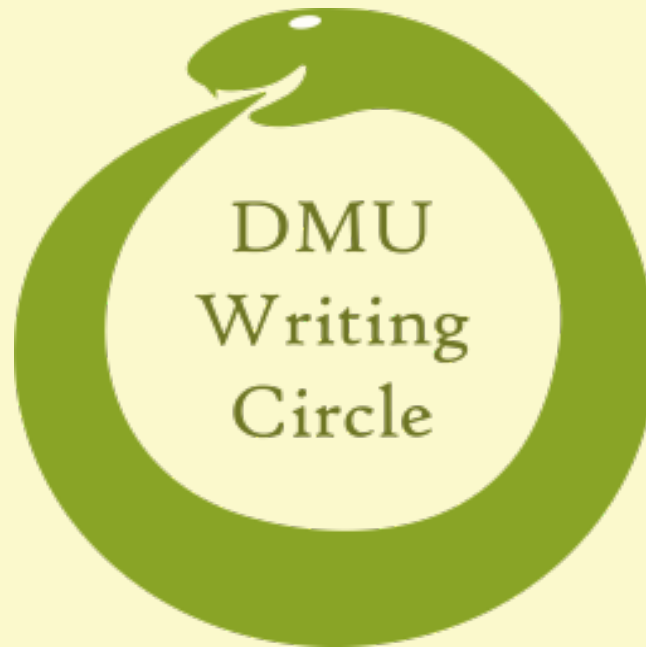# Introducing the DMU Writing Circle

Building capability to engage students in developing their academic writing

DMU
Writing
Circle

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"An individual experience of learning"

- DMU Teacher Fellow Project 2018/19-2020/21
- Interested in how a student's can experience 'individual learning' in mass higher education
- Ideas of involvement, expression and peer learning
- PhD Thesis (UCL IoE) in philosophy of education

DMU Writing Circle - What is it?

'Community of writers'

- Cross-disciplinary.

- All levels of experience and capability.

- United by the common practice of *academic writing.*

Involving staff researchers and research students in the first instance (phase 1), but with the potential to extend to taught postgraduates and final year undergraduate students (phase 2).

What is it?

Weekly 'writing circle' meetings – (up to) 2 hours of **social writing** every Wednesday 3-5pm during term time in Eric Wood EW2.03.

"Shut up and write"

What is it?

Events and talks to supplement the regular social writing space:

- *Writing for publication: The real story* (Autumn Term)
- *Writing beyond Word(s)* (Spring Term)
- *Plan your summer of writing* (after Easter)
- *Mission Impossible: Writing during term time* (end of summer vacation).

Plus various writing cafés, writing days, Thesis Boot Camp, Trinity One Day Writing Retreat.

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What is it?

Potential avenues for further development (phase 1):

- 'Crit Corner' – sharing writing for constructive critique (following WGRS model);
- 'Writing Buddies' – semi-formal peer-peer support;
- 'Flash meets' – spontaneous social writing using WhatsApp
- 1:1 support with a member of the CLaSS team (me).

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What is it?

"Meet. Write. Learn."

Disengagement

Not *how to engage* students etc., in learning (which is given to the logic of 'marketing and promotion') but rather *how to address their disengagement*.

Specifically, their disengagement from the process of (academic) writing. This disengagement is something staff and researchers also experience.

Disengagement

- ## Physical

Time in the diary; clearing the desk; removing distractions; workplace offices cited as problematic for writing.

Regular time & space.

- ## Cognitive

Psychological preparation for writing; 'headspace'; 'lead in' to writing; not viewed as 'legitimate'

Legitimate activity, writing is the primary purpose

- ## Social

Separating from the demands of others; writing as 'selfish', not reinforced by others

Reinforced by the activity, example and support of others

Murray (2015), pp.93-94

Murray (2015), pp. 99-100

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'Holistic Containment'

Making writing the primary task

Preventing anti-task behaviour

Containing writing-related anxiety

(Murray 2015, pp. 105-109)

Phases of Implementation

2019/2020: Phase 1: Staff researchers and research students

Focus on developing conditions for 'holistic containment' and building an *ad hoc* community of practice around the DMU WC

?: Phase 2: Taught postgraduates and final year undergraduates (level 6)

Focus on extending the reach of the community to engage pedagogically with the broader academic community (i.e. PGT and UG students)

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Phases of Implementation

Not as **student/teacher** but as **peer/peer**

Not as **'a service to access'** but as **'a community to participate in'**

The pedagogy of writing support

In what way would student involvement in a writing group enable learning?

How would involvement in a writing group 'engage' students?

The Social Dimension of Learning

Bandura (1977): Abstract modeling

'observers extract the common attributes exemplified in diverse modelled responses and formulate rules for generating behavior with similar structural characteristics' (p.41)

Wenger (1998): Identity, participation, belonging

'Practices' as the start of a social process of negotiation and renegotiation.

Tsuji (2010) on Walter Benjamin's understanding of 'mimesis' and writing

Particularities of 'learning to write'

- Writing is 'private' and 'specific'

- Beyond grammatical rules, good/bad writing can be subjective and discipline-bound

- Consequences of 'bad' writing not immediately apparent

- Difference between learning to write as such (e.g. vocabulary; grammar; criticality; structure; tone etc., i.e. the mechanics of writing) and learning *approaches* to writing (behaviours).

Imitation as...

- Copying: representation or reproduction of existing models (without creativity);

- Mimesis: the gift to see similarities; the gift to produce similarities (Walter Benjamin)

Mimesis relies on 'chance events'; that is, not on having a specified object of learning (or 'learning objective'), but rather on we as learners having opportunities to see and respond to something 'other than ourselves'

Tsuji (2010)

Hence the private, specific, discipline-bound nature of academic writing when considered as a practice engaged in by an individual can be *seen as similar* by another individual to their own practices; and they, in turn, can *produce similarities* in writing practices as they relate to their own private, specific, discipline-bound context.

Mimesis and the Writing Circle

The DMU Writing Circle aims to create the conditions whereby the 'chance events' conducive to mimetic learning can occur by fostering a community of participants who meet regularly and who are **engaged primarily in the task of writing**, but who are also reflecting on this task, and interacting with and supporting other members of the community in various ways (i.e. by helping to **prevent anti-task behaviour** and by helping to **contain writing-related anxiety**).

…what is happening in the moment of learning through imitation? We are now in a position to say that that mimesis is somehow driven by the difference between the moment of losing one's subjectivity and the moment of writing. This makes learning something through mimesis and writing oneself very unlike such activities as purchasing something one wants, installing new software in one's computer or writing what one knows. Mimesis points instead to a strangeness or otherness that we cannot fully know or possess. Learning then is inevitably different from what is found where teachers present models to learners that they expect to be replicated and learners seek in teachers something merely to copy. Thus, writing opens a space for new (or forgotten?) possibilities in our way of living. (Tsuji, 2010, p.132)

'Holistic Containment'

Making writing the primary task

Preventing anti-task behaviour

Mitigates against **disengagement**

Containing writing-related anxiety

(Murray 2015, pp. 105-109)

Broader Implications

'Open' learning environments which permit 'chance events' and mimetic learning – e.g. all forms of extra-curricula or curriculum-aligned peer learning

Next Steps

- Open invitation to staff and research students to come along and write (and talk about their writing).

- Thoughts on shaping and sustaining such a community (what are we missing?).

- Thoughts on ways of extending the writing community – who can participate and how?

Who can participate?

- Invitation
  - Personal relationships, existing networks, scalable
  - Prone to exclusivity and lack of parity
- Application
  - Effort required to participate (commitment)
  - Resources to process applications
- Open
  - Parity, transparent
  - Scalability and 'quality control' issues

References

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