Academic writing masterclasses: 'shared live editing' in a group

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I spend a great deal of time in one-to-one support of developing writers – both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and colleagues who are writing for publication. (Fairbairn and Winch, 1996; Fairbairn and Fairbairn, 2005; Canter and Fairbairn, 2006) In each case I aim to facilitate the development of a clearer, more informative and more engaging style, partly by drawing attention to places where the writers in question are factually mistaken, and to aspects of their topic that they have failed to address adequately. Even more importantly, however, I try to help them to improve their ability as writers by commenting on the structure and presentation of their work – drawing attention to places where it is unclear or poorly argued, and to places where they have made mistakes in their use of language, which spoil the sense of what they are trying to communicate. I should make clear that I am not talking about a pedantic insistence on grammatical correctness, if there is such a thing, but merely on the need to attend, at the most basic level, to whether what is written says what the author thinks it says, and sometimes, even whether it makes any sense at all.

For more than a dozen years I have found that by far the best way of helping people to grow the skills and disciplines necessary if they are to write clearly and effectively, is to offer such help in the context of a supportive and nurturing group, in which the participants engage in 'shared live editing' of texts. I find such groups to be good places in which to offer individual support for learning about academic writing. Typically, during a meeting, we will work on one or more draft texts written by participants – which may be whole essays or articles, but may be shorter passages, or even single paragraphs. I use a data projector or large computer screen to allow the whole group to view the text 'live', as I help the author to edit and shape it, in a way that is rather similar to the musical masterclass in

which players are helped to develop their performances by a teacher, in front of an appreciative audience. The 'performances' on which we focus in live editing sessions are the texts that participants bring with them.

One reason that working in a group in which everyone has the opportunity to work with other people's texts is a helpful way of enabling the development of writing skills, is that it is always easier to detect problems in other people's writing than it is to detect them in one's own. Partly this is because when you are working with your own text, familiarity with what you wanted to say can lead to a situation in which, rather than reading what is in front of your eyes, you 'read' what you wanted to say, in other words the idea that was in your head, rather than what you actually committed to print. That is why I urge students and colleagues to develop the habit of trying always to read their work as if it was written by someone else. In addition I try to persuade them that if they want to be a writer, they should read their own work out loud as often as possible, because doing so makes it much more difficult to avoid noticing that what you have written fails to make sense. Reading out loud slows our reading down; forces us to read every word, and makes it easier two notice when we have used the wrung woods, or have misspeled or missed words out. And since when we read out loud we have to take breath every so often it also helps us to spot places where sentences are longer than they might be or are badly punctuated so that by the time we get to the end of them we are absolutely gasping for breath so that we hopefully come to the conclusion that we should split them up a bit more.

After almost twenty five years of working on the development of academic writing, I am increasingly convinced that learning to read what one has written as if it was written by someone else, and with a view to offering a critical appraisal, is the single most important skill that academic authors must learn, whether they are professionals or students. Such skill allows you more easily to edit your attempts at writing down the ideas that have either formed or are forming in your mind; it is easy to develop, though it involves making a leap of faith into thinking that it is OK to acknowledge that what you have written is less good than it could be – and perhaps, that it is literary (and sometimes even literally) nonsense.

In line with my belief about the benefits of reading out loud, one important element in my live editing sessions is that I like to get the protagonist (the person whose text we are focusing on) to read sections out loud, so that their written performance becomes public through the spoken word as well as through the medium of print. This gives these sessions

some similarity to an approach to the teaching of writing described by Fishman et al. (2005, p.226) who write that 'immediate and face-to-face performance encourages active participation and collaboration'.

In live editing sessions, participants are invited to offer comments on the protagonist's work, with the proviso that they must aim to be supportive and enabling. As a result, they almost inevitably show their appreciation of her efforts, sharing what they like about her work as well as identifying problems and suggesting possible ways of improving her text. In order to achieve this situation, it is important to make clear at the outset, that shared live editing sessions are not intended to provide an opportunity to engage in the bloodsport of criticising one another's writing skill or style, but an opportunity to develop together as writers.

In my experience, engaging with students and with colleagues in the live editing of texts is the most fruitful and least painful way of helping them to develop their skills as writers. One reason for this is that rather than offering advice about how text might be improved, and leaving the writer to work out for herself how to do it, live editing involves sitting beside her and working out together how her text might be improved.

As I have already hinted, 'live editing' involves working with text on screen, where it has the opportunity to grow and change in response to the discussion I conduct with those present. When I am live editing, I like to 'drive' the computer – partly because I text-process quickly and fluently. But partly it is because doing so allows me to model certain aspects of the creation and modification of text by careful reading and interrogation of what is already written and by 'auditioning' changes and additions to see whether, once they are in-situ, they help to make the text clearer. Working live with a student's or colleague's text in a writing masterclass ensures that it grows and changes and transforms, as we discuss the problems or weaknesses that I think I detect; that they think they detect, and that the other group members think they detect. Perhaps even more importantly, the protagonist's text also changes and grows as a result of praise and encouragement in relation to aspects of the text that work well.

When I am editing my own work, I always begin by 'marking up' a printed copy, because I find that reading what I have written on paper makes it is easier to avoid the mistake of fooling myself into believing that it is clear and well argued, even when it isn't, than trying

to read it on screen. Generally speaking, as well as writing corrections on the printed page, I also annotate it with comments about what has to be done, and often with gestures at how more significant changes – insertions and major re-wordings – might look. After that I turn to the computer and deal with corrections and minor changes, before beginning to work on the more important improvements I want to make. Rather than trying to work out precisely how an unclear, longwinded or over complicated sentence might be changed, before making the necessary changes on screen, I like to play with possibilities on screen, until eventually after successive modifications, I come up with a version that satisfies me (or at any rate, that satisfies me for the moment, because I often find that at the next reading through, it becomes obvious that more changes are necessary). By 'playing with possibilities' I mean trying out lots of different ways of addressing problems – adding and taking away text; rephrasing; restructuring sentences and paragraphs. Sometimes I will copy a paragraph or larger chunk of text into a new document and play with it there, both, because that way it is easier to revert to the original if necessary, and because separating it from the text in which it is embedded somehow makes it easier to work on.

For those who, like me, engage in it, this playing with text will seem obvious. However, in my experience surprisingly few people actually engage in it, perhaps because they are afraid of losing their way, or perhaps because they have poorly developed keyboard skills. Or perhaps it is just that they are so afraid of the possibility of losing the forms of words they have already put down, that they would rather 'freeze' them, than run the risk of losing them in the process of attempting to find a better form. I aim to encourage developing writers to play with text as much as possible and to develop skill in spotting forms of words that not only 'sound good', but successfully communicate what they want to say.

Shared live editing is particularly useful with groups of postgraduates whether they are at the stage of developing the proposals for their research projects, or developing the text of their theses; and with colleagues who are working on articles intended for publication. However, it is just as useful for undergraduate students in, for example, the context of a tutorial session aimed at helping students to focus on writing as a way of developing their understanding of ideas.

The texts that participants offer up for public scrutiny in a live editing session may be at a variety of stages of development. Sometimes they are already rather advanced; in such cases the protagonist may choose to circulate a printout of his 'performance' beforehand,

so that when he asks to focus on a particular section, the members of the group know how it relates to the piece as a whole. On the other hand, a protagonist may want to work on a piece that is in a rudimentary state, or even on what Lamott (1994) refers to as a 'shitty first draft'; working on early drafts can be helpful in reassuring inexperienced authors that getting something down in print, however uncertain, can be a helpful staging post in the development of a finished text. Indeed, I often work with text that has not even been drafted before the session and is brought along as nothing more than an embryonic imagining in its author's mind. This can also be very productive.

The way in which mistakes are addressed during shared live editing is particularly worthy of mention because they are sometimes the source of a great deal of humour as protagonist and participants alike collapse in fits of giggles as they begin, for example, to spot the stylistic 'tics' that characterise a particular author's work (and we all have such tics; one of mine is the overuse of semi-colons). Now having one's mistakes spotted and laughed over in public could be traumatic were it not for the fact that such sessions almost always turn into joyously happy and supportive places, in which both learners and experienced authors can rest assured that mistakes are not taken as a sign of weakness and stupidity, but rather as a sign of ordinariness. Nonetheless, lest participants should be put off by the idea of exposing their weakness to their peers, I always introduce the idea of live editing by offering something that I have written myself as the first subject for attention.

Sometimes I use text that I have downgraded from a finished piece – from a published article say, by making changes that pepper it with a range of mistakes. But sometimes I use text that is genuinely at an early stage of development because that way I can be sure to provide participants with a feast of examples of all kinds of errors and all kinds of problems, as I attempt, in front of an audience, to find the best way to say what I want to say, or even to decide what I want to say.

Shared live editing groups are a good vehicle for the development of writing skills because over the course of a series of sessions, each person in a group has the opportunity to receive support in developing not only his or her text, but his or her skills as a writer. Not only that, but when it is their text the group is working on, they receive individual support for their learning, not only from the teacher, but from their peers. My enthusiasm for this way of working on academic literacy is thus formed out of my experience of seeing it work,

as well as from my belief that it is an economical way of supporting students and professional academics as developing writers.

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