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ABSTRACT

Museum staff strive to create environments rich in opportunity for visitors to explore their relationship with their heritage, culture, art, or science. Their unique expertise in communicating and creating educational spaces are critical to the field of informal learning. Museum staff possess wide-ranging capabilities across various forms of communication, but many organisations do not employ specialist research staff whose day-to-day work includes writing and publishing in academic journals. Consequently, the academic research that takes place in museums is conducted and published with museum staff, rather than by museum staff. As part of the European science communication project, QUEST, an academic writing group composed of museum staff was established with the goal of creating a handbook to encourage and aid museum professionals in extending their communication skills so that they may convey their work in academic writing and take ownership of how their field is portrayed in the published literature.

Introduction

There are a number of handbooks that offer support to museum staff through professional development; from general museum management (Edson and Dean 1996) and museum theory (Macdonald et al. 2015), to exhibit evaluation (Rennie and McClafferty 1996), media engagement (Drotner et al. 2018), and visitor perspective (Dierking and Falk 1992; Falk and Dierking 2000). Science museums, for example, have a considerable presence in the arena of professional development due to a long history of collaboration with the field of informal science learning, and can draw on theoretical, practical, and general guides to science communication (Wilson 1998; Brake and Weitkamp 2009; Jamieson, Kahan, and Scheufele 2017). As museums have evolved their public engagement approach, traditional 'explainer' roles have been replaced by

museum educators and communicators acting as 'facilitators' responsible for mediating dialogue (Nielsen 2017; Gorman 2020).

The professional development of museum communicators and educators is integral to understanding and improving best practice in the field (Tran and King 2007; Bevan and Xanthoudaki 2008). Professional learning opportunities are readily available to the museum sector in the form of workshops and conferences (Trant 2009; Roche et al. 2018), however, these tend to be once-off experiences (Tran, Gupta, and Bader 2019). The practice of academic writing may appear incompatible with the museum vision of impactful and publicly accessible communication; particularly because this vision is not always shared by some academic publications. For many museum professionals 'excellent communication skills are crucial' (Schep, van Boxtel, and Noordegraaf 2018, 11), and such staff are ideally placed to use their expertise in public engagement to break down barriers by making academic writing more inclusive and relatable to non-experts. This approach could, in turn, encourage a sense of professional legitimacy among museum communicators (Tran 2008).

Although written communication is prevalent in the museum sector (Ravelli 2007; Jeanneret et al. 2010; Noy 2015), academic writing is not a widespread skill among museum staff. While larger museums may have in-house research groups, the majority of organisations in the museum sector focus on public engagement with their primary audiences instead. When external researchers or academics undertake museum-based research, independently or in collaboration with museums, the external experts generally lead the writing of the resulting academic outputs. If more museum communicators and educators were given the opportunity and the support to develop their own academic writing skills, it would not only close the gap between research and practice — thus strengthening the professionalisation and credibility of the field — but it would also empower museum staff to take ownership of how their field is portrayed in the academic literature.

As part of a European Commission funded project called QUEST – 'QUality and Effectiveness in Science and Technology communication' — a study of science communication was carried out in countries across Europe with the view of mapping the landscape of European science communication and subsequently creating resources and guidelines to support and enrich the field (Mannino et al. 2021; Davies et al. 2021; Olesk et al. 2021). A key objective of the project was to develop specific tools that may be of use to communication professionals working in various fields. For the museum sector, a team of professional museum communicators and educators collaborated on the development of an academic writing handbook.

Establishing an academic writing group

The development of the academic writing handbook was carried out with museum educators and communicators working at Science Gallery Dublin, an organisation with a history of supporting professional development, reflective practice, and peer-learning (Gorman 2008; Enros and Bandelli 2018; Moore et al. 2020; Roche and Murphy 2020). To create a culture of mutual learning and to develop the specific skills of academic writing, it was determined that the best approach would be to establish a staff writing group (Murray and Moore 2006). Academic writing groups generally constitute two or

more individuals who meet regularly to write or to share and discuss their writing (Aitchison and Guerin 2014). They provide a structured and social setting for people to write in, while boosting their confidence and motivation — even being informally held accountable to others through regularly reporting progress is a reliable way to increase writing productivity (Boice 1990). This type of support is key to fostering capability in some particular aspects of academic writing — such as incorporating reviews of the published literature, citing evidence, referencing, and writing in a formal and objective tone — which can be intimidating to those without previous experience. Members of writing groups often find that in tandem with the benefits of receiving critical feedback on their own writing, critiquing their peers' work can also be invaluable in creating a culture of peer support and gaining insight into their own professional development (Aitchison 2009). While it can make sense for members of a writing group to have similar writing goals, diversity of background and experience can also enrich the writing group's potential for peer learning and support (Bergen et al. 2020).

The writing group at Science Gallery Dublin was established with the aim of helping museum staff gain experience in academic writing while creating a handbook to document the learnings from that process. Crucially, the group agreed at the outset that publishing academic writing was not a core objective of the work, but rather an aspirational goal. The guiding principle of the writing group was that it should feel like a community and provide a welcoming and safe space for critique and encouragement. Rules, guidelines, and protocols were discussed in the initial meetings so the group members could set out their consensus views on how the meetings should run and how they should communicate, particularly in terms of offering constructive criticism on each other's writing. The COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in the writing group's weekly meetings taking place online, instead of having the planned face-to-face meetings. Digital platforms such as Zoom, Google Drive, and Slack were used to support a shared and non-hierarchical workspace.

To ensure that the museum professionals were actively involved at every stage of producing the academic writing handbook, a co-creative process in which all participants were given the same opportunities to contribute to the creative process and equal power in any decision-making was employed. The group members created content and artwork and decided the design and format of the handbook, with the aim of creating a resource that would appeal to their fellow professionals in the museum sector.

An academic writing handbook for museum communicators

Over the course of four months, the writing group met weekly to discuss academic writing, exchange ideas, and experiment with writing processes. Alongside these exploratory activities, the writing group also catalogued their learning and highlighted what should feature in an academic writing handbook in order to make the process more accessible for other museum communicators.

The handbook begins with a short overview of academic writing in museums alongside the reasons members of the writing group felt it was a practice that could be beneficial to staff working in the museum sector. The group felt it was crucial to include a section that explains all of the different stages of the academic writing process — from ideation and outlining to drafting and editing. It was perceived that such guidance could make the

daunting task of writing an academic paper a less intimidating prospect. Clarifying the publishing process was another key focus of the handbook. Highlighting the different types of papers that could be relevant to museum communicators and identifying prospective journals were significant elements of this work. Often, the most off-putting aspect for people new to academic writing is the peer-review process, which can present challenges through understanding the submission process, carrying out revisions, and dealing with rejected manuscripts.

A significant portion of the handbook is dedicated to providing advice on setting up an academic writing group. As this process proved engaging and effective for the museum staff designing the handbook, it was decided that their experiences of being part of a writing group should be included as context for these recommendations. The key steps in the process are described — including scheduling meetings, co-constructing rules regarding feedback, having flexible working arrangements for members of the group, maintaining accessible channels of communication, and having one or two experienced academic writers participating in the group to act as facilitators and provide guidance. The guiding principle of the design being that it should take the form of a succinct and easy-to-share PDF with a modest amount of text and plenty of graphics and images, which were contributed by writing group members. The handbook can be downloaded here: http://bit.ly/academic_writing_handbook.

The aim of the academic writing handbook is to provide communicators, educators, explainers, and guides working in the museum sector with support and encouragement to write about their experiences and publish their work in academic journals. As well as providing museum professionals with guidance on academic writing, it is hoped that the handbook will empower museum professionals to become more involved in how research in the field is shaped and shared, and to help 'reflect on our institutions and practices, and the ways we can and should change to better serve our communities' (Bradburne 2021, 1). By replicating the participatory approach of establishing and sustaining a writing group, academic writing can become a professional development opportunity for all museum staff that is built on collaboration and shared learning.

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Mireia Batlle, Eleanor Martha Hulm, Evan Lynch, Ian Martin, Eimear McDwyer, Fiona McLoone, Manting Mu, and Cliodhna Ryan are museum professionals who took part in the writing group and helped create the academic writing handbook while working as mediators in Science Gallery, Trinity College Dublin.

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