

Taking a Text and Tweaking it: Using Wendy Belcher's 12-Week Journal Writing Program to Support Writing Wellbeing for Busy Educators. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report argues that, in a higher education system where publication is a key performance metric, existing resources, such as textbooks, can be used and modified to make engaging and valuable professional development resources for researcher/educators – both students and academics. The report outlines a series of writing workshops offered over 2021 and 2022 at Queensland University of Technology, based on Wendy Laura Belcher's 2019 book *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*. The practice report describes the specific steps taken to “tweak”, or re-work the book-as-curriculum, to provide flexibility and a place for writing wellness for educators during over-crowded academic semesters. It also provides a case study of the usefulness of the writing program for educators in enhancing their writing wellbeing, and ends with lessons for other academic developers who may be considering using existing texts as the basis for professional development for already-overworked staff in the neoliberal academy.

Keywords: Academic development; researcher wellbeing; professional development; writing.

Introduction

After a long career in corporate data and evaluations, with occasional forays into curriculum development and professional course accreditation, in 2021 I found myself re-inventing my professional self as a researcher and writing coach for the QUT Design Lab at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Australia. Building on a decade of mentoring students and academics (Winter, 2018), this was a challenging but re-invigorating shift. This practice report outlines how the use of one academic text helped cement my new professional identity, while helping academics and research students across two faculties become more reflective and productive writers by enhancing their writing wellbeing. I define writing wellbeing as an educator's ability to face their writing without a feeling of dread, and ideally with at least a modicum of pleasure. This is particularly important given the neoliberal university's growing demand for publications as a research output (Cadez et al., 2017; Horta & Li, 2023; Huang, 2010; Olssen & Peters, 2005; ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012), where academics are expected to ‘publish or perish’. Indeed, in many institutions, across disciplines and countries, academic progression and promotion depends largely on research publications (Haven et al., 2019; Rickard et al., 2009), particularly for permanent jobs (Waaijer et al., 2018). This is despite the workload of many academics being focussed, time-wise at least, on supporting student learning



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(Ates & Brechelmacher, 2013; Grant-Smith & Payne, 2021), whether in an undergraduate classroom, graduate seminar, or doctoral supervision.

In 2021 Wendy Laura Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks* (2019) was doing the rounds as researcher professional development at QUT. The book provides a guided twelve-week program for turning collected data into a complete journal article, including considerations such as editing, writing a strong argument, and selecting the right journal to send your article to. I first came across it when an early-career researcher suggested it as a potential program that I could run, and there was significant interest in a community of practice meeting which indicated Belcher was definitely in the zeitgeist across my university, possibly helped by the fact that Belcher herself provides a curriculum outline for others wishing to use her book as a teaching tool – the first step in making writing improvement more accessible to educators.

However, there was one crucial problem with the curriculum Belcher so generously provides – it was designed for teaching university students in a ‘standard’ three-hour a week class format, plus extensive homework and assessment. I would be teaching the content to time-poor academics and research students, who are expected to deliver publications in an increasingly managerialist and neoliberal university system (Grant-Smith & Winter, 2022; Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2017). The work situation for most at my university (broadly) is approximately half of their time spent on teaching, less than half on research (which includes supervision of research students), and the remainder on institutional service activities (participating in committees, leadership roles). This has led, in many cases, to a university (and, indeed, a sector) where “wellness” has become a solution to the issues of overwork (Grant-Smith & Payne, 2021; James et al., 2019), and where many academics find their time taken by either teaching (and its preparation) or administrative service to the university. As a result, many academics do not have the luxury of time to write alone, so many of their publications come from the research students they supervise (Horta & Li, 2023; Huang, 2010). As they are teaching the next generation of academics (Waaiker, 2015) at the same time as their undergraduate and postgraduate students, it is inevitable that educator wellbeing can influence the wellbeing of their students – both research and coursework (James et al., 2019), whether they intend it or not. Because of these issues of overwork and lack of time, I knew I would have to modify (or tweak) Belcher's program to suit the specific needs of my target audience.

Tweaks

I made six tweaks to Belcher's program to make it work better for the wellbeing of my already-overworked educator participants. The first tweak I made was to shorten the name to *W12* to differentiate it from other offerings of Belcher's program.

The second tweak I made was also a shortening – to cram the learning into one hour a week rather than three. I knew that there was little chance that my busy educators would be able to find half a day a week to improve their writing skills, but an hour a week over the semester was feasible, particularly given all of the other demands on their time (Huang, 2010; Savage & Morrissey, 2021). Aligned to that, I also made sure to start the program a few weeks into the academic semester, so that attending wouldn't clash with the first month of classes, when issues and crises often arise.

Third, I offered the program in hybrid mode. Those who were on-campus were welcome to join in-person, but I also ran it concurrently as a Zoom meeting, so participants could choose their mode of attendance, an easy way to enable a simple wellbeing choice for my participants. This echoed other communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that I had organised and participated in over my working life, including other training for research students.

The fourth tweak I made was to give my participants more explicit opportunities to reflect, both in and on their own practice (Schön, 1987). My successful applications for Associate and then Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy had reinforced to me the value of reflection as a learning tool, and I had carried that into my mentoring work at another university in 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Winter et al., 2022). I therefore crafted reflexive questions for the start of each week's workshop, ranging from the purely practical (*Do you have any grammar or writing weaknesses?*) to the harder work of thinking about the attendees' specific writing project (*Who's your ideal Reader?*). These helped the educator participants to reflect on their writing in ways that would carry beyond the individual article they were working on, to give them both practice with reflection and provide writing wellbeing skills for the rest of their academic careers, as Kelly (2022) has shown there is a link between reflection and teacher wellbeing.

The fifth tweak was in the same vein as the fourth – I wanted to make the *W12* program more conversational. I based this on three beliefs – that we learn through conversation (Savage & Morrissey, 2021), that the wisdom of the group is greater than

that of any individual (Surowiecki, 2005), and that we can pack things away for the clever back-of-our-brain to work on while we do other things (Sarnecka, 2019), including talking.

In that spirit of conversationality, and because I knew that my participants were already stretched in terms of their time, my W12 program incorporated a brief summary of Belcher's chapter as the basis for each week, interspersed with as many reflective questions as I could fit in to get the participants talking about their writing. There were no lectures and no slide decks, just a group of people talking about their writing within a structured framework each week, so that the preparation and emotional labour (Abery & Gunson, 2016; Hochschild, 1983) was minimised for the educator participants. I also invited our university librarians to join the conversation in the fourth week, when the topic was choosing the right place to publish, so that the librarians could share their expertise and provide a focussed session helping my participants to find and select a journal.

The final tweak I made to Belcher's program was to bring in the voices of many other wonderful writers and researchers on academic writing. Blog posts from *Patter* (Thomson, 2023), *The Thesis Whisperer* (Mewburn, 2023), and *Doctoral Writing SIG* (Aitchison et al., 2023) featured heavily, as did references to sections of books including many of my favourites – *How to Write a Lot* (Silvia, 2019), *The Writer's Diet* (Sword, 2016), *Stylish Academic Writing* (Sword, 2011), *The Clockwork Muse* (Zeruvabel, 1999), and *Don't Panic: The Procrastinator's Guide to Writing an Effective Term Paper* (Posusta, 1996). As a voracious reader for my own professional personal development (and pleasure), every iteration of my W12 version of Belcher's program has had additional resources added, so even those who attend the program more than once are gaining something new. By doing so, I am not only providing them with resources to help with their writing wellbeing, but I am also remaining engaged and interested as the facilitator, because I cannot support and model writing wellbeing if I don't have it myself.

From my perspective as facilitator, the first iteration of the W12 program, run in Semester 2, 2021 for the QUT Design Lab, was successful. Seven people attended, and the main feedback was to please offer it again, because it had been useful. After discussing it with my supervisor, we agreed that it would be worth offering it again in Semester 1, 2022. Consequently, I applied for institutional ethics clearance (#5398) so I could write up what I was doing for others to learn from, and in Semester 1, 2022 I offered the W12 program twice, for cohorts in Business and Design.

A Brief Case Study – 2022 Semester 1

Despite planning to teach the second and third W12 offerings in hybrid mode, the floods that affected Eastern Australia in early 2022 meant that campus buildings were closed for the first half of the semester, so the Business workshops were all virtual-only. The workshops offered to Design went ahead in hybrid mode.

Seven students enrolled for the second offering through Design, while 22 registered for the third W12 through Business. Of these, a dozen participants completed the pre-program survey on their broad attitudes to academic writing, and all agreed to participate in the data collection for the associated research project. They were a mix of academics and research students, most with teaching and research responsibilities that placed pressure on their time available both to attend the workshops and to produce quality publications, with many of the research students also under pressure to produce their final thesis.

In terms of previous publications, 72% (9/12) of respondents to the pre-survey had published previously. In both cohorts, participants were doing less writing and reading than they wanted, and experienced feelings of being overwhelmed, struggling with the workload, procrastination, guilt, and stockpiling of reading materials – indicators of a lack of writing wellness. However, they were also experiencing more excitement than they expected to about their writing, indicating the possibility of growing their writing wellness through the W12 program. The fewer respondents from Design (3/12) were doing less research and a lot more thinking about their writing than they wanted, while the Business respondents (9/12) were more balanced (some more, some less) in their amount of time researching and thinking prior to undertaking W12.

Overwhelmingly, across both cohorts, lack of time was the biggest issue, followed by editing. Using questions derived from Boice's (1990) writing productivity study, Business respondents struggled with lack of confidence and an inability to finish, but none had an actual distaste for writing. Design respondents struggled with an inability to start writing, and anxiety about their writing, but had absolutely no problems having ideas about what to write.

The final question in the pre-program survey was about participants' personal goals for the 12 weeks. The most common answer was to write or finish a paper. Other responses covered themes such as productivity ("Allocate blocks of time for writing", "To learn how to be faster at writing"), learning ("Observe the habits of other successful researchers"), and aesthetics ("To improve my writing style").

The 12 weeks progressed largely as already described, with participants attending when they could. At the end of the 12 weeks, I ran a post-program evaluation survey, which 10 people across the two offerings responded to. One of the questions was around the various reasons for not attending workshops, with clashing meetings the most common reason, closely followed by administration and “life happened”. Two missed workshops because of leave, while the remaining reasons were illness, work pressure, and not having enough written to make attending worth their time. All respondents found the program useful, and 100% would recommend it to others.

Measuring writing wellbeing, in terms of change of attitude over the 12 weeks, the Business participants did less active research and were less excited about their research than before W12, but also struggled less with their writing, and stockpiled reading materials less. Their writing, sense of being overwhelmed, and procrastination remained about the same as before the program, but they were doing more reading and more thinking about their writing by the end of the program. The Design participants were writing, procrastinating, and thinking about their research less, but feeling more guilty about their writing and doing more reading. They rated about the same as before the program in terms of researching, feeling overwhelmed, struggling, and stockpiling reading.

Over the 12 weeks, the only constant between the two cohorts were that participants all read more than before the program, and felt about the same in terms of being overwhelmed, which may be indicative of the research pressures on academics (Macfarlane, 2021; Nordbäck et al., 2022).

In terms of specific productivity problems with their research, the Business cohort still felt a lack of time to write, but confidence, editing, and an inability to finish were no longer problems for them, and their distaste for writing remained low. The Design cohort still felt anxiety, but now also felt an inability to finish, perhaps because some had not completed the writing they had hoped to during the program.

The post-evaluation survey also asked two open-ended questions. The first was about what participants found most valuable in the 12-week program. Responses fell into three broad themes – productivity, collegiality, and technical writing skills. Productivity comments included that it helped them to, “... take a step towards making writing more present in my routine”, and that it gave them “Time and space to write”. Collegiality comments included those often heard when a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) is experienced for the first time: “Being part of a group with both HDR students and established academics was very valuable”, “While Belcher’s guide is useful, it was really valuable to have the opportunity to unpack it with other people, and hear examples of how people were applying it in their own work”, and “Having others provide feedback on your own work was really helpful”. Technical writing skills comments included: “I really enjoyed the breakdown of the argument and how to structure the question so the writing was directly related towards it”, “Learning the 12-week structured approach”, “A structure to help focus on bite-size pieces of writing at a time” taught them useful skills, and “Learning to articulate my research motivation and contribution more clearly in writing” was beneficial.

The second open-ended question asked participants to reflect on their productivity during the 12 weeks. Three main themes are evident in the responses. First, respondents reflected that they used the program to work on their writing: “It was a bit messy. I actually worked on 2 different papers along the way, but I managed to make progress on both and take them a step closer to submission”, and “Although I didn’t complete a journal article yet, I started drafting one as well as progressing with other writing tasks – all of which will help me to write the article/s.” Next, participants chose to reprioritise what they had originally intended to work on during the program: “As the project I identified for this course was a sole author, it got pushed aside. But I did write on my other projects”, and “I used the time to prioritise 2x revise and resubmits”. Finally, respondents reflected on their changing attitudes towards their writing: “I would say my writing productivity improved during this 12 weeks, largely by the shift in my attitude towards writing.” Respondents also particularly found focus: “I overcame the inertia that was stopping me from writing”, “On average on the days (or short blocks of time) that I dedicated to writing I was able to write with more focus which meant I got more quality writing done”, and “Overall, I experienced less procrastination and less self-sabotaging thoughts when thinking about my writing”.

The reflections on productivity are of particular importance because they align to the original design intentions for the program, to enable participants to become more confident and productive writers in only a short amount of time each week – to build their writing wellbeing as busy educators. These comments confirm that it is possible to assist researchers with their academic writing, and thereby improve their own feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989) about it, without requiring a large dedication of time. And seeing them become more confident helped me to feel ownership of the skills I was imparting, and my role as a writing coach.

The final open-ended question was a practical one about what additional support participants might need to be able to write productively. In addition to the participant who simply needed “Time”, I categorised the responses to this question into four themes. Firstly, working with others in a community of practice: “Critical friend”, “Collaborators”, and “Peer support” were valuable. Secondly, some participants wanted additional content or professional learning on how to write: “Attend W12 again”, “Justifying that a paper is worthy of a journal”, “Different ways to construct an argument to think through different methods effectiveness”, and “Workshops”. Third, several participants wanted some ongoing accountability: “Daily check-in”, “Regular meetings with check-in and check-out to help sustain momentum”. Finally, respondents wanted specific professional help at the end of their writing: “Proofreading”, and “Use of copy editor”.

Overall, these comments, particularly the one about attending W12 again, show that the participants valued what they had experienced across the 12-week program, both from a technical writing improvement perspective and also as a community-building exercise. Having found a cohort of like-minded writers-in-progress, many realised the importance of supporting other writers, and being supported in turn, both for the students and for the educators, as educator wellbeing impacts on their students’ wellbeing, and research students’ wellbeing can impact on the wellbeing of both their research supervisors and the students they are teaching as sessional staff.

Lessons

In the spirit of helping other academic developers with this practice report, I provide a list of the six main lessons I learned from taking Belcher’s text and curriculum and tweaking it to turn it into professional development for academics and researchers.

- 1) Don’t be afraid to make a program your own.
- 2) Be willing to be flexible – the program has to work for your audience, and you need to be aware of the various pressures in their lives in order to create professional development that can lessen their pressures issues and improve their wellbeing.
- 3) If something works, do it again, and make it better – every iteration I change the program slightly, adding better explanations and new resources that I’ve read recently about being a better and/or more organised writer, because I never know which piece of advice is going to help improve an educator’s writing wellbeing.
- 4) Developing good professional development is a lot like good curriculum development, particularly when it is constructively aligned and well-considered (Biggs, 2003).
- 5) Turn your program development into research – I used the evaluations from 2022 Semester 1 to inform the case study in this paper, in the same way that many educators research the scholarship of learning and teaching.
- 6) Supporting academic staff in their writing means they will be better able to support students with their writing, because we tend to teach things the way we’ve been taught.

Conclusion

My delivery of the tweaked W12 program succeeded in its goal of creating a place where writing wellbeing could be developed – reiterating that earlier definition of writing wellbeing as an educator’s ability to face their writing without a feeling of dread, and ideally with at least a modicum of pleasure. The wellness of teachers can influence the wellness of students (James et al., 2019). As Gillett-Swan and Grant-Smith (2020) note, “self-efficacy and confidence in supporting students are central to [academic mentor] wellbeing” (p. 405). Building academic wellness should be a comprehensive suite of activities, but providing useful professional development is an important component, within the boundaries of what’s possible to deliver and ask already-busy people to attend (Gunson et al., 2016).

In the spirit of what is possible, the case study of my tweaked W12 program discussed in this practice report had two key limitations: firstly, the research only focuses on two deliveries of Belcher’s text, albeit for two different educator cohorts. The second limitation is the small number of participants, although many of their comments align with those I have received in post-program evaluations for the other iterations of the W12 program that I have run. I’ve recently finished iterations four and five (running the W12 program for almost 30 staff across my Faculty) and have also turned Laura Portwood-Stacer’s (2021) *The Book Proposal Book* into a similar 12-week program. I’ve also recorded my summaries of Belcher’s book, and these will be uploaded to YouTube so I can offer an even shorter version of the program in the future – half an hour’s contact, purely focussed on reflective conversations and sharing writing, so that the busy educators can watch the content videos in their own time, but still build the community of practice and gain the writing wellbeing benefits that it offers.

I intend to keep offering and tweaking W12 for as long as academics and research students are willing to attend (and, of course, someone pays me to do so – as a member of the precariat, that’s an important consideration as well). I would be delighted to have a conversation about taking a text and tweaking it to deliver useful, short-form professional development for busy academics and research students. Please don’t hesitate to reach out – if not to me, then start a conversation with an academic developer at your campus about how they can help you, or with an academic or research student about what support they actually need to improve their writing wellbeing. Academic wellbeing does have a flow-on effect to student wellbeing, and that can be improved for everyone when it’s supported by writing wellbeing.

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