

## **Performativity or peer-formativity?: Academics' responses to research policy and regulation (0061)**

### **P**

Institutions have research policies and profiles, and academics know how to deliver within them, but how exactly do academics write to disseminate their research in performative settings? Drawing on the work of Mayrath, this research aimed to discover if academics see disengagement from other tasks as a factor in their writing and, if they do, how they do this. Forty-two UK academics responded to an email questionnaire. All respondents associated academic writing with disengagement from other tasks in two ways: physical and cognitive disengagement. Responses suggest that peer interactions are an important component of writing to disseminate research. However, they suggested that institutions could help. This study makes the case for writing-oriented peer relationships, described in this article as 'peer-formativity'. These findings have implications for how institutions manage research policy and associated systems of regulation.

### **Background**

Academic writing is regulated (Deem *et al.* 2008). There are specific, explicit demands on those who write, and the stakes are high. This creates tensions for academics who are motivated to write to create an impact, as much as to score high impact factors or other indicators used in regulatory systems. These types of impact are not mutually exclusive, but they can be experienced by academics – both emerging and eminent – as conflicting (Carnell *et al.* 2008). Performativity in higher education is becoming increasingly restrictive (Ball 2003, Foucault 1977). The negotiations surrounding the imperative to produce writing that counts are relatively unexamined, and the demands seem non-negotiable. How individuals respond to this performative environment, has not been fully explored.

Mayrath (2008) found that successful academic writers moved between research, teaching and administration in a series of engagements and disengagements. Specifically, successful writers reported that writing requires disengagement from other tasks and processes. While success in academic writing may be related to the ability to disengage from other tasks, this disengagement can be complex (Murray & Newton, 2009). This research was motivated by the desire to explore this disengagement in more detail. This study, supported by the university's Research Development Fund, focused on the concept of engagement/disengagement. Specifically, the study had three objectives:

1. To explore whether writing for publication is associated with disengagement;
2. To explore how academics interpret and perform disengagement;
3. To capture academics' assessments of their effectiveness in doing this.

### **Methodology**

A questionnaire was emailed to academics in a range of universities. Analysis of responses contributed to achieving research objectives as follows:

1. Providing definitions of and responses to the concept of disengagement;
2. Providing definitions of disengagement associated with writing for publication and practices used to achieve it;
3. Providing insights into academics' assessment of their disengagement, cross-checked against their publications.

## **Findings**

Forty-two academics (29 female, 13 male) responded to an email questionnaire. Their disciplines included nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, health and rehabilitation, human and health sciences, social work, educational development, academic development, engineering, social anthropology, land economy and environment, library and learning, tax law. The responses were read multiple times and then coded and categorised.

All of the respondents associated academic writing with disengagement from other tasks. They reported disengaging from these tasks as a series of steps: clearing things away before they could start writing, clearing their diaries, clearing their desks, clearing out of the office and clearing their minds.

Responses indicated that academics saw disengagement in two distinct ways: firstly, as physical disengagement, which involves clearing time in their diaries, clearing their desks of unfinished work and finding a place to write; and, secondly, as cognitive disengagement, which involves psychologically preparing in order to concentrate on academic writing.

More specifically, switching off email, mobile phones and other distractions was considered essential by all. Finding the appropriate physical space was more difficult, although all respondents said leaving the office was essential. Most worked from home, using their own time to write, but one lone voice stated, 'often academic writing is done outside of working hours – as a mother this is a culture which does not help' (37). This raises the question of how sustainable the required disengagement may be; in fact, this respondent implies that this model is not sustainable.

Cognitive disengagement was cited in 75% of the responses. Fear and anxiety about tasks left incomplete or meetings not attended played a role in their inability to clear their minds: 'I find it hard to disengage with tasks that have not been brought to a state which does not worry me' (5). The legitimacy of writing was raised by several participants: 'I would like to legitimately send apologies for not attending meetings' (4) and 'there is some sense that writing is a selfish activity' (9). Writing was seen as a covert activity for some: 'I prefer to write in spaces and times when nobody knows what I'm up to ... I diarise writing as meeting-free days rather than writing days' (19).

Half of the respondents felt they were reasonably successful at disengaging in order to write, but the other half did not. Suggested forms of support to enable disengagement included writing retreats, writing groups and writing buddies. These suggest that peer support is regarded as an important aspect of academic writing. This may be conceptualised as a form of social engagement, involving engaging with others who want to write.

However, there were suggestions as to how the organisation could help. There were practical suggestions, such as the sensible administration of teaching time and not having teaching randomly distributed. One participant summed it up by saying, 'The [institution] must offer structured support within the working day. [Writing] is not a hobby. Publications are hugely important for the academic, the department and the institution. The onus should not be on the academic to publish without providing them time for it' (37).

### **Implications**

This study has implications for higher education policy and management: writing to disseminate research should be included in academic workloads, and peer relations around writing to disseminate research should be fostered.

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