Developing an experiential research writing course experientially

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Abstract
In 2009 we developed an experiential Research Writing course to help academics at our university to become more productive and successful writers. Our aim was to create a stimulating environment in which each participant’s voice, knowledge and experience was valued, and where learning was characterised by optimism, creativity and energy. In this article we describe the context which gave rise to the Research Writing course, and the theories of learning and writing which informed course design and development. We also discuss the variations which are inevitable when learning is experiential, and dependent, in part, on group composition and dynamics. Is it possible to design a course for a diverse group of academics from different disciplines, at different levels of seniority and with different first languages? To answer this question we describe three cycles of action research, and reflect critically on our experience of presenting the course.

We experience, we observe, we conceptualise, we act and we reflect – we change as the environment changes (Packham 1989, 129).

INTRODUCTION
In this article we reflect on the purposes, context, experiences and outcomes of an experiential research writing course for academics. We describe in some detail the collaborative process of the course design and the series of activities intended to overcome the isolation, ‘stuckness’, doubt, and tendency to procrastinate which academic writers often grapple with. For many academics, writing is an arduous and anxious process. To overcome this, the course design is grounded in creativity, exploration and fun. The course aims to assist practitioners to find their voice, gain confidence and increase productivity in research writing. In the process we aim to build an ethos of trust and sense of community among participants.

We show how our own engagement in the course design, activities and evaluation mirror the experiential learning process that the research writer-participants engage in. As course designers and facilitators, we work experientially – we act, observe,
Developing an experiential research writing course experientially

categorise, reflect, give each other feedback and adapt to changing groups and contexts.

We also provide an account of three occasions on which we presented the course in 2009 and 2010 at the University of the Witwatersrand. On each occasion, the participants, their expectations, and the nature of their engagement in the course activities differed markedly, challenging us as to be responsive and flexible. We then reflect on some of the other challenges we have experienced as course presenters, including co-presenting to our peers, group cohesion, accountability, and difficulties experienced by some participants in learning experientially. We consider participants’ formal and informal evaluations of the course and report on an enquiry into which of the writing skills were easy or difficult for participants to implement once the course had finished.

ORIGINS

Many of our colleagues and students find research writing difficult and intimidating. They complain that they feel anxious, guilty or ‘stuck’ when confronted with writing tasks. The implication is that they seek help not only with research writing, but also with dealing with problems such as writers’ block and procrastination. They need to learn how to manage their time, prioritise their research, and set goals for writing, just as they may also wish to learn how to draw up a literature review, write a Ph.D. proposal, compose a journal article, or respond to reviewers’ comments on their work.

We wanted to help our colleagues improve their research writing and become more productive writers, while at the same time we wanted to generate energy, enthusiasm and enjoyment in writing. What was needed, we thought, was a structured and sustained opportunity to develop research writing skills through writing. We hoped that the course would provide an attractive opportunity and model for academics, themselves lecturers, supervisors and researchers with a responsibility to extend and adapt learning opportunities for their own students. Already competent writers would be challenged to produce excellent written work, and to produce more of it (Attwood, Broekmann, Nichols and Castle 2003). Newcomers would develop positive attitudes and skills leading them to become successful research writers.

A foundation for our course was laid by our former colleague Cecile Badenhorst, whose books Research writing (2007), Dissertation writing (2008) and Productive writing (2010) are based on her own experiences of being a doctoral student, and, once qualified, working with postgraduate students and academics on their own dissertation and research writing. In her books Badenhorst argues that ‘writing begets writing’ and encourages authors to undertake free-writes to ‘get going’, later revising their work to fit a specific genre (Hadingham 2010). An important theme of her books is that writers should tackle affective barriers to writing while also acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to become accomplished and productive writers. Badenhorst’s books can be used as self-study guides, or to form the base of a workshop-type course, which is how we used them.
THE INSTITUTION

Located in Johannesburg, South Africa’s largest city and its industrial and commercial hub, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is an urban institution spanning five campuses on the edge of the inner city. From its origins as a mining college 80 years ago, Wits followed the model of elite British universities to become one of South Africa’s leading tertiary education institutions, with nearly 30,000 students registered across five mega-faculties. Nearly one third of the students are postgraduates – a figure that the university aims to increase in the next decade, in response to national and international demands for greater research ‘outputs’ (publications, conference papers, reports). Consequently there is great pressure on academics to publish and supervise students.

Just over half (54%) of the student body is female and 56 per cent are black African – figures which disguise the enormous metamorphosis in the institution in the past twenty years. Wits’ staff complement is not as representative of the country’s demographics as its student body. In 2010 only 30 per cent of its permanent academic staff was black, while 47 per cent was female (University of the Witwatersrand 2010; Hadingham 2010). Nearly seven per cent of Wits’ student population is made up of international students, from Africa and beyond. As English is the first language of only a small proportion of students, writing in English may be particularly difficult.

Since the dismantling of apartheid in the late 1980s, new challenges have emerged for the country and for Wits – challenges of reconstruction, social transformation and development. Higher education institutions have been mandated by the Council on Higher Education to increase access to quality education, ‘transform’ the student and staff profile, and increase research output. Thus Wits has a responsibility to broaden access to its qualifications, and also to ensure success once students have gained entry. One priority is to improve the qualifications of existing academics so that they can conduct research and supervise postgraduate students, thus contributing to institutional and national long-term development. The university’s strategic plan foresees raising the number of academics holding a Ph.D. from 48 per cent to 70 per cent by 2022 (University of the Witwatersrand 2006).

Among the programmes and services developed by the university in response to these needs, the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development launched a ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme in 2007. Popularly known as the ‘PhD Boot Camp’, it is a year-long programme designed to encourage and support early career academics to complete a higher degree, and to establish a publication record in peer-reviewed and accredited journals (Geber 2009). The programme required selected early- and mid-career academics to complete six courses including the flagship course, ‘Research Writing’, within an eight-month period. Participants also received twelve hours of personal coaching based on the co-active coaching model (Coaches Training Institute 2003).
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Our teaching philosophy and practices are informed by a variety of learning theories and perspectives on writing. The learning theories include experiential learning; communities of practice; critical reflection; transformative learning; dialogic spaces; and life coaching. The perspectives on writing include writing to enhance creativity and develop a writer’s identity; and productive research writing. We look at these theories and perspectives in turn in the section below and describe how they influenced the curriculum of the Research Writing course.

Experiential learning

It is a truism of adult education that adult learners bring a wide variety of educational and life experience with them to the classroom (Rogers 1993). Furthermore, their experience is linked intimately with their identity (Knowles 1989). Consequently, life experience serves as a rich resource for learning and identity formation, both for individuals and groups.

From a constructivist perspective (Candy 1991; Gravett 2005) learners’ existing knowledge and experience serve as an interpretive framework, or lens, for learning. In order to promote meaningful learning, learners’ existing knowledge should be ‘surfaced’ or lifted to a conscious level, where it can be explored, clarified, and linked to new learning content (Miller and Boud 1996). In the Research Writing course we try to surface participants’ existing knowledge in a number of ways, including brainstorming key ideas; constructing mind maps; drawing pictures; telling stories, predicting the outcome of an event, and so on. When this is done in a group, the experience and knowledge generated is made available to others as a resource for learning. Participants begin to link their past and current experiences to new learning, creating new interpretations of where they have been and visions of where they may go.

Life experience can also be an obstacle to learning (Gravett 2005). Adults often hold entrenched attitudes, beliefs and thinking patterns which can be difficult to change because they are longstanding and represent an emotional investment. When new information is presented which differs from what they hold to be valid or true, it can be difficult to integrate with their existing knowledge and beliefs. This may apply particularly to those trained in one way of writing and conservative modes of learning and teaching. They find it difficult to detach themselves from their beliefs about academic and research writing. In this regard, the threat induced by the high stakes attached to academic publishing is an additional consideration. A major goal, then, in our Research Writing course, was to create an environment in which participants felt safe to explore and share their experience and knowledge about writing, and to create a community which fostered dialogue, reflection and discussion.

Communities of practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common purpose and a desire to learn from one another (Hansman 2001). The point of participating in
a community of practice is to construct knowledge actively with other community members through dialogue, discourse and shared experiences (Monaghan and Hansman 2010). In our course, we purposely seat participants at tables of four or five, and promote learning in pairs, triads and small groups through dialogue and shared experiences. For example, we ask participants to read aloud to others at their table a passage of writing they have just completed, and then for all at the table to select one piece of writing from the group to read aloud in plenary. Our intention here is to engage participants in dialogue about the characteristics and quality of their writing, and to provide constructive feedback and encouragement to each another. Participants do this in a concrete way that promotes learning, often in playful and personal short pieces which help to overcome the terror of academic writing.

People’s expressive and communicative skills can be improved with practice, reflection and critique (Lodge 1996, 177). The aim in our Research Writing course is to work towards a supportive yet critical community in which writers can develop and test their talent. We also encourage the formation of networks and communities of writers among course participants which may endure beyond the eight days of the course.

Critical reflection

In order for learning to be meaningful, the learner has to believe that she is learning something of personal value. Thus reflection on learning is crucial. Through reflection, we construct meaning and value; and through discovery, re-creation and transformation, the ‘content’ of learning becomes meaningful. In our Research Writing course, we use the principles of single loop and double loop learning (Argyris and Schoen 1974) to promote reflection. For example, in an exercise following a discussion about the characteristics of different writers, we asked participants to identify a research journal in their field which they admired. They were asked to specify, in a free-write, the nature and characteristics of the research writing which the journal publishes. The purpose of this exercise was threefold: to encourage analytical and critical thinking about academic journals, to surface the journal’s stated and implicit editorial policies, and to foreground the qualities the participant-writers want to develop in their own research writing in order to be published in the chosen journal. This exercise is an example of single loop learning, where the process of reflection does not yield change. We then ask participants whether they would dare to challenge the conventions of the journal by submitting an article written in their own voice and style, and to think through what the consequences of this might be. This is an example of double loop learning, where reflection potentially instigates change, in word or deed.

Brookfield (1986; 1996) maintains that adult learners may need extended time and opportunities to reflect on their beliefs and scrutinise their convictions. Reflection can be encouraged by stimulating uncertainty, ambiguity and doubt in learners, and confronting them with anomalies and discrepancies in their existing views, with a view to changing them. We use case studies, simulations and role play as ways of
establishing opportunities for learners to construct meaning through reflection and discussion of experience.

**Transformative learning**

Mezirow (1991) proposes that through experience, critical reflection and discussion, people may come to realise the constraints and limitations of their ideas, values and worldviews. Although dialogue and discussion may help individuals to change their way of seeing things and making meaning in the world, Mezirow proposes a ‘disorienting dilemma’ as the first step in bringing about transformation. Cranton (2002), too, discusses the importance of critical reflection in change, describing it as a way to work through beliefs and values in the light of new experiences. In our Research Writing course, we strive to provide opportunities for ‘disorientation’, discussion and reflection with a view to transformation. For example, we begin the course *not* by asking participants to provide the usual introductions and motivations, but by asking them to find someone in the room they do not know and ask him/her ‘What is your dream about research writing?’ After this brief encounter, they go on to pose the same question to two or three other participants. This beginning is a ‘disorienting dilemma’ which helps participants to recognise and articulate their own reasons for participating in the course, while discovering others’ hopes and dreams. It also sets the tone for meaningful group practice.

Mezirow (1990, 1991) specifies four conditions for transformative learning:
1. Acknowledge the presence of the other (do not take things for granted).
2. Encourage reflective discourse (especially critical self-reflection)
3. Live in a mentoring community (an ecology of relationships with people who value transformative discourse)
4. Seek out opportunities for committed action.

In our Research Writing course, we consciously strive to create these conditions.

**Dialogic spaces**

Participants in our course are diverse in terms of age, race, gender, social class, and their experience of writing. Their perceptions of one another affect the way they work together, and may prevent them from understanding and working collaboratively. Racial and gender stereotypes and discrimination are operative even when participants have superior education and high skills levels (Monaghan and Hansman 2010).

We sought to create a dialogic space (Rule 2004) for participants by proposing that all members of the group agree to act on a commitment to individual and collective well-being. We try to open a space for dialogue where participants can explore and experiment with writing, and improve the quality of their communication, both verbally and in writing. A space where participants ‘really listen’ to one another is different from ‘waiting for a chance to speak’ (Reason 2004, 2).
engage in dialogue in the reflection and feedback sessions following many of the free-writing and homework activities. The Research Writing course features dialogue among participants as they engage in reflection on writing; between participants and the course presenters, both at the time of the course and subsequently; and between participants and the university regarding the nature and importance of research and writing for the institution, individuals, and the disciplines they work in (Rule 2004, 325). One way to promote dialogue, in the sense of reflection on writing, was to give course participants an attractive blank page journal for their research writing and reflections. We discourage the use of laptops as these hamper discussion and group interaction.

Writing for creativity and identity

One assumption in our Research Writing course is that academic writing is not a discreet discourse (Attwood et al. 2003). Writing can be understood as a form of role-play, while skill in writing can be understood as the ability to frame, manipulate and communicate the writer’s intention in role. Everyone has experience of role-play, and we drew on this tacit knowledge of role to facilitate research writing. For example, we asked half of the participants to take on the roles of first-time applicants for research funds from the National Research Foundation (NRF). The other half were to be assessors employed by the NRF. We set up a ‘speed dating’ scenario, where applicants took rapid turns to present their research projects to assessors. Applicants had to convince assessors of the importance of their research in only three minutes and with one prop (a handwritten business card). Assessors had to rate the quality of the applications, and prizes were given to the top three. The role-playing was dramatic and serious, but the scenario itself was parodic to the point of farce. The atmosphere in the workshop was alternately fraught with tension and bursting with laughter.

Creativity, energy and humour in writing

‘Creativity is transcendent in that it makes a contribution that surpasses what is known or what exists’ (Persing 1996). The requisite rigour and originality of academic research rests, to a large extent, on creative thinking. From the room set-up to the arrangement of activities, a certain degree of surprise or disequilibrium encourages new ways of seeing and acting. External sources of creativity, according to Druker (1998), include unexpected events and incongruities. Prather and Gundry (1995) recommend an environment that is challenging, playful, and is characterized by trust and openness. From an individual perspective creativity flows from rejection of rules, a desire to seek new things, and holding a deep empathy with others (Hamel 2001). In a shared workshop space where risks and ‘being put on the spot’ are real, we join participants in experiencing and encouraging these features of creativity. Aspects of the workshops are re-created, take unexpected turns, and show up in different guises.
While playfulness contributes to stress release, sharing, opening, enjoyment, and energy renewal, research by Lloyd (2001) into creativity in the workplace shows that the generation of ideas doubles when working in a group, and is increased exponentially when play is introduced. Play moves people forward, almost without their noticing, through games, prizes, crayon drawings, drama, jokes, stories and team sharing. These activities may be challenging but they help writers overcome obstacles such as fear, habit, socialization and fixed assumptions (Palmer 2002). Playful and creative tasks and structural designs also encourage right brain recovery from left-brain-dominated work schedules. Imagination, feeling, symbols, images, perception, appreciation, and flexibility enter the writer and writing.

These different facets use and generate different energies, and, ‘like people, writing radiates energy fields’ (Haarhoff 1998, 42). Infusing energy and life into writing is as important as being productive.

**Coaching**

Coaching is a usually a short-term process used to develop a person’s knowledge and skills, especially self-knowledge, leading to better (more coherent, consistent, effective, efficient) performance at work, or in life in general. Coaching helps people to identify priorities, look at the big picture, set goals, visualise alternatives, develop strategies for change, plan future actions, and hold themselves accountable. A coach may help a client to explore an aspect of her work linked to a specific goal, or may explore wider-ranging areas like work/life balance, interpersonal skills, communication, assertiveness, relationships, and dealing with criticism (Geber 2009).

We had both completed training in the co-active coaching method (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House and Sandahl 2009) and had coached students and colleagues in the Ph.D. bootcamp, with positive results. We found many ways to apply coaching principles and techniques in the Research Writing course, for example by challenging participants to set goals for their writing, and to identify the beliefs and actions (saboteurs) which thwart the achievement of goals. We tried to offer opportunities to try out alternative ways of being and doing through research writing, for example by asking participants to adopt a particular persona when writing, or to consciously write in a different genre or style from their customary one. Coaching offers a wide range of participatory techniques to help participant-writers re-frame their experiences and to move from (critical) reflection to transformative action.

**COURSE DESIGN AND ACTIVITIES**

The framework for our Research Writing course was developed by Badenhorst. It consisted of 1) a precedent – Badenhorst had delivered her course with positive response to two audiences at Wits in 2007 before emigrating to Canada; 2) a structure (eight mornings, divided in two four-day sessions, with a break of two weeks between
them); and 3) a set of course materials which had been collected and published (Badenhorst2007).

We adapted this framework each time we presented the course. We kept the eight-day, mornings-only structure, deeming it suitable for most academics at Wits. Atwo-week break in the middle of the course allowed participants to undertake a significant writing project which they could bring to the second four-day session. We retained the daily homework assignments, and the selection criteria for the course: that participants commit themselves to participating in the eight days of the course, and that they bring with them on the first day a sample of writing from their work-in-progress. Participants were recruited through the Ph.D.Boot Camp, notices on the university intranet, and word of mouth.

We also re-worked the course design, infusing it with principles which had supported us in our practices as lecturers, curriculum designers, researchers, writers and colleagues. We elaborated on Mezirow’s four conditions for transformative learning:

**Acknowledge the presence of the other (do not take things for granted)**

We developed the course based on the assumption that academic staff have diverse disciplinary backgrounds and interests, as well as diverse social, cultural and linguistic identities, and that this diversity could enrich the course by forming a base and resource for further learning for individuals and the group. However, we were also aware that many of our colleagues and students were accustomed to receiving technical solutions to problems through a didactic education paradigm (a predominantly left-brain approach) and might not find experiential and transformative learning as familiar and rewarding as we did. We were, however, committed to working experientially from the start of the course, and decided to do this by first exploring participants’ attitudes and beliefs about research writing in an active, concrete way (through free writing and loop writing) explaining the experiential and transformative principles of the course at a later stage.

Another important principle of course design for us – a principle which lies outside experiential and transformative learning – was to encourage the flow of creativity. We also support experimentation, and ‘out of the box’ thinking by asking participants to draw pictures and maps of their research, and to use metaphors when ‘telling the story’ of their research. We support experimentation, and break the barriers of caution, reserve, formality and convention in research (right-brained approaches), by asking participants to do outrageous things, such as turn their data into a song, poem or drama to be performed in plenary. This provides a lot of energy, laughter, play and praise. The emotional climate is dramatically different from what participants might expect from a course billed as ‘Research Writing’ in a university.
**Encourage reflective discourse (especially critical self-reflection)**

Opportunities abound for critical reflection in the Research Writing course. After most writing exercises, we urge participants to read their writing to a neighbour or to a small group, and to both give and receive feedback. By asking writers to create their own reference points for feedback, participants have frequent opportunities for critical reflection, including self-reflection. We also introduce participants to a range of indices and criteria for assessing ‘good’ writing in different genres, for example, journal articles, research reports, theses, and encourage them to reflect critically on both their writing and the indices.

**Live in a mentoring community (an ecology of relationships with people who value transformative discourse)**

We attempted to build communities of practice within and beyond the course by having participants write, read, solicit and engage with feedback in small groups of four or five. The groups change every few days so that participants get to know all members of the larger group. We try to model active listening and reward participants for good feedback as well as good writing. By listening attentively to others, and hearing feedback on their work, participants begin to recognise and develop confidence in their own voice as writers, and to develop their identities as research writers. They build trusting ‘communities of practice’ in which they can experiment with new techniques and styles of writing. It is quickly apparent that individuals in these communities write differently and participants appreciate each other’s distinct voices.

**Seek out opportunities for committed action**

A useful lesson from coaching which we attempt to integrate in the Research Writing course is to encourage participants to spend time envisioning personal goals before elaborating strategies and planning actions to attain them. Time spent acknowledging and elaborating participants’ personal interests, values and principles in connection with a goal, increases the likelihood that actions taken to achieve it will be focused and committed.

Even when dealing with hard content, such as composing problem and purpose statements, formulating research questions, building an argument, or editing work, we use experiential and participative methods, such as gallery walks, brainstorms, and dramatisations. These methods not only encourage active, creative experimentation, they also stimulate critical reflection, analysis, and theorising, thus prompting learning in a variety of ways.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

Action research can be described as a series of cycles of action and reflection, based on Kolb’s (1971) experiential learning cycle. The principle is that we seldom learn from experience unless we analyse the experience in terms of our own goals, aims,
ambitions and expectations (Saddington 1998). The experiential learning process begins with an experience (concrete experience), followed by reflection (reflective observation), then reflection is assimilated into a theory (abstract conceptualisation) and finally these new or reformulated hypotheses are tested in new situations (active experimentation). Experiential learning and action research are cyclical, or a recurring series of cycles.

The purpose of the action research cycles was to check our assumptions about the purpose and design of the Research Writing course against what actually happened with three groups of writer-participants. Each time we presented the course, we asked ourselves questions such as, ‘What works and doesn’t work in this course?’ ‘What could we do differently (better) next time? Is there anything in the course which is redundant, or stale?’ ‘What do we need to learn more about to improve the course?’ This is one way in which action research can bring espoused theories (the theories to which we hold allegiance) closer to theories-in-use (the theories which govern our actions) (Argyris and Schoen 1978).

As well as being a dynamic process of research, action research is also collaborative. The contribution of research participants is strong, in the sense that they are co-researchers and contribute to creative and critical thinking at all stages.

Course participants agreed to participate in the research and allowed us to collect samples of their writing. We agreed to protect their privacy by not revealing their names and identities in our publications.

THREE CYCLES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Each of the cycles described below represents one eight-day course. It becomes apparent that the composition of the groups affects the lived experience and outcomes of the course.

Cycle one

Most of the twenty participants were employed in the Wits School of Education. Many of them were white, female, mid-career academics who had known and worked with one other, and with one or both of us, for many years. A second, smaller group consisted of younger lecturers and researchers, both black and white South Africans, employed in the humanities, social sciences and biology. These younger academics were under some pressure to establish themselves as researchers by increasing the number of their publications or to make substantial progress with their Ph.D. studies. Half of the course participants were members of a Ph.D. Boot Camp coordinated in their School or Faculty.

Most of these participants were already active experiential learners, keen to develop new ideas and skills in research writing, or extend existing ones. Many were already aware of their preferred learning and teaching styles and conscious of their writing histories. A hallmark of this group was their eagerness to share their writing with others and to give and receive feedback. They did not find the self-exposure in
sharing their writing in small groups or in plenary at all intimidating or inhibiting.

The expressed needs of this group were mainly to ‘get going’, to develop ‘motivation and momentum’, and to find their voice. Several participants mentioned that they hoped to learn skills or techniques in their writing. They engaged wholeheartedly in group activities, did their homework, wrote their journals, were ready to take risks, and were unequivocal about their appreciation of the course. As one participant observed, ‘I was made to think in many creative and analytically demanding ways about my whole project. [There was] never a dull moment.’

Given a half hour to transform their research data into a drama, song or poem for presentation in plenary, they developed lively texts punctuated with humour and references to individual group members’ research activities and interests. For example, they produced dramatised poems on the mating habits of cheetahs, allegories of anthropomorphised molecular reactions, and a TV script about pregnancy and HIV.

Some of their written comments in response to the question ‘What new skills have you learned on this course?’ were:

How to be a critical reader and writer. How to make my writing colourful and readable.

Free writing helped me to get going on my writing.

Participants appreciated the structure of the course in two four-day sessions separated by two or three weeks; the intense programme in the mornings only, with homework assigned to prepare for the following day; and the interactive and group work; remarking:

We had to be active participants and also understand, capture and apply what we learned.

We learned a lot, not in a serious but fun way.

These elements of fun and creativity seemed to come as a surprise to many participants.

Their critical comments about the course indicated that we, as course presenters, did not work much with the texts we [the participants] brought with us (draft thesis or chapter or proposal). We resolved to refer more often to participants’ work in progress in course activities and homework the next time around.

Buoyed by participants’ positive feedback on the course, we shifted some activities around so that the sequencing and pace of activities each day were less predictable, and we introduced coaching activities to encourage planning and accountability. We resolved to work with participants’ work-in-progress.

Cycle two

Our experience of conducting the Research Writing course with the second group of participants was different in many respects to our experience with the first group.
The second group was smaller and more diverse in terms of disciplinary affiliation than the first group. There were participants from health science education, computer science, mining development studies, law, molecular and cell biology, research ethics, education, management, and construction economics. None of the participants was part of a Ph.D. Boot Camp, but there were two postdoctoral students and several recently appointed academics charged with mounting new research projects or publishing from ongoing ones. This group appeared to be under closer supervision of their work than the previous group, and experienced intense pressure to produce journal articles rapidly. Becoming more productive and efficient research writers was their main motive for participating in the course.

A recurrent theme in this group, expressed in a free-writing exercise (‘I am the kind of writer who...’) was the struggle to find the perfect time and place to write, free of other obligations and demands. Participants wrote of striving for focus, precision, accuracy and clarity in writing, and their wish to be able to write perfectly the first time around. One participant wrote poignantly about her desire to write work which was ‘significant, original and meaningful’. Yet most of the participants castigated themselves for perceived weaknesses. One wrote that:

I am the kind of writer who ... does too much reading; too little reading; is lazy to revise and edit; procrastinates; loses focus and interest; lacks confidence; has opinions, but cannot develop arguments; feels guilty about being unproductive.

Many indicated that for them writing was ‘a linear process’, ‘a hard task’ and ‘a chore’, guided by ‘senior experts’. We therefore focused our initial activities on free writing, loop writing and developing a focus in research.

By the fifth day of the course, after a two-week break, one participant wrote:

For the first time I feel I can fit writing in my highly congested work schedule. A writing session nowadays usually starts with a 10 minute free writing exercise to get me going. The great motivating thing, though, has been others’ endorsement ....

Another wrote:

I am reading other authors and checking for style.

In their final day’s evaluation of the course, participants declared that they now enjoyed writing and taking risks; they were more alert to alternative perspectives; and could question more freely, without fear of judgment:

I am more reflective and constructively critical of my own work.

and

I am more confident about expressing myself in my own voice.
Poignantly, some individuals indicated that:

I now have some strategies, techniques and resources I can use when struggling.

I can put thought into words; words into pictures and stories.

Like Steve Biko[^4] said, I am now the kind of writer who writes what I like.

An interesting aspect of these changes in attitudes and skills is that they contrast so sharply with participants’ initial mechanistic goals.

One participant found some ‘brilliant websites’ to share with the group, and encouraged others to remain in contact with one another by email. Many participants shared resources and some participants took on mentoring roles for less experienced writers.

After this cycle, we made very few substantial changes to the course, but resolved to spend more time at the beginning making explicit the ethos, aims and process of the course. We also decided to negotiate clearer ways of interacting by drawing on a coaching technique called ‘designed alliance’.

**Cycle three**

The third group of participants was particularly diverse. More than half the group spoke English as a second or third language. Participants spoke Turkish, Polish, Greek, Russian, and Ibu. South Africans, with their wealth of languages and cultures, were in the minority. There were representatives from environmental science, pharmacy, mining engineering, chemistry, education and economics. We saw this as a strength of the course: the diversity added to the richness of learning.

Diversity was also reflected in participants’ research writing experience. Two members of the group – one a former journalist, another a prolific researcher – wrote quickly and easily. They gave generously of their wisdom and experience to less experienced members of the group. Several participants were embarking on an academic career, and did not have a writing project underway when they joined the course. Two of them had no mentor or supervisor and no collegial support for their research. Three participants were repeating the course for the second time.

Even with the generous assistance of more experienced writers in the group, novice writers placed limits on the level of knowledge construction and critical reflection which they could achieve in the small groups. The course went too fast for these less experienced participants, touching on, but not deepening knowledge and experience on too wide a range of topics.

This group, more than the previous one, anticipated that they would be ‘trained to write scientifically and academically’ in the course, and that they ‘would be made to write a paper’. Some participants were interested in our course in order to get ideas for their own courses on research writing and to improve postgraduate supervision:
I’d like to assist my honours students more with their research writing – perhaps start them on the right track with mindmaps and building arguments. Mostly, though, I will apply what I’ve learned to my own research.

Participants’ evaluations noted that we, as facilitators, were ‘flexible and engaging’, and ‘gentle in coaxing would-be writers into producing some amazing work’. ‘One gets a strong sense that they are enjoying what they are doing’. This was certainly true.

Insights and skills which participants said they acquired in the course included ‘building an argument, which was my worst nightmare’, ‘the value of writing groups’, ‘how to review and assess a paper’ and ‘writing for journals and conferences’. It is interesting that these outcomes have a different focus from those of previous groups – something to be expected in experiential learning.

In response to an expressed need we added a section on theoretical and conceptual frameworks for research into an existing section on literature reviews. Some members of the group participated in a seminar by a visiting lecturer on ‘Writing for publication – Art or Strategy’, and followed this up with an in-house seminar on getting a literature review published. This showed their engagement with the topic.

As was the case in the previous two cycles, participants indicated that the techniques they used regularly after the course included free-writing, mindmapping, drawing, and using metaphors. They made suggestions for follow-up workshops, off-campus writing retreats, and better links between creative activities and ‘the final product’.

As in cycle two we did not expressly communicate the pedagogic principles behind the course, relying instead on participants to pick them up intuitively. We were, however, clear about the course aims, daily activities and overall structure. We may have failed to communicate our enthusiasm for breaking with convention in research writing, because after the course, one participant circulated to the group by email rigidly structured guidelines for writing a research proposal – exactly what we were trying to free participants from adherence to.

REFLECTIONS

Following this third cycle of action research, we could see that by acting, reflecting, analysing, theorising and new planning each time we presented the Research Writing course, we were indeed developing an experiential learning course experientially. The Research Writing course allowed us to listen to how academic staff approach writing, and to gain insight into the teaching and learning processes which enhance participants’ confidence, fluency, energy and voice. Some of our critical reflections on the course are presented below:

Reflections on the course design

The course design is malleable and flexible. It can be tailored to suit individual or group needs.
The broad theoretical base of the course provides a platform for diverse learning and teaching styles and approaches, and encourages experimentation, keeping the course fresh for participants and for us as presenters.

The course is more process than content-oriented. Although it runs counter to the tendency in our university to adopt outcomes based education and assessment and evidence-based performance management in our institution, we believe the lack of formal assessment and reportage is an advantage in our course. Critical self-reflection and evaluation are facilitated, and may be more valuable for academics to learn.

Reflections on facilitation

The development and presentation of the course presented challenges to us as course presenters, including: ownership of parts of the programme; receiving joint rather than individual feedback; recognising that there was a need to trust, care for, and be sensitive to one another as well as be responsive to the needs of individuals in the group. We had to develop strategies for managing disagreements on the spot. In cycle three, for example, we devised a fishbowl exercise to resolve disputes and demonstrate a method of conflict resolution.

It was necessary for us to have a repertoire of teaching and learning activities, and experience of facilitation. There were pressures on us, for example, to model facilitation to our peers; and to manage the cohesion of groups. We had to share power and ownership not only between ourselves, but with course participants. An example of this was when the first group of participants announced that they would only write a praise song for themselves if we did, too.

Reflections on group process

Some groups handle the varied activities better than others. The first group (cycle one), for example, did wonderful dramatisations of their research data, and participated wholeheartedly in speed dating for research writers. The second group was not nearly as enthusiastic or entertaining. However, there is no need to jettison parts of the programme because they did not work well with one particular group.

Group attendance was voluntary and required a significant commitment in time and energy from participants. The fact that attendance was good indicates that participants felt the need for writing development opportunities and trusted in the experiential nature of the course.

Reflections on outcomes

While some transformations were achieved in the course – for example in participants’ willingness, enthusiasm and skill to engage in research writing – transformations are not always lasting. Participants re-enter the fray of academic life, and some compromises are inevitable. Yet enduring changes are possible. We encounter past course participants from time to time, and they attest to the lasting benefits of free writing, drawing, experimenting with different voices, and freeing up their creative self by using coloured pens and paper.
CONCLUSION

This article described a collaborative, experiential approach to designing, presenting and evaluating a Research Writing course for academics – an approach which draws on a wealth of theoretical perspectives, including experiential learning, communities of practice, transformative learning, dialogic spaces, identity and writing, and personal coaching. These perspectives formed the platform for an essentially experiential course design which involved exploring participants’ beliefs about research writing through writing, encouraging creativity and experimentation, and providing opportunities for critical reflection and fun.

In keeping with the experiential process of designing and presenting the course, we turned to action research as a process to support critical reflection on our practice and to generate new ideas and plans. We described our own, and participants’ reported experience in three cycles of action research in 2009 and 2010, noting that the diversity and levels of experience of the groups affected their interaction with us and with one another, and led to different outcomes. We then reflected on our experience as designers, presenters and evaluators, and established that despite many challenges, this experiential research writing course realised our goal of providing ‘a creative and supportive space for writing journeys’ in a research focused university.

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NOTES

1 The Faculties are Humanities; Science; Engineering and Built Environment; Commerce, Law and Management; and Health Sciences.

2 Participants should have commenced a Masters degree or Ph.D. and made substantial progress on it. Preference was given to applicants from previously disadvantaged groups, and staff doing research in areas identified as ‘scarce skills’ (science, mathematics and engineering). Applicants had to be supported by both the Head of School and their supervisors.

3 The six courses were Research Writing; Voice and Presentation Skills; Effective Speed Reading; Time and Stress Management; IT tools; and How to Write Funding Proposals for the National Research Foundation.

4 Steve Biko was the charismatic, anti-apartheid leader of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa whose death at the hands of the Security Policy in 1976 caused an international furor. I Write What I Like is a book of his collected writings, published posthumously.
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