



**The University of Edinburgh
Principal's Teaching Award Scheme**

Project Final Report

Project title: Developing doctoral students as (collaborative) writers
Team members: Dr Dagmar Alexander and Dr Jonathan Wyatt

This report outlines the process and outcomes of our PTAS-funded study on the experience and impact on doctoral students' writing of the experience of a yearlong collaborative writing project.

The project began in October 2014 and, while the PTAS funding ended in January 2016, the work of the project continues. The outline of what has taken place during this time now follows before a summary of what has emerged from it.

Thirteen early-career researchers signed up for the project. 11 were doctoral students, two were recent PhD graduates in post-doctoral positions in the School. There were participants from three of the four subject areas in the School of Health in Social Science: one from Interdisciplinary Social Sciences in Health, three from Nursing Studies, and ten from Counselling and Psychotherapy (the department the two investigators were located). One of the lead investigators, Dagmar, was a PhD student at the start of the project, Jonathan a member of faculty.

Four participants withdrew from the project at different points. Two withdrew after two or three sessions because they realised this project wasn't for them: they had imagined, for example, we would focus more on some of the pragmatics of writing a collaborative publication and/or, related to this, they found the invitation to write from a personal perspective, and to share that writing, uncomfortable. The remaining two withdrew later in the project because other demands meant they were unable to attend sessions.

The group met monthly from October 2014 through to June 2015, six times for 1.5 hours and twice for 2.5 hours. One further session, the final in June, took place over a day and a half. Dagmar and Jonathan facilitated the session, together with a visiting scholar experienced well published in the field, Dr Susanne Gannon from the University of Western Sydney, for the June event.

In each meeting participants were offered the experience of different models of collaborative writing. Examples included:

- The introductory 'zigzag' (Guttorm et al, 2012), where participants introduce themselves to another in the group (witnessed by all). Once the introductions are

- complete, each writes in response to the introduction they have received. These writings are exchanged and, in turn, responded to;
- 'Collective biography' (Davies & Gannon, 2006), where stories on a theme are told (in our case, on 'becoming writers'), then written, read aloud, responded to, and re-written'
 - 'Writing in response to objects' (Gale et al, 2013), where each participant brings an object that means something to them in relation to writing. Another picks it up – anonymously – and writes in response. Participants then write about their own object. All writings are then read aloud.

Dagmar Alexander interviewed each participant in August and September 2014, before the start of the project, and again in July and August 2015 after the face-to-face workshops had finished. This included three of the four who withdrew. We held a focus group in March 2015. All interviews were recorded and transcribed; the focus group was recorded.

A number of us have since been writing. Four attended the *International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry* in May 2016, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA and presented two papers-in-progress. One paper (with two authors) has since been accepted by the journal, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and we plan to submit the second (with ten authors) before the end of the year. Both papers are being presented at a seminar in the School in November.

Reflections

We are still in the process of digesting what has emerged and been learned from the project, including from the interviews and focus groups. However the key learning, in particular concerning the project's primary focus on the impact on doctoral students' writing and sense of themselves as writers, can be summarise as follows:

- The project enabled participants to experience and find new possibilities in their writing and their academic voice. Often this was a result of being invited to *try something out*, and – immediately – to risk sharing their writing with others. One reported she might never have taken her thesis in the direction she has had it not been for this project;
- In part this outcome of finding a new writing possibilities was associated with the visceral realisation that writing is always relational, not only in the collaborative writing setting but also when writing alone towards a PhD; an 'awareness of the other', as one said;
- In part, too, this sense of possibility related to an increased willingness to 'let go' of writing, to see writing as not 'our own' but shared and in process with others. 'I had reached the point where things were not in compartments any more', one reported;
- Writing collaboratively is risky, difficult, messy. For it to work well it requires an openness and a capacity to 'get lost' and, in a sense, to lose ourselves;
- Participation enabled some to a) become less scared of writing and, related to this, b) to come to see themselves, for the first time, as writers;
- Writing can become something fundamental to who we are, not just something we do.

The project has been a success, overall, and valued by those who completed it. Its work and impact is still in process. There seems to be great potential for similar opportunities to be offered both within the School and in others. Care would need to be exercised to be clear about expectations and to ensure sufficient time was given.

References

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