ESTABLISHING A COOPERATIVE WRITING GROUP AMONG TEACHER EDUCATORS: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Getting published has become important in academia and also among teacher educators. The purpose of this paper is to investigate potential benefits and challenges when establishing an academic writing group among Finnish teacher educators. The three authors of this paper applied an autoethnographic approach to study the starting points of the writing group. In the group, mentoring and social support were used to share experiences and knowledge about academic writing. Relationships and contributions from all participants were emphasised. Each member was considered equal to the other members. The study demonstrated that writing for international academic audiences was challenging; it was deemed to be both emotionally and intellectually demanding. Many participants described the experiences of tension when allocating time for teaching and writing. Membership in the group provided possibilities for social comparison. The members encouraged self-improvement and allowed other group members to become reflective mirrors. The participants considered their membership in the writing group positively and indicated that it had contributed to their academic writing. On the basis of the project, it is recommended to establish continuing writing groups to promote academic writing and publishing as a central part of teacher educators' profession.

Key words: *academic writing, autoethnography, co-mentoring, cooperative learning, cooperative research, researcher's career, social comparison.*

Introduction

Participating in international discussions via publishing has become an essential part of university life, which McGrail, Rickard and Jones (2006) describe as a 'publish or perish' situation. Besides the importance of disseminating new knowledge, publications are needed for individual and institutional purposes, such as indicating one's performance, applying for academic promotion and achieving funding (Kamler, 2008; McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006; Opetusministeriö [Finnish Ministry of Education], 2009). Despite its importance, writing is regarded as a difficult task, one with which many academics struggle (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; Murray, 2009). The reasons for low publication volume are many—for example,

a lack of support and inadequate time or structure allocated for writing as part of an academic post (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). Cameron, Nairn and Higgins (2009) describe the process of academic writing as requiring a combination of insight about one's sense of self as a writer, writing know-how and emotions like fear and anxiety, joy and satisfaction.

Academic writing is an enterprise that is not often shared with other scholars, and only the polished and published work of others is usually noticed (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009). It is also expected to be learnt without any teaching (Murray, 2009). To solve these challenges, universities have tried out various writing interventions, for example, writing support groups, structured writing courses, writing retreats and writing coaching. They have all been found to be efficient tools for increasing publishing (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). According to McGrail and others' (2006) review, the most dominant interventions are writing support groups or writing groups. They are groups of colleagues that regularly come together to discuss academic writing and provide feedback about others' work. Writing groups are beneficial because being a member in such a group and sharing one's work at different stages with colleagues opens up the writing and publishing processes to scrutiny and makes it possible to share writing know-how and learn from others' experiences (Lee & Boud, 2003). Assumedly, there is a lot of tacit knowledge that more experienced researchers have acquired through practice, which may become articulated in a group. As Lee and Boud (2003) state, this promotes writing to become 'normal business' of academic work.

The majority of previous studies have looked at writing groups aimed at doctoral students (Aitchison, 2009; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Ferguson, 2009; Kamler, 2008). The key finding of these studies has been that participating in a writing group produces more publications and confidence to publish during and after one's studies. As well, there has been some research on writing groups directed towards academic staff in universities (Bone, McMullen, & Clarke, 2009; Lee & Boud, 2003). These previous studies have indicated that writing groups work well at different levels of academia, but it is not obvious what happens in such a group (Aitchison, 2009). In this paper, we uncover some answers to this question.

In 2009, the three authors of this paper established a writing group at a Finnish university. The group was aimed to promote academic writing and publishing among teacher educators. It still continues to work as a group, though there have been some departures and arrivals. In this paper, we report the starting phase of the group in 2009 and reflect the possibilities the group provided to the participants and the challenges in establishing a writing group. Following the suggestions of Cameron, Nairn and Higgins (2009), we consider academic writing from the aspects of writing know-how, emotions related to writing, the sense of oneself as an academic writer and how these things emerged in the group. This paper is a cooperative enterprise, involving the three authors. It is our learning story about establishing a writing group in teacher education.

Co-Mentoring and Social Comparison in Writing Group

The writing group consisted of more experienced and less experienced academic writers. When planning how to start with the group, we decided that on the one hand, we wanted to share experiences and knowledge about academic writing. On the other hand, we wanted to avoid a traditional approach, where the experienced members of the group transfer their knowledge to the less experienced members. Concepts of mentor and mentoring have been defined in the literature in many ways, often carrying the traditional definition of a mentor as someone whose main task is to transfer his/her knowledge to a mentee (Kochan & Trimble, 2000). Instead of this traditional mentoring, we emphasised collegiality and shared learning and tried to encourage co-mentoring (Clarke, 2004; Jipson & Paley, 2000; Kochan & Trimble, 2000). As Bona, Rinehart and Volbrecht (1995, p. 119) note, 'Placing the prefix "co" before "mentoring"

reconstructs the relationship as non-hierarchical; "co" makes mentoring reciprocal and mutual'. As Byrne, Brown and Challen (2010) have indicated, peer learning provides opportunities for reflection and opportunities for sharing thoughts with colleagues. However, it is somewhat a dilemma—if the experienced academics have tacit knowledge of academic writing, should they not explicate and share it. Maybe this is a delicate matter–how to convey this knowledge without being 'above' the others, and to try to maintain equality in the group.

Using the concept of co-mentoring, we stressed each person's contribution to the writing group's relationships. According to previous studies concerning co-mentoring, the critical point seems to be relationships between the academics in the group (Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008). They need time to develop and may come near to friendship. To achieve this, two different kinds of commitment were needed in the group: commitment to write an article and commitment to help others. The relationships were based on reciprocal benefits: the status of each person was supposed to be as equal as possible, and communication was meant to go in both directions (Clarke, 2004). Like Clarke (2004), we regarded co-mentoring relationships as synergistic interrelationships. They provided opportunities for involvement in mutual learning by means of sharing and commitment within shared projects. In the process of becoming a writing scholar, learning took place via individual constructions and social processes with other group members (Cobb, 1994).

A membership in a group that is psychologically significant influences a person's behaviour, thoughts and emotions, and the groups people belong to influence how others know them and how they view themselves (Darley, 2001; Hogg, 2003). A writing group can be a significant group to its members and offer possibilities to expand their understanding of academic writing. Accordingly, other group members may become important in the process of building a sense of oneself as an academic writer and positioning oneself as an academic with legitimate voice and contributions (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; Grant & Knowles, 2000; Musolf, 2003).

The members of a writing group may use others as standards against which to assess their own abilities (Festinger, 1954). By using this kind of social comparison, people gain information about themselves as academic writers, alongside with objective information like feedback from reviewers and the number of accepted publications, and temporal comparisons with their own development in the past and imagined future (Wood & Wilson, 2003). In upward social comparison, a person compares him/herself to a more advanced person (Collins, 1996). If another person's skills are slightly–but not too much–more advanced, a comparison with him/her can encourage self-enhancement and self-improvement (Collins, 1996; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003), but as Trujillo (2007) indicates, upward social comparison to far more advanced scholars can negatively affect one's self-esteem. A writing group provides opportunities to social comparisons, hopefully in a positive way. Other group members can become reflective mirrors and role models; they can facilitate upward social comparison and thus encourage their self-esteem as a writing scholar (Bone, McMullen, & Clarke, 2009; Markham, 1999).

Research Focus

The purpose of the research reported in this paper was to make sense of what took place within a writing group among teacher educators. The aim was to describe and go beyond mere description to understand the factors and processes of establishing such a group.

The research questions were:

1) What are the possibilities and challenges when establishing a cooperative writing group among teacher educators?

2) What factors and processes seem to support or hinder teacher educators' academic writing?

Methodology of Research

General Background and the Participants

The project started with a planning phase in May 2009, and in August 2009, the three authors of this paper established a writing group with five academic scholars to facilitate academic writing and publishing and promote collaboration and peer learning. Altogether there were eight academics, seven females and one male, interested in improving academic writing skills and publishing in international arenas. The participants were invited to the group on the basis of their expressed interest in developing their writing skills. They came from different backgrounds: five had doctorates in the educational sciences, two in the arts and humanities, and one person was just about to finish her doctoral thesis in education. Only two senior academics had previously published internationally.

The group came together approximately once a month, and by the end of 2009, there had been three meetings. Between the meetings, the participants worked with their papers and developed outlines and drafts, which were then discussed in the group. In 2012, the group continues to work together; some people have left because of moving to other jobs, and additional members, who had heard about the group and expressed their interest, have joined in. This paper reports the starting phase of the writing group from the planning phase to the end of 2009.

Study Approach and Data Collection

A cooperative autoethnographic approach was used to study the writing group in which the three authors participated (Anderson, 2006). Following Ellis and Bochner's (2000) suggestions, we used our own experiences as group members to look more deeply into what occurred. The study was "grounded in self-experience but reached beyond it", and we aimed to enhance theoretical understanding of our shared experience (Anderson, 2006, p. 386). Our thinking and reflections were captured using memos and audio recordings from the planning sessions, notes from the writing group meetings and in our reflective journals. Dialogue with other group members occurred by means of emails, planning papers and article manuscripts at different stages.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

A co-constructed narrative method was used in data analysis. It is a sequential model in which one researcher writes about his/her experiences and passes the writing to the next person, who adds his/her story and then passes it along to the next person for further additions (Davis & Ellis, 2008; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Following this procedure, the authors created a shared narrative. Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang (2010) call this a collaborative autoethnographic approach, in which participating researchers make decisions together, collect data co-operatively and are accountable to each other.

The autoethnographic approach demanded specific ethical considerations regarding the authors' roles as participants and researchers, and close relationships with other group members. Ellis (2007) calls this 'relational ethics'. We were aware of these challenges and constantly returned to discussions about them. In the beginning, other group members were told about the study and data gathering, including audio recordings and notes from the meetings, emails and reflective journals written about the process. The study was discussed in the group meetings, and the cooperatively written narrative was took back to the group where it was shared and

discussed. Another ethical issue concerned the potential for self-absorption (Anderson, 2006). To respond to it, the learning process was shared within the authors by constantly exploring wider perspectives from literature and discussing them in reflective meetings.

Results of Research

Writing Know-How

Writing and publishing know-how was on the agenda from the planning phase to the end of year 2009. It can be seen in the following extracts from the memo of a planning meeting and notes from two writing group sessions:

> Our aim is to make the phases of writing transparent and by doing this to find the checking points [in the writing process] and the different needs of support. (Memo from the authors' planning meeting)

> We talked about defining the focus of a paper, and Raimo noted that the challenge is to divide the doctoral thesis to small-enough pieces. It is also essential to find something new to say. (Notes from the second writing group meeting)

> The discussion moves on to footnotes and whether they should they be used or not. (Notes from the third writing group meeting)

Writing and publishing know-how was discussed during every writing group session. Issues included how to write outlines and choose the journal, what the structure of an article should be and how a shared authorship works. The questions related to choosing the theme for a paper were also shared: How should the paper–or should it–be linked to the doctoral thesis? The discussions during the group sessions indicated that the group members, although they had finished their doctoral studies, did not have basic knowledge about academic writing for publishing internationally. These results resonate with previous studies and confirm that becoming an academic writer after doctorate is not a straightforward step, but needs support, for example, in the form of a writing group (Murray, 2002; Murray, Thow, Moore, & Murphy, 2008).

Time Management

Time management was a significant challenge and was reflected for example in the following extracts:

> In the first meeting I felt that everyone had decided to start to write an international journal article, but on the other hand, everyone highlighted the time problem: how to find time to write. (The third author's reflective journal after the first writing group meeting)

> And when you know that you only have a little amount of time and that your holiday will start December 23, then you have to do it if your deadline is December 8. Then it has to be in Katri's email [this was the agreement between two members of the group]. Otherwise, I would not have done it. (Maria in the third writing group meeting, when she pondered the reasons for her productivity)

Especially dividing time between teaching and writing was considered challenging. Teaching took so much time and energy that little was left for writing. Time management is a worldwide issue in academia, and much advice has been written about it (Belt, Möttönen,

& Härkönen, 2010; Silvia, 2008). As Schwieler and Ekecrantz (2011) indicate, the problem of time can be interpreted from different perspectives: as a tug-of-war between teaching and writing or as two sides of the same coin. Both of these perspectives were present in the writing group; writing and teaching were constructed as 'either/or' parts of academic work, but advice and reflections about putting them together were also shared. Talking about time helped the participants to reconstruct teaching and writing as parts of their academic work and to find their own ways to manage time-related issues. The solutions were individual: some group members dedicated special writing time for themselves, some used Saturdays for writing, and some combined their teaching and research to gain the advantage of synergy and could see these as mutually benefiting.

Writing in English

English was a second or even third language for all writing group members, and writing in English was regarded as challenging. It was not only a practical challenge, but also an emotional issue. The following extracts expose some of the language-related issues, and how the strategies to cope with them were shared in the group:

> We also talked about language. What language should be used when writing the outline? Tuija said that she used 'Finglish' [a mixture of Finnish and English] and revised the text during the writing process. Raimo talked about the same kinds of experiences. We decided that everyone can initially use the language/languages that work best for him/her. (The first author's notes from the first writing group meeting)

> Minna: But I would like to say, what I caught on in the Academic Writing Course is that it is not a good idea to do the thinking part in Finnish. Do you know, the trick is that you start to think in English. You can't do it first in Finnish and then translate it to English. That is totally the wrong way. And then after all, I do not lean on any Finnish references. … So it was good to realize that if you write in English, you have to think in English.
> Raimo: You quite quickly get used to thinking in English. For the last couple of years, I have written straight in English. The first articles I wrote were written first in Finnish and then translated into English.
> (Discussion in the third writing group meeting)

According to Green and Myatt (2011), working in a second (or third) language puts a strain on an academic scholar and arouses negative emotions, sometimes causing the writer to feel stupid and insecure. In our group, writing in English aroused lots of concerns and uncertainty of one's capabilities.

Challenging the Tradition of Writing Alone by Enhancing a Co-Mentoring Approach

Before the writing group started to come together, the participants were asked to write down their expectations. We got three written responses via email, and in all of them the writers expressed their needs for support and willingness to work together with colleagues:

> I am looking forward to mentoring and wish that it will be a rewarding co-operation from everyone's perspective. (email response)

> When I can proceed unhurried with my own pace, and as Vygotsky says "in collaboration with more capable peers", and get some support, I can write a scientific article—even in English! (email response)

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These responses indicated that the participants had positive expectations towards their capacities in academic writing and international publishing. They also showed that they felt that other people were needed in this endeavour.

Our aim was to develop co-mentoring and peer learning as part of the effort. At the end of 2009, our group had been operating for four months, and it was obvious that the development of the group towards co-mentoring practices was still at its starting point. A tradition to work alone, which is common especially in social sciences, was challenging to overcome. In the beginning, everyone chose a single-authored paper to start with, even though we talked about shared authorship and its benefits. When people started to get to know each other, the atmosphere became open and friendly and opened up possibilities for co-mentoring and peer learning. The following extract, concerning the third writing group meeting, shows the move towards a positive and open atmosphere:

> When I listened to the audio recording [from the third writing group meeting], it was nice to realise that the atmosphere was open and relaxed, and it felt like an unofficial get-together with an agenda. I think that everyone felt free to talk about their writing, ask questions and share experiences. (The first author's reflective diary after the third writing group meeting)

To break the culture of isolation, we suggested having small working groups or pairs. We had high expectations for them, but in the first few months, only one pair started to work together. And yet, the small groups were the places where co-mentoring relationships could have been developed. The shift from an individual academic enterprise towards a social identity of working cooperatively did not happen easily, and self-interest remained stronger than the group interest (Brewer, 2003). To promote co-mentoring and peer learning, two different kinds of commitments were needed: commitment to write the article and commitment to help others and cooperate. At the end of 2009, the commitment to help others was just about to emerge in the group.

Even though writing together did not happen in the starting phase of the writing group, talking with someone about writing was beneficial. Many named the persons they had spoken with. Often these critical friends were other writing group members.

> I realised that people talked about impetuses which promoted the writing process. A common denominator for all of them was sharing ideas with someone. Other people, who the participants had talked with, flashed in the stories. The conversations with these significant others had opened up new perspectives and validated one's ideas. (The first author's reflective diary after the second writing group meeting)

Increasing Insights of Being an Academic Writer

Life during and after the doctoral studies was a constantly revisited issue during the writing group meetings. In the first meeting, the participants talked a lot about their doctoral studies and dissertations as a starting point for their papers. Excluding the two senior academics, the doctoral dissertation was the 'task at hand' for the group members, a big work they had completed recently.

> Some participants stated that their doctoral theses were too far away from their present interests. We had a vivid discussion about articles and shared the idea that it was good to choose an interesting topic, which could be outside of the thesis. (The first author's notes from the first writing group meeting)

In the second meeting, the discussion around doctoral studies continued and deepened, as can be seen in the following extract:

> The discussion continued with sharing experiences and feelings during and after the doctoral studies. Many had experienced fatigue and losing one's grip on research after the PhD. Eeva talked about PhD illness and the typical features of doctoral studies and said that the symptoms were attached to the disease. Helena pondered the influences of doctoral studies on life after a PhD. That aroused a vivid discussion about doctoral studies, their meaning and their influences. (The first author's notes from the second writing group meeting)

In the third meeting, dissertations were hardly mentioned, and the discussion concentrated on the current writing tasks. The process of redefining oneself as a writing academic was promoted in our group by means of sharing meanings, emotions and goals, as can be seen in the previous extracts (Andersen, Chen, & Miranda, 2002). The doctoral thesis and previous positions as doctoral students, as well as experiences and feelings related to doctoral studies, needed to be dealt with. After doing that, by the time of the third meeting, the participants were ready to move forward as academic writers. The change in the way that the academic writing was discussed was significant. In the first meeting, the doctoral dissertation was a starting point of the discussion; in the second meeting, we talked about life after the PhD, and in the third meeting, the doctoral studies were hardly mentioned. Because of the group and discussions in it, the participants started to think about their academic writing after the PhD. When the participants shared their work, received feedback and talked about writing, they started to see themselves as academic writers with their own voices and contributions. This process took the individual participants different amounts of time and was in its early stage after four months.

Discussion

Participating in a writing group provided many possibilities to the group members. The different aspects of academic writing were covered in the group and thus demystified (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009). The group offered a forum to share and learn about writing know-how and share emotions related to writing and publishing. The group also provided support in gaining a sense of oneself as an academic writer. In the beginning, writing know-how was a concrete starting point. It was required to get the writing and publishing started, and issues related to writing know-how stayed on the agenda in every group session. All participants had written academic texts, but they were mostly in Finnish and usually done as dissertations. Academic writing in English and for publication in international arenas differed from the participants' previous writing and was something that they had little knowledge about. In studies on early career academics, it has been shown that there are challenges in encouraging academics in the post-doctoral phase to continue academic writing and publishing (Kamler, 2008; McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). Although PhD is a research degree aiming to an independent research career and original contribution to the discipline, going on with research and academic writing after the doctorate is not easy (Lovitts, 2005, 2008). From this point of view, it was no wonder that post-doctoral writing and publishing had not become a part and parcel of the participants' work. Participating in the writing group offered possibilities to continue in one's academic development.

In the starting phase of our group, the emotional aspects were mostly related to writing in English. It aroused feelings, such as uncertainty and incapability, among the group members. With these feelings, they were not alone. Publishing and the 'games' related to it are an international phenomenon, and academics all over the world write frantically and try to get their

papers published. The Finns, among other researchers, whose native language is not English, encounter an added challenge in addition to increasing competition when they write in their second or even third language. It is both technically and emotionally challenging, as many Finnish academics expressed in *Kasvatus [Education]* issue 4 in 2011 (Hakala, 2011; Löytty, 2011). Writing in English is a necessity in the international academic world, but there are few studies about academics with English as a second language and their language-related coping strategies. According to this study, there is a need for more studies and development of this issue.

Sharing experiences and feelings formed a resource for the group members, and the social context of the writing group influenced how the participants saw themselves as academic writers. Membership in the group was regarded as a means of self-improvement; it provided possibilities to social comparison and promoted gaining a sense of oneself as an academic writer (Collins, 1996; Darley, 2001). It also helped the group members to negotiate their positions as teachers, previous doctoral students, and writing scholars. The group offered models and mirrors and helped answer questions such as, 'What kind of academic writer am I?', and 'What kind of writer would I like to become?' The models and mirrors for repositioning oneself as an academic writer and seeing the writing as part of academic work were available in the group (Andersen, Chen, & Miranda, 2002).

Besides the possibilities, we also faced challenges when establishing the writing group. They were mainly related to getting co-mentoring and peer learning happening in the group. This process was slow, and at the end of 2009, it was in its early stage. This was expected because previous studies indicate that it often takes at least three to five years to achieve a real co-mentoring relationship (Kram, 1988). Gradually, during the study, our writing group started to develop into a community in which writing and publishing was shared and became social practice (Kamler, 2008). This was facilitated by explicating our previous norms, roles and expectations regarding academic writing and co-mentoring, and demanded different ways of doing things. In a social situation, as in a writing group, a person adopts a role, which represents a set of expectations regarding how to act in his/her position (Forsyth, 2010; Yackel & Cobb, 1996). The norms of how to behave are often implicit, and thus people may not be aware of their norm-obeying behaviour (Forsyth, 2010; Hogg, 2001). To challenge the roles, available positions and norms in the group, we constantly talked about the ideas of co-mentoring and encouraged everyone to be in a learner position. When the members got to know each other, the atmosphere became open and friendly and allowed the participants to talk about their feelings related to academic writing and publishing. This convinced us of the emotional aspects of academic writing, stressing the importance of taking the emotion into account and sharing feelings within the group.

Conclusions

During the first four months of the writing group, it became obvious that having writing know-how was important but not enough. Knowledge about how to write is available in books and internet sites, but unless it is shared with other academics and connected to constructing one's identity as a writing scholar, it can remain a "box of tricks". The group members felt that it was important to belong to a group in which their professional development as academic writers was promoted. They wanted to develop their skills and become productive writers, but they needed help and support, which was available in the group. The starting phase of our endeavour indicates that a writing group can be a significant group for its members; it offers a forum for looking at writing and publishing as part of academic work, and it is a place to talk about writing and share thoughts. At its best, being a member in a cooperative writing group offers endless learning possibilities when writing know-how, emotions and identity work are shared.

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