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Overcoming isolation with community based digital writing initiatives

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Overcoming isolation with community based digital writing initiatives

Abstract

Isolation is a consideration for many writers and is a term that has become synonymous with the pandemic. Perhaps this explains why the focus for much practice and research on writing development from a learning development and academic literacies context has traditionally focussed upon in-person support. Digital writing practices offer alternatives to in-person support and opportunities to address writers' feelings of isolation. The research question for this case study is, therefore; to what extent have changes in writing development through the pandemic refocussed how we engage students in community-focussed digital writing practices, in a learning development and academic literacies context? This case study seeks to answer this question by critically reflecting on the University of Manchester Library's 'My Learning Essentials' approach to digital writing during COVID-19 isolation. During this period, the team launched a range of community-based digital writing development initiatives. These include the peer-led Writing Together workshops and innovative uses of shared Digital Notebooks in embedded writing workshops when teaching within the curricula. Community-based digital writing development has enhanced My Learning Essentials' existing pedagogic principles of peer-learning and student-centred active learning. The 'What-So What-What Next' framework of critical reflection will be used to analyse what worked, what did not work and what we learned in delivering these digital writing initiatives. This case study will provide practise-based suggestions and implications for writing workshop pedagogy in the age of COVID-19 and beyond, that will be of interest to learning developers, academic skills tutors and other teachers of academic writing, as well as practitioners of digital writing more generally.

Practitioner Notes

1. When supporting students' digital writing online it is more important for students work to be visible, rather than focus on the students themselves.
2. Presenting students with varied opportunities to engage in community-focused digital writing workshops shifts the power balance encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning.
3. Utilising shared, open workspaces, such as Digital Notebooks, creates opportunities for students to learn from each other and receive feedback on writing in real-time.
4. Holding a silent space allows students time to think, process and reflect on their writing and learning.
5. We would also argue that, despite a sense of the contradictory, silence can help overcome feelings of isolation by showing care, attention and respect to students and is essential when moving away from a teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning.

Keywords

Collaborative Writing, Digital Writing, Overcoming Isolation

Introduction

The University of Manchester Library's My Learning Essentials (MLE) team, which consists of Learning Developers and Librarians, provide academic and information literacies training to students from all faculties and all levels across the institution. Prior to the COVID-19 enforced lockdowns, MLE's academic writing workshops focused predominantly on introducing students to strategies and structures that would help them produce pieces of writing for a range of academic assessments. During COVID-19 lockdowns, however, the focus of MLE academic writing workshops switched to community-based interactions to help students share knowledge and discuss the process and challenges of academic writing. This article will reflect on the process of implementing these changes to analyse the benefits that digital writing practices can have in engaging students in community-focussed writing. Community-focused writing is regarded here as a group of individuals writing together and learning from each other in a shared space with the goal of developing academic writing as a process, rather than a product. The 'What – So What – What Next' framework will guide our critical reflection (Rolfe et.al, 2001), to evaluate what worked, what did not work, and what we learned from this change in approach.

Setting the scene

Writing is an act of expression and communication (Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2018). Despite this, the process of academic writing can be felt predominantly as an individual activity, which writers often say can be isolating and stressful (Julien & Beres, 2019; Hanson, Loose & Reeves, 2020; Morris, 2016). This may be particularly true for undergraduate students who are often expected to write highly individualistic written assessments. This sense of isolation was heightened and extended to other aspects of our students' lives and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lectures and seminars were moved online and social hubs like university libraries, student unions, and other shared spaces were closed (Filho et.al, 2021; Lowenthal et.al, 2020; Mattingly & Marrs, 2021).

Therefore, as Aston, Stevenson, and Inala (2021) have outlined elsewhere, the MLE team took time to reflect on the support we wanted to offer students during the pandemic. This reflection, alongside anecdotal student feedback, led us to think carefully about how we could support the social and psychological aspects of learning in virtual and digital environments (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). In this regard, we took to heart Hughes and Spanner's (2019) belief that the responsibility for student wellbeing does not rest solely with student support or wellbeing teams.

We recognised the need to do more than simply support students' academic writing development; supporting their wellbeing would be equally important. As learning developers, we occupy the 'third-space' between academic faculty and student support services, and can often be seen as a bridge between students themselves, higher education expectations and the 'hidden curriculum' (Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars & Dingwall, 2021 & Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). As a result, a pedagogy of kindness and a

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focus on wellbeing can be even more potent when employed by learning developers (Gilmour, 2021a). As a team, we, therefore, made the decision to embed building a sense of community at the heart of our pandemic support to help students connect with one another to address feelings of isolation.

The MLE approach to overcoming increased isolation during the pandemic and the move to online learning combined elements of collaborative and community-based learning. Reciprocal interaction and dialogue between students, as well as between students and learning developers, was used to create multiple opportunities to share knowledge, learn from each other and reflect upon our own writing practices (Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Davin & Donato, 2013; Kaufhold & Yencken, 2021). Importantly, belonging to a wider community can become a coping strategy in overcoming isolation (Chakma & Kahuhung, 2021; Eardley, Banister & Fletcher, 2021; Mattingly & Marrs, 2021). The benefits of writing communities are perhaps nothing new, as shown by the continued popularity of writing retreats and Shut Up and Write events (Grayson & Theis, 2021; Woloshyn et.al, 2019). However, such writing communities are predominantly focused on academic staff and researchers, rather than undergraduates. The positive effect these communities can have on their members' wellbeing is also increasingly understood and pursued as a specific outcome (Eardley, Banister & Fletcher, 2021; Stevenson, 2021). As a team we wanted MLE's online writing support to harness the advantages of writing and collaborating in community and share this with our students, both undergraduates and postgraduates.

As part of our early reflections, we also recognised that the approaches we used in our in-person workshops would not directly translate to an online learning environment; we needed to utilise new pedagogies and tools to combine community-building and writing development successfully. MLE's approach to in-person physical workshops traditionally use a range of activities designed to help students learn the rules, expectations, and structures in producing a piece of academic writing. These activities include a mix of individual, pair and group work to encourage peer-learning, but rarely involve all students in the group writing together in a shared space as part of a connected-community. Fortunately, the move to online learning presented us with a range of tools to retain these peer-learning and student-centred pedagogic practices, whilst also enhancing our ability to increase the visibility of the writing process to the whole group.

What?

The MLE team made use of different approaches and tools to create opportunities for community writing in live online teaching in both the open programme and the embedded programme. This ensured our support suited the context in which it was delivered and the audience it was delivered to. In the open programme we launched Writing Together Workshops and in the embedded programme we made use of digital notebooks to design activities around community-focused writing.

The Writing Together sessions were based on Rennie Saunders' popular Shut Up and Write model, but targeted predominantly at undergraduate students, with a focus on the writing process, rather than the product (Writing Partners). Writing Togethers run for two hours and are structured on the Pomodoro Technique, with three writing blocks of 20 minutes, 25 minutes and 30 minutes, each separated by a 10-minute break. The sessions are co-facilitated by two members of staff and a member of the Library Student Team. At the start of each session attendees are invited to

introduce themselves to the group and share what they are writing or working on. The facilitators and Student Team co-facilitator also introduce themselves and share what they are working on to help create a sense of community. Before beginning the first writing block the facilitators outline the structure of the session and explain the benefits of the pomodoro technique in helping to overcome procrastination and avoid distractions. Students can use breaks to either relax away from the computer or join in discussions around different aspects and challenges of writing. After the session a post-session blogpost would be created which recorded all the writing knowledge, advice and suggestions shared between facilitators, student team and attendees as a co-produced record of these discussions that attendees could look back on as and when needed, to extend learning beyond the session itself.

The open programme, in which Writing Together are delivered, provides students with the opportunity to self-selectively attend extra-curricular workshops to develop their academic writing. It is open to students from all subjects and levels across the university. This allows students from different backgrounds and expertise to interact and learn from one another. Whilst this presents powerful opportunities for peer-learning, it can also present challenges in ensuring all students receive the level of support and advice they need or want. Fortunately, digital tools gave us the opportunity to tailor these sessions to the needs of attendees and create deeper opportunities for peer and community learning. The sessions were delivered online via Zoom and, importantly, there was no expectation that students would use their webcams or microphones throughout the entire session. A 'How To Join In' slide is displayed as students enter the Zoom room that outlines expectations of webcam use, making clear that students can use them or not, depending on what they are comfortable with and outlines alternate ways students can engage in the session. This helps to keep the sessions as inclusive and accessible as possible. As this was a new type of MLE session, a pre-session blogpost was sent to all sign-ups to explain in more detail what the session is and how they can get the most from it.

Figure 1

'How To Join In' Slide



In the embedded programme, we co-design writing workshops with academic colleagues that are delivered in the curriculum, at a programme and/or modular level. Embedding academic skills

teaching is regarded as the most effective means of developing students' academic literacies. It ensures all students, not just those who are referred or self-refer to extra-curricular activities, are supported to develop their writing skills in the context of their academic discipline (Cairns, Hervey & Johnson 2018; Wingate, 2006). Digital notebooks, adapted from Google Slides (Tucker, 2019), provided a flexible format in which we could combine elements of subject-knowledge (such as extracts of journal articles) with scaffolded activities to help students experiment with the process of writing whilst simultaneously developing their subject expertise and critical thinking in a shared collaborative space. For example, in a session designed for second-year midwifery students, we created a [digital notebook](#) that scaffolds students through the journey of turning their reading into writing by using the It Says, I Say, And So writing strategy. This strategy creates a model students can use to think, note take and then write critically about the evidence. In the first part of this session, students are invited to read and collaboratively annotate with their thoughts an extract of a subject-specific journal article. In the next activity, the notebook is divided into three columns: It Says, I Say, And So. Students take a row each to write about a piece of evidence, quote or paraphrase they thought was important from the reading. Google assigns each contributor an animal-based avatar/name, which ensures all work is anonymous and students do not have to worry about their peers or facilitators knowing which contributions are theirs. This anonymity helps to create a safe-space where students can experiment with new strategies. The shared communal work-space in the Digital Notebook ensures students can learn from one another in real-time. Students who are more hesitant and unsure can learn from more confident students and facilitators can offer real-time formative feedback on both an (anonymous) individual and group level.

So What?

Both the embedded programme and open programme sessions were guided by the same pedagogic principles and a focus on using community to overcome isolation. These pedagogic principles include active learning and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Race, 2015), which were entrenched by making use of digital tools to create shared spaces in which students write and reflect on the process of that writing, both individually and collectively. This approach is supported by Rakedzon's (2021) belief that learning to write requires actual writing and feedback, and that this is easier to achieve online. This is something we certainly found to be true. Collaborative digital tools allowed us to design shared spaces wherein students could ask and answer questions anonymously and see other students writing in real-time, which enabled facilitators to give immediate formative feedback that would benefit both individuals and the group.

For example, in Writing Together we used Microsoft Forms to invite students to anonymously share what they find difficult about writing and what aspects of writing they want advice on. These contributions are used to shape the discussions in the breaks to ensure that students received the help and advice they need. Similarly, in embedded workshops, Digital Notebooks showcase student writing in real-time, which allows facilitators to identify common approaches and trends that can then be highlighted, explained or corrected. These low stakes activities, therefore, created a safe space in which students could experiment with new writing approaches and processes and receive immediate formative feedback from facilitators and peers (Mattingly & Marrs, 2021).

As outlined above, dialogue between students was a central component of MLE's approach to community writing. Kaufhold and Yencken (2021) consider a number of potential limitations of dialogue in writing communities. One of these, over-reliance on facilitators for feedback, is particularly pertinent for our community-writing initiatives. One of the ways we attempted to overcome this across both the embedded and open programmes was through a release of responsibility (Fisher & Frey, 2013); by empowering students to help and learn from each other in an attempt to reduce the dominance of the facilitators. This was part of a clear decision to continue moving away from authoritarian approaches to teaching and learning, in which the teacher is centred as the font of knowledge (Mattingly & Marrs, 2021). Teaching online with digital tools and via platforms, such as Zoom, have the potential to help create a more democratic learning environment compared to physical classrooms in which tutors traditionally dominate the space by standing at the front of the class while students remain seated. In this situation, attention and focus is placed firmly on the tutor. In contrast, the horizontal power-arrangement afforded by Zoom creates opportunities for multiple voices (Kaufhold & Yencken, 2021). This was reinforced by the join in slide previously mentioned at the start of MLE online sessions, which outlined the different ways students could engage and contribute to activities and discussions whether they were comfortable and/or able to use webcams and microphones or not. This made the sessions more inclusive and encouraged participation by ensuring multiple avenues of engagement.

In Writing Together this was partially achieved by co-delivering sessions with members of the Library Student Team (current university students from a range of degrees, levels of study and backgrounds), who would share their own lived experiences, knowledge and advice, and partially by encouraging student attendees to offer their own advice to create peer learning and knowledge sharing. Releasing responsibility was important again here, as rather than facilitators immediately offering advice or sharing resources (which would come later), we would ask student attendees how they would respond to that challenge and what strategies they found useful. The use of digital note-books establish this approach in our embedded programme. As students wrote in a shared space, they modelled good practice, different approaches and created authentic and real-time exemplars for each other to adopt and adapt. In this way we used writing, and discussing writing, as a guided process of discovery; students could discover how they write best as an individual and how they can best overcome writing challenges (Murray, 1972). This also allowed us to cement wellbeing in our dialogic approach, by giving students a space in which they could support each other socioemotionally (Bali, 2020) and share their challenges to help overcome feelings of isolation. For example, alongside discussing writing, breaks are also often used for general conversation or sharing advice on how we were all coping with lockdown. In this way, students joined a community of writers in which they were both benefactors and beneficiaries of knowledge sharing (Woloshyn et.al, 2022). In Writing Together this was active knowledge sharing: sharing ideas, strategies, and offering advice to questions. In Digital Notebooks, this was passive: visible writing in a shared space allowed sharing and learning.

Another potential problem highlighted by Kaufhold and Yencken (2021) is the perceived relevance of feedback. This is perhaps exasperated in writing communities focused on undergraduates, who may have signed up hoping to get 'answers' from the facilitators they regarded as the 'experts'. Importantly, research on dialogue in writing groups has suggested that attributing only one solution or a perceived writing 'norm' can shut down conversation and knowledge sharing

(Kaufhold & Yencken, 2021). Therefore, this expectation of the facilitators as the sole fonts of knowledge was something we wanted to move away from. To achieve this, we made sure to reinforce that there isn't one 'best' strategy to help with writing, and that it is better to experiment, adapt and learn from others to find which approaches work best for individual writers. This was frequently modelled by co-facilitators (including Library Student Team) describing how they did things differently to one another. In a practical sense, the use of Microsoft Forms allowed students to share the aspects of writing they wished to discuss, which ensured we, as a community, shared ideas on topics relevant to the students, not just what facilitators thought they needed to know. In the embedded programme we released responsibility to the students' expertise by stressing that they, not us, are the subject experts in their fields, and that they have just as much, if not more, to learn from each other than us.

What Next?

As facilitators there was a lot to be learned about how our behaviour during sessions and activities can encourage or discourage community learning and engagement in collaborative writing. We believe these learnings helped, and will continue to help, enhance our own teaching practice both generally and specifically in relation to community-based digital writing.

One of the most debated challenges throughout the pandemic was the in/ability to gauge student engagement by observing body language when webcams were not used (Bali 2021; Symons, 2021; Wakefield, 2021). However, many studies have since reinforced that participation and interaction, not 'being seen', are more useful markers of student engagement in online learning environments (Bashovksi, 2021; Gilmour, 2021b; Nadeem & Blumenstein, 2021). From reflecting on our online teaching, this is something we would wholeheartedly agree with. Our use of digital tools kept writing a visible and communal experience. This ensured we did not have to rely on, often misleading, visual cues to gauge student engagement. In the digital notebooks, we could see, in real-time, students' progress and approach when writing. We could identify if there was group hesitation around the activities, which would allow us to clarify expectations or offer encouragement. In Writing Together, we could gauge student engagement through the participation in the conversation which they could engage in either over microphone (with cameras on or off) or via the chat, whichever they preferred. In regard to our own teaching practice, this reinforced our belief that digital tools should be used to make students' writing visual, not the students themselves.

Arguably one of the most important behaviours we developed was the need to embrace the silence; to wait, and then wait even more, to give students time to process what we were asking them to do and then to reflect on what they wanted to write about before starting to write and/or before offering their own suggestions and strategies to aid others. Despite a sense of the contradictory; using silence to address isolation, silence can mean so much more (Alerby and Elidottir, 2003). We used silence to show care, attention and respect to students who prefer to join in conversation through the text chat, to allow them the necessary time to think and type their thoughts and ideas, without unintentionally excluding them from the community or prioritising those on microphone and camera. When we did speak we were careful to offer two things: affirming and encouraging feedback, acknowledging the efforts that individuals were making, often addressing students by name, we would also chat with our student team attending, asking

them to share their approaches to a writing task. This dialogue was intended to instil a sense of community; growing together and building confidence in practising.

As educators it was a challenge to hold a silence. However, we sincerely believe it is an essential skill to develop when moving away from teacher-centred authoritarian teaching and learning, to one that steadily releases responsibility back to students themselves, and encourages them to learn from one another, and discover writing approaches that work for them. Importantly this approach also aligns with “emancipatory practice” as a guiding value of Learning Development (Association for Learning Development in Higher Education [ALDinHE], 2022). The difficulty of expressing what emancipatory practice means in a practical teaching and learning sense has been acknowledged by other Learning Developers (Webster, 2019). We believe, therefore, this combination of embracing the silence in order to release responsibility back to the students, and utilising digital tools to create communities of learning, may suggest a way forward in developing a distinct pedagogy for Learning Developers. Building a sense of community and community discovery to reduce the authoritarianism of a facilitator-dominated session is central to this pedagogy, which builds upon the ideals of an academic literacies approach to academic writing (Lea & Street 1998), by ensuring we do not try to ‘fix’ an individual student’s writing ‘deficits’ by introducing them to a pre-determined box of tips and tricks. In moving the role of the learning developer away from the fixer to the facilitator with a focus upon community-discovery, we may enhance how we consider academic literacy and skills development with emancipatory practice.

Zooming out, at a programme-level, this approach reinforced the importance of slowing down to speed up when encountering situations that challenge or necessitate change in existing teaching practices. As mentioned above, early in the pandemic and the shift to fully online learning, the MLE team took the decision to not rush into simply trying to translate existing support and workshops like-for-like to the online environment. We took the time to reflect upon what our students would need in lockdown, online learning and then to research the best methods to deliver this. Although it is important to state that MLE’s pre-existing focus on blended learning ensured we were in a fortunate position to take this slower and more reflective approach. From this experience, we would agree with Kaqinari et. al.’s (2021) belief that lecturers with high self-efficacy and confidence in their pedagogic approaches to teaching may be able to adapt to changes more effectively. As a team, we certainly feel we were able to adapt effectively and efficiently to deliver academic writing support that would allow students to develop their writing while simultaneously overcoming isolation by connecting with and learning from others during lockdown.

Elsewhere, as teaching continues to move back on campus and into physical lecture and seminar rooms, we are keen to avoid the temptation to revert fully back to our older ways of teaching and lose the experiences, skills, and opportunities gained during online learning throughout the pandemic. Indeed, going forward, we are intending on building what we have learnt about our own behaviours and how we engage students in digital writing practices to further enhance our commitment to community building and peer-learning, and to facilitate hybrid modes of teaching that engage our diverse student community.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university.

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