

Home alone? Creating accessible, meaningful online learning spaces to teach academic writing to doctoral students

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The challenge

The teaching of academic writing has seen disruptive changes since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Most prominently it signalled a need to turn to remote teaching at very short notice. Here, I share my experience as a self-employed academic writing teacher for doctoral students in Germany and its neighbouring countries.

In my writing workshops, rather than conveying knowledge or teaching techniques, I seek to support early career researchers as they explore what constitutes good academic writing in their research fields, expand their competencies, and develop their professional identities as members of their respective scientific communities (on writing as a social, embodied practice see: Kamler, 2008; Lee and Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison and Guerin, 2014; Kamler and Thomson, 2014). In my sessions I aim to create low-threshold, meaningful learning experiences that involve interacting with and learning from peers, working on real-life tasks, and being present as human beings with minds, emotions, and bodies (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007; Immordino-Yang and Gotlieb, 2017). Another important aspect is the focus on participants' resources and on solutions rather than problems (Bamberger, 2015; Oades et al., 2017; Middendorf, 2019).

When the pandemic forced me to move my support online, I wanted to retain my successful hands-on, interactive, personal approach but this created three main challenges: how could I transfer a successful analog approach online while still taking seriously the participants' specific needs as academic professionals? How could I ensure the writing workshop stayed as accessible as possible and kept its sense of live presence/character? How could

I support participants to reflect, interact, and connect as adult learners who do not just need and want to learn but also to contribute their own experiences and expertises (Knowles, Hilton III and Swanson, 2015)?

The response

To transfer as many qualities of a long-standing, well-evaluated teaching format to the online environment as possible, I took three major decisions: I wanted to deliver live (synchronous) sessions that felt real to the participants and that used simple technology.

I decided early to focus on **synchronous** training to engage participants in multiple ways (cognitive, social, visual, bodily-kinesthetic, etc. See: Gardner, 2011; Rapanta et al., 2020). The resulting shared live online space fostered a sense of togetherness, even though group members were not in the same physical room. I was visibly present in our virtual room during the whole workshop, even during small-group work. This availability and accessibility contributed to a focused atmosphere and was noted as a positive by participants. In addition, it enabled me to join small groups to answer questions and assist in technical/technological troubleshooting. Students reported that they appreciated my approach as it complemented the asynchronous, written forum discussions and feedback (e.g., on Moodle or Blackboard) offered by other colleagues.

I wanted my online teaching to have qualities which made it feel as **real** as its on-site counterpart. I reinforced this through the use of analogue objects and materials (flipchart, books, prompt cards) to complement digital whiteboards, slides, online resources, etc. I also encouraged participants to use long-hand writing (Mueller and Oppenheimer, 2014; Morehead, Dunlosky and Rawson 2019; Oppenheimer, 2019) for note-taking and other writing tasks.

To ensure that participants could focus on content and meaningful interaction (Turkle, 2017), I usually chose the **simplest** technical solution available. I did this in order to keep the training accessible for doctoral students, whose situations are traditionally precarious (Consortium for the National Report on Junior Scholars, 2021), and who were deprived of

the institutional infrastructure they could formerly rely on (e.g., modern computers, broadband, etc.) when forced to work from home.

During the workshop, students spent considerable time on synchronous writing tasks (e.g., free writing, writing sprints, storytelling, and mind-mapping). During individual tasks, they could choose to stay visibly present to strengthen the community of writers, or to find another workplace. In small groups, they gave and received peer feedback on drafts produced on the same day, or in advance, and discussed individual challenges and useful writing strategies. Breaks could also be spent together in break-out rooms created for informal, relaxed interaction with peers.

Participants really appreciated the steps I took to retain my hands-on approach with its focus on connecting with fellow human beings ('I was underestimating the importance of dialogue and feedback, I'll try to communicate more with my colleagues', 28 July 2020). They may have been at home, but they were not alone. The practical tasks I gave them were useful for creating an atmosphere of deeper thinking and playful experimentation in their writing ('I no longer fear writing. I now find writing playful', 8 September 2020; 'hand-writing: this increased the output during the writing sessions a lot for me', 15 January 2021). Students reported feeling even more productive after the online sessions; attending a workshop virtually from the comfort zone of one's desk might make it easier to just sit down and write than when in an unfamiliar classroom.

Recommendations

When I developed more routine and confidence, after the initial turmoil of adapting to online teaching, I realised that effective teaching depends on many factors. As an educational professional, I wanted to create live, synchronous environments where young academics with diverse backgrounds could enter the professional conversation and connect with me, each other, and themselves – wherever possible.

I did not want to teach writing skills but to empower young people in the academy (Peris-Ortiz and Lindahl, 2015; Rodríguez-Gómez and Ibarra-Sáiz, 2015). To reach this goal, I

addressed multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 2009; Gardner, 2011), I used humour (Powell and Andresen, 1985) and a fair share of pragmatism (Silvia, 2018).

To sum it up, the real question is not whether we teach on-site or online, but what kind of teaching we provide (Ross, Bayne and Lamb, 2019; Bayne et al., 2020). Educators are constantly challenged to reflect on who they are, and who and what they care about. What do you want your students to take away from your class? Once we are aware of our own motivations and foundations, we can create the learning/teaching environments that best suit us and our learners – whether we meet in the physical or virtual world.

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Vera Leberecht studied Linguistics, Intercultural Communication and Theology in Germany and Finland. She worked at Maastricht University Language Centre for several years, first as a teacher for academic writing, then as a head of department of the English Section. In 2008, she left the university to start her own training and consulting business. She is passionate about empowering professionals to communicate with reason and resonance, in academia and beyond.