “next thing”’

- Another principle: there is only so much time in any given day. If you are offered a new time-consuming opportunity, say ‘no’ to it if your writing goal is a higher priority and will be blocked as a result. Metaphor of new opportunity as a ‘shiny ball’ (not necessarily valuable). ‘I said no to a shiny ball’
Initial Findings

- A third principle: writing is new words on the page (not editing, or thinking, or reading another article). ‘I wrote 100 words’

- A fourth principle: at the end of a work session, write down a specific TNT. This practice will jump-start your next session, and like a ‘car parked on a hill’, avoid the normal ‘gearing up’ time it can take to get moving again. ‘I wrote a post-it note to self: my “parked car on a hill”’
Finally, principle of the 80% rule. When a piece of writing is 80% ready, send it to a critical friend for feedback (if it’s 90-100% ready, has taken ages to get there, and you’re not so open to feedback... especially if it would take you in an unexpected direction). ‘I sent off an “80%” piece yesterday for feedback’
Planned Evaluation

- Impact of writing programme on ‘output’ dissemination: a rigorous qualitative measure
- Not looking at productivity pre and post: too many factors and additional influences to consider there
- Also not looking at power of collegial group experience: too ‘fuzzy’. Will report on though, as part of programme context
- At the end of each workshop and on the day, captured new and developed tools, strategies, approaches and ways of thinking that the participant believes will benefit their writing productivity. Asked for as much specificity as possible
Planned Evaluation

- Not a course evaluation per se, and not anonymous (asked if de-identified comments can be shared with workshop facilitator)
- At 4, 8, and 12 months, will inquire about output dissemination subsequent to programme completion, and ask whether and to what extent supported by specifically reported learnings
- Finally, the number of participants who rate in the 2018 PBRF round will be noted (no direct causal links can be assumed here; rather, corroborating data)
Conclusion

- Targets: half of participants linking output dissemination to workshop participation, and one-third of participants rating in the next PBRF round
- Will also qualitatively analyse strength of any links made, and note any patterns in particular skills, tools, or approaches referred to as supportive, for future research PD planning
- As noted earlier, findings will begin to help fill a gap in the literature on the effectiveness of writing programmes for established researchers
References


