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Writing as liberatory practice: Unlocking knowledge to locate an academic field

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Abstract

Research and writing are integral to academic identity; however, professionals identifying as Learning Developers form an international practitioner community with limited expectations for publishing. Inhabiting the liminal space between academic and professional roles, they have only recently begun to develop their own disciplinary scholarship. In this paper, the authors – Learning Developers who have transitioned from discipline-based to LD-based writing – argue that Learning Development (LD) struggles to be perceived as a distinctive academic field because it has not yet sufficiently written itself into existence. They propose a model for writing as liberatory practice that facilitates scholarly conversations and co-creation of an academic field. Through collective autoethnography, the authors build on their own positionality in LD in order to outline a framework for knowledge production, and demonstrate that scholars in emerging disciplines need encouragement and support to unlock their practitioner knowledge and articulate what makes them a unique scholarly field.

Keywords

academic writing; academic publishing; collaborative writing; liberatory practice; writing strategies

Introduction

This article explores the act of writing as a way of collectively building a field of knowledge and practice. Through the lens of Learning Development (LD), a relatively young sub-field of Education, we analyse the context in which its practitioners write and address its challenges by proposing a model of writing as liberatory practice. What this paper does not do is argue whether a particular field of knowledge or practice, in this case LD, should be a discipline; it has been undertaken elsewhere (Samuels, 2013: Hilsdon, 2018). It also does not have the ambition of clarifying the porous and contested definition of Learning Development. Instead, its focus lies chiefly in the importance of broadening the conversations that comprise a field by encouraging more voices to join through publication. While this might be an obvious route for academic disciplines, the situation is far more complex in the context of LD.

A common trope in higher education is that of ‘publish or perish’: the demand for outputs, citations and achievement that can determine the course of a career (Nygaard, 2015), but which also establishes and demarcates a discipline in an on-going, negotiated discourse. LD as a field has no such clear imperative, being located in ‘the third space’ (Whitchurch, 2008) between professional services and academia. When we as Learning Developers write, we do so with intention and with choice, rather than contractual compulsion. While this reduces the pressure on individuals to undertake the performativity of publication, it also carries the drawback of leaving LD as a field under-theorised (ldtheory.wordpress.com) and under-recognised (Samuels, 2013), a prospective discipline that has yet to be satisfactorily written into existence. Similarly, despite the shared values uniting those undertaking LD work across a multiplicity of backgrounds, the profession continues to lack an identity comprehendible to those outside its substantial international community.

This paper adopts a collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) approach (Adamson and Muller, 2018) to the pursuit of releasing the individual voices and narratives within the collective endeavour of writing of, into, and for LD as a profession, an activity characterised by a strong element of ‘voluntary compulsion’. In doing so collaboratively, we aim to resist the ‘“auto” of autoethnography’ (Gale and Wyatt, 2017, p.255) and maintain the visibility of the ‘claims and assertion of others’ (p.256). We acknowledge that our own experiences and disciplinary backgrounds will have shaped us as writers – we both hold doctorates in our respective disciplines and (as individuals with leadership roles in the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education) are dynamic members of the LD community with access to its collective voice. With this in mind, we therefore open up the social, professional and cultural landscape of LD to those ‘voices . . . muted or forcibly silenced within more traditional forms of research’ (Adamson and Muller, 2018, p.208).

Nevertheless, our own voices are important: the ‘auto’ of autoethnography stands apart from but in close relation to our understanding of the LD world, and adds to its richness. Our aim here is to draw on our own situated experiences as writers and Learning Developers and explore how they inform our practice, in a way that enriches the collective knowledge of the community. We do this by presenting a model of writing as liberatory practice, ‘as a way to challenge the status quo’ (hooks, 1994, p.60), and call fellow Learning Developers to the task of writing their profession into existence.

The paper therefore proceeds as follows. We begin by outlining the context of LD and its values, the pathways into the field and their repercussions for writing, and frame this with the concept of writing as a form of liberatory practice (hooks, 1994); specifically as way of ‘liberating the self’ by approaching writing as a collective endeavour. This idea is reflected in the methodology, which introduces collective autoethnography as writing from experience within a community context. As such, we use this section to present the various forms of dialogue in which we have engaged: with each other, with the wider community, and with colleagues who provided us with feedback on a draft of this paper, thereby placing our own conversations in conjunction with the social relations and voices that have informed them. We finish by introducing a model for writing as liberatory practice, which aims to reframe and transform common barriers to writing into acts of liberatory practice, thereby encouraging and guiding more practitioners into joining the conversation.

Context

LD is a relatively new field in higher education. It can be broadly defined as 'the practice of working alongside students to enable them to achieve their goals and reach their potential by teaching, demystifying, and challenging academic practices and conventions' (ALDinHE, n.d.), and this definitional breadth is also a hindrance to fully understanding LD's reach and focus. Over a hundred UK HE institutions are members of ALDinHE and more than a thousand practitioners subscribe to the LDHEN professional network; yet the field is rather poorly studied, written about, and understood. Learning Developers usually self-identify based on the activities and responsibilities they perform but also through a set of shared values (ALDinHE, n.d.). These, including partnership working and emancipatory practice, unite Learning Developers into a community of practice within the social structures provided by ALDinHE, which in turn provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and recognition of the individual as belonging to the community (Hilsdon, 2011). Active involvement in LD allows for a constant renegotiation of identity, and recognition of that identity by meaningful others through dialogue 'with each other at a professional level' (Agrifoglio, 2015, p.26).

LD, as a field of HE, embraces practitioners from a variety of disciplines, with a range of distinctive routes into the profession. Two prominent pathways include professional services and academic fields, but many colleagues also come from industry. Within these pathways there is much diversity in terms of experience, training, and expertise. Learning Developers include those formerly holding academic posts, and those with professional services backgrounds, such as student services, libraries, digital education, educational development, or counselling services. There are Learning Developers who hold hybrid posts, combining LD with subject specialism, but also academics who conduct research into LD for their pedagogic development or who self-identify as Learning Developers because they practise in line with LD values.

The sheer variation in practice, lack of precision in defining LD as a field with a 'signature pedagogy' (Webster, 2019), and sometimes lack of exposure to the publishing world, mean that even eager writers in LD might simply not know what and where to publish (Bickle et al., 2021). In addition, Learning Developers work on a range of contracts (academic and professional and in any combination of full-time, part-time, temporary or casual), with few requiring publishing, which removes the external pressures to investigate the publishing option. This is further augmented by the fact that LD-related jobs are often student-contact intensive, leaving little to no time for research in workload models. On the structural and systemic level, the lack of a clear career path and promotion opportunities in LD in many institutions can also lead to practitioners feeling unvalued and invisible (Hilsdon, 2018), thus searching for opportunities in more academically-oriented roles, which contributes to a sense of transience in the field. Altogether, these challenges may create considerable restrictions and limitations on many practitioners' will and ability to develop writing projects in Learning Development.

Writing as liberatory practice

While our larger mission is to begin creating a sense of professional compulsion for writing among Learning Developers in order to co-create the field, even in the absence of contractual compulsion, in this paper we do so by proposing looking at writing as liberatory practice.

What kind of liberation do we have in mind? Firstly, liberation from self-explanation. Learning Developers are practitioners who are regularly called to explain who they are (Eyre and Slawson, 2018). Learning Development is often confused with Learning & Development, and even more often used in a generic way, literally as 'developing learning'. In the absence of clear boundaries around the field, workable self-definitions, and a totalising vision, the narrative of LD is lost and our self-representation in crisis. The blurriness of the field and the variety of interests of its practitioners lend themselves to a fragmented, case study-driven and under-theorised (and thus under-valued) writing that is more concerned with explaining what Learning Developers do than with building a coherent body of knowledge.

Secondly, liberation from self-justification. Despite seeing the value of their interventions with students, Learning Developers often have to validate and justify their work in a higher education environment predicated on quantitative measures. While researchers increasingly take on this challenge (Johnson, 2018) and translate LD impact into hard data (Loddick and Coulson, 2020; Coulson, Loddick, and Rice, 2021), LD departments across HE institutions continue to lack the academic gravitas and an effective language to fight for scarce resources. Similarly to self-explanation, the constant need for self-justification undervalues LD voices and undermines confidence, although we believe that as the field matures and writes itself into existence, the propulsion to self-justify will subside.

Thirdly, liberation from self-doubt. The perceived need for self-explanation and self-justification contributes to self-doubt, and not only in terms of the content of writing but also the very ability to undertake the writing and publishing process (Edwards, 2019). This in turn exacerbates the fear involved in, and resistance to, writing. Our own experience of writing, however, compels us to posit a thesis that developing ideas *through* writing generates more ideas and more need for writing, and thus becomes a self-perpetuating process of creation and validation. This kind of liberation is particularly intoxicating where the demand and compulsion to produce is less consuming and more inner-directed. It is precisely that freedom to write and publish and the ability to actualise that freedom that we argue is so liberating. And while all these liberatory acts can be highly individualistic, it is ultimately a collective liberation for a community.

This final form of liberation therefore comes from collective endeavour, what we might term liberation from the self. Collaborative writing, by shifting from 'I' to 'we', necessarily acts to 'release the self' and allow space for others in a 'constant becoming' (Gale and Wyatt, 2017, p.358). What we are thus creating in this collective writing process is telling our 'collective story' (Richardson, 1997, p.14), a story of what bonds us together as practitioners, researchers, and writers in LD, and of how our constructed category of Learning Development offers us a unique lens into student experience and empowers us to take action on behalf of the field.

Liberation is certainly not the first word that comes to mind when thinking about writing. As we will discuss later in the paper, writing can be experienced as oppressive, restrictive, painful, frustrating, and laden with other negative emotions. Few of us sit down to write and feel instantly liberated. But we can write with that intention in mind; we can aspire to become liberated writers. Even though Learning Developers are experts in writing, we often separate the teaching of writing from writing as an act. Our writing can emerge from our practice, from the concrete experience of working with students, and our critical reflection on this experience. While our work is difficult to evidence and our methodologies blurry, the solution is not to rest in our own knowledge that we know-who-we-are and we see-the-difference-we-make-to-students-every-day, but to write more about our practice. Capitulation only prolongs the indistinctness of the discipline, gives more power to those who doubt us, and perpetuates the notion that we can do our job without writing and putting our ideas out in the world. To paraphrase Sunny Dhillon's (2019) words, we simply cannot afford not to write and theorise in LD. This paper is therefore a call to action: to write in order to establish our professional identity; demonstrate our impact and locate Learning Development firmly as a field; and liberate ourselves from self-doubt as LD researchers and practitioners.

We are thus writing this paper not for those who are already established and confident as active authors (although we welcome them as readers!) but mainly for those who are considering writing and publishing, those who definitely want to engage with it, those who have doubts about it, and those who need encouragement or helpful strategies to begin. We acknowledge that there is variety in preparedness for writing and publishing among Learning Developers and we hope that the framework we propose will be found useful and productive.

Perhaps a gentle disclaimer is due. We do not claim to be experts at writing and publishing in teaching and learning. Our combined publishing record is modest, although committed and growing. As average (if not entirely unrecognised in the community) Learning Developers, we feel we are on a similar journey to many of our colleagues and this positioning helps us empathise and seek ever more effective means to connect with writing and publishing.

Methodology

Collective autoethnography

In taking an autoethnographic approach to this paper, we have given ourselves the obligation to write about our experience, in 'a necessary process of constant discovery, of invention, of reversal, and of synthesis' (Goodall, 2000, p.24). Rather than positioning Learning Developers as objects of study and analysis, we seek to reflexively explore our writing worlds, rather than try to explain or predict that world (Wang and Geale, 2015). In the 'interpretivist and impressionist' nature of ethnographic writing (Goodall, p.77), we hope to confront the privilege of representation, and challenge established power relations by giving voice to those 'at the borders' (Tierney, 1988, p.66). We see the third space, and the Learning Developers within it, as being marginalised within the traditional research and publication context of higher education. Bakhtin (1981, p.348) argues that 'one's own discourse . . . will sooner or later begin to liberate [itself] from the authority of the other's

discourse,' in the process of authoring the self. What better way to author the self than through a written narrative that is contextualised, agentic, and dialogic (Naughton, 2014)? Accordingly, in the process of writing this paper we have considered both ourselves and the voices from our community to be active agents in our writing worlds.

In an effort to hear these voices, we initiated a community-led conversation on publishing in LD via a conference session entitled 'Turning knowledge into power: from presentations to publications' (Buckley and Syska, 2021), a space to share feelings about the perceived barriers to writing and publishing. We introduced the key pillars of our writing model, engaging participants in the possibilities of going beyond conference presenting as a scholarly activity. Six months later, we held a follow-up webinar (Rooney et al., 2021), which invited delegates to reflect on their 'scholarship story', looking ahead to what they might want to achieve and how they might get there. In addition, we kept a reflective record of our weekly meetings and the progress made in our writing, which informed our ideas and thinking around writing as liberatory practice.

Through writing together in real time we created an on-going dialogue of shifting meanings that constantly transformed our living piece of text. In doing so we illuminated a tacit process that was open to other voices, intentions and experiences in the community, refracting them through our own dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981). This dialogue was also extended through exchanges with our informal commentators whose observations we weaved into our writing, reinforcing its collaborative nature while universalising our experience.

Discussion

We opened this paper with a call to publish, one that has been a result of our own journey into LD. Our own voices therefore represent a struggle for the liberation from self-explanation, self-justification and self-doubt we have experienced as Learning Developers. As such, we present the story of our journeys here in dialogue with each other, in order to locate ourselves as writers in LD and to invite our readers to identify and reflect on their own pathways through LD in the context of their relationship to writing. In this discussion, we therefore shift the writing voice to briefly connect with the 'auto' in our autoethnography.

CB: We both write, and have written. What's your background as a writer?

AS: I am an Americanist and a historian, with deep roots in sociology. American Studies is a discipline that for a long time struggled to locate itself theoretically and methodologically (Maddox, 1999) and when I entered the field of LD and recognised its difficulties in defining itself and marking its disciplinary boundaries, I felt an instant affinity with this intellectual mission.

CB: That feels very familiar to me. My writing experience is rooted in history and anthropology, both with very distinct ways of writing and thinking, and the lack of that in LD left me somewhat rootless for the first few years I was engaged in it. I needed something to anchor my experiences and ideas to, and I couldn't immediately find it.

AS: For me, it was very serendipitous to discover that one of my most admired authors in the field of American Studies, bell hooks, was also one of the most inspiring writers on teaching and learning. It was ultimately her book, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), that most profoundly inspired my pedagogic thinking and later our conceptual framework for this article. hooks writes that she 'came to theory because [she] was hurting . . . wanting to comprehend' and theory became her 'location for healing' (p.59).

CB: The idea of liberation appeals to me because where I feel most at home as a writer is in the telling of lives, the analysis of circumstances and situations, and the framing of perspective. I've carried this through into my fiction writing and my professional life, both contexts requiring that I reflect on the needs and experiences of others.

AS: And ourselves, too. We have turned to writing to heal our frustrations as Learning Developers struggling for identity and recognition. Where for hooks theorising was a way of finding her way back home, for us writing has become a way of finding a home for LD.

CB: Writing as a way to not only build the field, but also ourselves within the field.

AS: And also to reconsider what a 'field' is. I like Richardson's playful description of a field as 'an open, inviting expanse, . . . a place where "energy" converts to "matter"', although she still acknowledges it as 'also a battlefield, a minefield, a war zone' (p.4).

CB: With the conflicting visions of whether LD should be a discipline at all or whether we should take advantage of its fuzzy boundaries and build on this definitional uncertainty, navigating writing in LD can certainly feel like a minefield sometimes!

Aware of the limitations and inevitable bias of our own thinking, we were curious how other Learning Developers experienced writing for publication, so in our conference session we asked a series of questions probing colleagues' attitudes and perceptions, as well as emotional responses to writing. Their answers presented a range of reasons for not engaging in writing for publication, the most representative of which included:

> *I used to think that I don't have a PhD, so I am not 'qualified' or 'trained' to write for publication.*
> *Lack of confidence in identifying an appropriate research method that is relevant and of interest.*
> *Half-formed (at best, at times!) ideas - prospect of working them up/knocking them into shape is daunting.*

These conversations made us more aware of our own positionality. For example, we had not appreciated the perceived imperative of holding the highest academic qualifications when engaging in writing for publication, as we saw our 'right to write' as existing independently of our PhDs. Conversely, the issues involving knowledge of research methods and inability to formulate compelling research problems strongly resonated with us. Similarly, participants' statements invoking, unsurprisingly, 'lack of time' (or, more poignantly phrased by some, not 'making time') were familiar to us, as was the fear of not being 'good enough'. Our participants also described the idea of writing for publication in opposing terms, as both 'exciting' – with incentives ranging from increased 'credibility with academic colleagues' to enhanced sense of 'self-worth', 'achievement', and making a 'contribution to the field', to

'daunting' – with the accompanying terror of being exposed as an 'imposter' or ridiculed by reviewers or the community.

These themes were evident again in the follow-up webinar (Rooney et al., 2021), with external pressures around contracts (no 'official' research time provided) jostling against the perception that only peer-reviewed journal articles 'counted'. Overriding this was a sense that the diversity of the field and the contexts in which practitioners work should also be reflected in a diversity of approaches to scholarship, publication and dissemination. Participants welcomed our proposals of offering access to centralised, community-based support, such as mentoring, podcasts with authors, curated bibliographies and structured writing sessions, as a way of finding encouragement, guidance and inspiration for writing.

The lively conversations at both sessions resonated with our own experiences of writing, with those perceptions less customary to us significantly enriching our understanding of the inner battles, fears and resistance that we as a community need liberating from. The products of these conversations, combined with our own experience and bolstered by research on writing, informed our approach to writing for publication in this paper. It also allowed us to propose a model for writing as liberatory practice, which we refined in our own collaborative writing process. The model is therefore an outcome of our own experience, which we have been able to verify against the experiences of others.

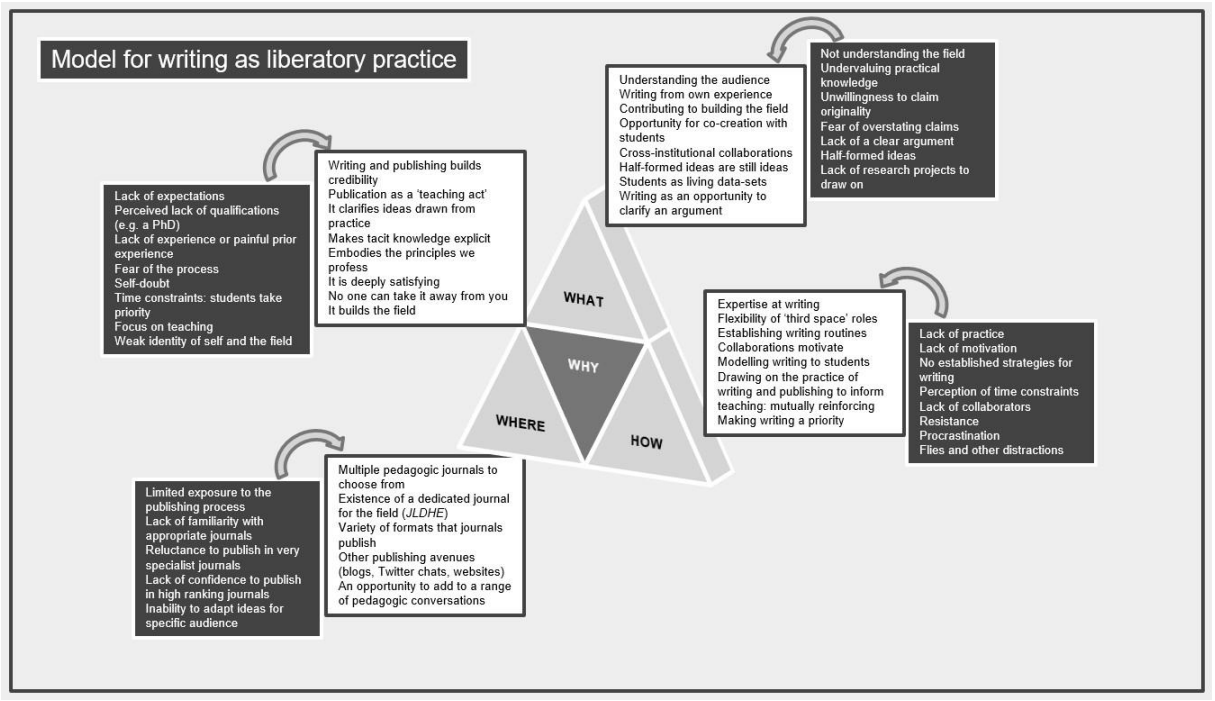
A model for writing as liberatory practice

Like academics and practitioners in other, particularly less sharply defined, fields, Learning Developers 'are restrained and limited by the kinds of cultural stories available to us' (Richardson, p.2). These stories are often self-limiting and can sometimes confirm the status quo instead of rigorously scrutinising existing paradigms, approaches, and methods. Our conversations with colleagues demonstrate that as Learning Developers, for example, we tend to believe that we excel at 'showing', rather than 'telling'; that we lack practice in writing for publication; that we should focus our efforts on the groundwork – supporting and developing students' learning, rather than our own disciplinary knowledge. With such stories as part of our professional narrative, how can we profess to 'know' something, make contributions to the existing scholarship, and collectively write the field into existence?

Not uniquely to LD, even if we as writers acknowledge that we 'need' or 'want' to write something, we often struggle to identify 'why' we want to write it, 'what' we want to write, 'how' we want to write it, and 'where' we want it to appear, which addresses the more profound question of who we want to write it for. Figure 1 proposes a deliberate strategy for initiating, sustaining, and actualising the process of writing for publication in a way that liberates the writing practice. It is designed to acknowledge the contexts that affect our writing, undermine the defeatist stories we tell ourselves about writing, and demystify the writing process while enabling strategies for liberated writers. It puts forward four key questions a prospective author must consider in order to embark upon a writing project and brings out into the open the most common barriers to writing in LD. It then proposes alternative, more productive, stories that reframe writing as liberatory practice. Below we explain the four pillars of the model and its liberating potential from the perspective of our

own, and our colleagues', experience. In this discussion, we return to the more playful format of a dialogue in order to position ourselves as participants in the ongoing conversation, who look at writing as a dialectical process of (self)discovery.

Figure 1: Model for writing as liberatory practice. The four pillars of the model are placed in the pyramid, with statements in black boxes representing common obstacles to writing and white boxes offering a more productive reframing of these statements.



Why?

The question 'why write?', and more specifically, 'why publish?', is the central one a writer needs to answer, and we have learnt first hand of a range of demotivating factors that may hinder or even prevent commitment to writing for publication.

CB: What's clear is that for us and some of the colleagues we consulted, working on professional or teaching-related contracts brings limited institutional expectations to publish, despite our qualifications. Other powerful deterrents to publishing in LD include scarcity of dedicated research time for formal research projects, lack of solid disciplinary foundations built on well-established paradigms and methods, and a weak academic identity of Learning Developers stemming from the under-theorised field.

AS: Equally powerful motivators, however, may allow us to shift these operating assumptions. In our own experience, publishing and being part of scholarly conversations has bolstered our professional capital as well as our writing identity (French, 2020). We have also found publication to be 'a teaching act' (Boyer, 1995) that clarifies ideas drawn from practice, makes tacit knowledge explicit, and embodies the principles we profess in our practice. Here, I'd like to lean on bell hooks's words again: 'There are writers who write for

fame. And there are writers who write because we need to make sense of the world we live in; writing is a way to clarify, to interpret, to invent' (1999, p.13).

Writing for publication is not evidence of one's qualifications or 'intellectual abilities' but rather shows 'access to, and experience with, effective writing strategies' (Jensen, p.13). When it comes to addressing the question 'why?', one of those strategies proposed by Jensen is writing a mission statement. Our mission statement for this project was 'to compel Learning Developers to write so we can collectively build LD as an academic field'. We were also energised by James Baldwin's words: 'You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well you probably can't, but…if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way…people look at reality, then you can change it' (cited in Watkins, 1978, p.3). If we inspire one Learning Developer to set time aside to write up and publish their work, this article will have been worth writing. Indeed, one of our commentators exclaimed after reading the first draft: 'It makes me want to write something today!'

When deciding to write, it is vital to choose projects we will enjoy and care about, and here Jensen has an important piece of advice again: 'follow your lilt' (p.79). If talking about a project fills us with enthusiasm rather than flattening our voice because we committed to something uninspiring we feel obliged to continue, then we might still endure the writing but also miss out on the joys of writing and the sense of accomplishment derived from working on what matters to us. Simply put, the 'lilt' becomes our 'why'.

What?

Unlocking the 'what?' of writing is central to transforming practical knowledge into shareable outputs, yet we must first recognise our practical knowledge as valuable in an institutional culture that increasingly favours formal, funded research submitted as part of assessment exercises (REF, 2021).

CB: To complicate this further, while our professional culture values community, this can problematise claims to originality in an area of practice (for example, see McCulloch and Horak, 2019). Although we attend pedagogic conferences and are active in the field, we still must work to keep up to date with scholarship, to determine any gaps that will provide a suitable rationale for publishing, and to discern what is held to be valuable by fellow practitioners. The two of us are not new to writing yet even we recognise this as a barrier, one which may be significant or even insurmountable to those with less experience.

AS: Nevertheless, our fellow practitioners comprise an established audience with clear needs and interests, and writing gives us opportunities to reflect on practice, clarify arguments and develop half-formed ideas. Writing from our own experience has been a useful starting point from which to build expertise and, subsequently, collaborative opportunities, intra- and inter-institutionally and with students, who themselves constitute a living dataset for any Learning Developer to explore.

Doubting that you have something to say may lead to procrastination, which is a form of resistance that will 'tell you anything to keep you from doing your work' (Pressfield, 2012,

p.9). Pressfield's words were firmly etched on our psyches throughout the writing of this article, especially his statement: 'The most pernicious aspect of procrastination is that it can become a habit. We don't just put off our lives today; we put them off until our deathbed' (p.22). Resistance to writing is normal, especially when we seek perfection, but the response to it should never be to stop writing. What we found is that the more you write, and the more you train yourself to sit down and write, not only will you become a better writer, but you will also find it easier to sit down and write. This approach aligns with one of the core tenets of stoicism: 'what stands in the way becomes the way' (Aurelius, *Meditations 5.20*); in other words, writing happens by writing.

Sometimes the question of what to write can be more easily answered when working and discussing ideas with others. We cannot emphasise enough the importance and value of collaborative writing, which is increasingly recognised among educational practitioners (Peters et al, 2021). Whether it is designing and developing projects with a colleague – like us – or being part of a writers' group or community of practice (Bickle et al., 2021), or participating in writing retreats (MacLeod, Steckley and Murray, 2012), or just receiving feedback on your 'shitty first drafts' (Lamott, 1995, p.21), writing collaboratively and collegially can be one of the most productive strategies for creating research outcomes (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2022). Drawing on and giving back to others' knowledge, experience and energy consolidates motivation (Ness et al., 2014) and contributes to creating an invaluable writing culture.

Our answer to 'what?' was therefore to begin with an auto-ethnographic collaborative exploration of our own relationship with writing and its harnessing in the service of the LD community. We kept a 'ventilation file' (Jensen, 2017) to express our frustrations and to free-write ideas, but also to motivate each other, as seeing each other's notes in our shared folder reinforced our dedication to the project. It also provided us with valuable material to use as evidence in this collaborative autoethnographic undertaking.

Where?

Even when we know what we want to write about, finding a suitable destination can be daunting. The question of where to publish is a question of audience – for whom do we want to write? Most academics write for other academics; some for the public. The platform we choose has profound consequences regarding whom and how we engage in the conversation.

AS: Most Learning Developers are well aware of the existence of the flagship journal for LD – the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. *JLDHE* publishes writings on topics that align with the values of LD and is a lively forum for LD professionals. However, its specialist readership and lack of impact factor may preclude participation in important conversations happening in more established journals with a wider audience. On the other hand, while these journals may be more attractive to experienced writers and many Learning Developers have been successful in publishing there, their often very stringent requirements and high rejection rates may be intimidating to new authors.

CB: And yet the wide range of pedagogic outlets opens different conversations in teaching and learning. Healey et al. (2020) provide a useful guide to the top HE journals, which also publish a range of formats, from standard research papers, case studies, and opinion pieces, to shorter forms and assorted modalities. Increasingly, scholarly activity is not limited to journal and book publications, but includes blogs (e.g., #Take5), online magazines (e.g. *Creative Academic*), social media threads (e.g., #LTHEchat), and resource sharing (e.g., LearnHigher).

AS: Indeed, many journals have been experimenting with textual form and voice. For example, *JLDHE* recently published a compendium of short reflective pieces that liberated authors from the standard article format, providing a useful first publishing experience for many new writers and bringing together Learning Developers, librarians, academics and others in a discursive space (*JLDHE*, 2021). This idea has since been extended to the Conference Proceedings from the 2022 ALDinHE conference, which were reimagined as collaborative and reflective conversations between presenters and delegates and which offered another route into writing and publication.

These outlets all signify opportunities in need of contributors, and we have learnt the value of saying yes to opportunities. Discovering a potential outlet may also lie in reaching out to collaborators, joining groups and talking to editors. Seeking feedback from colleagues is a valuable first step in making not only our ideas known to others but also ourselves accountable. To liberate our practice through writing means to consider who we are talking to – in person and on paper.

We considered our publishing outlet in consonance with the conversation we wanted to provoke and progress, and the wider platform we wanted to reach with this article. We clarified our *What?* and *How?* first, and then looked for an audience that would welcome it.

How?

The question of how to write should come easier to those who teach others the process, yet even so, if we do not write regularly, the lack of practice will make itself known.

AS: We have found that creating strategies for writing reduces the risk of procrastination, which we experience in this context as being akin to imposter syndrome, i.e. the fear of failure that can arise in someone who ‘should’ know how to write but who nevertheless doesn’t know how to start. Procrastination serves a purpose here in that engaging this fear of failure actively protects the procrastinator’s sense of worth and ability from potential harm (Abdi Zarrin et al, 2020). In addition, a common misconception, related to procrastination, is that writing can only be successfully achieved through binge-writing (often under pressure of a deadline), whereas Silvia (2007) and Jensen (2017) advocate scheduling and protecting regular, shorter periods of time.

CB: This is where we have again benefited from collaborative writing, and the motivation and support that a writing partner can provide, which is in turn underpinned by the social practices inherent in LD’s characteristic academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 1998). The relative flexibility and autonomy of our professional roles allows us to manage

our daily activities, making it possible to schedule writing either alone or with a partner. While many Learning Developers can find themselves constrained by the demands of students, developing productive habits around writing will also inform teaching practice (Nygaard, 2015). In addition, modelling writing to students, involving them in the process, and bringing them into the conversation, is one of the central values of Learning Development – only by writing can we claim credibility in advising on writing.

Writing productivity advice is fairly consistent in that scheduling regular writing sessions in your diary and showing up for them (as with any other appointment) is crucial to successful projects. They can be as short as fifteen minutes a day (Bolker, 1998; Jensen, 2017) to keep in touch with the project, and ideally they would happen at the time of the day when you write best (Jensen, 2017). This is easier if you write collaboratively – co-writers hold you to account – but showing up for yourself is just as important. When people insist they don't have time, we will hazard that they mean it is not a priority. Make it a priority, and all else will follow. For the six months of writing this piece, the two of us met weekly for an hour or so and miraculously never cancelled a session. There were more and less productive days but we kept chipping away and often found much joy in our conversations and reading each other's creations. Showing up takes discipline but it shouldn't be difficult in itself. If it is, then it might be worth returning to *why* you want to write and question your motivations.

Staring at a blank screen is very intimidating and we avoided it by beginning the project with detailed outlining, which is a form of writing that clarifies thinking. Here, we followed Silvia's (2007, p.79) motto that '[w]riters who complain about "writer's block" are writers who don't outline'. A good outline allows you to simultaneously develop multiple threads of the project, so each time you return to it, the page is already partially filled. We favoured Murray's Level 3 outlining (2020, p.109) when creating a detailed design for our paper with allocated word counts for each section. Then we assigned ourselves to those sections and focused on completing one in each writing session. This 'chunking' of the project and tackling the writing process 'bird by bird' (Lamott, 1995) allowed us to have manageable goals and even created excitement around the tasks.

Our most consequential answer to *How?* was: collaboratively, regularly, and methodically, and from there we developed a range of principles and strategies that allowed us to complete the process.

To summarise, it is important to acknowledge that writing is almost universally acknowledged as difficult, which is why multiple guides to writing and publishing exist, from the more general books (Zinsser, 2006; Sword, 2012), to more strategy-orientated manuals (Silvia, 2007; Jensen, 2017), to those focused specifically on writing in academia and T&L (Murray, 2020; Healey et al., 2020). As Jensen (2017, p.21) put it, 'Just like most diet advice is some version of "eat less, move more", most writing advice is some version of "fear less, write more"'. That fear and the obstacles we all face when approaching writing need to be recognised so we can liberate ourselves into writing and begin to execute our projects. We hope that the model we have proposed here will guide our readers in this process.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was never to argue for the need for LD to become an academic discipline. In referring to it as a field, rather than a discipline with its complex conceptual implications, our starting point was to acknowledge the common values of LD (ALDinHE, n.d.) that unify the cacophony of voices the field comprises. A professional field is circumscribed by the conversations that happen within, around and for it. Our aim was to open up those conversations and compel expansion of this cacophony by encouraging more voices to join in through writing. For third space professionals, such as Learning Developers, to become engaged in those conversations, encouragement is imperative.

Nevertheless, many will question whether writing – consistently, and to publication standard – is possible when not part of a formal job description, and whether this is even something that most Learning Developers want. We do not claim to speak for an entire community but base our conclusions on the insights derived from an array of conversations and interactions with colleagues, combined with reflections on our own experiences. We acknowledge that questions remain regarding the importance of writing for Learning Developers' identity and field recognition.

The approach of collective autoethnography we adopted in this paper was intended to give space to the individual voices and stories of the LD community, to better understand the motivations, troubles and desires inherent in the act of writing of, into, and for LD as a profession. We have identified this as a 'liberatory practice', a way of overcoming the tension between the rewards of and obstacles to writing, which chimes with Toni Morrison's assertion that 'The function of freedom is to free someone else' (cited in Lamott, 1995, p.193). In the same way, we have ourselves felt liberated by the process of creating and then following the model for liberatory writing, and this sense of mission and direction in our own writing is something we can in turn pass on to other prospective writers.

What writing as liberatory practice can offer the community is less fear around writing, more courage to publish, and the freedom to shape the field and its future. Each act of writing is an act of courage that allows us to get in touch with who we are, contribute to our collective story, and measure our participation within the field. It is also an act of giving (Lamott, 1995), that helps us abandon the rhetoric of disciplinary newness and commit to articulating as best we can the ideas and principles governing and guiding LD professional practice. The provocation of this article is that this mission can be accomplished most effectively through writing and publishing, with every Learning Developer responsible for their part in unleashing their knowledge and unlocking the field.

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