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The digital writing café: accessibility born from necessity

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Presentation abstract

The Writing Café is a creative space for students to talk about academic writing across disciplines, and to support them to become better writers, underpinned by the philosophy of inclusion and inquiry.

Originally located in a café on campus, in response to the pandemic the Writing Café transitioned online. This took into account the additional struggles that students might be experiencing as a result of the pandemic. Within days, it had moved online with no interruption of service.

Attendance in the Digital Writing Café increased by 50% during lockdown, and the service was highlighted by the Gravity Assist report as one of the most innovative examples of how universities and colleges have responded to the pandemic by providing online support to their students.

Due to the successes, the Digital Café now runs concurrently alongside The Writing Café in the Library providing a flexible service to meet the varying needs of the students.

Though the Writing Café has always been a space that helps bridge the gap in supporting social mobility, this new flexible approach has seen a drastic increase in engagement from students who identify as from Access and Participation Plan (APP) categories.

The presentation explored the evolution of the Writing Café to the new hybrid dual delivery model, with provision located physically at the heart of the campus in our Library café, alongside an online digital provision using Zoom. Our Writing Mentors will share their experience and will discuss the impact on our student engagement.

Community response

Would love to get something like this going. We are planning to develop a writing café, though in person only at this point. Luckily, we have a café in our building, so I will be pushing for us to set one of our own up!

It was a privilege to hear how the Writing Mentors translate the programme's ethos of inclusivity and student empowerment and embed it into their practice of providing academic writing support for students. Your students are an inspiration and testament to the fact that peer support is an essential pedagogical tool that helps democratise learning and empower students. I love the idea of a space in which students can compare writing styles and conventions across their disciplines and gradually understand how to write for their subject and develop a supportive community of practice. The sessions ultimately highlight the value of combining peer learning initiatives with core academic skills support, enabling cross-discipline conversations and a non-hierarchical approach for students to understand and hone core principles of learning within higher education.

The Writing Café seems like such a huge way to overcome what Cara spoke about – the stigmas around deficit and remediation associated with Learning Development work, and the type of student who might be told or advised to engage with it. It looks like such a democratic and non-hierarchical way of doing things. The Mentors are co-owners of the Writing Café space; they actively work in partnership and shape future growth and development through their feedback and research (such as this piece). This partnership approach fosters a sustainable learning initiative that is flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of students, reflected in the success of running a hybrid Writing Café.

Next steps and additional questions

This is an excellent project, demonstrated by the length of time it has been running and the continued engagement of students. Responding to the shift to online must have been a challenge, but as the students outlined it was clearly successful. I wonder how this will develop beyond the 'Covid' years and how new students respond as we move back to a sense of 'normality'? I wondered how this format could also be applied to specific disciplines or communities which find engagement with LD more difficult? It is an approachable and low risk environment which encourages students to seek support and could be utilised in those spaces.

Authors' reflections

Nina Kearney

The Writing Café has been developed to provide students with a friendly and informal learning environment. Adaptations for Covid-19, moving the service online, were positively received and the service was developed into a hybrid model as students began returning, increasing the flexibility of how students can choose to engage. Having the Mentors as co-owners of the space, working actively in partnership with us to shape the development of the space through their feedback and involvement in research, supports us to be proactive in adapting the service to meet the changing needs of students as we return to a new 'normality'.

The informal café learning format can easily be adapted to benefit students and communities in specific disciplines, foster conversations around developing academic writing, and engage participants through networking, by being part of a positive learning community. We have previously run one of the Writing Café roadshow days with health students based at off-site campuses, with really positive feedback on how this fostered a sense of learning community with the group around developing their academic writing.

We discussed our hybrid dual delivery model in the presentation: the Digital Café runs online via Zoom, concurrently with the Writing Café physically taking place in the Library café. Both spaces are run by our Writing Mentors, who are rota-ed to work either in the Library or online for the shift. They follow a similar format: on arrival students are welcomed and asked about their writing questions, concerns, or areas they would like to develop. The Writing Mentor will ask them if they are happy to share a bit of their writing to

help shape the conversation. Online the Writing Mentor and student move into a breakout room for the student to share their writing. At the moment Writing Mentors work in one space, either online or in the Library, however there are opportunities to develop some fluidity between the two spaces moving forward.

Cara Baer

The appointment of interdisciplinary Mentors is intentional, as is ensuring this is a paid role so that students from a range of backgrounds can afford to offer their time. These have been core points of reflection since the conference. Both points link to a key aspect of the Writing Café: that Mentors reflect the student demographic (subject and diversity), which can encourage a sense of belonging; we hope that the Mentors reflecting a diverse range of students is empowering. The interdisciplinary nature of Mentors can challenge ideas around deficit approaches to knowledge and support, repositioning the discourse around seeking support from being a stigma-based matter, to being one of development.

We know from research and from speaking with other universities that the Writing Café is unique in its offering as an interdisciplinary space that focuses on academic skills, rather than course content. This is to promote a removal of the hierarchy that often exists with subject knowledge: we make students visiting the Café the experts in their subject. However, we also see the value, and potential comfort, that knowing a face or feeling reassured that a Mentor knows your subject can provide. This has been another key reflection point: why it is important that the Café is not discipline specific but is able to highlight how the Café can support students' disciplines, which is likely to improve engagement and awareness of the service.

Michaela Moclair

The Writing Café's emphasis on the partnerships between student workers and students creates a dynamic workspace which can reinforce the resilience of the student. Having a space which the students control can create a more comfortable atmosphere to encourage peer-to-peer learning. The hybrid approach of the adapted Zoom online space and the physical Writing Café space has helped our Writing Mentors to reach a more diverse range of subject areas and given students flexibility on how to approach this learning space.

A huge part of Learning Development is a focus on students; allowing the student Writing Mentors to present as part of the conference gave us a chance to open new ways of thinking about the Writing Café's achievements, while being able to discuss this with both internal peers and an external audience. The supportive community that the Writing Café has become not only upskills the Writing Café Mentors and prepares them for post-university work, but also encourages different approaches to learning which were shared at the conference.

Jack Pendlebury

The conference was extremely valuable, with the audience engagement proving very encouraging to our work in the Writing Café. Given the massive benefits we have seen, I'm excited to see other institutions implement their own versions. I'm hopeful that next year's conference will see plenty of ideas from institutions that have put their own spin on the idea of a Writing Café or have taken some of our ideas to integrate within their own learning schemes.

One of the questions that I found most interesting was regarding the diversity of our Mentors, and what we were doing to ensure that we were recruiting from a widespread range of candidates, both regarding BAME students, as well as ones from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the mentorship is biased towards humanities students. The Writing Café's leadership is acting decisively on the former; an issue that I believe to be in no small part due to the geographic location of our university and the demographics therein.

As one of the students from a less fortunate background and having spoken to some of my colleagues who shared the same difficulties that I had, I am happy with how the Writing Café has given us opportunities to improve our own academic writing skills as well as putting us in a position to help others who are/were suffering similar difficulties to us. Whilst not all the Mentors in the Writing Café share these sorts of backgrounds, I have always felt welcomed by both the leadership and my fellow Mentors, and I am so glad that the space exists to provide this. A large push has been undertaken recently to market the Writing Café better, and make sure that it is reaching everyone. This is something that I believe will help make great strides towards diversifying our recruitment pool. I, myself, have been a part of the push to recruit additional STEM students to the Café, as currently

the lack of targeted outreach could be a contributing factor towards lesser uptake from students in those courses.

I am excited to see what the future holds for the Writing Café, especially after taking on some of the potential ideas that we've gained from this conference! I've thoroughly enjoyed working with my colleagues on this presentation and was extremely grateful for the opportunity to share our Writing Café.

Acknowledgments

Author details

Nina Kearney is a Project Manager at the University of Plymouth, with experience in leading Widening Participation and Peer Learning initiatives.

Cara Baer is a lecturer in Education, researcher, and PhD student with interests in inclusion, social justice, access to education, and Widening Participation. Cara has worked as Writing Mentor throughout her studies, enabling insight into the peer interactions.

Michaela Moclair is a PhD student in Creative Writing, whose research focuses on Greek mythology and posthuman feminism. Michaela has a keen interest in positive partnerships founded from peer-to-peer learning and has experienced this during her work at The Writing Café.

Jack Pendlebury is an MEng Robotics student with a focus on machine learning and artificial intelligence. He hopes to apply research in Learning Development to artificial intelligence applications within robotics. He has worked in the Writing Café throughout his

time at university, enabling him a first-hand look at peer learning and alternative learning methodologies.