



Learning and teaching in clinical practice

## The write stuff: A proactive approach to increasing academics' writing skills and outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

An important way to advance the profession of nursing, to promote best practice and to improve the quality of nursing care, is for nurses to publish. A publication track record is necessary to gain competitive research funding, build knowledge, disseminate new insights and advance the profession. However, academics often experience obstacles in publishing ranging from a pervasive teaching culture, lack of confidence in writing, and lack of strategies to write more strategically. The benefits of writing retreats have been discussed within the nursing and other academic literature but the specifics about the method as well as the unplanned benefits have not been explored. More exploration and discussion is needed about factors assisting writers to complete papers and successfully publish. This paper discusses a novel intervention which aimed to seed the beginnings of a flourishing scholarly community at a regional Queensland University. The paper also presents qualitative and quantitative evaluation data.

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### Introduction

An important way to advance professional groups, to promote best practice and to improve the quality of care provided is for health professionals to publish their research and development initiatives (Ketefian and Freda, 2009). Within the university sector, a publication track record is necessary for gaining competitive research funding and furthermore is a recognised indicator for organisational performance. However, health academics teaching at Universities may frequently experience role overload due to the pressure to teach large and diverse student cohorts. The pressure of teaching is escalated when there is a falling supply of colleagues, as academics retire and are not replaced (McAllister et al., 2011). Many of the newly appointed educators are relatively naive to publishing, time strapped and perhaps grappling with the transition from clinician to educator (Anderson, 2008). Thus it is challenging to find ways to assist this academic community to participate in a

flourishing publication community. This paper presents an evaluation of a writing retreat in Australia that was designed to: develop a writing community; increase publication outcomes; and revitalise the writers at the same time.

Over the last decade the publication output by Australian academics has increased, however many health professionals, including nurses, are still not publishing completed research or innovations (Jackson, 2009). Furthermore, analysis of trends in publishing indicates that of the research published in high impact nursing journals across the world, only 7% were from Australia or New Zealand, where this project took place (Wilkes and Jackson, 2011). It is not clear whether health educators and nurse academics understand these trends and the relationship between chosen research method and publishing in high impact journals. Sharing this knowledge may assist educators to focus their work in areas of need, and areas where they can make a distinct contribution. Writing workshops are one way of developing that community knowledge.

Several faculties of health have begun to see the value of implementing different methods of writing interventions to increase publication output. These methods include: short courses, support groups, retreats and coaching (Jackson, 2009; McGrail et al., 2006). In addition there is a growing body of literature focusing on exactly what skills need to be developed in novice writers so that they can improve the quantity as well as the quality of their writing so as to achieve productive outcomes (Camp, 2012;

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Gardiner et al., 2012). In the world of academia, that means producing manuscripts that are accepted in reputable peer reviewed journals, as well as accepted conference papers at prestigious events where knowledge will be effectively disseminated.

Writing workshops that are held away from a participant's home town offer the benefits of a retreat from usual distractions and concerns, training to improve writing skills and thus enhance the likelihood of productive outcomes. The opportunity to experience cultural tourism, where a holiday is made more pleasurable by intellectual stimulation is also appealing (Hawryluk, 2010). Other benefits are that the distance from usual routines creates space for ideas and the time spent together develops peer understanding and collegiality (Murray and Newton, 2009; Murray et al., 2011). All of these factors were considered in the design of a writers retreat developed for a particular cohort of academics working within a regional Australian University. The paper will now go on to explore and evaluate the outcomes of this unique case.

### A case study of a regional Australian University

In 2013, academics from health disciplines, primarily in nursing and midwifery, exercise science and occupational therapy were engaged in a writing retreat in an attempt to increase publication rates. The University has a 20 year history and had a strong reputation for being teaching-intensive, but has aspirations to enhance its research capacity. The School of Nursing and Midwifery offers one of the largest programs within the university and has a staff profile that is quite typical of the health schools. That is, it has a population of 30 staff, including four professors, eleven active researchers and twenty-five teaching scholars. Approximately 62% of staff had published in the last three years. However, 57% were publishing one or less papers per year and 81% were publishing less than five papers in the last three years. Many of the staff expressed a desire to improve their writing skills with an aim of increasing their publication output in their performance appraisal. The challenge was to develop a writing workshop that met the needs a range of academics from teaching-intensive health educators, early career researchers and accomplished scholars. In order to support these identified areas for improvement a working party was established to design a relaxing, revitalising, stimulating intervention to generate a sense of scholarly community and shared purpose, and increase publication outcomes.

### The approach

Wenger's concept of Community of Practice is a useful conceptual framework for developing a vision so that individual writers become part of a community (Wenger et al., 2002). In this approach to learning, individuals come together over a shared domain of knowledge, in this case health discipline education and research. They are interested in developing their practice to advance the knowledge and this occurs best in a community, rather than an individual context (See Fig. 1). The vision was for the group to be working towards a clear and shared goal, where individual contributions and are part of something bigger.

As the sense of community strengthens, more and more of the action for group members is compelled from within, and less of the action is required from the outside. People who feel ownership or a sense of belonging in their community have a strong sense of group identity. In a community, people make decisions, uphold rights and perform duties based on a sense of obligation toward each other, rather than because they have been enforced by rules or hierarchy.

A process of developing, delivering and evaluating a writing retreat was undertaken. The process involved a number of stages. A team comprising five people was convened and the literature

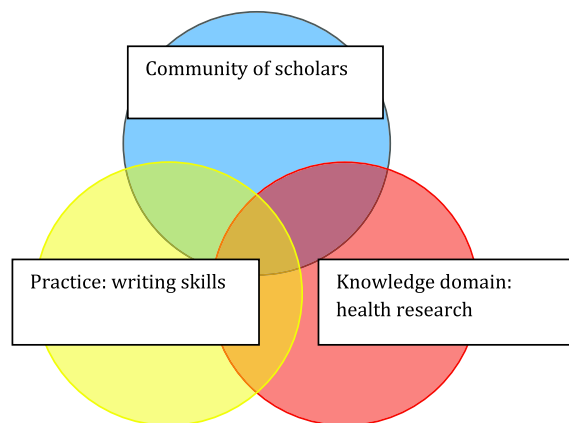


Fig. 1. The community of practice of health scholar writers.

reviewed to consider successful strategies for conducting writing workshops. The team met regularly via teleconference, to identify aims, methods, expected outcomes, select a suitable venue and to apply for internal funding support from the HEALTH Collaborative Research Network (HEALTH CRN). The HEALTH CRN specifically aims to network academics from regional with established research teams to facilitate collaborative networks and quality publications.

It was agreed that the aims of the retreat were to: a) build writing skills; b) develop a culture that values scholarship in both teaching and research; c) create a relaxing space where collaborations could emerge; and d) explore and minimize anxiety and inertia that results from allowing teaching practice to dominate workloads. For each participant, the expectation was that they would submit one manuscript to a peer reviewed journal listed in the Scopus data base within three months of completing the retreat. In order to help members become a more active participant, four elements were considered as important: relaxing, structured interventions, opportunity for solitary activity and collegiality.

The setting for the writing retreat was considered vital for enhancing a sense of mind-space in which new ideas could flow. The venue would need to be free from distractions, directions and intrusions. The warm water, possibility for snorkeling, quiet walks, or contemplation enhanced the likelihood for creating thinking through mind-body and relaxation. Participants would be encouraged to leave work stress behind, avoid checking emails and use the space to reflect, relax, write and converse.

The planning of structured interventions for writers, prior, during and after the retreat, was considered important to ensure that individuals internalized a sense of commitment to the workshop, doing what they could to prepare, and to actively engage to gain tangible benefits of participation (Table 1). Facilitators were asked to provide expert writing sessions, participants were asked to write, question, discuss and develop. In order to continue the sense of community and achieve outcomes it was also important to devise activities following the retreat to reinforce the team strength, and produce outcomes.

Opportunity to work in a solitary way, free from distractions from others was seen to be an important aspect of the work of writing. Participants were encouraged to bring required information loaded onto their own computer so that they did not need to access the internet, printing or libraries to undertake the specific task of writing. Within the program itself, time was also allocated to have one on one consultations with facilitators for immediate feedback on the progress of papers to continue motivation and progression of the paper to stage of near completion by the end of the retreat.

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