

# Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations  
across a Range of Genres

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## CHAPTER 7

### WRITING ALONE OR WITH OTHERS

#### *Solitude, Writing Groups, and the Role of Collaboration in Writing*

*Sole-authored articles are the most highly prized by [higher education institutions] due to neoliberal imperatives such as funding formulae for research incentives and rewards. (Bozalek et al. 2017, 2)*

*What I learned through . . . [writing partnerships] is that I am more likely to “get stuff done” when I work with someone else. It is not always straight forward nor painless, but in most cases, work written in this way seems to proceed more quickly to publication. (Simmons and Singh 2019, xxix)*

Whether you write alone or co-author in collaboration with others is in part dictated by institutional expectations, as Vivienne Bozalek and her colleagues note above, and in part by personal decisions, though opportunities often arise that affect these choices. We have all written on our own and in partnership with co-authors, and we see benefits and challenges in relation to both, as Nicola Simmons and Ann Singh’s quote above suggests. In this chapter we first consider writing alone and then address how to maximize the benefits and reduce or overcome the challenges of working with others to produce a scholarly writing output.

## Writing Alone

Many appreciate the independence of writing on their own, and single-authored publications are expected in some disciplines, particularly within the humanities, and can be a boost to your curriculum vitae (CV). To succeed as a sole author, it is critical that you have something worth saying and a powerful desire to communicate it (Black et al. 1998; Sadler 2006). If you do, you can set your own schedule, write at your own pace, and use your own voice. These are all benefits.

While most authors will write alone some of the time, producing your first piece of writing for publication can be a scary experience. You have to be very determined and self-motivated to complete the task. As we discuss in [chapter 23](#), allotting time and choosing space to write involves self-awareness and intentionality, and that is also the case for writing alone, whether you are just starting out or have a good deal of experience.

If you are introverted or appreciate solitude, writing alone can be energizing and efficient. If you are more extroverted and thrive in the company of others, then writing on your own can be a lonely business. One way to both write alone and benefit from others' insights is to join a writing group or attend a writing retreat.

## Writing as a Sole Author in a Writing Group

Writing groups, or “publication syndicates” (Sadler 1999), can be a supportive way for both experienced and inexperienced writers to set aside dedicated time to write. Here we focus on the writing group model in which members are working on their own pieces of writing and generate critical feedback for other participants. Writing groups may meet at a formal writing retreat (at a local or distant destination for differing lengths of time), a café, the library, or online (Simmons and Singh 2019), and a range of evidence suggests involvement in any model of supported writing enhances productivity (Geller and Eodice 2013). Writing retreats may be held over several consecutive days, or at a regular time weekly, fortnightly, or monthly (Moore 2018). Most meet face to face, but online versions have also been developed (see, for example, [Laura Pasquini's \(2016\) online summer writing group](#)).

Some writing groups are designed for particular groups, e.g., doctoral students (Wilmot 2018), faculty of color (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008), or women (Grant 2008). A few are aimed specifically at people who want to write about their scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) projects (Chick et al. 2014; Felten, Moore, and Strickland 2009; Moore 2018). One group followed Wendy Belcher's (2009) book *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* to structure a SoTL writing program (Weaver, Robbie, and Radloff 2014). Less formal writing groups may be established by two or three colleagues willing to support each other. Participants in such approaches might be better described as "writing partners."

Rowena Murray (2009, 170-71) proposes five benefits of a writers' group: making time for writing, getting feedback on writing, discussing writing practices, developing productive practices, and sharing information about journals, editors, and reviewers. Of these, the first two are probably the most important, the next two are discussed in [chapters 23-25](#), and the last one applies if the writing group is based around a specific topic, such as SoTL, and is discussed briefly in [chapter 8](#). Many of the questions we have included at the end of each chapter and posted in the [online resources of this book](#) could be useful for discussion by a writing group or with a writing partner. The critical thing, though, is to agree on the purpose of the group and to share with one another what your writing goals are. Writing as a dialogue with critical friends is discussed in [chapter 26](#).

Writing retreats can be designed to maximize publication outputs. One study found that:

The five key elements of writing retreats conducive to increasing publication output were protected time and space; community of practice; development of academic writing competence; intra-personal benefits; and organisational investment. Participants involved achieved greater publication outputs, particularly when provided ongoing support. (Kornhaber et al. 2016, 1210)

Moreover, writing retreats may contribute to the well-being of participants, as Rowena Murray (2009, 175) notes:

Perhaps the greatest benefit of attending writers' group meetings is that people often report that they arrive at the meeting "in a frenzy, but leave on a high." Some turn up with very low feelings about their writing and about academic life in general, and leave with a sense of satisfaction at having, in spite of everything, progressed their writing project. This facility for turning around very negative feelings is perhaps one of the healthiest outcomes of a professional activity.

### **Collaborative Writing**

Writing with others offers different benefits and challenges from writing alone. If you have not co-authored before, you might consider trying a shorter piece of writing, such as a case study, reflective essay, or blog post before trying a research article or chapter, or co-editing a book. Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler (2013, 146) distinguish among three types of collaborative writing:

1. Type-talk: where two or more people sit side by side at the computer and work together
2. Cut it up and put it back together: where two or more people divide the paper into sections and write these separately, then one person puts the draft together
3. First cut: where one person takes the lead and writes the first draft in its entirety and the others add, subtract, and amend.

As we pointed out in [chapter 1](#), our strategy for writing this book falls somewhere between the last two types. In Reflection 7.1, Kathryn Sutherland reflects on her experience of using all three strategies at different times.

**Reflection 7.1****The experience of using Thomson and Kamler's (2013) three types of collaborative writing**

I'm a talker and can rattle off ideas eloquently (mostly!) in discussion, but I sometimes struggle to commit them as easily to the page. So, all three of these techniques work really well for me.

I used the “type-talk” technique with a Canadian colleague when I was on sabbatical: we holed up for three days in my hotel room and I talked while he typed (and also talked and questioned and challenged). We churned out a decent first draft this way. Distance then got in the way, and it took a couple of years—and a call for a special issue with a close fit to our manuscript—before we finally transformed that first draft into a publishable article (Holmes and Sutherland 2015).

I often use the “cut it up and put it back together” technique when writing with students, to make sure that everyone's voices are incorporated. It does require some effort to bring different narrative styles together coherently, but that work pays off when everyone can see how they've contributed (Sutherland, Lenihan-Ikin, and Rushforth 2019).

The “first cut” method, where one person produces the first draft which others add to and amend, is probably the “easiest” form of collaborative writing but also the least collaborative. To alleviate this, we often turn the tables for the next piece of work and swap the responsibility around, so a different person takes the lead each time (Hall and Sutherland 2013, 2018).

*Kathryn Sutherland is associate professor at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.*

**The Advantages and Challenges of Writing in Partnership**

Collaborative writing involves “pooling strengths, skills and contacts” (Murray 2009, 33). The multiple perspectives brought to bear can lead

to a higher quality output as you clarify or complicate understanding, deepen analyses, shape and reshape arguments, and edit each other's contributions. More can be achieved in a shorter time period, and there is also evidence, at least in the sciences, that the higher the number of authors of a paper, the greater the probability of publication and the more citations it receives (Weller, 2001). It's also worth considering long-term writing partners. As Pat Hutchings (personal communication, June 11, 2019) notes: "Many of us, over the years, find one or two authors we write really well with, and that becomes an ongoing partnership that is incredibly rewarding." Indeed, when writing partnerships work, they can be highly enjoyable and energizing and help build the confidence of all the participants (see chapter 26).

A challenge, however, is that when you have multiple authors, the process often takes longer as the tendency is to go at the speed of the slowest. We recently celebrated the publication of a paper that we began two years previously and involved nine authors, six faculty and three students (Matthews et al. 2018). Although there were periods of inactivity as other commitments intervened, we felt the project needed that time to ensure everyone contributed and felt part of the team. Another challenge is that tensions can arise if the co-authors have strongly held contrasting viewpoints or, as Mick notes in *Our Perspectives* 7.1, they have different attitudes toward keeping to deadlines and responding in a timely manner to queries and drafts.

To write together effectively requires that all parties be open to discussion and willing to accept feedback and to compromise. It is also important to spend time ensuring that there is a common style of writing throughout the piece. Sometimes one of the co-authors may be given the role of checking for style consistency. This does not mean that differences of opinion should be glossed over. In this book we use the "Our Perspectives" sections to highlight where we have different approaches to writing.



## *Our Perspectives 7.1*

### **Collaboration versus writing solo**

**Kelly:** I collaborate a lot—90% of my publications are co-authored. The collaborative process is a rich learning process that offers collegiality, connection, and mentorship. However, collaboration can be slower than solo writing, and different voices can get lost or overpower others in the process. Increasingly, I co-author with undergraduate students, which has inspired my writing and thinking in new ways. To keep collaborators on the same page and create space for everyone to contribute meaningfully, I usually start new writing projects by outlining some key points (journal, aim, contribution) using one-page plans (Matthews 2018a, 2018b; see online resources: “[Simple Publication Plan for Getting Started](#)” and “[Project Plan for Research](#)”).

**Alison:** I experience collaborative writing as a form of dialogue in practice, and I find that it can invite further dialogue. Although I am profoundly introverted, I am energized by most co-authorship, and I am smarter in collaboration than I am alone. Through writing with others, I am forced to wrestle, grow, reconsider, and compromise as well as to learn new things and to make explicit what I think I already know. To my mind, co-authoring has a better chance of capturing the multiplicity of perspectives that is virtually always relevant.

**Mick:** When I wrote as an economic geographer, I usually wrote by myself. When I moved into writing about geography in higher education and then about SoTL and higher education research more generally, I more commonly co-wrote with colleagues. Collaborating generally made the writing process a much more enjoyable experience and improved the clarity and quality of our writing. I usually learn a tremendous amount from my co-authors, as has happened, for example, in writing this book. The only times collaboration has not worked quite so well was when my co-authors had different attitudes than me toward keeping to deadlines

and responding in a timely manner to queries. So, choose your co-authors with care!

*Source: Based on Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, 40)*

**Your perspective:** What are your experiences of and thoughts on collaborating versus writing solo?

Similar benefits and challenges have been noted regarding the experience of participating in international collaborative writing groups, which have become a signature pedagogy of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching (ISSOTL). These are discussed in the online resource “[The Experience of International Collaborative Writing Groups](#).”

### **Ethical Authorship**

Who should be credited as an author and in what order is another area where there is potential for disagreement and ill feeling. These questions may arise from different practices in different disciplines but are also open to potential abuse when there are power differences between team members. For instance, in some disciplines, graduate students at some institutions are required to add their supervisors as co-authors on papers, whether those supervisors were supportive and contributed in meaningful and productive ways or not.

There are guidelines on ethical authorship. However, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), whose membership includes more than 4,000 journals from all research fields, acknowledges that “there is no universally agreed definition of authorship” (White 2004, 70). Many journals, particularly in the sciences, have adopted the definition of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE 2017, 2), which identifies four criteria for authorship, the first three of which may have some relevance to learning and teaching journals:

- Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work;
- Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and

- Final approval of the version to be published.

One of the issues these guidelines were designed to address is “gift authorship,” i.e., including names of those who took little or no part in the research and who may be better listed in the acknowledgments.

As for the order of authors’ names, there is again a variety of practices in different disciplines (Tschardt et al. 2007), although in the education field it is most common to list authors in order of their contribution and to put authors in alphabetical order where the contribution is similar. Applying these guidelines to writing about learning and teaching can, however, be problematic. As Trent Maurer (2017, 1) points out, “The collaborative interdisciplinary nature of much SoTL work, along with the increasing focus of SoTL on students as co-inquirers into SoTL research, creates unique issues and challenges in ethically assigning authorship credit on SoTL projects.” He further suggests that “if authorship credit is reserved for idea generation, research design, and manuscript writing, many students, especially undergraduate students, would be ineligible for significant credit even in fairly collaborative projects” (3). He goes on to propose a process-focused approach to determining authorship based on the Research Skill Development framework (Willison 2009), in which we find ways to value, in Angela Brew’s (2006, 136) words, “the contributions of each person no matter what their level of prior understanding and knowledge.”

For the reasons cited above, the ethics of authorship is a complex and sometimes controversial area. We advise teams to discuss the issues involved early on but also be flexible and open to amendment should the assumptions on which the initial decisions are based change during the writing process.

Writing in collaboration is intellectual and emotional work in which the participants undergo a learning journey and develop their identities (see [chapters 3–5](#)). This is apparent in the reflections of three co-authors who collaborated on thirty-five publications over two decades: “In any one session, we learned to expect the unexpected—to be exhilarated and confused, surprised and displeased, praised and pained—sometimes at the same time” (Nevin, Thousand, and Villa

2011, 290). Clearly, positive experiences of co-authoring can lead to long-term and rewarding writing partnerships.

### **Academics and Students Writing Together**

Academics and students co-authoring offers particular challenges and rewards. One challenge is that there are different expectations for faculty/academic staff and students regarding where they need to put their time and energy. While writing for publication is an expectation for many scholars in higher education and therefore factored into how faculty spend their time and energy, most students, particularly undergraduates, may not have the time, interest, or confidence to author traditional scholarly texts, given their commitments to their courses, jobs, and extracurricular activities, as well as their academic goals (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019; see also Maurer 2017, for some of the structural barriers to students as co-authors in SoTL).

While some faculty might not be compelled by the idea of writing with students, others who are might not be able to do so because of the pressures those faculty feel due to tenure expectations, requirements to seek funding, and workload. For undergraduate students, writing for publication is often an add-on for which there is not necessarily any benefit beyond the experience and satisfaction of co-authoring with a faculty member. Furthermore, because of the demands on their time and their own priorities, students may not have the time to familiarize themselves with the literature that constitutes any given conversation in the field, unless the writing project is part of a course or research project conducted in collaboration with faculty. Finally, many of the genres of writing typically expected and valued in academia consist of what one student author described as “clear logic and air-tight assertions” that many students find “stuffy” and uninteresting (student authors quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 19, 21). This type of writing may also exacerbate the imposter syndrome so many students feel, as Sophia Abbot notes in Reflection 7.2. Some genres we discuss (such as reflective essays and stories) and others we do not delve into (including feminist and queer autoethnography, collective writing approaches, and critical

social work) enact alternative modes of analysis and reject some traditional norms of academic writing.

### *Reflection 7.2*

#### **Acknowledging imposter syndrome**

I certainly had a strong feeling of imposter syndrome as an undergraduate writing for publication: How could I be so bold as to believe that *I*—a 20-year-old with very little life or scholarly experience—have something worth saying and sharing with the world!? Even now, despite my experience writing, publishing, and being a scholar, I feel those uncertainties. My imposter syndrome has been exacerbated by the “air-tight assertions” expectation, because it is easy as a newer scholar, still getting to know a body of scholarship, to wonder whether my assertions really are airtight. Writing in other genres has given me space to explore my ideas and get affirmation on the value of them.

*Sophia Abbot is a graduate student at Elon University, US.*

For academics and professional staff, the rewards of co-authoring with students include the opportunity to learn from the perspectives that students bring and, in some cases, the conceptual frames they introduce (Cook-Sather 2018b). For students, co-authoring with academics and professional staff affords opportunities to affirm their identities and perspectives and contribute their knowledge to wider discussions—a form of epistemic justice—a concept, by the way, introduced by a (then) graduate student author, Alise de Bie, to Alise’s faculty and undergraduate co-authors (de Bie et al. 2019).

#### **Over to You**

Writing on your own affords independence, and sole-authored publications are often expected in many higher education contexts. Co-authoring in collaboration with others can be enormously satisfying and the benefits usually far outweigh any challenges.

Alone or together? Take a moment to reflect on your preferences and assumptions:

- Do you prefer writing alone or in partnership? What do you see as the benefits and challenges of each?
- If you are new to writing, do you have someone you think you could work with in collaboration?
- How can you best promote a culture of ethical authorship?
- How might you go about joining a writing group or setting one up with colleagues? How might this benefit you?