

# **The Journal of Pedagogic Development and the Path to Academic Publishing**

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## **Abstract**

This paper introduces the *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, which is produced in the Centre for Learning Excellence at the University of Bedfordshire. The *JPD* is only two years old and yet we have received submissions from every continent in the world but Antarctica. The paper explains the journal's ethos of strong academic writing and its journey from an in-house journal to one that has a worldwide readership. This leads to the connection with the CLE's academic writing retreat. The paper explains the reasoning behind this annual event, its benefits to staff, and reflects on the comments made at the 2012 event and how they helped to shape the structure of the 2013 event.

## **Introduction**

Along with a colleague who also works in the Centre for Learning Excellence (CLE) at the University of Bedfordshire, I co-edit the *Journal of Pedagogic Development (JPD)* and organise and present writing retreats and writing workshops. Depending on the needs of the individual participant, these entities – the journal and the writing activities – can be stand-alone affairs or intricately linked as part of a coordinated pathway that will lead the writer to a finished and submitted academic paper and a sense of confidence in his/her ability. If, along the way, we encourage an atmosphere of support, encouragement and a community of enquiry, then this must be all to the good as well – a fortunate by-product of our aims and beliefs.

## **The *Journal of Pedagogic Development***

We established and edit the *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, a publication that appears three times a year in hard copy and online. Its first issue was published in July 2011, its launch taking place at the university's annual Staff Conference. The timing of the launch was carefully chosen because we wanted to establish that pedagogic development and learning and teaching in Higher Education (HE) are inseparable. Academics are knowledgeable and passionate about their disciplines, for example, but how to communicate that knowledge and passion in a way that will engage and inform their students rarely forms any part in subject specific undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Taking an existentialist perspective, university teachers will always arise from different times, environments and perspectives

from their learners. Pedagogic development is essential to close the gap of time and place so that the issue of how students learn and how they make sense of academia can be both understood and realised.

These points, and any number of other points besides, we hoped to bring out and address, from our early days until the current time. Now that we have planned the issues that will take us to the end of 2013, it is interesting to take stock and reflect on our achievements – and on the areas where we know there is work still to be done. For example, we are delighted with the ‘broad church’ attitude and tone that the *JPD* has adopted. Not only have we had submissions from every continent in the world apart from Antarctica, we have also had submissions on a wide variety of teaching styles and academic subjects. As long as the theme is pedagogic (or educational), the *JPD* can be considered a potential home for a writer’s work; and this is why (or is one of the reasons why) we have read submissions on subjects as diverse as Computer Science and Kung-Fu, on Film-Making and the Resilient Learner – and many, many subjects in-between. We also run a regular slot called Key Pedagogic Thinkers, which allows less confident or less experienced writers to dip their toes in the publishing water, to produce a shorter piece on an important academic who has influenced their work in some way. (This influence need not be positive either, although most of the articles have described a positive experience.) Furthermore, staff here at the University are often approached to write book reviews and shorter opinion pieces.

Of course, not all of the submissions are published. Far from it. More or less as soon as we opened the doors to external submissions in 2011, we have been well served by interested parties from overseas and from partner universities in the UK. It would simply not be possible to print them all, even if we wanted to. From the very first issue, we established a pattern of (approximately) 50% internal UoB submissions and 50% external (from anywhere else in the world). Some of these contributions have required a good deal of editorial support and guidance; some have required next to none. Apart from language issues, I have helped with structure, content, re-focusing and/or anything else that is needed in order to bring the paper to its full potential. Papers that arrive from UoB staff are further eligible for the sort of ‘prose-massaging’ that might make a contribution a strong contender for its author’s place at our writing retreat (of which more below).

More than anything else, the *JPD* (as the name should suggest) is concerned with pedagogic development – and pedagogic development is more than the transmission of learner-centred teaching strategies. While it is true that the *JPD* was established to provide a forum where good practice in teaching and learning, underpinned by research, could be shared to stimulate a ‘can do’ environment, it is also true that we wanted our readers to put down their copy, or close the browser window, and think: ‘If they can do that, I can too. I’ll give it a go!’ Therefore, we will continue to encourage strong submissions from different parts of the world; to inform our readers of good practice emerging from other continents; and to try to form a picture of what constitutes contemporary pedagogy. While we are focused on identifying and strengthening the links between research and practice in education and

development, we are simultaneously mindful of the fact that both research and practice are predicated on an epistemological position: in other words, how we think individuals learn.

Pedagogy is epistemology in action, and this is where research is so valuable. It gives us findings with which we can present evidenced judgements on practice to support the development and adoption of contemporary pedagogies. Although the UK would not be considered a developing economy, universities here are operating in the same technologised world but from a different historical and political socio-economic base. This has its advantages and disadvantages; and one of the disadvantages is that academics in the UK tend to construct pedagogies based on the concept of a 'traditional' learner, rooted in nineteenth century conservatism with Oxbridge elitism at its core. The *JPD* is but one way of challenging this narrow vision; of presenting evidence to the contrary; of offering a worldwide alternative to chew over. We are intent, in other words, on forming a picture of what constitutes contemporary pedagogy – or even what constitutes a paradigm of adult learner resilience (Chapman Houlton, 2011), thereby acknowledging that life situations, however unorthodox they might seem to many, can influence and swerve a learner's course.

This leads us to a discussion of the UoB writing retreats.

### **Writing Retreat**

The aim of the UoB writing retreats is to provide early career researchers and writers with the support necessary to bring their work up to a publishable standard. Ordinarily the nine-month process begins with a Call for Papers at the annual Staff Conference. The first stage is for prospective participants to submit a 300-word abstract by the end of October. Successful authors are then asked to write up the full paper. They submit the first draft in the New Year for constructive feedback from me and my colleague. The successful authors then work on their papers for a second submission in March, prior to the retreat. At the retreat, authors peer review articles, attend seminars to improve aspects of their work, and work with us and our invited external editor (an editor of a different journal) to complete the honing of their papers. At the end of the retreat we encourage participants to 'Press send!' – to dispatch their papers electronically to their chosen publishers.

We see the writing retreats and the *Journal of Pedagogic Development* as ways of reaching not only individuals, not simply teams, but communities of enquirers whose everyday lives are embedded in scholarship and research. We fully endorse the need to encourage colleagues to come out of their silos and see both the *Journal of Pedagogic Development* and the writing retreats as encouraging this. Both initiatives aim to disseminate and embed individual good practice, based on research. In this way, and for these reasons, our writing-related work should support us in our pedagogic endeavours to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the exciting and fruitful developments that are taking place beyond our own silo.

## **Brief History of the Retreat**

The writing retreat process began in 2009 when the first retreat was held at Streatley, Oxfordshire. This retreat and that held at Highgate Hall in Northamptonshire in 2010 were organised by the University's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) to produce two internally published books charting different departmental perspectives on the significant curriculum changes introduced during that time. The 2011 and 2012 writing retreats had a different purpose: to produce individually authored articles for externally published academic journals. So the overall aim of these events was for each participant, including my colleague and myself, to finish an academic paper, the first draft of which had been submitted to the CLE for editorial review as part of the application process several months earlier. The objective was for all authors to submit their papers electronically at the end of the three days. This objective formed part of the Centre for Learning Excellence's strategy to support the University's ethos of scholarship, by encouraging academic writing for publication.

Writing retreats are the final event of a process that includes our Writing for Publication seminars and the establishment of the *Journal of Pedagogic Development*. Having gained experience of writing and publishing in this process, writing retreats allow delegates the opportunity to dedicate time and concentration to a specific piece of writing, with the support of their colleagues. By taking the delegate away from his or her more customary work patterns and rhythms of the working week, the retreat provided space to focus, and for the words to flow. Although the three days were busy with activities, workshops and tasks, the focus was very much on completing the paper in question, or getting as close to completion as possible.

## **Writing Retreat 2012**

In attendance at this year's event were ten delegates from the University, all from different departments. This wasn't regarded as a problem; in fact, it was seen as a positive. One delegate noted: 'If we were all from one discipline there would be differences of opinion on content or subject, but that hasn't got in the way at all...' We had also invited a Guest Editor, because we believe that it is important for the authors to have the experience and perspective from an external authority in research scholarship focussed on their work. Six of the ten participants had never been on a writing retreat before. Naturally, there was an air of anxiety when we first assembled: not only was there concern about writing at the perceived standard and finishing; there was also the presence of the other delegates. At a very basic level, would everyone 'get on' and be supportive of one another?

In groups, delegates discussed the purpose of universities, their role as academics in fulfilling it, and the part that writing for publishing played in that role. With the context established, expectations were shared, which can be summarised as follows: 1. To develop an ethos of scholarship. 2. To share an understanding of pedagogy. 3. To take delegates out of their silos... By the latter, we meant supporting delegates to take off their 'hats' as tutors and departmental colleagues, so that they could become open to the thoughts and experiences of

others, hopefully with positive results for their writing. The delegates' expectations were represented by mind maps. Examples of the words and phrases recorded were Motivation; Confidence; Inspiration and clarity; Pressure and intensity; Time and headspace; Concentration; Focus; Support and Mood and atmosphere.

A result of these activities was that members of a group got to know each other. Gradually the atmosphere of anxiety disappeared. There was a definite feeling in the conference room that participants were now able to open themselves up to their colleagues and were ready for the activities of the retreat. They were amenable to regrouping into combinations structured before the retreat, when everyone's draft article was circulated for review. In this way, before we'd arrived at the event, everybody had had a chance to read at least two other drafts of papers, which they would then be able to comment on at the event itself.

A 'community of practice' had been established by the time that lunch was served on the first day. This was appreciated. One delegate, echoing the written feedback of others, said: 'I think the big strength for me is being part of a community of enquirers...' The rest of the time was spent in activities that both reinforced the ethos of supportive community and allowed time for individual writing. At times, the reinforcing of an ethos and making time for writing combined in a single activity. For example, we knew that focus is important when writing an article. We showed delegates how to put their articles into the open web resource Wordle. This is a programme that counts up the words used most often and displays them as a pattern with the most frequently used words displayed big and bold. So delegates uploaded their draft articles into the programme. If their key words were not among the big, bold words in the patterns, some redrafting was required, we suggested. Every delegate was given time with the Guest Editor, to be given individual feedback on her/his draft. Another activity involved the Guest Editor leading a session on abstracts and introductions. Delegates found these activities very useful, as their feedback on their initial expectations for the retreat indicated.

## **Conclusion**

We learn a lot from every writing retreat. Indeed, a retreat could easily be considered a failure if we did not learn something from it. At the time of writing these words (March 2013), we are two weeks away from the 2013 retreat (to be held, again, at the Hitchin Priory), and it is fair to say that we are in a reflective mood – reflecting on the successes and minuses of 2012. For example, several of the 2012 participants commented that there was not enough time spent with our Guest Editor, and that there should have been more writing time on the first day. These comments we addressed when planning the 2013 event.

We were asked to make sure that the retreat had a higher profile during the year, so that authors did not have to rush to meet a deadline that they'd missed at first call. For this reason, we have been sure to repeat the call several times via the University's standard information channels. The 2012 participants asked us to organise a follow-up session, the better to keep the momentum going. This we did four weeks after the event, with six of the ten delegates attending. We intend to do the same thing once the 2013 event has passed.

There were many more positive than negative comments from the 2012 participants. Particularly gratifying was the appreciation that delegates felt for the fact that we wrote alongside the delegates and took part in the various activities. We are every bit as much a part of the writing group as anyone else is, and we set ourselves exactly the same tasks and deadlines. One delegate said: ‘...it’s not just the structure and I’ve found the structure helpful, but it’s about the collaborative nature...it’s because the tutors are also engaged in the same activity, which means there’s a respect between all of us which has been absent in some in-service teaching’.

With all of this in mind, the timetable for the 2013 writing retreat was structured as follows. By the time I present the contents of this paper at the conference in Slovenia, I will be able to reflect on how the event went. I will be able to focus on what developments we feel we might need in the future.

<b>Wednesday 3 April</b>		
<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Led by</b>
9.00	Arrival (tea and coffee)	
9.30	Introduction to the Retreat Individual presentations (no Powerpoint will be available!)	Author’s colleague.
10.15	Group activity: Review	Author.
12.15	Group activity: Structure	Author’s colleague.
13.15	Lunch + check in to hotel rooms	All
14.00	Guest Editor's activity: Voice	Guest Editor
15.00	Writing time	All
18.00	Review of what's been achieved (Where to next?)	Author’s colleague.
18.30	Pub or hotel bar (optional!)	
19.30	Dinner	All
<b>Thursday 4 April</b>		
9.00	Tweets and abstracts Group activity: Abstracts	Author’s colleague/ Author
10.30	Guest Editor's activity: As per feedback from Day 1	Guest Editor
11.30	Writing time	All
13.00	Lunch	All
14.00	Writing time Individual tutorials with editors (optional, 'appointment' system)	All
17.30	Free time or writing time!	All
18.30	Pub or hotel bar (optional!)	

19.30	Dinner	All
<b>Friday 5 April</b>		
9.00	Panel activity	Author's colleague, Guest Editor, Author
10.00	Writing time	All
13.00	Lunch	
14.00	Finishing off – and sending off your paper to the journal!	All
15.30	Evaluation: What next?	All
16.00	Finish... and relax.	