

Lillis C. and Farrell, A. (2017) 'WAC, WID and WHY writing can contribute to professional development for teachers', *Literacy News*. Spring Newsletter. 22-30.

WAC, WID and WHY writing can contribute to professional development for teachers

Carmel Lillis, Associate, Professional Development Service for Teachers

Alison Farrell, Centre for Teaching and Learning, School of Education, Maynooth University

Introduction

At all levels of education, reading and writing matter. In *Reading News*, unsurprisingly, many articles are published about reading, not least because of the essential nature of reading in all our formal education systems. Occasionally, colleagues contribute to this publication on the topic of writing. Valerie, Kurkjian and Turner in *Reading News* Autumn 2014 begin with the bold statement 'Writing helps' (12). They continue, 'We need our students to develop as readers, writers, and thinkers ... Writing helps our students to accomplish [the] Herculean tasks' of becoming problem solvers, good citizens, and individuals who can positively engage with content (12). Valerie et al. also comment on process: 'To become effective writers, students need myriad opportunities to develop their craft' (12). We agree with them and commend their National Writing Project work. We assert that writing is a key component of students' lives and also of their education particularly when it comes to assessment within formal education setting. This is certainly the situation in higher education, where much assessment in text orientated disciplines, for example, English, History, Sociology, Anthropology, Classics, etc., can be almost entirely through either a written exam or written assignments of one type or another. Outside of education settings and in the world of work, writing continues

to matter. Deborah Brandt in her 2015 book *The Rise of Writing. Redefining Mass Literacy*, notes that 'While until recently it would have been difficult to fathom how people could be writing more than reading, it is indeed happening for many' (3-4). She notes that 'For perhaps the first time in the history of mass literacy, writing seems to be eclipsing reading as the literate experience of consequence' (3).

The piece of research that we report on here exists against this landscape of mass authorship. In this research, the students are also teachers in the formal sense of their professional lives. Our work is based on our experience of integrating more in-class and out of class writing into a Level 9 programme for teachers; we wanted to assess the various impacts of additional, low-risk writing for participants, not least in terms of their understanding of the course material.

Context

We completed this research over academic year 2015-16 with a group of teachers who were engaged in a Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership (PGDEL), also called *Tóraíocht*, which was then jointly offered by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and Maynooth University. The course was aimed specifically at aspiring school leaders: those teachers, working in primary, post-primary and further education, who were interested in becoming principals or deputy principals in their settings. *Tóraíocht* was a leadership programme that drew from the literature around reflective practice, action research and school effectiveness. Its theoretical foundations were in the work of Bush (2003), Fullan

(2006) and Harris (2005), and more recently that of West-Burnham (2015, 2016). As such, the course providers were endeavouring to help participants to prepare for the practical experience of being a leader in their setting, by connecting the relevant theory and research towards informing practice.

The link with writing and writing support evolved over the lifetime of Tóraíocht which began with its first cohort in 2008; since then almost 1000 teachers have completed the programme. While writing was a key part of the assessment for Tóraíocht since its inception, the use of writing to learn was neither a common nor a highlighted pedagogy. However, in 2012, and following the establishment of a writing centre by Maynooth University, staff teaching on Tóraíocht connected with the then head of the University writing centre to explore ways in which they could support their students as writers. The professional conversations that began, led first to an integrated and discipline specific writing workshop for all participants on Tóraíocht. This initial intervention contributed to collaboration between staff teaching on Tóraíocht and staff in the writing centre and this led, in turn, to the piloting, of what some writing and research traditions would call, a WAC/WID pedagogy.

WAC/WID stands for Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines. WAC is defined by Susan McLeod in terms of pedagogy and under the two headings of 'writing to learn' and 'writing to communicate' (2012: 150). The WAC Clearinghouse echoes this definition and notes that 'When we consider how Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) has been implemented at a range of universities, we see that

writing assignments generally fall into one of two categories ... Writing to Learn [and] Writing in the Disciplines'. For our work, in practical terms, adopting a WAC/WID approach involved seeing writing as a vehicle for learning. We assert that writing helps us to make meaning and that asking our students to engage in frequent, low risk writing, including informal in-class writing, helps our students to make sense of their learning. WAC/WID approaches also value writing processes and facilitating students in becoming better writers particularly through the iterative nature of drafting and revising. WAC/WID curricula abound in programmes offered by higher education providers in the United States and it is well beyond the scope of this modest article to explore the area of WAC/WID in any adequate way. For readers interested in this area (and we encourage you to indulge any curiosity that this offering might pique) we recommend beginning with Susan McLeod's aforementioned overview. Readers who are particularly interested in how WAC/WID functions in higher education in Ireland will be pleased to find an accessible and locally sensitive article about this area by Riedner et al. (2015). A key benefit that the Riedner et al. article has, for those wishing to learn more about Irish instances of WAC/WID, is that it has been collaboratively crafted by Irish and American colleagues. Riedner's contribution, in particular, is grounded in significant experience and expertise in WAC/WID in the United States, but this coupled in the piece with a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of how WAC/WID does, or could, or might not, work in Ireland. Those readers who wish to pursue this area further should seek out the WAC Clearinghouse, hosted by Colorado State University, which is a veritable treasure trove of open access resources and research on this topic.

The pedagogical intervention

Lillis and Farrell, both writing here, discussed how a WAC/WID type intervention might work in the Tóraíocht programme. The writing centre, then under the leadership of Farrell, was piloting a writing liaison initiative where a member of the Writing Centre staff would be matched with an academic colleague to explore how student writing development and writing to learn might be promoted within a given module. Lillis agreed to partner with Farrell in this initiative and during academic year 2014-15 Farrell attended the Lillis tutorials with her Tóraíocht group in Castlebar Education Centre. During this time, Farrell identified places where more in-class writing might be integrated into the Lillis classroom pedagogy. In academic year 2015-16, Lillis trialled some of these ideas with the Tóraíocht participants in Sligo and Drumcondra. Both Lillis and Farrell believed that this localised version of WAC/WID would help Tóraíocht participants to better engage, interrogate and understand the programme material. In practical terms, the WAC/WID pedagogy involved both in-class writing and out of class journaling. Lillis and Farrell followed up with participants to learn about their impressions of the impact of integrating more low risk writing of this nature into the programme. The feedback from participants with regards the in-class writing is reported in an article which is at present submitted for consideration in *Irish Educational Studies*, the official journal of the Education Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI). This companion piece records the participant responses to the out of class journaling. Because the article submitted in *Irish Educational Studies* is longer and of a different form, a more

comprehensive overview of the context, rationale, methodology, findings and discussion around our work will be available there (subject to publication). The following sections of this piece will summarise, albeit regrettably briefly, how we gathered data, what we discovered in those data and the sense we tried to make of them.

Methodology

In order to assess participants' experience of the impact of out of class journaling we included statements and questions which referred specifically to this activity in an online questionnaire which was designed to explore the WAC/WID intervention more generally. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions in total, with a mix of 5 point Likert statements and open ended questions: four of the Likert statements and one of the open-ended questions referred to journaling specifically. Following ethical approval, the questionnaire was sent to approximately 80 of the complete Tóraíocht cohort. Of this number, 36 participants completed the questionnaire (45%).

Findings and initial analysis

The first Likert statement that referred to journaling read 'The journaling out of class helped me to work through the course topics': 72% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement with 13.9% unsure. In reaction to the statement, 'The journaling out of class helped me to complete the assignments for the course', 83% either strongly agreed or agreed. Responses to whether

participants said they would continue to journal fairly regularly as part of ongoing professional development were more mixed with 11% strongly agreeing, 56% agreeing and 33% unsure. Interestingly, there were no 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' responses to this question. The final statement which referred to out of class journaling enquired about its potential impact beyond the course participants. This statement read 'I have introduced more writing into my own education setting, with my students, as a result of the in-class writing and journaling for this course'. There was a spread of responses to this question with 50% strongly agreeing or agreeing, 16% unsure and 33% disagreeing.

The open-ended question read as follows: 'What was most useful about journaling?' Responses to this question were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using Braun and Clarke's five phased approach codes were developed, and themes and subthemes identified, reviewed, defined and named. The two themes which emerged were that of 'Developing competences and understanding' and 'Developing as a professional'. With regards the former, respondents noted that the journaling helped them to be prepared for the formal writing assignments of the course, to recall, to make sense of and/or to clarify the material, to feed forward to the next stages of the programme or indeed the work environment, and to link theory and practice. Some comments included:

'[journaling] helped me to tease out how I see my school: the strengths and the challenges'.

'Journaling facilitated me in fleshing out my thoughts in a coherent manner ...'

'Keeping track of experiences that I would have been otherwise forgotten'.

'Making sense of events, considering improvements'.

'It became a record to return to ...'

'It structured ideas and acted as a vehicle to construct meaning from what I was writing'.

With regards 'Developing as a professional', there were many insights which the respondents recorded. Collectively they touched on the areas of how journaling helped to facilitate reflection and questioning, how it assisted in providing an alternative, or indeed a number of alternative perspectives, how it aided the tracking or just the observation of transition and change, how it was a stress reliever and how it was enjoyable. Some comments included the following:

'I have been able to track my progress and my emotional journey'.

'helped me to work through difficulties and at a later stage allowed me to reflect back over how I dealt with issues and how I might change my practice and thinking in future'.

'It captured my transition from the beginning of my leadership journey to now and I can see my own professional progression'.

'It's a good stress reliever ...'

'I surprisingly enjoy it and it has helped me develop as a teacher and leader'.

'I found that journaling is great to see the experience that I had during the day from a different perspective ... when I write it down it really makes me think about every aspect of the experience'.

'It identified patterns and changes in my behaviour and it made me question myself much more, I am now more reflective and capable of understanding why I behaved in particular ways'.

Discussion

We recognise the limitations of this research; we acknowledge that the cohort is small and that the data that we did gather are not immense. Nonetheless, we believe that we can make some claims around what we have discovered. And, we are relatively confident that these claims would hold out with a larger sample and more comprehensive feedback from participants (for example, that which one might glean in an interview or a focus group).

Our research suggests to us that incorporating WAC/WID pedagogies into the teaching and learning approaches of *Tóraíocht* does help with participants' understanding of the course material, that it aids participants as they complete the assessment requirements of the course, and that it may contribute to a behaviour shift for some participants in terms of the regular inclusion of journaling as part of reflective practice and continuing professional development. Equally, half of participants noted that they introduced more writing into their own classroom settings as a result of the WAC/WID approaches which they had experienced. The research also suggests that there were other positive impacts associated with WAC/WID type pedagogies, as noted in the findings, which reflect what other colleagues have found in their research and which they have recorded in the

literature. Aharonian (2016) drawing on Bruner notes that 'the narrative mode of thought', found in writing like journaling, 'provides a means of "ordering experience, of constructing reality" (11)' (214). This is held out in our research as is the value of Aharonian's intentions to use written texts in her work with teachers as a means of 'exploring classroom practice and for sharing teacher knowledge' (215). She draws on the literature to contextualise how she introduces 'educators to the benefits of writing as a mode of professional learning', she believes that 'narrative writing can facilitate rich professional learning within a dialogical context' and that 'This narrative mode is paramount to the way we make sense of the world around us ...' (2016: 214 - 215). We concur. Similarly, Elbaz-Luwisch, examining writing workshops, remarks on how the practice of teaching is constructed 'when teachers tell and live out particular stories' (2002: 403). Elbaz-Luwisch draws on 'the growing evidence that the process of telling and writing personal stories constitutes a powerful tool in the fostering of teachers' professional growth' (405). In its focus on writing workshop Elbaz-Luwisch's research resonates with much more recent work by Smith and Wrigley (2016) on teachers' writing groups, by Elbow on the connections between speaking and writing (2012) and by Geller and Eodice (2013) on working with university teachers on writing. This literature all asserts the value of writing for teachers. It contextualises our findings which also reflect those of Farrell (2013) who when writing about teacher self-awareness through journal writing found that in the case study he examined 'the act of writing has a built-in mechanism that facilitates reflection by allowing time for teachers to organize their thoughts' (470).

Returning to the impetus for this work, Lillis believed that the dilemmas and stresses faced by teachers might be addressed, to some extent, if either a forum or a process for the articulation of their concerns existed. She and Farrell believed that adopting a WAC/WID approach, regardless of whether it was named as such or not, would help teachers not only in their professional learning but also in their professional lives. Lillis and Farrell recognise that a WAC/WID curriculum might not ‘become a reality using that nomenclature or under that designation’ within their institution but nonetheless they advocate that there is a need to work with colleagues to help our students to become better writers and better critical thinkers (Farrell in Riedner et al., 2015: 27). The WAC/WID approach adopted by Lillis also went part way to addressing the issue of some Tóraíocht participants not being prepared for the rigors of academic writing at this level. Lillis sensed the need for support and encouragement to revive earlier competencies in this area and to ignite enthusiasm and scaffold processes for those participants who felt they were all but entirely new to these writing genres.

Final reflections – Lillis writing

As a result of my role as co-researcher in this initiative I now prioritise writing within each presentation I make to teachers. Most recently I have employed this with a group of deputy principals who have come together in a support group that I facilitate. An example is the use of a trigger sentence, ‘What I enjoyed about my work today’, where the group write for four minutes about the positives within their role. When questioned on this task participants commented on the relief of being

able to see how much they value what it is they do in their schools and how happy they are to embrace the challenges and the opportunities within the role of deputy. This method of reflection will hopefully bring the group closer to their values as professional educators and enliven their approach to their work.

In my work as tutor I have found the courage to advocate an iterative process to teachers in order to improve their writing skills. This is time consuming for busy professionals yet critical to their learning. Using this approach, we acknowledge that we think *when* we write: *before* we write and *while* writing. During the space away from our writing new ideas take shape and more concise ways of stating our points develop. This process embeds our learning and contributes to growth. Importantly for teachers, it raises their sense of self-confidence and enables them to find their voice.

I too see the need to improve my own practice as experienced by all reflective practitioners. I would like to build on the work we described in this article and encourage discussion about writing, peer review of writing and publishing, particularly co-authoring, with teachers. In-class writing is an important first step toward achieving the clarity of thought required for academic writing. When a group of professionals engage in writing together they feel supported by one another and give one another the encouragement, and the courage, to continue.

References

- Aharonian, N. (2016) I thought to myself: what a long way I've come ... : teacher writing for professional learning, *Teacher Development*, 20 (2), 213-228.
- Brandt, D. (2015) *The Rise of Writing. Redefining Mass Literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.
- Bruner, J. S. (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bush, T. (2003) *Theories of Educational leadership and Management*. London: Sage.
- Elbaz-Luwisch, F. (2002) Writing as Inquiry: Storying the Teaching Self in Writing Workshops. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32(4), 403-428.
- Elbow, P. (2012) Vernacular Eloquence. *What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2013) Teacher self-awareness through journal writing. *Reflective Practice*, 14 (4), 465-471.
- Fullan, M. (2003) *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Geller, A. E. and Eodice, M. eds. (2013) *Working with Faculty Writers*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Harris, A. (2005) *Teacher Leadership: Stating the Obvious?* American Education Research Association Conference. Montreal.
- McLeod, S. (2012) The Pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum in: Myers Zawacki, T. and Rogers, P.M. eds. (2012) *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Critical Sourcebook*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's. 149-164.
- Nicolas, L. and West-Burnham, J. (2016) *Understanding Leadership: Challenges and reflections*. Wales: Crown House Publishing.
- Riedner, R., O'Sullivan, I. and Farrell, A. (2015) *An Introduction to Writing in the Disciplines (WID) Curriculum*, Maynooth: All Ireland Society for Higher Education/Irish Network for the Enhancement of Writing.
- Smith, J and Wrigley, S. (2016) *Introducing Teachers' Writing Groups. Exploring the Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge/NATE.

Valerie, L., Kurkjian, C. and Turner, J. (2014) Expanding Student Writing through Family and Community Connections. *Reading News*, Autumn 2014, 12-14.

WAC Clearinghouse (1997-2017) <https://wac.colostate.edu>
(accessed 27 March 2017).

West-Burnham, J. and Harris, D. (2015) *Leadership Dialogues: Conversations and Activities for Leadership Teams*. Wales: Crown House Publishing.