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Publish or perish?

Evaluation of a writing week

Background

To improve research publication output, a general practice department in Australia declared a department wide 'writing week'.

Method

Components included: pre-registration, an initial presentation followed by scheduled one-on-one sessions with an external facilitator, a progress 'running sheet', voucher incentives, and a concluding session for shared feedback and 'prize giving'.

Results

Ninety percent (18/90) of potential staff participated, from novice to senior. In the subsequent 3 months eight papers were submitted and a further nine were nearing completion. Expressed benefits were having dedicated and structured time, collegial support and an external facilitator.

Discussion

While effectiveness of writing week could not be precisely measured with respect to publication outputs, researchers, regardless of seniority, benefited from the provision of structural knowledge, quarantined time and/or support to write up research.

■ **For better or worse, the research output of academics is measured by the number of publications, citation rates and the impact factor of peer reviewed journals in which they publish.¹ While the impact factor is a crude measure which may not adequately represent scientific quality and overall impact of a paper within a given field,² quantity and quality of publications are critical to an individual's academic review and may influence future employment. This is as true for primary health care academics as it is for biomedical and general scientists.³**

Conducting research without disseminating findings is disrespectful of participants' contributions and is likely to be viewed negatively by funding bodies. Poor dissemination also diminishes the impact of research on health practice and policy.

The Australian General Practice Evaluation Program's 1990–1999 research funding resulted in 201 peer reviewed papers by 2002, representing 41% of funded projects.⁴ Although satisfactory, this did not compare favourably with 82% of Australian Public Health Research and Development committee grants producing peer reviewed publications within 6 years of funding.⁵ Similarly, Australia was out performed by Canada and New Zealand in mental health research output.⁶

Family medicine academic departments tend to be underfunded compared with hospital based specialities.⁷ General practice academic staff often juggle teaching, clinical, administration and research commitments, with the latter their lowest priority.⁸ American family physician residents report very little protected research time,⁹ but are more likely to conduct research if supported within university departments and provided with mentors.¹⁰

Developing research potential helps facilitate a speciality's recognition.¹¹ Family medicine is a young academic discipline,¹² which recognises that research must become more of the culture. The primary care research output of 18 developed countries between 1975–1993 showed a vigorous increase in publications in most countries.¹³ In 2003 New Zealand led the way with 20 publications per million inhabitants, followed by the United Kingdom and Australia. New Zealand also

published more primary care publications per total number of human medicine publications (4.6%) than Australia (3.8%).

A systematic review of interventions to increase publication rates, from 1984–2004, found that writing support groups, courses and coaches were the most common interventions, and that all interventions resulted in improvement.¹⁴ To improve publication output, a general practice department in Australia declared a department wide writing week, entitled 'Publish or perish!' In the spirit of trans-Tasman cooperation, a New Zealand general practice academic with a high publication record was invited to provide mentoring.

Method

Research staff and higher degree students of all departments were invited to participate in the writing week, which took place at an Australian department of general practice during 2007. The intervention was developed by the authors and consisted of:

- pre-registration (3 months before the event) for potential participants to express their interest, identify papers on which they planned to work and determine their primary goal for the week. In addition to ensuring that potential participants had quarantined the time for writing week, this also focused potential participants to reflect on what might be achieved
- attendance at a 1.5 hour presentation by the workshop leader. This provided a mix of helpful tips on writing articles for journals as well as important information about the submission and review process
- key points provided as a written handout
- scheduled meetings with the workshop leader for 30 minute one-to-one sessions (participants were asked to send their work in progress before the first meeting). The workshop leader was able to assist participants to identify achievable goals before subsequent meetings
- one or two follow up meetings with the workshop leader
- a 'running sheet' in the staff tearoom for writers to enter details and record progress of their paper by application of yellow spots. This sheet reflected the development of a paper and included categories such as: 'title of paper', 'journal aimed for', 'completed introduction', 'completed methods', 'completed first draft', 'sent to co-authors for comment', 'completed final draft', and 'date submitted'
- book token incentives for the first submitted paper and for other evidence of progress at the end of the week (determined by the workshop leader)
- a short final evaluation involving free text about what activities were liked and what could be improved, with a 5 point Likert scale on usefulness of the various components
- a 30 minute concluding session for shared feedback and prize giving.

To be eligible to attend the scheduled one-to-one sessions, participants needed to meet the following criteria: have an idea about a paper they wanted to write, have access to the original ethics or grant applications, have completed some analysis and have dedicated time available during writing week.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Melbourne (Victoria) Human Ethics Committee.

Data collected about the participants included publication experience (novice, intermediate or senior), age, gender and their involvement in writing week components. Number of publications submitted in the subsequent 3 months and papers nearing completion were also recorded.

Descriptive statistical analyses were performed. Qualitative data from evaluations was analysed using a general inductive approach which provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analysing such data in focused evaluation questions.¹⁵ Prevailing themes were identified by two of the authors. Coding discrepancies were resolved by adjudication.

Results

Twenty-five participants engaged in some aspect of the writing week (*Table 1*); 5 were research higher degree students who attended the presentation only and were not yet expected to produce papers; 20 were academic departmental staff, whose writing and publication experience was graded as senior (six), intermediate (seven) or novice (seven) on the basis of their history of authorship. Senior writers had been first author on more than two publications, intermediate writers had contributed to a publication, but not as a first author, and novice writers had never written a publication for peer review. There were 17 women and three men, ranging from 20–50 years of age.

Twelve out of the 20 had pre-registered for writing week; two who had pre-registered did not subsequently participate. Of the 18 academics who participated, 15 (83%) attended the presentation and also had at least one individual session with the external facilitator. Seven had one face-to-face session; eight had two or more. Twelve of these 15 also used the staff tearoom running sheet. The remaining three participants used only the running sheet but did not attend the presentation or the writing clinic.

Eight papers were submitted in the subsequent 3 months, three by senior and five by intermediate researchers. There were a further 10 papers nearing completion, including three by novice researchers. Papers covered a wide range of topics and were submitted to a range of journals, with almost equal numbers submitted to content specific (eg. drug and alcohol, ethics, neurology) and general medical journals. For some participants, being able to discuss and decide on an appropriate journal for their paper was a valuable outcome of writing week.

Fourteen participants evaluated the usefulness of the writing week and its components (*Table 2*). Twelve judged the week '4' or '5' on the 5 point scale where '5' was extremely useful; the remaining two judged it '3'. The initial presentation and face-to-face meetings were mostly judged '4' or '5' by those who used these. Ratings for other components were more variable. Pre-registration ranged from '2' to '5' and the running sheet and the book token incentive ranged from '1' to '5'.

Four major themes emerged from the free text on the evaluation forms. Dedicated time was identified as a key advantage:

'I loved having enforced focus and boundaries (1 week) to write within, and the free space to commit to more or less nothing else except writing'.

Table 1. Participants of writing week

Experience	Papers published in past 5 years	Pre-registered	Attended presentation	Number of one-to-one meetings	Used running sheet	Submitted paper	Paper nearly ready*
Senior	>30	Yes	No	0	Yes	2	2
Senior	>30	Yes	Yes	1	Yes	0	1
Senior	10–19	Yes	Yes	2	Yes	1	0
Senior	5–9	Yes	Yes	1	No	0	0
Senior	5–9	Yes	No	0	No	0	0
Senior	5–9	Yes	Yes	1	Yes	2	2
Intermediate	5–9	Yes	Yes	2	Yes	2	1
Intermediate	5–9	No	No	0	Yes	0	0
Intermediate	5–9	Yes	Yes	1	No	0	0
Intermediate	5–9	No	Yes	1	Yes	1	0
Intermediate	5–9	Yes	No	0	No	0	0
Intermediate	5–9	Yes	Yes	2	Yes	0	1
Intermediate	<5	No	Yes	2	Yes	2	0
Novice	<5	Yes	Yes	3	Yes	0	0
Novice	<5	No	No	0	Yes	0	1
Novice	<5	Yes	Yes	1	Yes	0	0
Novice	0	No	Yes	2	Yes	0	1
Novice	0	No	Yes	1	Yes	0	0
Novice	0	No	Yes	3	No	0	0
Novice	0	No	Yes	2	Yes	0	1
Student	0	No	Yes	0	No	NA	
Student	0	No	Yes	0	No	NA	
Student	0	No	Yes	0	No	NA	
Student	0	No	Yes	0	No	NA	
Student	0	No	Yes	0	No	NA	

* At 3 months postwriting week; student = Masters student

The clear goals and enforced focus offered by the week was valued:

‘I had clear goals as to what had to be achieved’; ‘I loved the log sheet and the yellow dots!’

Interaction with colleagues was also recognised as important:

‘I enjoyed the environment that the week created. People talked a lot more about their research and actively engaged in discussions around this more than what is generally the case’; ‘I really enjoyed meeting fellow writers at the printer and seeing their copies of ‘draft only paper’ emerge hot off the press, and we kind of cheered each other along’.

Finally, many appreciated having an external facilitator available for mentoring and motivation:

‘Having dedicated meeting times with the facilitator was the key to the week as I knew I had to ‘report’ to someone and this encouraged me to keep going and to make progress before our next meeting’.

When asked what to change for a future writing week, the strongest theme to emerge was to quarantine more time. Other suggestions

included making more use of the individualised meeting times, having a follow up meeting after the initial workshop, and modifying the running sheet to allow the recording of an activity that was in process although not completed. Another change suggested by the workshop facilitator for a future writing week would be to make the initial one-to-one session longer, preferably 45–60 minutes. For novice writers, a longer initial consultation might allow them to progress further by the end of the week. For more experienced writers, one longer session at the start may be all that is required to encourage them to finish their paper.

Discussion

Mentoring, time, and a culture encouraging research and dissemination of findings strongly influence an academic department’s research publishing output. Writing week provided dedicated time, support and professional assistance to focus on academic writing for publication in peer reviewed journals. Subsequent to writing week, progress was made on other papers that were not the focus of writing week,

Table 2. Judged usefulness of writing week activities

Research experience	Having a writing week	Pre-registration	Initial talk	First 1-to-1 meeting	Next meeting (s)	Running sheet	Voucher incentive
Senior	3	NA	4	4	NA	2	2
Senior	5	5	5	4	5	4	3
Senior	5	5	5	5	NA	3	5
Senior	5	5	4	3	NA	3	1
Intermediate	5	3	5	5	5	4	5
Intermediate	5	NA	3	3	NA	4	2
Intermediate	5	NA	5	5	5	4	3
Novice	4	3	5	5	5	4	3
Novice	5	4	5	4	4	3	4
Novice	5	3	4	4	5	4	3
Novice	5	2	4	5	5	5	2
Novice	5	4	5	5	5	3	3
Novice	5	NA	4	4	5	1	3
Novice	3	NA	4	NA	NA	3	NA

5 = extremely useful to 1 = not at all useful; N/A = not applicable (did not do)

suggesting that the innovation may have had a broader impact than that of the nominated papers alone. Skills and confidence gained during writing week hopefully will be long lived, leading to more productive academic staff.

Limitations of this study

A limitation of the evaluation is that we are unable to determine whether pre-registration alone had any impact on the subsequent completion of papers. After registering, participants had several weeks to wait before writing week commenced. This may have encouraged some to mull over ideas for their paper, while others may have placed such thoughts to one side, confident that they would have the opportunity to focus on their paper during writing week.

We are also unable to establish the exact contribution of writing week to the research publication output. While eight papers were submitted and a further 10 neared completion in the 3 months following writing week, establishing a baseline rate for the 3 month period preceding the week was problematic. We cannot attribute publications specifically to this one event, although three of the nearly completed papers are by novices, for whom these will be their first publication. Conversely, more papers may have arisen in the following months that were germinated, cultivated or revived during writing week.

Conflict of interest: none.

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