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Collaborative Writing as a Scholarship Activity: A Framework for Extension Faculty

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Abstract

As Extension faculty and staff work to meet the requirements for increased scholarship activities through multiple outlets, a collaborative writing activity can be an important instrument in one's academic toolbox. Writing collaboratively allows colleagues to support one another's individual strengths and work through concerns together. This shared endeavor can help Extension professionals translate and disseminate the impacts of and findings from Extension programming for academic and practitioner audiences.

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Introduction

The tenure and promotion expectations for field-based Extension faculty at some land-grant institutions have been shifting (Enfield & Lee, 2004; Llewellyn, 2013). For example, expectations for tenure and promotion at Washington State University (WSU) include publication of peer-reviewed journal articles and other forms of peer-reviewed publications that may include Extension bulletins, poster presentations at professional meetings, and other forms of media (Washington State University, 2014). These revised standards are consistent with increased recognition for field-based Extension positions, which are now categorized as professorships and involve the same duties and responsibilities for producing scholarship that research and instructional faculty positions have. The standards reflect a shift away from traditional Extension publications, such as newsletters and other locally produced publications.

Action

In response to shifting expectations, a diverse group of youth and family Extension faculty created a professional development experience to assist one another in strengthening skills needed for scholarship and identifying opportunities for generating peer-reviewed publications. In 2014, the group, a mix of county-based, departmental, and statewide Extension faculty, met in person in a neutral location—a public library meeting room in a remote community that was away from each member's primary work location.

The goals of the group were to develop collaborative writing teams, to share ideas, and to provide support in completing articles for submission. Prior to gathering in person, the group met several times via conference call to outline the process that would support the experience. Understanding the world of journals emerged as one of the first steps that would be needed in the process. The group identified the need to research and compile information about journals that would be likely to publish Extension articles and the associated submission requirements. The departmental Extension specialist in the group, who had a strong history of publishing in peer-reviewed journals, created a journal review matrix. Each group member reviewed at least two journals and completed the journal review matrix for each journal prior to the in-person gathering. (An example of a completed matrix is shown in Figure 1.) The group shared their completed journal review matrices via Dropbox, an online file storing and sharing application. This effort was a step toward choosing appropriate outlets for works the group members would produce. As Silvia (2015) emphasized, "picking the right journal for your manuscript takes more experience than you think to do it well" (p. 37).

Figure 1.
Example Journal Review Matrix

Journal Name	<i>Journal of Extension (JOE)</i>
Link to Author Guidelines	http://www.joe.org/for-authors-submission-guidelines.php
Audience	Extension educators and adult educators
Topic Areas Covered	“Successful educational applications, original and applied research findings, scholarly opinions, educational resources, and changes on issues of critical importance to Extension educators.”
Article Categories (e.g., Research in Brief; Ideas that Work)	<p>Feature: (3 reviewers). Concepts & findings of interest & significance to increase knowledge base, methodology, effective practice & organization. Emphasize IMPLICATIONS for U.S. Extension. Max 3,000 words</p> <p>Research in Brief: (3 reviewers). Data and methods emphasized more. Specific & Localized. Max 2,000 words.</p> <p>Ideas at Work: (1 reviewer). Max 1,000 words. Novel ideas, innovative programs, new methods.</p> <p>Tools of the Trade: (editor reviews). Max 1,000 words. Report specific materials, books, techniques, & technologies useful to Extension professionals.</p> <p>Commentary: (editor reviews). Max 1,500 words. Offer a challenge or present a thought-provoking opinion on an issue of concern to U.S. Cooperative Extension. Initiate discussion or debate by responding to a</p>

	Cooperative Extension. initiate discussion or debate by responding to a previously published JOE article.
Print or Online Only	Online only
Publication Frequency	Publishes 6 issues annually. Anecdotally, some articles can be in queue once “in press” for some time. This is usually related to copyright compliancy issues.
Acceptance Rate or Impact Factor	25.5% as of 5/11/16
Representative Extension Article	<p>Deen, M. Y., Parker, L.A., Hill, L.G., Huskey, M. & Whitehall, A.P. (2014). Development and Implementation of a Successful Cultural Competency Training for Extension and Outreach Professionals. <i>Journal of Extension</i>, 52(1).</p> <p>Crawford, J. K., Riffe, J., & Adesope, O. (2014). Buffering Negative Impacts of Divorce on Children: Evaluation of Divorce Education Program’s Impact. <i>Journal of Extension</i>, 52(4).</p> <p>Pendry, P., Roeter, S., Smith, A., Jacobson, S., & Erdman, P. (2013). Trajectories of Positive and Negative Behavior During Participation in Equine Facilitated Learning Program for Horse-Novice Youth. <i>Journal of Extension</i>, 51(1).</p> <p>Cummings, M., Petty, B., Hansen, L., Hoffman, K., & Wittman, G. (2012). Expanding the Reach of Extension to Underserved Audiences Through Study Circles in Rural Idaho. <i>Journal of Extension</i>, 50(4).</p>

The in-person gathering was launched with a reflection on each individual's writing strengths and challenges. Silvia (2007) in a review of the writing process described specious barriers that are superficially plausible but actually wrong. Common specious barriers to writing include poor time management, lack of regularity, negative self-talk, poor preparation, and not waiting for inspiration. The group focused on these and other barriers to guide a discussion of what each person viewed as his or her strengths and challenges related to writing efforts. Identifying and acknowledging collective strengths and areas of growth or concern is vital to building effective writing teams of any size and can help set the stage for both physical and cognitive space, as well as allow time for individuals to manage strong feelings that can get in the way of productivity (Murray, Steckley, & MacLeod, 2012).

Setting aside time for reflection and dialogue at the beginning and end of each day of the in-person gathering provided a forum in which faculty could express thoughts on specific aspects of their work and the collaborative writing experience as a whole. The act of revisiting collective strengths and working through concerns together built a foundation of mutual trust and support. Approaching writing through the lens of a team allowed the group members to draw strength from one another and thereby push through challenging or unfamiliar realms.

Institutionalizing the Application

One year later, in spring 2015, WSU Extension established the Extension Scholarly Writing Group in which

colleagues could support one another's publishing efforts through mentorships and accountability. This year-long commitment generated 10 submitted publications from 12 participants. The successes of this group and the previously described collaborative writing group demonstrate the need for faculty to set aside time for writing and suggest that this can be done in both formal and informal settings.

Conclusion

Writing can be an empowering experience for Extension professionals, from the novice to the prolific writer. Approaching writing with the goal of collaboration and teamwork can enable those participating to work through and overcome fear and to find that which empowers the creative mind. It is through this collaborative approach to writing that one can find support to help organize thoughts and ideas as well as to "discuss issues . . . establish positions . . . stimulate writing [and] provide time and space for reflection on writing more broadly" (MacLeod, Steckley, & Murray, 2012, p. 642).

As Extension faculty work to meet the requirements for increased publishing activities, it has become clear that supporting the development of authorship is needed. Familiarizing oneself with journals and journal requirements, identifying individual strengths and challenges, making a commitment to regular writing practice, and developing a team of people with whom one can write are all instruments in one's academic toolbox. These tools can help Extension faculty better translate and disseminate the impacts of and findings from Extension programming for academic and practitioner audiences.

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