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Reflections on the Development of International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWGs) about Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Mick Healey
mhealey@glos.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of a model for *international* collaborative writing groups (ICWGs) about teaching and learning in higher education, which began in geography in 1999 and was then transferred to the scholarship of teaching and learning community in 2012. It summarises some of the evidence which has emerged from research into the experience of participants in ICWGs. The paper ends with a few comments on the future development of the model.

Dans cet article, l'auteur explore le développement d'un modèle de groupes *internationaux* de rédaction en collaboration portant sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage dans l'enseignement supérieur, qui a vu le jour en géographie en 1999 et qui, plus tard, en 2012, a été transféré à la communauté de l'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage. L'auteur présente un résumé d'un certain nombre de preuves qui ont résulté de la recherche sur l'expérience vécue par les participants à ces groupes internationaux de rédaction. En conclusion, l'auteur présente quelques commentaires sur le développement futur de ce modèle.

Writing for publication is at the heart of the identity of many academics. Most commonly this is a discipline-based activity undertaken on one's own, or with one of two colleagues with related interests. Several helpful guides to writing journal articles have been published in recent years (e.g., Belcher, 2009; Murray, 2009), but these are typically aimed at individuals, especially new authors. There is also some guidance available when you take academics outside their comfort zone and they begin to investigate and publish about teaching and learning in higher education, both within their own discipline and more widely. This is often written under the title of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Cleaver, Lintern, & McLinden, 2014; Cousin, 2009; McKinney, 2007; Norton, 2009). Again, most of the advice is aimed at individuals. There are several examples of residential academic writing retreats, but these are designed to give individuals space and time to work on their writing tasks (e.g., Grant, 2008). In contrast, there is little written about collaborative teaching and learning writing groups, especially where this includes a writing retreat.

This paper explores the development of a model for *international* collaborative writing about teaching and learning in higher education, which began in geography in 1999 and was then transferred to the scholarship of teaching and learning community in 2012. Arguably the challenges in undertaking collaborative writing are magnified when the authors are based in several different countries. It is this model, which has been adapted by SoTL Canada, the outcomes of which are published in this issue.

This article begins with a discussion of the origins and development of the model in geography, before exploring how it was modified for use by the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL). It then summarises some of the evidence which has emerged from research into the experience of participants in the international collaborative writing groups (ICWG), particularly from the ISSoTL12 event. The paper ends with a few comments on the future development of the model.

The Origins of ICWGs in Geography

The first ICWG emerged with the founding of the International Network for Learning and Teaching Geography in Higher Education (INLT) in the late 1990s. At that time, there were two very active national networks focused on learning and teaching in geography—the Geography Discipline Network in the UK, run by the author out of what is now the University of Gloucestershire, and the Virtual Geography Department and the Geographer's Craft based at University of Texas and run by Ken Foote. At a meeting between the two of us in 1998 we decided that the best way to share the work undertaken by these networks and by individuals in a variety of countries was to establish an international network (Healey, 1998). We invited Ian Hay at Flinders, Australia, to join us on the planning team. We put a call out for interested individuals to join the network and to meet the day before an international geography conference in Hawaii in April 1999. We put people into groups prior to the meeting and asked them to produce position papers around the theme of developing an international network, which were posted online prior to the meeting. There was strong support for establishing the INLT and most of the meeting in Hawaii was spent discussing goals and how the network would operate (Hay, Foote, & Healey, 2000). The papers were subsequently revised and submitted as a symposium of nine papers, plus an introduction published in the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (Healey, Foote, & Hay, 2000).

The key features of this first meeting in 1999 have continued to characterise the ICWGs which followed for the next two decades. They are:

- Making an open call for colleagues to participate
- Organising colleagues to join international groups to write about an aspect of learning and teaching
- Putting early draft outlines of the papers online for discussion in advance of a face to face meeting
- Bringing the groups together prior to, or following, an international conference
- Supporting the groups in their writing and giving opportunities for networking between the teams, both in workshops and through social activities
- Having the agreement of an international teaching and learning journal that they will review the papers for publication, usually as a special collection, a few months after the meeting
- Taking around 9-12 months between the call for participants and the submission of the articles.

Since then, there have been four INLT ICWG meetings in Glasgow (2004), Brisbane (2006), Washington (2010), and London (2014). In these meetings, the time spent supporting the writing groups was increased with up to two days spent working in their groups and sharing their ideas in plenary sessions (Healey, 2006; Healey, Pawson, & Solem, 2010).

From INLT to ISSoTL

The idea for taking the INLT model and applying it to ISSoTL emerged in a 15-minute conversation between Sue Vajoczki, Beth Marquis, and myself at the beginning of the 2011 ISSoTL meeting in Milwaukee. Sue, like myself, had experience of several of the INLT meetings. By the end of the conference most of the detail was in place. The initiative took place the following year, when McMaster University hosted the ISSoTL conference. Sadly, Sue died before she could see the outcome of her vision (Healey & Marquis, 2013; Healey, Marquis, & Vajoczki, 2013). Three years later, the ICWG initiative was run again in Melbourne at ISSoTL15 under the leadership of Kelly Matthews and myself (Healey & Matthews, 2017; Matthews & Healey, 2017).

The aims of the ISSoTL ICWGs were to: (a) build the capacity of participants to work and write in international collaborative groups; and (b) contribute to the literature on aspects of a range of SoTL topics from an international perspective.

We expected there would be significant interest in the initiative and that we would need to be selective. In 2012, we could take just less than half of the applicants, and in 2015, it was fewer than a third. We selected applicants to maximise diversity in terms of nationality, previous experience of SoTL, and stage of career. We included at least one student in each group and subsidised the cost of the event for these students. For ICWG12, we had nine groups of approximately eight members each and three years later we reduced this to eight groups because of space constraints in *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*—the journal to which the articles would be submitted. This contrasts with the INLT practice of taking all who applied, usually in groups of five to six. For the ISSoTL ICWGs, we decided to appoint the leaders in advance, choosing individuals we thought had the skills to manage groups, and could facilitate investigation of broad complementary SoTL topics. INLT, in contrast, typically advertised ten to a dozen topics, and asked participants to choose up to three that they would be interested in joining. People were allocated to the six to nine most popular topics, and then one member of each team was invited to act as chair.

Most of the articles in the ICWGs were based on a review of the literature on their chosen topic, though up to half the ones in the ISSoTL ICWGs chose to collect some original data. A further difference from the INLT experience is that with the ISSoTL versions we conducted complementary action research projects. In ICWG12 we explored individuals' experiences of participating in the initiative and their perceptions of its impact. In 2015 the focus of the research was on a longitudinal survey of participants' experience.

Research Evidence of Participants' Experiences

In parallel with the process of supporting the ICWGs' preparation of their papers at the two ISSoTL events, we investigated the experience of the participants (Healey et al., 2016). In 2012, we undertook two on-line surveys and a series of focus groups (Marquis, Healey, & Vine, 2014, 2016; Matthews, Marquis, & Healey, 2017). In spite of challenges related to group size and diversity, we found that ICWGs can enhance individual and collective SoTL capacity through mentoring relationships, creation of community, bringing together multiple perspectives, and experiential learning. A key factor in the success of the groups emphasized by the participants was effective leadership.

In a follow-up online survey of the nature of leadership in the 2012 ICWGs, we found that the most common things emphasised by the group leaders, according to the participants and the leaders themselves, were teamwork and community building, achieving consensus for decisions, and meeting responsibilities. All three were also given high efficacy ratings (Marquis, Mårtensson, & Healey, 2017). Effective leadership in an ICWG involves a tricky balance. On the one hand, a collaborative, distributed version of leadership was seen as most effective by participants as contributing both to developing SoTL capacity and to completing a collaborative article. On the other hand, the importance of group leaders also taking an active, fairly directive approach was also emphasized as necessary for completing the paper within a brief time frame.

Many of the interim findings from the 2015 survey confirm the 2012 results, but they also showed that "the roller coaster ride of the year and half-long journey" was not to everyone's taste and led us to suggest that to gain the most out of the experience, certain dispositions among the participants are desirable (Healey & Matthews, 2017):

1. Willingness to collaborate on a journey that has an uncertain outcome.
2. Adventurousness that embraces a journey of co-creation with unknown, diverse scholars.
3. Open mindedness to question *what one thinks* SoTL is.
4. Empathy for others from different cultures and contexts that affect how they collaborate.
5. Willingness to make time and space for collaboration using online tools.

These findings suggest some guidance that could be developed for facilitators and potential participants in future ICWGs.

Future Development of the Model

Encouraging faculty to engage with SoTL is challenging. Breslow et al. (2004) suggest that:

> One of the key ways in which to engage colleagues in their development as critical and reflective teachers, in a way that goes beyond the hints and tips they may need at the beginning of their teaching careers, is … to stimulate their intellectual curiosity. … The asking of questions is at the heart of intellectual curiosity and engaging staff in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). (p. 84)

As this article has shown, one way of stimulating curiosity and building capacity is working in an ICWG. However, the model is likely to have greater impact if it is adapted for use in national and local contexts as well.

The best example of a national version of the ICWG is the one developed by SoTL Canada and held at the STLHE16 conference, which is discussed in this Special Issue. The model also lends itself to adaption at institutional level where building capacity of faculty and students to engage in SoTL needs to begin. Many institutions have their own learning and teaching journals and a collaborative writing group initiative would be one way of developing copy for the journal and at the same time engage a significant number of people publishing on SoTL for the first time, with the support of more experienced colleagues.

CWGs, whether taking place at institutional, national or international levels, are an important addition to the armory of the SoTL community, although, as with most other learning initiatives, it is important to recognise that one solution does not suit all, and flexibility and variety in implementation are to be encouraged.

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