

## *Establishing a Writing Practice Remotely: A WhatsApp Course for Academics*

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### **Abstract**

In many universities there are numerous writing courses, workshops, resources and writing centres for academics. Some of these were disrupted by the Covid pandemic. A positive outcome has been moving beyond Emergency Remote Teaching to innovative pedagogical alternatives that continue to be effective as lecturers and academic developers reenvision teaching interventions past the pandemic era. A WhatsApp Writing intervention has provided a new way for research writers to make progress on their writing. This study describes and reports on a 10-day WhatsApp writing course that is designed to connect group members, increase accountability, address obstacles to writing and develop the identity of the writer. The format addresses issues of access and zoom fatigue. The theoretical basis of the design draws from mindfulness, coaching and research into academic writing. The course was run for between 10 and 40 participants in 16 separate courses. Participants include supervisors, postgraduate students, as well as creative writers across South Africa and internationally. I analyse and share some observations from participants' contributions on what makes writing difficult, their writing blocks, as well as their perceptions (and changing perceptions) of themselves as writers. Personal perspectives from writers show up three main common concerns of lack of confidence, distractions, and isolation. The posts also highlight the individual sense writers have of their identity. The course format could serve as a model for similar curricula design interventions.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Writer Identity, Online Learning, WhatsApp Course

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## **Introduction**

Much has been written recently of moves to on-line learning, student responses to remote teaching and also the crisis of well-being among academics especially in the time of Covid lockdowns. The aims and design of the WhatsApp writing course described here are in response not only to the need for online writing support, but also take into account academics' increased isolation and frequently-reported distress. The course design, while aiming for optimal accessibility, deliberately focusses on the personal perspectives of the writer, creativity, fun, as well as daily structure and accountability to the group. Activities are designed to explore writer identity; individual writing journeys; overcoming writer's block; finding one's voice; and forming a Community of Practice. As Castle and Keane (2017) pointed out, before the event of Covid: academics need more than policy mandates to flourish as writers. This remains true and should not be lost sight of in the pressures to publish and produce outputs. Lee and Boud (2003) argue for the importance of identity work in developing writing. In addition, the complementary aspect of social engagement, which Dwyer, Lewis, McDonald and Burns (2012) emphasise as necessary for authentic professional development, is somewhat provided for by the immediacy and informality of social mediate messaging.

In this paper I explore a different aspect of the 'personal development discourse' put forward by Çimen where she argues, citing Marsen (2007) that self-development books may be considered as technologies of the self while they actually serve neoliberal managerialism. Little less acerbically, Liang (2015) concludes in her thesis that the self-help genre, aimed at improving a person's life, has a strongly individualistic orientation." Liang, 2015). Such a discourse does not necessarily fit alongside Communities of Practice, collegiality and collaboration which is the aim of the course discussed here.

This paper centres on the inquiry: How may academics be supported, especially remotely, to develop their writing, and not simply find fixes to complete a degree or complete a product?

I start by describing briefly the course rationale and theoretical underpinnings; and then present a course outline and examples of participants' responses to daily tasks. I then conclude with an argument for the inclusion of mindfulness, creativity and collegiality in a digital space, where writers develop self-reflection and a sense of agency.

### **Focusing on the writer or the writing?**

At some universities a template or directive Writing Frames are provided for students undertaking research for a postgraduate degree. Students frequently ask: 'How long must the Introduction be?' 'How many words must I have in the conclusion?' 'How do I structure my findings?' There are a plethora of websites, self-help books, 'How to complete a Doctorate' guides, as well as innumerable short courses on research and writing. See for example Badenhorst (2007; 2008; 2010); Murray, (2013); Murray and Moore (2006); Silvia (2007). There is a continuum along the axis of 'How to' writing assistance and 'Writer identity development'. Technical advice on writing, while helpful, is not sufficient for establishing productive writing habits among academics, as Moore (2003) and Murray (2013).

In the same vein Thomson and Kamler (2013), while providing numerous writing guides argue that "we are never just writing the article, we are also simultaneously writing our self." It is clear that this is a complex process that is not without obstacles.

Grant (2000) and Grant & Knowles (2000) advocate increasing participants' As Chihota & Thesen, (2014) claim that "writing one's way into being a postgraduate involves many small acts of trying on that identity and slowly building it into a composite experience." pleasure in their writing and Castle and Keane (2016b:268) show how confidence in writing increases academics motivation to write. We agree with these authors. Writing, and exposing one's writing to others for scrutiny and critique, can make writers feel vulnerable and exposed (Murray & Moore 2006; Murray 2013) thus writing more regularly and with others in non-threatening spaces is valuable. (Castle & Keane, 2016b).

In relation to academics' research and writing, Backhouse (2011) identified three doctoral discourses, each with a distinct purpose: the 'scholarly discourse', the 'labour market discourse' and the 'on-going personal development discourse'. This third discourse she defines as "somewhere between revealing an independent scholar and training a skilled human resource ... that of developing a critical intellectual" (Backhouse, 2011: 33).

As many of the WhatsApp course participants are pursuing doctoral research or writing for publication, it is clear that gaining and communicating deeper and more nuanced understandings is essential, as is developing a unique identity as a writer. The 'personal development discourse' extends beyond the 'How to' genre to the holistic development of the writer and the writer-in-community.

In summary, I am not dismissing the usefulness of any of these support structures or writing frames but querying whether reliance on more step-by-step templates promotes the development of a writer identity, and whether they provide sufficient encouragement and challenge to provoke criticality and creativity. Some balance is needed for writers to move from the position of experiencing academic writing as "...mysterious, daunting and unsupported' (Moore, Murphy and Murray 2010, 21), and discovering for oneself authentic new knowledge and the ability to push the boundaries of disciplines and genres. Many academics struggle with the pressures to publish articles without having any mentoring or induction into the process (Kapp, Albertyn & Frick, 2011). Kamler and Thomson (2008) having analysed some characteristics of this self-help genre, including the ways it produces an expert–novice relationship with readers. It also reduces dissertation writing to a series of linear steps, enumerates rules, and asserts a need for compliance to a set standard. These authors argue for a more complex view of doctoral writing both as text work/identity work and as a discursive social practice. In this lies the challenge for a short online course. WhatsApp, however, is ideal for group interaction, informality and immediacy. WhatsApp is also less likely to rely on transmission pedagogies that normalize the power imbalances. With this in mind the theoretical and practical approaches in the course design include: mindfulness, coaching, experiential learning, and developing a community of practice.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

This WhatsApp course described here is underpinned by concepts of experiential learning and on-line learning, but importantly, in its design, draws on practices of mindfulness and co-active coaching. Dirkx (1997; 2001) proposes that meaningful learning is grounded not only in rational, critical, and cognitive processes but in a person's emotional, imaginative connection with the self and the social world. Both mindfulness and coaching offer useful perspectives to encompass these human and social aspects of writing.

## **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness here means being present with our writing; thoughts, feelings, and developing focus while writing. Mindfulness, as described by Glomb, *et al* (2011: p, 118) is “paying attention to what is happening in the moment...” For many of us distraction from the task in hand, the writing or reading, is an enormous challenge. whole range of input and competing demands for our attention, including mental clutter, so that focusing on the one intended task at hand – writing – may be very difficult. Beauchemin, Hutchins, and Patterson, (2008) have shown how mindfulness contributes to intellectual achievement. Writing sessions in this course therefore deliberately start with an intention to set aside multitasking. Developing clarity and voice require being present and focused on the writing project for some length of time. Another aspect of mindfulness is its facilitation of insights, productivity as well as physical stress reduction (see National Health Services in the UK, and the Oxford Mindfulness Centre. Most of the voice notes for each day begin with a short mindfulness exercise. Mindful pedagogy is based on the premise of a student showing up 100%. Mindfulness also facilitates access to multiple meta-perspectives and improved cognitive processing (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

## **Coaching pedagogy**

Some of the strategies and tools from coaching contribute in this course by requiring students to clarify their goals, to self-reflect on their personal development and to be accountable. At the start of the Course participants are asked to share their writing goal with the group and to periodically check-in on their progress, feelings and reflections. The coaching tool of identifying one’s ‘inner gremlin’, sharing what these inner critics say help writers realise that they are not the only ones suffering from insecurities and writer’s block. Such exchanges through WhatsApp normalize the writer’s struggle and diminish feelings of isolation. Coaching, opens up paths for creativity which is brought in through drawing activities, free-writes, mind-maps and the use of metaphor. Some of these tasks provoke a sense of fun which assists one to gain perspective and relax. Easy creative activities at the start the of day are often the beginning of a new mental space where practicing letting go of thoughts about the past and future helps writers develop focus and connect to others attentively. Through fostering an ability to be present and to play creatively we have an opportunity to see things anew. (Keane, 2017:143).

## **Course design**

Course design draws from both the facilitator’s experience but also the literature. According to Murray and Moore (2006, 24–27) and Murray (2013) drawing on international research and theory suggest the following: Interactivity and dialogue with others (that is, talking with others about research through personal or virtual interactions); Knowledge creation and extension; Achievement, output and approval; Engagement and getting into the ‘flow’ of writing. The benefits of group work are confirmed by Silvia (2007) who claims that they can sustain individuals’ accountability and help writers meet deadlines.

The WhatsApp daily messages include voice notes, short texts on the daily writing topic and two to four tasks for the writer to complete. At the end of each day the writer simply posts: ‘Day Complete’ with their name. About five of the days require additional posts from participants such as topic researched, brief comments, drawings or check-ins. Many of the activities are creative. Such activities not only assist with the writing process but change the

way we relate to our work and to each other. Developing writing capacity can foster collegiality, mutuality and sense of community (Castle & Keane, 2016) and perhaps surprisingly this was evident for a short course through the informal social medium of WhatsApp.

## **Conclusions**

Discoveries from bring a facilitator on the course, and from course evaluations and feedback are, firstly, that groups are so very different: some groups did not finish; another has continued on their own for 2 ½ years. This is evident even if groups are from the same level and same university.

Writing in English, using academic language, appears not to be a great problem. This in spite of the majority of participants having English as a second or third additional language.

Initial feelings of isolation, fear, procrastination, self-doubt turn out to be common obstacles.

Creativity, sharing, humor, routine, commitment to the group are helpful elements for productive and enjoyable writing.

Admitting to difficulties and experimenting with play seems easier for more experienced writers.

The asynchronous course design allows all to participate; flexibility and encouragement are important. Participants end up supporting course design through their input.

Goal setting was useful but avoiding a template-following strategy freed up writers to discover their own voice and creativity.

A typical response came in a free-write on 'I am the kind of writer who...'. A participant wrote:

*"Now I understand myself better as a writer ...I am the kind of writer who likes to procrastinate...! My writing takes many paths when I have an idea ...thanks to these tasks, I feel as though my writing can be more structured and I can focus on one path at a time."*

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