A program for writing

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A writing program based on brief regular writing sessions can greatly improve research productivity. Ten years' experience with a program at the University of Wollongong provides insights into the benefits and challenges in supporting a new writing habit.

Introduction

I coordinate a writing program for academics and research students at the University of Wollongong. The core of the program is daily writing. Every member is encouraged to write some 'new text' – text of an article, thesis, blog, grant application or diary – most days of the week, spending five to twenty minutes per day at this task. Members are encouraged to keep a log of their writing specifically how much new text they write each day and how many minutes this took. They are also invited to send their log to me, as a method of accountability. In addition to writing new text most days, participants carry out their other usual research activities such as collecting and analysing data, reading, revising texts and submitting articles.

Unlike most other methods used to boost research performance, the writing program is based on published evidence. In this article, I describe some of the studies underlying the writing program and then tell about what I've learned over the ten years it has been running.

Background

Robert Boice is a psychologist and education researcher who worked at the State University of New York. In the 1980s, he carried out investigations concerning the research productivity of newly appointed academics. He noticed that most junior academics felt under a lot of stress. They put most of their energy into teaching with the result that their research output was low. They postponed writing until they had large blocks of time or until the pressure became too great. Then they would write continuously for lengthy periods. Boice

suspected that this typical approach of procrastination and bingeing was not very productive.

Boice also observed a small number of new academics who seemed to be more productive while being less stressed. They carried out their teaching and research using brief daily sessions. Boice thought that the same approach might help other academics to become more productive and set out to test this idea. In one study, he compared the research output of three groups of junior academics (Boice, 1989). One group was left to proceed in their usual way (procrastinating and bingeing). The second group was instructed to write every day in brief sessions, while the third group was instructed to write every day and to report to Boice regularly.

The first group, procrastinating and bingeing, had a very low output. The second group wrote several times as much and the third group was even more productive. Boice's results showed that changing junior academics' writing habits could greatly increase their productivity. In another study he showed that daily writing also led to greater creativity in dealing with their research topics (Boice, 1983).

Although Boice wrote books as well as many articles about his studies (e.g. Boice 1990, 2000), I never heard about them until reading a short cogent book titled *Publish & Flourish* written by Tara Gray (2005/2020). Gray, a professor at New Mexico State University, in her own research confirmed Boice's results (Gray and Birch, 2001; Gray *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, she formulated a multi-step program for higher research productivity. The program is based on brief daily sessions. It also has various other steps, including seeking comments on drafts from non-experts and then from experts before sending polished texts to publishers. It is compatible with recommendations from a number of

other authors (Jensen, 2017; Johnson and Mullen, 2007; Silva, 2007).

I read Gray's book in 2008 and was struck by the value of her approach. Prior to this, I had a special role in my faculty, 'publications mentor,' in which I had free rein to try to promote research productivity. I had talked with academics and research students and organised a variety of workshops. However, none of this seemed to have much of an impact. Gray's program offered the prospect of changing habits in a way that would make a lasting difference. However, I soon learned that most researchers find it extremely difficult to change their habits.

The writing program

After reading Gray's book, I immediately adopted the program myself, writing nearly every day and keeping a log of the amount of new text I had written and how many minutes this took. Usually I worked on an article or book chapter following a dot-point plan prepared in advance; sometimes I would write on a grant application, diary entry or letter to a friend. Typically, this daily writing session was about 20 minutes resulting in 300 words of text. During this time, I did not look at other texts or check sources.

The idea behind writing without stopping to edit or check sources is to tone down the mind's critical eye and allow the creative side to come out. Many writers are excessively perfectionistic. Some can hardly write a paragraph or even a sentence without obsessively seeking to make it perfect. Fortunately, I had never suffered this syndrome. Even so, I found daily writing to be a liberation. Instead of slogging through an hour or more on an article, which was exhausting, I could stop whenever I liked, even after just five minutes.

The amazing thing was that writing just a few hundred words per day provided a powerful incentive to accomplish other aspects of my research. After a week of writing, I had text to revise, new ideas to follow up, awareness of gaps in my argument and awareness of areas I needed to follow up with new data, sources or theory.

Writing in brief daily sessions is an efficient way of working on research. A bit of writing, unfinished, uncovers gaps and weaknesses. In the time before the next writing session, the unconscious mind often addresses these challenges. Often, the solution is available the next day. Regular writing maximises mental processing just like regular exercise builds strength and endurance.

Another saving occurs in time spent on reading. Rather than reading everything potentially relevant beforehand, by starting writing, you learn what you need to know so your reading is much more focused. Some books and articles can be probed for relevant ideas and others passed over as unnecessary.

For a researcher, writing daily is analogous to training daily for an athlete. Coaches these days know that training once a week, no matter how long and strenuous, is inferior to daily training. Runners and swimmers, for example, may vary their routines, but they train nearly every day. Furthermore, this daily training drives other aspects of their preparations, for example diet and sleep.

After trying out the writing program myself, I next offered it to the PhD students I was supervising. Only some of them took it up; those who did thrived. My weekly supervision meetings with them meant that I could help them fine-tune their practice.

I also offered the program to colleagues and research students in my faculty. I held an initial meeting at which I explained the program and then we met for an hour each week, nearly every week of the year, discussing progress and challenges, and reading each other's texts.

Strengths of the program

I soon learned that relatively few researchers are interested in changing their habits, despite the promise of a huge boost to productivity. Some colleagues were interested and listened eagerly at an initial meeting but did not return. I remember talking to a colleague who desperately wanted to make progress on writing but suffered from severe perfectionism. I suggested writing for just five minutes per day. She couldn't do it, even for a single day.

Just as Boice had observed in the 1980s, most academics have developed habits based on procrastination and bingeing. Writing is seen as unpleasant, even agony, and so is postponed as long as possible, until the pressure of deadlines is overwhelming. Then comes a binge session lasting hours or even days or weeks. The binge is exhausting and so aversive that it leads to another round of procrastination. Brief daily writing counters this pattern. However, for many, it doesn't feel productive. It is so brief that it seems like nothing is accomplished. Furthermore, it doesn't seem like the familiar agony of bingeing. If it feels easy, the unconscious assumption may be that it must not amount to much.

Some participants prefer to follow the program on their own. They adopt its principles but do not attend meetings. One assiduous member writes every day and sends me his detailed log every week but never attends meetings.

Attendance at the meetings is usually between four and eight, varying week to week. There are full-time academics, honorary fellows (unpaid PhD graduates) and research students. Occasionally we've had honours students as members.

The meetings offer several benefits. Perhaps the greatest is being in a group where every member acknowledges the challenges faced in writing. Many scholars suffer the pangs

of thwarted aspirations privately. Learning that others have similar struggles can be liberating. The group is a safe space for admitting difficulties and seeking help. Expressing vulnerability is rare in academia, where competition is the rule and many scholars suffer from the imposter syndrome, the fear that colleagues will discover they are not a real scholar.

In the first half hour of each meeting, we share how we're going, with special attention to anyone who is having difficulties. This conversation usually centres on the process of writing but can also range across other issues in academia and beyond. Challenges discussed include being stuck and not able to write anything, suffering from a lack of confidence, how to respond to article reviews, what to expect from thesis examiners, how to organise material in an article or thesis, and how to deal with co-authors.

We are mostly from humanities, social sciences or law, with occasionally someone from education or business. A diversity of membership has advantages. When reading each other's texts, we are usually non-expert readers. No one else in the group was knowledgeable about Xiaoping's research on Chinese language learning or Ben's research on the oral history of Vietnam veterans. Nevertheless, we could read their texts, make suggestions and ask questions. Non-expert readers can actually be better than specialists in requesting clarification of terms and logical arguments; experts already know the area and often do not notice omissions and lack of clarity. Sometimes asking basic questions highlights assumptions that need to be articulated. Occasionally our comments, coming from a different background, provide unconventional perspectives.

Members of the group have had different amounts of experience with the writing program itself. As well, individuals have their own personal challenges. This diversity enables us to provide each other better advice than would be possible from any single person, no matter how knowledgeable. Sometimes newer members provide the most helpful suggestions because they have recently dealt with the problem themselves. For example, one issue raised by some members is dealing with the challenge of writing while being a mother. Other mothers in the group, with children at different ages, sympathise and are able to offer suggestions. Another is addressing the internal voice that tries to discourage writing, saying 'This is no good,' 'I'll never finish' or 'I'll never become a researcher.' Although such thoughts are remarkably common, few writers ever admit to encountering them. The group is a good place to bring such obstacles out in the open to be addressed.

Challenges

For participants, the most common problem is getting started with a new habit, in this case writing regularly in relatively brief sessions. Some begin with great enthusiasm but give up after a week or two, and we don't see them again. Typically, it takes a few months to establish a new writing habit. The most important thing initially is establishing a routine with daily writing as a component, even if it is just five minutes per day and the writing has nothing to do with research.

My impression is that research students find it somewhat easier to adopt a daily writing habit than do academics. There are two plausible explanations. The first is that academics have been writing for longer and hence their habits are more entrenched. The second is that academics no longer think of themselves as learners: already having PhDs and publications, they assume they are supposed to know how to do research.

Boice (2000, pp. 75–80) wrote that when academics were asked about how they can improve their teaching, they answered that they relied on themselves rather than asking for assistance. The same seems to apply to research. Most academics rely on their own skills and resources and don't often seek assistance to improve (Baker, 2020).

In the writing group we mostly support each other in the early stages of Gray's program, including writing regularly and commenting on each other's texts as non-experts. One particular step needs development: seeking comments from specialists prior to submitting articles to journals. Wright and Armstrong (2008), based on a study showing a low rate of accurate reporting of cited research methods, recommend sending drafts of publications to authors cited for confirmation or clarification of results and methods. Not every living author cited needs to be contacted, but certainly ones whose work is discussed at length and whose methods are used. I've used this technique myself, sending drafts of texts to authors whose works I discuss, sometimes even in just a paragraph. Most respond. Who can resist checking what others say about your research? In this way my writing has become more accurate. However, most researchers, including ones in our group, seem reluctant to seek feedback from cited authors.

There is a nice connection here. The usual approach to writing – at least in relation to theory and 'the literature' – is to immerse yourself in piles of reading, become familiar with as much of it as possible, and only then to start writing. When you've polished the manuscript, you send it off to a journal. The only formal help along the way is feedback from referees or, for collaborative work, from co-authors.

The implication is that researchers can greatly benefit by being willing to ask for help. This applies to many of the steps in the writing program. Instead of reading everything relevant before writing, a slogan of Gray's that we use is 'Write before you're ready.' In other words, write before you know everything about a topic, and before you feel psychologically prepared. Help is valuable for this and is available from others in the writing group. Obtaining comments from non-experts and experts also involves seeking help.

Sending drafts to readers requires time, but it also saves time when readers offer suggestions that can address shortcomings. Importantly, obtaining comments on drafts addresses the feeling that the quality might not be sufficient because you haven't read everything. Actually, you can feel more secure.

Learning skills

My experience with the writing program has highlighted a widespread reluctance in academia to give attention and support to skill development. At the individual level, most attention is oriented to content, namely learning about the topic being researched. In other words, the attention is focused on what is being researched, not on skills to do the research more efficiently.

It seems that most researchers assume they develop skills by using them. Most researchers treat their skills as fully formed, so they just need to be applied to new topics or applied more diligently. To the contrary, studies of experts show the importance of practice, in particular practice that is oriented to improving the weakest parts of one's performance (Ericsson and Pool, 2016).

Skill development in areas besides writing is also neglected. Most researchers spend a considerable amount of time reading, yet few put in effort at becoming faster and more efficient readers, despite the ready availability of guides on how to do this. Similarly, many persist in two-finger typing rather than putting in effort to become touch typists, something that would save large amounts of time over a career. Ways of reading and typing are habits that become deeply entrenched, meaning that change requires effort, by oneself or with support from peers or mentors.

Neglect of skill development is also apparent at the level of research policy. Within and beyond institutions, the primary tool for promoting research is incentives: money, grants, jobs and promotions. These are incentives to work harder or sometimes to work on particular sorts of projects, but not directly to improve skills.

Conclusion

There is evidence that writing in brief regular sessions is a path to greater research productivity. However, evidence alone is not enough to alter deeply entrenched habits or to introduce policies that address inefficient practices. Part of the resistance to change is related to the idea that scholarly performance is largely based on innate talent. According to Boice, leading researchers benefit from belief in the primacy of talent and hence are reluctant to promote adoption of habits and development of skills that would level the playing field.

Unlike competitive sports, in research there is no obvious and repeated test of performance, and so research support systems have insufficient incentive to promote skill development. In this context, those few who are able to change their habits will gain a great advantage.

Acknowledgements

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