VIRTUAL ACADEMIC WRITING: THE MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY EXPERIENCE

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Abstract.

This "rapid response" piece explains how, due to Coronavirus, Maynooth University Library shifted from face-to-face academic writing workshops for librarians to delivery via Zoom. The operation and elements of the one-day workshop are presented. Participants were surveyed using Survey Monkey and their responses are given. The piece concludes that Zoom offers a viable way to deliver academic writing workshops and may have advantages such as inclusivity, that go beyond what a face-to-face workshop can offer.

1.   Introduction.

For the past five years Maynooth University Library has offered an academic writing workshop to library staff nationally who wish to write for publication. The purpose of this event, which is free of charge, is to develop librarians' skills, knowledge and motivation to publish. Approximately 14 people, from libraries across Ireland, attend each year. The workshop is delivered by the two authors who have considerable experience in writing and presenting at conferences.

Research on the publication output of Irish academic librarians notes an increase in librarians writing for publication. The research suggests the workshops and an increasing emphasis and recognition of academic writing as a form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for librarians have contributed to this growth (O'Brien and Cronin, 2017).

2.   COVID-19.

A June date for the 2020 workshop was established at the start of 2020. The outbreak of the coronavirus made having a face-to-face workshop impossible. We felt it was important to run the workshop, both in terms of fulfilling its traditional role of developing skills, and in the context of creating a writing community for the duration of the workshop and possibly beyond, in a time

when library staff might feel particularly isolated. We decided to offer the event in a virtual environment. As in previous years, the workshop was advertised primarily via social media. We limited the number of participants to 14, as we wanted to have meaningful discussions around academic writing and poster presentations, rather than delivering lectures to a larger group. The event took place on 10th June, the date initially scheduled for the onsite workshop.

3.   Zoom.

The Library took out a Zoom account shortly after the outbreak of the Coronavirus. Prior to the workshop we used Zoom for interviews, meetings and some events. The workshop was set up using the *schedule a meeting* option in zoom. It was password protected and the *enable waiting room* function activated. This meant people had to be admitted by the host. As the host you will be able to join the event before participants. Guests are admitted to the waiting room and you click on "*admit*" icon to bring them into the meeting. There were two presenters (the two authors) and a third member of library staff who acted as host and administrator. This was key to the success of the event. It meant the presenters could focus on presenting. We did not have to check the waiting room and admit people, check the chat box for comments, check if people had used the raised hand symbol, or ensure anyone who was "*dropped*" due to poor wifi connection was readmitted. She also set up the breakout rooms, which were vitally important, allowing people to discuss their writing in small groups.

The host e-mailed the meeting link and password to participants the day before the workshop. Once admitted, they were put on mute. People had been asked to login in around 9.50 for a 10 o'clock start. Participants outside of Ireland were advised to note the time difference; two were working through the night. Two people cancelled at a late stage and the final number of attendees was 12.

3.1 Welcome and Zoom Etiquette.

People attending a face-to-face workshop get instructions on fire exits, break times and so forth at the outset: in the zoom environment we began with Zoom etiquette. People were asked by the host to ensure their microphone was on mute, asked to put queries in the Chat box, and Zoom symbols – raising hand, applause – were explained.

3.2 The Morning Session.

The morning session (3 hours) was on writing for academic publication with a focus on writing for journals.

3.3 Introductions.

The two facilitators and the host introduced themselves, the participants were asked to introduce themselves, through the task below. The facilitator then used the share screen option on Zoom to make her PowerPoint slides (which included the tasks) available to the group. The slides had been circulated the previous day. In the Zoom workshop it was not possible to have ongoing input from the participants in the way one would have in a face-to-face interaction. Tasks were particularly important in engaging people.

Task 1. Write for five minutes, in sentences not bullets, using one of the following prompts

•   I am interested in writing about…

•   An area of my experience which I would like to write about is…

•   A really interesting project that I think people would be interested in reading about is…

•   I feel at my most creative when I'm writing about…

Each person introduced themselves and shared brief information about their writing aspirations through the prompt. This took approximately 30 minutes.

This was followed by the facilitator outlining the key characteristics of professional and peer-reviewed journals. Some library-specific titles were mentioned and participants were invited to share additional titles via the *chat* function in Zoom. Participants were given ten minutes for the second task. Each person was on mute and had the option of switching off their camera.

The next task related to having clarity from the outset about the audience for, and the purpose of the article.

Task 2. Answer the following questions in single sentences

•   Who is the audience for your writing?

•   What is the purpose of your writing?

This was followed by some guidance from the facilitator on selecting a journal. This included scanning the literature to see where the topic had been covered before, talking to a supervisor (where relevant), consulting the Directory of Open Access Journals (www.doaj.org), ascertaining copyright position (www.sherpa.ac.uk), establishing whether a particular title is a trusted journal (https://thinkchecksubmit.org/), and sending a query e-mail to an editor. Some guidance on choosing titles and keywords was given by the Facilitator, and the third task followed.

Task 3. Assigning a title and keywords

•   Give your article a working title

•   Allocate three keywords to help people retrieve your article.

Participants were then given examples of both informative and structured abstracts. Following this each person wrote an abstract in the format of their choice. This task was followed by a half hour breakout session, with people allocated to breakout rooms, in groups of three, to discuss their writing. Because this was a three-hour session, providing a number of practical writing tasks to engage people and also some time for people to work together in breakout rooms, was vital.

The following topics were covered in the final 45 minutes: outlining/structuring, writing the article, submission, the peer-review process and promoting the finished work via institutional repositories, social media etc. There was then a 30-minute break, then the afternoon session on designing a poster began.

3.4 Posters that get noticed.

This one-hour session discussed the rationale for designing a conference poster and looked at the advantages of poster presentations and their growing popularity. For many people attending a conference there is a nervousness at public speaking – presenting a poster alleviates this issue while also giving the presenter the opportunity to interact on a one-to-one basis with attendees at a conference. The session also covered ways in which posters can be viewed and accessed even after a conference through resources such as Twitter and Slideshare.

The session then moved on to the practicalities of poster design including factors to consider when starting to design a poster. Participants learned how to generate an idea for a poster, how to develop that idea, how to identify the target audience and how to outline that idea in visual

format. Guidance on content and words, layout and colour, typeface, illustrative material and feedback from peers or colleagues was given. The need to draft many times before reaching the final product was highlighted. The group critiqued a number of sample posters from previous conferences and this was a very interactive process with lively discussion.

The poster session concluded with a look at some online tools which make poster design easy such as software for design, free online images and examples included http://www.canva.com and http://www.piktochart.com.

This session was followed by a short (30 minutes) review/discussion where each participant outlined how they were going to progress their writing.

3.5 Survey.

At the end of the session, participants were sent a survey, created in Survey Monkey, with the following questions:

1.   Have you used Zoom before today?

2.   How would you rate today's session overall?

3.   What was the most useful aspect of the day for you?

4.   Have you any suggestions for future academic writing workshops?

5.   Given our busy schedules, how can academic writing be further developed among library staff?

6.   Any other comments?

All participants had used Zoom previously and found it easy to navigate. The session was rated as "*excellent*" overall. The most useful aspect of the day for most participants was building confidence in either starting to write a paper or design a poster.

> *"Thinking that you incapable of writing and then in a couple of tasks being asked to write and then in front of you is something you have put down on paper. Just like that!"*

> *"It gave me confidence, as it reassured me that writing doesn't come easy to anyone, it's the research preparation and editing that you put into it. The more you read, practice, prepare the better you get at it!"*

Having tasks to do that gradually progressed writing was seen as beneficial, as was the discussion and feedback:

"The tasks that followed each section of the presentation [was most useful for me] as it reinforced understanding and removed the fear of getting started"

"The tasks that were given at the workshop lead me to framework my writing".

Suggestions for future topics relating to writing included:

- research methods (both qualitative and quantitative), doing a literature review,

- the components of a journal article (abstract, methodology etc).

- the role of a proofreader in academic writing

- analysing a piece of academic writing

- writing and presenting conference papers

Responses to the question as to how busy librarians could incorporate writing into their lives included:

- support and encouragement from other team members and the possibility that it is included in job objectives.

- paper swaps for people who have an in-progress or nearly finished piece that people could give feedback on, perhaps in small groups.

- providing an exclusive time on professional development individually or in groups to discuss writing ideas and provide peer-support.

- weekly timetabled slot for writing.

- encouragement and support from more experienced team members.

- Ease of access to publishing spaces.

- more education on the actual submission and publishing process.

Any other comments included:

- The pace and content were excellent.

- The breakout sessions worked well as we could talk about our writing plans in smaller groups.

- The workshop has helped me understand how someone could possibly carry on with their life while simultaneously writing an article for a blog, a book or a journal.

- The steps and structures outlined in the workshop helped with this penny dropping moment.

Figure 1: Five tips on using Zoom

4.   Conclusion.

Using zoom allowed for a much wider geographic spread of attendees, than with the face-to-face workshop, a fact which we welcomed. While we endeavoured to make the content and shape of the virtual workshop similar to the model we used heretofore in face-to-face workshops, we were particularly conscious of the need to have meaningful engagement, and also that two participants did not have English as their first language. The majority of attendees were Irish (8), but in addition there were four librarians from the UK, the US, Indonesia and Italy. Having a more diverse group was an enriching experience. The size of the group allowed engagement and the breakout rooms facilitated feedback on writing among participants.

Running this event in Zoom was a new and really useful learning experience. Engaging meaningfully in a Zoom event requires more practical tasks than a face-to-face event, and change of types of tasks to ensure participants don't experience Zoom fatigue. We also learned how important it was that there was an additional person, aside from the speakers, to manage the chat box and other practical aspects, thus leaving us time to focus on the content. Moving forward we would like to explore how Zoom might be used for peer feedback sessions and possibly establishing writing circles/groups that would offer support and encouragement to each other. Figure 1 outlines our five tips on using Zoom in this kind of scenario.

The current crisis presents many challenges to librarians. While addressing issues such as how we meet the needs of our undergraduate and research populations in the world we now find ourselves in, we need to continue to reflect on, and write about our practice. Academic writing has the potential to help us engage with common concerns as a community. Perhaps through writing we will find some of the solutions to the many challenges we now face.

5.   References.

O'Brien, T. & Cronin, K. (2016) Research Output of Academic Librarians From Irish Higher Education Institutions 2000–2015: Findings From a Review, Analysis, and Survey, New Review of Academic Librarianship, 22:2-3, 203-224.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2016.1181666