

A short course in writing for publication for health promotion practitioners

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Introduction

Many good health promotion programs are implemented and evaluated but not published. The potential for the field to learn from these programs is therefore reduced. This paper describes the development and piloting of an intervention to increase the skills and confidence of practitioners through a Health Promotion Writing for Publication Short Course (the Short Course), which was an innovative approach to support skill development in writing for publication to increase the dissemination skills of health promotion practitioners.

The course aim was to increase the skills and confidence in writing for publication among health promotion practitioners working in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) of Melbourne.

The Australian Health Promotion Association's Core Competencies for Health Promotion Practitioners state that an entry level practitioner should be able to write for a variety of audiences and purposes including peer reviewed journals, program plans and program update reports,¹ and Mittlemark²

asserts that 'health promoters must...share learnings of what works within and between countries' (pg. 34). Extending on this, King et al³ suggest that the dissemination of learnings from health promotion programs has been neglected.

There have been many attempts to increase writing for publication in health promotion through workshops held at local, national and international health promotion conferences, however the attendees have not been followed-up. The barriers to writing for publication include lack of confidence and lack of time, as academic writing is not usually incorporated in the work plans of most health promotion practitioners.⁴ As a result, many research projects remain unpublished, meaning that potentially useful findings remain inaccessible to the wider health promotion community.

The Short Course was based on the principles of adult experiential learning that support a 'participative, learner-centred approach, which places an emphasis on direct engagement, rich learning events and the construction of meaning by learners.⁵ To this end, we also drew on the

Abstract

Issue addressed: Many good health promotion programs are implemented and evaluated but not published. The potential for the field to learn from these programs is therefore reduced. This article describes the design of an intervention to increase skills and confidence in writing for publication amongst health promotion practitioners in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) of Victoria.

Methods: Health promotion practitioners from Community and Women's Health funded organisations in the EMR participated in the intervention, which was based on peer learning principles through a Short Course with key design elements. Two workshops were held over a two month period with a peer review process in between.

Results: Of the 26 novice participants in the workshops, 14 wrote an article that was published in some form. At four weeks post the course, another four had an article in draft format which they planned to submit in the near future. All participants indicated a desire to continue to write for publication.

Conclusions: Expecting health promotion practitioners to publish their work has had limited success in the past. This relatively short intervention has shown that to succeed, practitioners require a range of supports to enable them to gain the skills and confidence needed to write for publication.

Key words: capacity building, publication, dissemination, peer learning

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So What

Writing for publication by practitioners is achievable, and an important mechanism for disseminating the results of health promotion practice. There is much scope for health promotion practitioners to be making a greater contribution to the evidence base.

principles of peer learning. Peer learning is under recognised as a form of professional development because the ‘... credibility of peers’ knowledge is frequently undermined by the traditional reliance on outside experts, trainers and mentors’.^{6(p32)} Its potential is said to be almost unlimited because ‘...a peer learning partnership entails much more than simply learning from each other... it means learning with each other’.^{7(p14)}

Method

The multifaceted approach to building the capacity of health promotion practitioners to write for publication involved the following:

- 2 face-to-face workshops;
- creation and dissemination of tools to assist with writing for publication;
- a peer review process; and
- support from the funding body.

The Short Course was advertised through internal networks to the Victorian EMR Community and Women’s Health Service staff, inviting health promotion practitioners to participate. A pre questionnaire was sent to all registered participants (n=26) one month prior to the first workshop. The questionnaire sought to assess participant’s expectations of the course, previous experience in writing for publication and barriers to writing up their work. All participants were asked to bring a draft article of their own writing to the workshop.

Workshops and peer review process

The workshops were facilitated by academic staff from Monash University. In the first workshop, participants explored themselves as writers using an activity developed by Petrucci,⁸ enabling participants to identify strengths and weaknesses in their personal writing style.

Participants also actively explored a step-by-step guide to constructing a journal article developed by Dixon⁹ who suggests ‘... new authors can acquire experience in writing a paper by working through a systematic thought process that includes consideration of what journal readers and editors want and if the work is ready for publication’.^{9(p417)} Using a draft of their own writing, the activity enabled participants to think through the key ideas and their messages for readers, and they started to organise their ideas into a logical structure.⁹ Participants were then paired up with a peer reviewer and provided with a template developed by the facilitators to critically review each other’s draft articles. Over the next month, participants were tasked with advancing their draft articles using the peer review process, which involved the pairs swapping drafts of their articles and critically reviewing them

using the template. Many participants indicated they would use their own time to write the article as their organisations were not supportive of them completing this task during their normal work hours.

The second workshop was a forum for feedback as well as open peer-review process. Participants were able to reflect on what they had achieved, the barriers they had experienced, and the next steps required to finalise the articles. A second peer review was organised after the workshop to assist with final revisions before submission by the author to their chosen journal, newsletter or newspaper.

Mindful of evaluation, we ensured that we could measure both process and impacts. To measure process, participants were asked to complete a post questionnaire at the conclusion of each workshop. To measure impact, participants were asked to complete pre and post course questionnaires. These questionnaires obtained both qualitative and quantitative information about the experiences of participants prior to, during and after the course.

Results/Discussion

Pre-course questionnaire

A 50% response rate was achieved (n=13). The main barriers reported to writing for publication were consistent with the literature, i.e. lack of time, lack of confidence and lack of skill. We also knew anecdotally that these were a major concern for health promotion practitioners considering publishing their work.

Post-course questionnaire

Two months post workshop two, a post questionnaire was distributed to participants, a 100% (n=26) response rate was received. Of the 26 participants in the workshops, 14 went on to publish an article in some form of publication. For several, the publication was in a professional newsletter at the Victorian or National level. This was a good first step for novice writers, and these publications gave satisfaction and confidence to participants in working towards peer-reviewed journal publication. At four weeks post the course, another four had an article in draft format and planned to submit them to a peer reviewed journal in the near future. All participants indicated a desire to continue to write for publication.

Feedback indicated that the workshops were successful in building skills and confidence around academic writing and the peer review process was valuable. Participants appreciated the different perspective that a peer could provide on their work. A small number of participants⁵ reported some frustration with the peer review process as they were unable to find someone to review their article or their nominated

peer let them down by not completing reviews as agreed. In hindsight, the peer review process would have benefited from better structure to avoid some of the issues experienced by workshop participants.

A recurring issue with professional development workshops is the continued application of the skills learned once participants are back in the workplace. Participants were asked what processes or systems (in their workplace) would support them to continue to write for publication. Overwhelmingly, participants responded that they would welcome support to have writing time included in work plans. They wanted to continue the peer review network to provide support for writing for publication. The majority of participants indicated that they intend to continue to write for peer-reviewed journals, newsletters or local publications.

The processes involved in piloting the Short Course have demonstrated that practitioners often undervalue their capabilities and experiences. Consequently, they undervalue the significance of what they have learned from their work and rarely share those learnings. The opportunity for peer-to-peer learning was at first, confronting for practitioners, but they could see the potential and embraced the process quickly. The tools developed for the short course gave participants concrete strategies to take back to the workplace to ensure their learnings and outcomes could be sustained beyond the intervention.

Peer review processes and a peer-learning network sought to address the main barriers to writing for publication, i.e. lack of confidence.⁴ By creating a peer relationship and allowing a peer to review work prior to submission, authors felt an increased sense of confidence with their work. This peer relationship also contributed to the sustainability of outcomes from the short course as it established professional relationships that can be sustained beyond the life of the short course.

Conclusions

Sharing of learnings through publication by practitioners is a critical, but all too often absent, aspect of health promotion practice. We learnt from this process that practitioners can succeed in writing if they have support to enable them to gain the skills and confidence needed to write for publication. There is great scope for health promotion practitioners to be making a greater contribution to the evidence base to ensure future practice is based on the lessons learned, both positive and negative, from people working in the field.

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