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Writing Confidence and Capability: The Journey to Academic Identity

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The expectation to create written publishable work as an academic credential can seem a burdensome imperative rather than a fulfilling activity. A writing group community enables academics (teachers and researchers) to re-visit the joy of writing and to develop their writing repertoire and writer's voice. This article captures the experience of writing group participants in a UK widening participation university. This writing group and its associated model is deconstructed and evaluated, to assess impact on confidence for writing and development of academic identity, allowing for useful recommendations and practical applications.

Introduction

An archetypal, almost clichéd perception of being a writer assumes that the process of writing involves individual sequestration, even quarantine from the world and social connection. Whilst this reductionist perspective may seem an exaggeration of the usual writer experience, this anti-social trope may play a part in how we think about writing *before* we write and even *while* we stare at a blank page, struggling to write a first sentence. Confidence as a writer may dissipate rather swiftly if it is assumed that writing must be an individual activity.

Lee and Boud (2003) argue that writing groups "disrupt the commonplace and often debilitating fantasy of writing as a solitary activity" (p. 190). The collective writing experience can be beneficial, challenging negative archetypes of isolation. This simultaneous blend of individual writing practised in a communal space contributes to building confidence and asserting the identity of being, or becoming, a "writer." This blend negates the false dichotomy of writing being either individual or collaborative, allowing for individual writing and peer support concurrently. Hyer et al. (2020) argue that writing groups are "intellectual and socially vital places" and play an important role in building community and can even have a restorative function

for colleagues pressured by the demands of academic roles (p. 151). Resilience as a writer requires a growth rather than a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2000), and the support offered by belonging to a writing group may be perceived as the road to self-efficacy. The acceptance that an imperfect first draft is a normal phase in the writing process emphasises the value of writing development or growth as a path to mastery

Academic writing groups as specific communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) have become well-regarded within the university landscape (Aitchison, 2009; Healey, 2017). Publishable writing, driven by the need to establish an academic reputation, share research impact, fulfil government metrics and "institutional productivity" (Aitchison, 2009, p. 906), requires the development of a distinctive academic writing voice, "an appropriate voice" and an "authoritative stance" (Cotterall, 2011, p. 413).

Yet the academic voice in writing can be the opposite of distinctive. Stankiewicz (2017) points out that novice researchers may fall into a writing style that is "passive rather than active" (p. 262), mimicking a neutral voice that is perceived to be the—rigidly adhered to—academic voice. Our (Dawne and Kath's) own understanding of "voice" in writing and "academic voice" is a specific type of writing mode. "Voice" in writing is, for us, a judiciously chosen mode of writing, which addresses a particular audience, possessing clarity of expression and a narrative quality that makes use of analogy and metaphor: "Voice" is the authentic representation of the writer self. Academic voice, then, features multiple registers, displaying a cluster of characteristics common to other academic researchers. It offers the unique perspective of the writer, expressed through words, syntax and credible argument that distinguishes one writer from another. This voice may share commonalities with other academic writers and yet there will be clear distinctions, brought about by experience, beliefs, values, and life themes (Savickas, 2012), the pattern of our lives and how we make sense of experience.

A distinctive academic voice, combined with research rigour, can bring a topic to life for the reader. It projects viewpoints to the wider world, using the power of language and voice to influence in a unique way. It takes confidence to find a true-to-self authentic, appropriate academic voice. "Voice," writes Stankiewicz (2017) "depends on the writer's point of view or stance; it emerges from an author's original thinking and the courage to express those ideas" (p. 262).

The obligation to write for academic publications necessitates a willingness to engage with different lexical practices that support but do not thwart

a developing academic voice. Within this paradigm, academic identity may be perceived as developing in parallel, or even dependent on, academic authorship. Successful academic authorship confers a sense of belonging, of being valued and acknowledged by others in the wider academic community.

A hunch that academic identity develops through writing success triggered our small-scale practitioner research. However, we were aware that, for many early-career academics, the pressure to write and be published as an academic rests on the assumption that they should "go it alone" rather than seek out the academic fellowship of a university writing group. In addition, it seemed that this pressure had a power to leach the joy from the writing process (Dwyer et al., 2012). Our experience as members and co-facilitators of a newly formed academic writing group allowed us to interrogate our hunches through a process of enquiry, which capitalised on some naturally occurring data and some insider research (Mercer, 2007).

Background to Our Practitioner Enquiry

The writing group is situated within a Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) in a vocationally-focused UK university where teaching is the paramount activity. The Centre works across the university, supporting academic staff in enhancement of learning and teaching and career development. Freed from disciplinary silos, the Centre provides a focus for teaching and teachers, a space to build an interdisciplinary community. Many academic roles within the institution are fundamentally "teaching" orientated, constraining the time available for research. Whilst staff may be keen to develop their academic writing and scholarship, the demands of the role situate the emphasis elsewhere. Therefore, the imperative to write can seem quite daunting to new academics. Tarabochia (2020) states "meaning making, shifting relationships and identity negotiations are, indeed, entangled in writing lives" (p. 17). The ability to engage in scholarship is entwined with a sense of self, and this entanglement of selves and the threads of confidence and identity were central to the collective and individual development of the group and its participants.

We became aware that some new academics, who arrived as "experts" from professional roles, found the transition to the academic writing style somewhat disempowering. For example, they may need to "switch voice" to write in an academically accepted way. Benner (1984) wrote eloquently

about the challenges of transitioning from "novice to expert" within professional life. This transition can be inverted for professionals entering academia as they may become a novice writer in academia. This not-uncommon experience presents a range of challenges and tensions. Reverting to the position of novice can trigger an awkward sense of "being wrong" or not "being right." This position marks an uncomfortable space, one that colleagues may wish to avoid. The writing group, on the other hand, is a safe, supportive space to explore this mutual discomfort and share strategies.

As researchers, writers, and academic developers ourselves, it was noticeable that for some new staff this transition to academic authorship created apprehension, avoidance, procrastination, and/or postponement of writing activity (Lee & Boud, 2003). We wondered whether academic identity development and academic self-assurance required writing confidence. A genuine desire to build confidence in academics for successful writing practice triggered our CLT's decision to create a "Writing for Publication Group."

The Writing for Publication Group: Our Writing Group Model

The writing group has been in existence for a number of years and continues to evolve. As the instigating group (academic developers with varied experience of writing), we made initial decisions for the programme based on knowledge of how other university writing groups operated. The UK does not tend to have a traditional "Faculty Model" of writing groups but depends on loose alliances of writers and formal and informal mentoring. Increasingly, though, CLTs are seeking ways to stimulate, support, and sustain academic writing and writers. We scheduled each facilitated, monthly lunchtime meeting. Each meeting comprised three or four segments: 30 minutes of "coaching" by a writing "expert" on a designated topic (such as editing and proof reading, abstract writing, structuring a journal article), followed by two or three 25-minute phases of timed writing including five-minute breaks for peer sharing and reviewing (see Cirillo, 2018). "Experts" offered their own perspective on a writing topic, grounded in the telling of their own academic identity story. The "experts" were largely existing members of the group and selected opportunistically according to our own connections, network, and suggestions from the group; there is synergy here with the perspective of Hyer et al. (2020) in being a "mentor by example and presence" (p. 154). The "experts" focused on their own varied writing journeys, but each firmly emphasised application to practice. This personalised

instructional aspect of the "expert" phase aimed to motivate members to recognise their own academic identity, created through their research and writing. Our writing group model was distinctive in content (the focus on topics, an "expert" and timed writing bursts) and through the egalitarian microculture of the group, informed by our own experience and beliefs in the value of collaborative, non-status-led collegiate approaches (Mullan & Kochan, 2001).

Initial informal discussions with academic staff made us aware that whilst writing in an academic voice in peer reviewed journals was certainly necessary, a "key indicator of academic identity and worth" (Lee & Boud, 2003, p.190), digital literacy and writing for other than academic spaces was increasingly a requirement of academic reputation building. These broader types of writing activity build confidence in writing from an academic perspective by testing out writing beyond the "intellectual hothouse" (Sword, 2009, p. 334). Academic writers are faced with an "increased and diversified function for writing" (Lee & Boud, 2003, p.190), which requires an adaptable style, whilst retaining scholarly rigour. The co-existence of academic, professional, and personal identities can be a point of tension for new writers entering academe until they discover and select the authentic and appropriate voice(s) required for their writing purpose.

Consequently, the remit of the group was extended to focus on other writing platforms, to extend reputational reach or impact. Digital literacy, or what Thomas (The Guardian, 2012) refers to as "transliteracy," the power to communicate across a range of platforms, offers an opportunity for academics to build their reputational capital (Hooley, The Guardian, 2012) by creating multiple and yet authentic voices in their writing/digital platform. This remit resulted in our group's balancing writing practice for different audiences, encouraging the development of distinct and diverse writing voices, crafted according to the purpose of the writing and the audience. For example, there would be practice at writing an informative tweet, LinkedIn summary, or post alongside more formal academic writing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, group members continued to meet together online to keep their writing aspirations alive. The format remained the same, but participants were able to move away for writing periods or remain connected but with muted microphones, visible but not audible to each other. It is interesting to note that the experience of being "together but apart," was viewed as being a central component of maintaining the imperative to write. This form of benign surveillance reinforced the commitment to personal writing within the space. Others described this as an

"individual collective," a solitary activity within a group context—a shared but singular experience that enhanced motivation to write through collective accountability. In a time of unprecedented change and increased workload, the commitment to the writing group did not wane, indicating the importance of the group in terms of connection, support, and the desire to maintain the identity of "writer" and to carve out time to write.

Methodology and Methods

Regular unprompted member feedback on writing development and on the usefulness of the meetings became a particular characteristic of this writing group. The breadth and scope of the feedback was a catalyst to our evaluation. Therefore, we decided to capitalise upon these spontaneous unsolicited responses from group members.

This evaluation was extended and amplified by the addition of formal evaluation data-sets (two interviews and a focus group), which were valuable in assessing the validity of our own impressions. We chose a generally phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 2014), a version of interpretative practitioner enquiry that seemed appropriate for this initial evaluation exercise and chimed with our own values and purpose. Phenomenological research is concerned with a "focus on peoples' perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 4), and we were genuinely curious about what we perceived to be the distinctive character of this writing group. We chose to conduct a thematic analysis of the detailed commentary we received to identify the different emergent aspects of the perceptions of group members. The adoption of this broadly phenomenological approach seemed congruent with an investigation into a newly formed community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Emerging Indications and Analysis

Whilst most findings aligned with the common denominators of successful writing groups, it became clear that some of the differences in our approach suggested a formula or model that added value. In particular, these differences that made a difference involved the enjoyment gained from our talking about writing approaches, such as the writing stimulation activities and the transliteracy aspect. The two-hour space for the scheduled writing group allowed for writing discussion and practice. Whilst the focus on academic writing predominated, the "fun" generated by short writing exercises

and by consideration of other platforms for promotion of writing and research (transliteracy), resulted in frequent unprompted appreciation from group members.

Table 1 provides examples of spontaneous comments from writing group members. The findings foreground the importance of identity and confidence, whilst simultaneously providing insights into the culture and practices of the group which support this development.

Theme 1—Collective Expectation

Collective activities and collaborative practice enable connection and accountability. It was evident that this collective expectation made writing "normal business" (Lee & Boud, 2003, p. 197) and provided an opportunity for a meeting focused not just on outputs but on "being" and "becoming" a writer. Co-production and interdisciplinary encouragement defused the dread of "having" to write something. Grant (2006) sums this dread up as "the imperative to write," "the frustration of planning to write yet never quite getting there" (p. 483). Members appreciated the "permission" to return to the joy of crafting writing.

Meetings provide a timeline and motivation, and thus, accentuate the personal and professional importance for group members. Peer groups provide support, encouragement, and interest, and provide a structure in which writing becomes privileged and mutually acknowledged. There was an unwritten understanding that group members would not attend "empty handed." As a result, the writing group created a unique environment that raised expectations and gave the process of writing pre-eminence over the emerging, written product in the initial phases. This emphasis is an implicit recognition that writing is a perspective, an intention, an activity, not just an output, and that the journey as well as the destination is appreciated. Writing groups, composed as they are, of a writing collective focused on their own "work in progress" fosters the ongoing belief that all members are co-learners, albeit with potentially different histories of practice. This shared experience of co-learning and constant development enables writing groups to be non-hierarchical collectives of peers. Peers, by virtue of their relationship, can challenge one another in non-judgemental ways, enquiring over progress, questioning clarity, making suggestions and giving feedback. This renders the writing group phenomenon somewhat unique in academic life: the position ing of mutual critical friends in a reciprocal activity of feedback and support.

Table 1
Representative Comments

Collective Expectation	"There is something about writing together, about being responsible to each other, about knowing that this is the time I will write at least something and not just think about writing."
The Joy of Talking about Writing	"I love that we talk about writing." "I like to be with like-minded people who like to put pen to paper and see where we go."
Writing Exercises	"I don't really mind what we are asked to write, it is just that we write something." "I need to see you all online whilst I am doing this, just knowing you are there is all the motivation I need."
Transliteracy	"Who knew there were so many ways you could write? I just thought I wrote…."
Creativity and Confidence	"This is a safe space. The group reinforces difference, we are all from different backgrounds, and it is about understanding that there is more than one way of doing this, of writing, that makes you feel you can at least begin." "I have never been confident, in writing ….sometimes in life…, but I feel more confident here with my peers…."
A Community of Practice	"I like the authenticity of what we do, the openness and the sharing of ideas… the lack of hierarchy too…."

Theme 2—The Joy of Talking About Writing

There was a great deal of talking about writing, but also about how to write in a meaningful, engaging, and authentic way. Leander and Prior (2004) commend the value of speaking about writing for the development of writing. We found that talking about writing resulted in members' increased confidence to write. For most members of the group, primary or elementary school was the last time they were taught to write. They found the chance to revisit the basics of the craft of writing to be invigorating. This reconsideration of craft basics offered members an incentive to refresh their writing, to enliven their style, and discuss how they could change a section, for example, to make clearer and "elegantly crafted sentences" (Sword, 2009, p.332).

This emphasis on the craft of writing relocates the emphasis from the output to the process of becoming a writer, enabling participants to practise, rehearse, and create their narratives. Occasionally, an element of playfulness pervades the opportunity to "try out" different approaches, stances, and voices. This willingness to experiment is a definite move away from the formulaic through the support of a community of practice in which participants can find their own way into writing and then articulate this perspective to others. This lack of rigidity fosters a resurgence in the joy of writing—the discovery that, although writing is an obligation for an academic, the experience can be fulfilling and personally satisfying

This joyfulness, however, co-exists with the other lived experience of writing, which is the imperative to begin and the difficulties of finding a starting place, coupled with the sense of exposure in taking one's writing, crafted in a personal space, and rendering it public. The writing group provides an in-between place for co-production and Vygotsky-like scaffolding (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bruner, 1964) for the emergent writer. Interdisciplinary backgrounds within a writing group enable and promote an emphasis on writing rather than subject or argument. This unique blend of support coupled with expertise, at times both pertinent to and distant from discipline, enables the writer self to emerge and to venture out into academic writing in the company of critical friends.

Theme 3—Writing Exercises

The group tested out freewriting (writing without pausing for a short, defined time slot) and generative writing (writing to prompts) exercises. Breaking through writers' blocks, these exercises still the inner, censoring voice,

and encourage creativity. Such activities allowed members to practise different strategies in a safe and affirming atmosphere. This "low stakes" writing (Elbow, 1997), followed by peer sharing, provided valuable reflection and writing development. Early on in group meetings, we also critiqued a selection of abstracts, analysing structure and language, resulting in worthwhile discussion. Some writing groups regularly conduct textual analysis (Aitchison, 2009).

Presuppositions about methods of academic writing surfaced in discussions after these activities. Some members assumed that to start writing, certainty about the topic was required, a "research/think-then-write" attitude. Freewriting and generative writing practices tempted members away from this attitude to a "think-while-you-write" approach. Torrance et al. (1994) argue that both approaches have "utility in the context of academic writing" (p. 390).

Theme 4--Transliteracy

A purposeful equity of importance was given to all types of writing. We recognised the importance of digital literacy and platforms to expand impact of scholarly activity, viewing digital platforms as a "credible destination" for academic work (Guardian, 2014). This recognition became the prompt for a more expansive view of academic writing that included traditional and digital platforms.

As a result, members enjoyed the chance to test out new ways of communicating their research through blog posts, LinkedIn articles, and tweets. The career-enhancing benefits of utilising digital platforms were appreciated, with some immediate reputational and collaborational results. We were happy to think of ourselves as encouraging transliteracy, the ability to write and interact across a range of platforms (Hooley, 2012; Thomas, 2012).

Theme 5—Connectivity, Creativity, and Confidence

Group members commonly expressed concern over the feeling of dispiritedness, caused by entering an academic community where writing was valued but subject to mysterious rules and conventions, what Lee and Boud (2003) refer to as the "secret codes" of academic writing. The group's interdisciplinary composition allowed for these concerns to be aired, confronted, and openly contested where necessary, resulting in an improved under-

standing of effective and "stylish" academic writing (Sword, 2009). Removing the requirement to demonstrate and adequately articulate subject knowledge, interdisciplinarity creates a space in which to enjoy writing, to focus instead on what makes writing accessible, engaging, captivating, and compelling.

The cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches across settings and subjects enabled participants to see that the parameters of academic writing are broader than the conventions and traditions of their own discipline and to be creative and explore writing in a freer way. Writing collectively enabled academic writers to be reminded of, and potentially reconnect with, their own previous writing voices and rediscover a joy in writing. This reconnection was facilitated within the group as members encouraged one another to write for different platforms and audiences. This writing enabled participants to see the scope of their own writing and to view their personal writing skills as multiple, agile, and adaptable to a range of audiences.

Confidence in writing was demonstrated in immediate responses through online groups and email. The example below sums up the positive outcomes from writing group membership:

> [The writing group] has helped me enormously as a fledgling writer on my first book . . . . The writing group helped me open up about my writing struggles and also feel confident that others were in the same boat.

This confidence seemed to be an example of how a sense of connection created by membership of the group was beneficial. It suggests that the writing group encouraged a safe space to be honest about the "struggle" to write, normalising the challenges of writing and thus promoting a balanced perspective on the writing process.

Theme 6—A Community of Practice

The writing group attracted a regular attendance of between six and 10 academic staff from a wide range of disciplines. It broadly matched Wenger and Wenger's (2015) definition of a community of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 2). Assessing the group composition against the criteria recommended by Bonk et al. (2004) in terms of membership, influence, fulfilment of individuals, shared events, and emotional

connections was revealing. *Membership* was fluid, with staff attending as other responsibilities permitted; *influence* was shared across the group through peer pairings and suggestions as to who could be the monthly "expert"; *fulfilment* was recorded through Yammer (Microsoft 365 online group) group commentary; and the sharing of the writing group event created *emotional connections*. The group developed organically, as the instigators or convenors of the group were equal partners in the group-learning experience. Everyone took turns to be the "expert."

Members praised the "space to think about writing," the "varied experience" of participants, the encouragement, the "specialist input by experienced writers," sharing problems, the work on LinkedIn profiles. Successful outputs included articles for *Times Higher Education* and *The Conversation*, blog posts, journal articles, a book in progress, and chapters completed. One member saw increased LinkedIn invitations exponentially escalate as a result of a rewrite of her LinkedIn summary. The writing group helped members to appropriately blend, develop, and articulate their emerging professional, academic, and personal identities.

The importance of this space to individuals and the expressed value of writing together led to the decision to evolve, adapt, and continue the group during COVID-19. (For interview and focus group commentary see Table 2 at the end of this section.)

Theme 7—Academic Reputation Development

The "experts" shared something of their own academic career path and surprised the group with the diverse nature of these stories and how their academic reputation had been curated through purposeful *and* accidental activities, along with specific writing approaches. Our digital literacy expert demonstrated how being in control of and capitalising on selected digital spaces expanded access to international collaboration and extended influence for research work undertaken.

Another expert shared a story of academic motivation and research success, which members found inspirational. This personal story showcased to the group how the academic curiosity of a nurse tutor, relating to a little known women's health condition, resulted in a research enquiry that contributed significantly to the teaching of health visitors and midwives. The success of this research generated a book publication and allowed this early career researcher to establish a reputation for expertise for both health and teaching. Overall, whilst the individual "experts" played a considerable part

in the group writing culture, the group itself became the expert space and valuable resource. In fact, as Aitchison (2009) argues: "In writing groups, writing is the subject and the object, the medium and the means of activity" (p. 10).

Theme 8—The Triple Identity Story: New Academics Have to "Become" Teachers, Researchers, and Writers

The interweaving of multiple identities and the emergent "self" is part of the work of writing. There are "selves" that manifest themselves in values or voice as well as in expertise. Bringing oneself to one's writing authentically is always a process to be explored and interrogated, together with the extent to which exposure of the "self" is managed, within writing generally and academic writing in particular. In academic writing, the legitimised selves that coalesce in the role and could be expected to arise in writing are the "teacher," the "researcher," and the "academic scholar/ writer," maybe also the "professional." These coexistent selves are subject to differing degrees of confidence and competence, forming a tension for the writer and the institution. Writing groups provide a space to explore these identities and the relationship between them, to experiment and to reflect on the way in which these identities interface.

Table 2 below displays the themes identified and explored in the section above. There were two distinct and separate data collection points. The first data set was generated from the transcripts of two writer group members who had reflected on their experience of being part of the writing group (Columns 1 and 2). The third column records the second data set, based on a focus group discussion prior to moving online due to Covid-19 and the campus closure.

Table 2
Data Themes

	Writer 1	***Writer 2***	***Group Collective***
Identity	"It has helped me enormously as a fledgling writer on my first book."	"I attended my first writing group with a sense of trepidation; would I be	"I am not yet a writer, but when I am in the group I feel I could be…."

		found out as an imposter amongst this group of academics?"	
Skill Acquisition	"I also learned about different possibilities for how to write from sharing with others and that was useful as I thought there was just one "right" way, whereas now I am learning to find what suits me…."	"… I have reframed my earlier, now misguided, notion of academic writing. I can produce publishable, professional writing and I need to do more of it."	"Sometimes now I read my own writing and I can see that I am getting closer to getting there, or at least somewhere!"
Confidence	"When I began working at the university I really didn't think academic writing was for me. I hadn't done any formal research; I didn't think I had anything to bring to the party."	"The guest speaker talked about academic writing was inspiring and planted a seed that began the change of how I viewed the whole notion of academic writing." "I … shared my self-doubt. She [the guest speaker, on hearing this] immediately … affirm[ed] my "experiential gravitas" – I have worked in education for 25 years and lived the role of a teacher and teacher educator – I	

		had a lot to bring to the party."	
Peer Support	"When I write by myself with no sounding board, I sometimes feel like I'm totally off track."		"Please continue the group, write with me, I cannot write alone…it falls away from me."
Creativity		"She [the guest speaker] talked about creativity in writing, bringing out the views and stories of those you were writing about."	"This group is a 'Brain spa' it gives me space to recharge and think differently."
Connection	"I felt isolated in the book proposal process…. The writing group helped me open up about my writing struggles."	"The atmosphere at the group was welcoming and inclusive, the facilitator's [name anonymised] warm style and approach created a positive space to be in."	"I look forward so much to the group, it is a place for me …[,] moments in my working life to do something which is somehow for me." "I have many networks, but this is one I really appreciate."

Additional Challenges Encountered

The "expert" section was so popular, stimulating multiple questions. As a result, time slippage meant there was less time for writing. The dual role

of the facilitator as peer member and "controller" of the schedule and timing can be problematic, highlighting tensions between roles. There was the additional complexity of our (Dawne and Kath's) being participants and observers (insider researchers) in relation to evaluating the writing group.

Mercer (2017) identifies a range of conditions that relate to "insider" research. These conditions cover the anthropological distinctions identified by Mead (1929) of the "stranger" who observes (the outside researcher) and by Merton (1972), who outlined the "distinctive assets and liabilities" of insider research, arguing that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Insider research could be described as a continuum, and Mercer (2017) focuses on shared characteristics rather than shared contexts being important in locating the researcher, arguing that the position shifts depending on relationship, time frames, and perceptions. Considering this perspective in relation to the writing group, shared characteristics can locate the "peer researcher" and other participants in the shared space, the "insider" perspective. However, there is another set of characteristics, which are less "shared" and move us, the researchers, along the continuum: as the facilitators, peer observers, and evaluators. As Merton (1972) argues, immersion in the group and sharing a lived experience offers more, on balance, than observation from the outside.

The Story of What We Do to the Story of Who We Are

The formation of a person's academic identity evolves like an intricate patchwork, emerging in small and often unrecognised epiphanies. These mini-epiphanies make up the constructed piece-by-piece identity journey:

- the story of what we do primarily (our academic role),
- the story of learning how to develop our writing in a purposeful, agile way to communicate and share experience and knowledge (writer formation), and
- the "knowing oneself," confidence enhancing story we become conscious of, from reflecting and learning with others, colleagues, and critical friends.

It seemed to us that while the academic role was to a degree determined by the organisation, the exploration and development of writer voice(s) offers a self-determined path and the vehicle for writer formation and self-knowing, resulting in an authentic academic identity. This self-determined pathway becomes the story of who we are.

To our surprise we noticed an alignment with Kegan's constructive development model of the evolving self (1994). At the outset, the writing group members situated themselves as writers who wished to gain approval from external sources (other colleagues, journal editors, supervisors), to gain reassurance, to establish a sense of their academic identity. Their initial comments and reasons for joining the group affirmed this perspective and motivation. This mindset would place them at the Socialised Mind stage of Kegan's model (1994), a development phase when someone looks outside themselves for a sense of who they are.

As the group progressed and the process of sharing, encouragement, and approval registered its effect, the confidence and success of publication for some group members resulted in a renewed joy for writing quite different from the initial fear and trepidation, revealing a different self-assuredness more akin to the Self-Authoring Mind stage of Kegan's model (1994). Whilst the phrase "self-authoring" is used by Kegan to indicate a stage of development whereby a person determines their own identity, their own value, rather than being dependant on external validation, the phrase, it seems to us, offers an especially exemplary word picture for a writer. This self-authoring writer is someone who writes for others but writes their own story of self in tandem.

Recommendations and Conclusions

This writing group model comprised a particular structure that was both planned and flexible according to the needs of those attending. The format offered three key phases:

Phase 1: Checking in—quick introductions and progress reports on writing.
Phase 2: Expert section (20-30 minutes)—guided discussion/instruction followed by interactive writing exercises.
Phase 3: Individual writing phases—generally two or three short writing bursts with peer sharing/reviewing.

This model fostered an enabling culture and genuine self-efficacy in testing out different writer selves and voices, liberating members from a limiting view of writing that pre-supposed a fixed academic writing style that had to be "put on over" a natural writing voice. Peer sharing of writing pieces in progress prompted us to recognise diversity of writing styles across disciplines and writing spaces. Rather than a unified writer self, we recognised

that we can toggle through a range of writer voices representing the different versions of ourselves, the roles we play, and our personal aspirations. Members were encouraged to "find their voices" appropriate to the audience, publication, or digital space. This realisation permeated the group conversations and output.

We would encourage participation in writing groups and our experience has affirmed the benefits of community, connectivity, and collective endeavour. Our writing group model is an exemplar, perhaps a variation on existing writing groups inasmuch as it allows for an instructional aspect to the writing development alongside timed, deliberate writing activity. Overall, we found that:

- It is useful to be playful, experimental, and adventurous with different voices and experiment with writing for different spaces.
- Being unable to be together in person (due to the pandemic) did not detract from the importance of "togetherness," writing online is different but still useful, the community evolved.
- The format—discussion followed by practise and application—works well; use of "experts" from within the wider group as participant-mentors is a useful practice.
- Benign surveillance can give purpose and direction.

The micro-culture created within a writing group, based on a sense of connection with others and shared purpose, can build confidence for successful writing experiences. We believe that writing groups in higher education create the environment for writing capability and that this can lead to the development of an authentic academic identity.

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