



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2006

A Cappella and Diva: A Collaborative Process for Individual Academic Writing

Wendy Beck

University of New England

Kerry Dunne

University of Wollongong, kdunne@uow.edu.au

Josie Fisher

University of New England

Jane O'Sullivan

University of New England

Alison Sheridan

University of New England

Publication Details

Beck, W., Dunne, K., Fisher, J., O'Sullivan, J. & Sheridan, A. 2006, 'A Cappella and Diva: A Collaborative Process for Individual Academic Writing', *M/C Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2,

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

A Cappella and Diva: A Collaborative Process for Individual Academic Writing

Abstract

Picture this: Five academic women are sitting at a round table in an elegant nineteenth century room located in a rural landscape in regional NSW. Sometimes with coffee, sometimes over lunch, the conversation ranges broadly across the spectrum of the personal, policy and university politics. Having traversed the terrain in which they work-workload, juggling the responsibilities that traditionally fall to women-the talk comes round to the business of the day: writing for publication. Here is how a typical meeting unfolds: they provide updates on their research successes, and then proceed to the discussion and critical response to a current piece of writing by one or two members of the group. While the rest of the group may not be familiar with the content or discipline area, they nevertheless are able to provide a meta-analysis of the structure and resultant clarity of the work using an agreed process. When the discussants-"the Divas"-talk about their posters or papers, "the a cappella group" analyses key structural features including the question posed, the main message to be conveyed, how the research was conducted and the scholarly contribution it makes to the field.

Keywords

process, individual, academic, writing, cappella, collaborative, diva

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Beck, W., Dunne, K., Fisher, J., O'Sullivan, J. & Sheridan, A. 2006, 'A Cappella and Diva: A Collaborative Process for Individual Academic Writing', *M/C Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2,

A Cappella and Diva: A Collaborative Process for Individual Academic Writing

- [Wendy Beck](#), [Kerry Dunne](#), [Josie Fisher](#), [Jane O'Sullivan](#) and [Alison Sheridan](#)
- [Respond to this Article](#)

Volume 9 | Issue 2 | May 2006 |

¹ **Picture this:** Five academic women are sitting at a round table in an elegant nineteenth century room located in a rural landscape in regional NSW. Sometimes with coffee, sometimes over lunch, the conversation ranges broadly across the spectrum of the personal, policy and university politics. Having traversed the terrain in which they work—workload, juggling the responsibilities that traditionally fall to women—the talk comes round to the business of the day: writing for publication. Here is how a typical meeting unfolds: they provide updates on their research successes, and then proceed to the discussion and critical response to a current piece of writing by one or two members of the group. While the rest of the group may not be familiar with the content or discipline area, they nevertheless are able to provide a meta-analysis of the structure and resultant clarity of the work using an agreed process. When the discussants—"the Divas"—talk about their posters or papers, "the *a cappella* group" analyses key structural features including the question posed, the main message to be conveyed, how the research was conducted and the scholarly contribution it makes to the field.

Overture

² This "collaboration" theme prompted us to unpack and reflect on our mode of collaboration, something we had discussed informally but not written about in any structured way. We have a successful mode of collaboration that offers individual benefits as well as enhancing the research output of the university.

³ In this paper we reflect on how our collaborative process benefits us individually and seek to make sense of our collaborative practice. Through this reflexive process we have identified six aspects of our interaction and collaboration (motivation to translate our research into publications; training in the template; multidisciplinary feminist consciousness; a negotiated process; commitment to practice on a regular basis; and trust and reciprocity) that have contributed to the success of our practice.

⁴ Our roundtable discussions provide a space in which the distinct but complementary disciplinary *a cappella* voices come together. Each of us arrives with an individual piece of research (our solo performance) and then through a group process of questioning and reflection we rehearse and refine our arguments. As a result of this process, each returns to her individual research context better equipped to perform as a Diva. We have come to conceptualise this process as one in which a poststructuralist writing self is created. It is as if, as we sit around the table, we create a discursive space at the centre of the table from which a "voice" emerges with a greater level of clarity and confidence—one attuned to its audience. This writing subject is, as a result of the process, self-reflexive and more responsive to a diverse range of contexts and audiences than we were as individual, isolated writers. This has strengthened our individual research publications.

A Cappella Collaboration

⁵ There is much in the literature about the privileging of individuality in humanities and social sciences research publications (Austin and Baldwin; Sullivan). We work in a university that, like most other universities, largely assumes that writing is an individual process, yet present tertiary sector research policy mandates collaborative research (NCRIS). We have developed a group process that creates a space where we as individuals can share our work. Through our connections, conversations and participation in this "community", we all gain.

⁶ We began meeting after a five-day intensive professional development workshop, *Writing for Publication*, funded by UNE and facilitated by a consultant (Brown). From this workshop we took away a template for interrogating writing based on a group process. Each individual prepared a "poster" which consisted of their answers to a series of specified

questions designed to explicate the structure and message of an academic paper. That was almost ten years ago, and our group of five has been meeting regularly since then to read and discuss each others' work in progress, providing meta-analysis of the writing rather than an analysis of the disciplinary specific content. We had joined the workshop as individuals, seeking to improve our research output, so that in this respect our group that emerged from the workshop is self-selecting. Since then we have become increasingly subject to changes in the Australian higher education system. Academics are now expected to publish more and more in order to comply with a climate of greater scrutiny of research productivity. At the same time academics face an increasing administrative and teaching load. While we work in an institution with a strong research tradition, our geographical isolation makes cross-institution face-to-face networking more difficult. Our writing group has ameliorated these pressures and provided a source of positive supportive, critical feedback. The process we have negotiated reflects our distinctive "take" on Brown's model. We engage in a collaborative process towards individual products.

Rehearsing

⁷ A key element of the success of our writing group is the commitment that we have all made to our regular meetings. Initially this required our having to prioritise the writing group's meeting times, and practice the process of making time for them. The regularity, or "habit", of the writing group's meetings is now part of our working lives, factored in just as would be any of our other work roles.

⁸ As a result of the skills we developed through the initial workshop and the adaptations we have negotiated over the years in our regular meetings, we have developed a very strong trust between members. Research has shown that face-to-face interaction is especially crucial in creating knowledge (Nahapiet, Gratton and Rocha), and we believe that the interactions we have had on a regular basis have contributed to a culture of trust, which is present within our group's interactions. In effect we practice what Delpit has described as a "special kind of listening" that involves not only "open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds" (297).

⁹ We are conscious of two dimensions of "trust" (as defined by Abrams, Cross, Lesser and Levin) as instrumental in the sharing of knowledge in our group: "benevolence ('You care about me and take an interest in my well-being and goals') and competence ('You have relevant expertise and can be depended upon to know what you are talking about')" (65). The benevolence we experience is one that also allows us to recognise the value of "giving". In sharing our ideas and suggestions on each other's work, there is no expectation that because one has shared an idea that she has authorship rights. Rather, it is through our collaboration that we bring our writing into focus and progress it to a stage where it is ready for individual publication. While we each benefit individually from our publications, as Wenger has also argued, we are not "blind to the social fabric that makes them possible" (xiii). Indeed, our group process could be regarded as a particularly feminist response to institutional pressures—women supporting women. We recognise we are fortunate in having developed friendship as well as having shared goals. Ours is a process that may not translate to other groups. In the absence of trust and friendship, competitiveness, ownership and lack of commitment to engaging in the work of others may simply produce a cacophony. The template may not always be sufficient as trust is essential.

¹⁰ These six factors—motivation to translate our research into publications; training in the template; multidisciplinary feminist consciousness; a negotiated process; commitment to practice on a regular basis; and trust and reciprocity—are integrally related. We function much as an *a cappella* choir, which allows the sum of our voices to inform the performance of the individual Diva. Rehearsing as an *a cappella* choir provides us with the confidence and skills to perform solo. We believe the confluence of these factors explains not only the longevity of our group practice but also its success, which is reflected in the number of published outputs (articles and books), prizes for writing and the status of the journals and publishing houses in which our work appears.

¹¹ What we do is collaborative but does not fit the norms. It is not a matter of producing a unified research purpose but we function as collaborators; a group conspiring to bring about individual outcomes building on a collaborative practice that works for the humanities and social sciences. It is dialogic, not hierarchical or hegemonic. Typically, the purpose of collaboration is an acknowledged collaborative outcome (Yancey and Spooner 46), whereas our collaborative practice focuses on enriching individual outcomes. When our voices meet at our round table it is a chorus out of which emerges five quite distinct solo performances.

References

- Abrams, L., R. Cross, E. Lesser, and D. Levin. "Nurturing Interpersonal Trust in Knowledge-Sharing Networks." *Academy of Management Executives* 17.4 (2003): 64-77.
- Austin, A.E., and R.G. Baldwin, eds. *Faculty Collaboration, Enhancing the Quality of Scholarship and Teaching*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, No. 7, 1991.
- Brown, R. "Write Right First Time." *Literati Newslite* 1994/1995: 1-8.
- Delpit, L.D. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 58.3 (1988): 280-298.
- Nahapiet, J., L. Gratton, and H. Rocha. "Knowledge and Relationships: When Cooperation Is the Norm." *European Management Review* 2 (2005): 3-14.
- National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy*. (NCRIS) Advisory Committee. 10 Nov. 2005 <http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/ncris/ncris_background.htm>.
- Research Quality Framework: Assessing the Quality and Impact of Research in Australia. The Preferred Model*. Sep. 2005. 16 Nov. 2005 <http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/research_quality_framework/default.htm>.
- Sullivan, P.A. "Revising the Myth of the Independent Scholar." *Writing With: New Directions in Collaborative Teaching, Learning and Research*. Ed. Reagan S.B., Fox, T and Bleich, D. Albany, N.Y.: State U of New York P. 1994. 11-30.
- Wenger, E. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Yancey, K.B. and Spooner, M. "A Single Good Mind: Collaboration, Cooperation and the Writing Self." *College Composition and Communication* 49.1 (1998): 45-62.

Citation reference for this article

MLA Style

Beck, Wendy, Kerry Dunne, Josie Fisher, Jane O'Sullivan, and Alison Sheridan. "A Cappella and Diva: A Collaborative Process for Individual Academic Writing." *M/C Journal* 9.2 (2006). 09 Jul. 2014 <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0605/09-divas.php>>.

APA Style

Beck, W., K. Dunne, J. Fisher, J. O'Sullivan, and A. Sheridan. (May 2006) "A Cappella and Diva: A Collaborative Process for Individual Academic Writing," *M/C Journal*, 9(2). Retrieved 09 Jul. 2014 from <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0605/09-divas.php>>.