



Mitigating writing anxiety through creative practices and community building

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Presentation abstract

Writing anxiety has been documented to have an inverse relationship with students' self-efficacy (Huerta et al., 2016). At the University of Southampton, the authors have devised a set of highly creative and practical steps to help students break the negative cycle of anxiety, negative feedback, and unrealised writing potential.

Apprehension around academic writing is a well-established and complex phenomenon that has been shown to negatively impact students in a variety of ways throughout their learning (Daly and Miller, 1985; Calimag, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2023). Furthermore, negative experiences of the writing process and feedback on writing often compound and exacerbate these anxieties in students' cognitive, social, and behavioural abilities (Bastug et al., 2017; Mercer and Gulseren, 2024). To ameliorate what often becomes a negative cycle of anxiety and stress around academic writing, educators can offer creative and meaningful practices that are easily adaptable to a variety of educational contexts and content (Bandura, 1977; Mitchell et al., 2021).

Some of these innovative practices were demonstrated during this session at ALDcon25. In this interactive workshop, Learning Developers (LDers) had the opportunity to try out a variety of creative practices designed to reduce apprehension and anxiety around academic writing whilst simultaneously building students' self-efficacy and developing positive learning communities. The workshop aligned with the 'LDers and Inclusive LD' sub-theme, showcasing activities that can be adapted to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners.

The activities explored in this workshop were also designed to promote positive learning environments (Advance HE, 2025) that foster a sense of community and belonging (Jury et al., 2017; Abegglen et al., 2021). Participants were required to engage fully with the activities and with each other in order to maximise the value from the session and to take away a bank of useful, replicable ideas.

In the wider context and with reference to ongoing work with specific awarding gap populations, the authors' writing practices within the Widening Participation and Social Mobility Directorate at the University of Southampton look to explore and build upon the existing body of research that links the above outcomes with increased student achievement (Hadden et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021; Andrews et al., 2023).

Keywords: creative activities; writing anxiety; community; sense of belonging.

Community response

This session was described by one participant as 'joyful, and a real oasis of reflective calm in the midst of a lively and stimulating conference'. The carousel, revolving activity format offered a mix of individual and group activities that were intended to provide contrasting spaces for reflection as well as active, discursive connectedness, and participants' encouragement to take part in the activities themselves provided an invaluable insight into the experiential impactfulness for students.

The activities in the session encouraged participants to think creatively and laterally about the writing process, yet still to focus on the production of an output that fulfilled specific criteria. There were multiple opportunities within the four tasks for colleagues to reflect on the confluence of personal and professional values and identities, and how their engagement with a breadth of social and cultural imperatives influenced their worldview, and as such their approach to producing a piece of writing, art, or contribution to discussion. This relational dimension gave participants the opportunity to position themselves within some of the tensions potentially felt by students when asked to undertake a time-bound task or the production of an artefact within unfamiliar parameters.

Whilst the tasks were perhaps unlike anything a student might produce within a formal assessment setting (collage, letter), the purpose of the activities to help 'get words down on a page' were clear to those taking part in the workshop. One participant commented that:

The simplicity, the freeing nature of thinking with our hands, the peer group we travelled with (literally and metaphorically), the friendly and welcoming prompts for engagement and reflection – all of these were so much more than simply “words on a page” and that is exactly what I would wish for any student to feel about writing.

The structure of the session allowed for a clear appreciation of how the creative techniques might be translated into specific teaching situations, and may help varying groups of students with a 'low stakes' approach to getting started with writing. The highly actionable ideas and short, timed activities were seen to be of particular benefit to supporting students to focus and ease them into a process of writing productively and effectively.

Returning to the clear sense of enjoyment from participants, one delegate remarked that the session, for them, 'reinforced the sense of joy and positivity in writing and has encouraged me to think differently about teaching writing skills to students'.

Figure 1. Creative carousel for writing.



Next steps and additional questions

The four activities were a taster of creative ways to dispel the feeling of being stuck in an anxiety loop, and engaging with writing in a positive and enjoyable way (Figure 1). All

participants took away inspiration and practical ideas to implement within their respective practices and teams.

Authors' reflection

Individuals worked in groups of six-to-eight and made their way around the 'Creative Carousel': four stations, each with a different activity to sample for 10 minutes before moving to the next. They had time to review the activity instructions before getting creative, with the caveat that these were bite-sized versions of the tasks that usually run for between 25-60 minutes when used with students or colleagues. The amount of positive energy, conversation, and joy in the room was palpable throughout the session, and we are really looking forward to hearing how participants trial these and any other creative practices in their own contexts.

The four activities included were as follows:

1. Creative connections

The below photo captures the 'Creative Connections' board as it appeared after all 28 attendees had contributed (Figure 2). After each drawing representations of themselves, tablemates were encouraged to chat, get to know one another, and draw connecting lines wherever shared ground was discovered, from a love of cats to holidaying in Iceland. Discovering what connects us and being curious about what each one of us chooses to share brings us closer as a learning community.

Figure 2. Creative connections board.

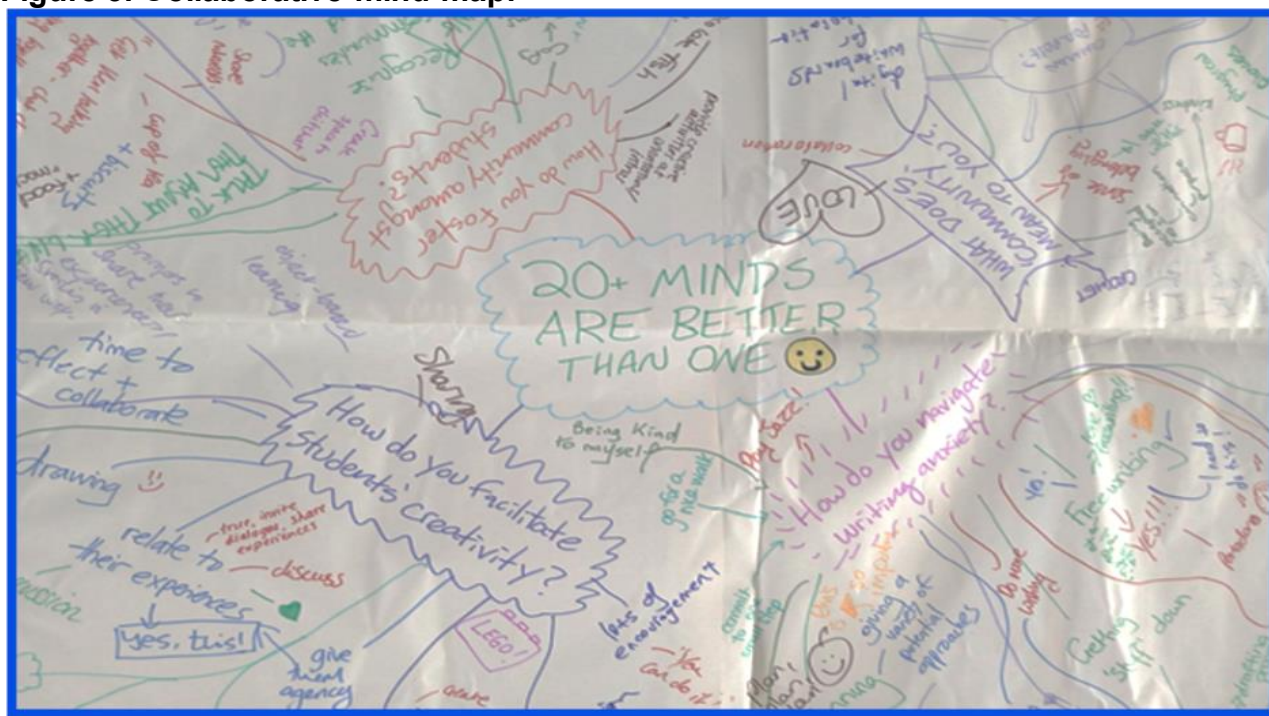
2. Collaborative mind mapping

The following photo depicts a jumbo-sized collaborative mind map collating the ideas and reflections of 28 practitioners on topics related to belonging, community, and writing anxiety (Figure 3).

Participants initially responded to the prompt questions. Then, they reflected on each other's ideas and developed them further with their own ideas, questions, and/or constructive critiques.

The enlarged section below highlights how collaborative ideation can cascade from participant to participant and across all groups (Figure 4). It offers a low-stakes opportunity for participation, removing the social pressure to speak in front of a group/class by allowing time to quietly reflect on contributions before adding to them in written form. Participants were aware that they should develop each other's ideas, challenge them, or agree with them, adding their own examples or reasons for doing so. Thus, they were able to see the breadth of knowledge and experience that both they and their peers bring to the learning

Figure 3. Collaborative mind map.

[illegible]

3. Creative collaging

In this activity, participants were asked to think about their current role and their relationship to it. They could either follow a series of prompt questions to help them reconnect with why they do what they do, recharge their motivation and create an artistic response, or jump straight into artistic exploration and find meaning in the multitude of collaging materials at their fingertips. These collages were taken away by participants to inspire them over the new academic year, and remind them of their passion, curiosity, and drive!

4. A letter to your future-self

Our inner critics can often monopolise our inner monologue, so attendees were invited to listen to that positive inner ally instead. They were encouraged to celebrate their successes from the last year, visualise future goals and achievements by drawing on the skills and knowledge they already possess, create a positive affirmation to build into their daily practices, and generally acknowledge the individual awesomeness that each of them brings to the world!

We all need to treat ourselves with the grace and empathy that we so often afford others, but can deny ourselves, and this simple positive practice can be geared toward concrete writing goals like a dissertation, appraisal, or as part of an ongoing practice that is revisited, adjusted, and celebrated throughout the year.

Figure 5. Example letter template for those wanting greater structure in the activity, whilst others chose to freestyle their letters.

Dear Future Me,

Hi, it's your inner ally from the past _____ (your name)! I just wanted to tell you that you are doing _____ (adverb). I also want to celebrate how truly awesome you are- remember when you _____ (something you are proud of), and that other time where you _____ (a success in your life). - I am so proud of you.

I know life isn't always full of successes to celebrate, like when _____ (a challenge in your life). It's OK though, as you learned _____ from the experience which can help you _____ in the future.

Thinking about the next 6 months, I really want you to focus on _____ (an action or goal) because _____ (why is it important?). Or maybe even _____ (an action or goal) because _____ (why is it important?).

There might be some challenges along the way to doing those things so make sure you 1) _____ (general advice), 2) _____ (self-care idea), and 3) _____ (support strategy), especially when you are feeling _____. In fact, I want you to use the following affirmation to motivate yourself each day _____ (positive affirmation!). You should say it to yourself every day before you _____ (daily action) because _____ (silly reason).

Finally, I just want to say _____ (your own ideas).

With love,
Past Me.

you GOT THIS

All activities used were designed to reduce writing anxiety through self-affirmation, playful exploration, self-expression, and rediscovery of what should be an enjoyable writing process, rather than a product-/assessment-only focus. There were clear elements of community building woven throughout the activities, with collaborative invitations to share as much or as little as participants would like with their peers, and opportunities to build trust with the facilitators too.

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