

## ICE FELLOWSHIP:

## TALKING ABOUT WRITING – A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE APPROACH TO PGR WRITING DEVELOPMENT

'Talking about Writing – a community of practice approach to PGR writing development' was a project devised by Joanne Wood (FASS Learning Developer, specialises in academic writing) and Corinna Peniston-Bird (Professor in Gender and Cultural History, Dept of History). The project explored with self-selecting group of History PhD students how to be a writer and a judge of writing in terms of self, peer review, and teaching. It also allowed for an exploration of facilitation in partnership.

Fortnightly ninety-minute Teams sessions ran over Michaelmas, Lent and Summer Terms, with twelve sessions in total. In addition to the discussion, the group used the chat facility to record insights and observations: most contributions were made in person. About twenty students attended, some as stalwarts, some more occasionally; some were at the beginning, some in the middle and some approaching the end of their studies; there were part time and full time students, local and remote.

**Curriculum:** We began with the whale: an origami exercise devised by Joanne which allows students to share how they experience the intertwined nature of the emotional and the practical experience of the writing process. Further sessions went on to discuss

- gearing up for writing;
- sharing intent;
- feeding back on shared texts (authored by others/ increasingly by group members);
- writing (to deliver) oral presentations;
- overcoming barriers to writing;
- exploring editing;
- registers;
- secondary literature reviews;
- sub/conclusions

After the first two (pre-planned) sessions, as intended, this curriculum was suggested either by the facilitators arising from the course of discussion, or by student request. Some topics had multiple sessions (reviews, conclusions,). All brought up other issues not captured in the outline headings, such as the balance of voices (quotations); sincerity; humour; authority; disciplinary expectations etc.

**Evaluation:** We considered seriously but chose against student questionnaires in the end. As this was a self-selecting voluntary group, its persistence through strikes, work stresses, covid issues etc. signified its value to its members. Several expressed an aversion to becoming part of an audit culture, not least because of the nature of this as a safe and liberating space. All feedback volunteered was consistently positive.

We evaluated the dimension of the project focussed on the nature of shared facilitation through shared self-reflection and observation for 30 mins after many sessions and with twice-termly lengthier discussions. We were particularly interested in the processes, self-regulation and expertise required to underpin facilitation.

**Emulation:** On the basis of this experience, for others considering offering their PhD communities similar writing support we would recommend

- 1) a curriculum that develops organically out of those present, and can be reactive to the rhythms of the academic year (for example, conference season; appraisal and confirmation season etc.)
- 2) building, maintaining and valuing the trust that allows for the vulnerability of sharing prose
- 3) a nuanced approach to 'authority' in the group to value the principles of co-creation<sup>1</sup>
- 4) two facilitators who bring different knowledge and skills bases running the sessions together

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by Historic England: <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/documents/grants/everyday-heritage-grants-call-for-proposals/> projects that are built around mutually beneficial relationships between participants and facilitators; where everyone involved plays an active role and their expertise is treated equally; where the process is valued as highly as the product/s; [...] that have a lasting legacy.