

“Writing sprints” can facilitate collaboration and encourage new ways of thinking about academic writing



Claire Taylor and Niamh Thornton describe their experience of hosting a “writing sprint”, a time-limited exercise in which academics from many disciplines and from all over the world were brought together virtually to produce an academic article. Despite certain challenges, the writing sprint proved a great way of facilitating collaborations and providing opportunities for reflections on the process of writing itself. It also led to the contributors producing a much richer output, one that combined their diverse skills, expertise, and perspectives.

During **Academic Book Week** in 2015, we held a “writing sprint” in conjunction with Liverpool University Press (LUP). We conceived the writing sprint as a time-limited exercise in which a group of academics were brought together virtually to produce a collaborative output, focusing on a specific theme. Our focus was around modern languages (ML), one of the major research areas within the university and a key area of publishing within the press.

Our sprint looked specifically at how ML engages with the digital in multiple ways. We commissioned several 500-word pieces from experts in their field, and appointed a broader group of respondents who were invited to dialogue with each piece, nuance it, and shape the debate. All participants then responded to the main question and, by the end of the week, a final piece emerged, for publication on LUP’s platform. Over the course of the week, ten contributors wrote and published 24 individual blog posts, containing their reflections and responses to the questions. The length of entries varied, with most comprising around 500 words, and some shorter reflections arising spontaneously as the week went along. At the end of the week, all entries made up a collaborative piece totalling just under 13,000 words. (The writing sprint can be viewed in process at [The Modern Languages Open Writing Sprint](#), and the finished article is available on LUP’s [Modern Languages Open](#) platform.)



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As we were setting up the writing sprint, we discussed what we were attempting to achieve. We agreed on five broad aims: facilitating collaboration; encouraging new ways of thinking about academic writing; engaging in reflective practice; rethinking peer review; and using our emerging digital scholarship to transform our writing practice.

Firstly, our approach meant a shift away from writing a single-authored piece; instead producing a collaborative, multi-authored academic article. Secondly, we wanted to encourage new ways of thinking about academic writing, in terms of its style and “voice”, something enabled by the blog format (about which more below). For the third aim, we wanted to make reflection on the writing process part of the research question itself, rather than just focusing on producing a “finished product”. Fourthly, it involved a rethinking of the peer review process, because contributors would be writing in a highly visible way (in real time, on a blog), with the various respondents nuancing and shaping the thoughts also doing so in a visible format, open to public view. Finally, we wanted to make use of digital transformations in our writing process, exploring how digital tools (such as the blog platform) can help us rethink our practice as we are in the actual process of writing.

During the week of the writing sprint, our contributors were asked to consider how digital technologies are changing the shape of ML research and publishing, and how the conceptual, methodological, and practical bases of ML research are required to adapt to the challenges of the digital. We set up six questions to feed into this main theme using the following titles as prompts, all of which considered how digital tools, platforms, and interfaces are changing research in ML: “(Big?) data and ML”; “ML and digital archives”; “ML: the digital as object of study”; “ML and digital ethnography”; “users and interfaces”; and “ML as research and process”.

The work we undertook was not without its challenges. Reassuring contributors, potentially daunted by the total visibility of the writing process, was one challenge; and one we attempted to address by setting out clear guidelines, as well as trying to generate a collaborative spirit amongst contributors. The challenge of establishing the authorial voice also required a new approach. As the process unfolded, we realised that each contributor wrote in his/her own voice, employing differing tones and styles. Instead of aiming to achieve a consistent authorial voice (as one would do with a single-authored piece, or even a conventional joint-authored article), we understood we had to allow for multiple authorial voices and styles to emerge.

Writing within a five-day period (to coincide with Academic Book Week) was also a challenge. The timescale was certainly different from that experienced by most academics when writing an academic piece, so it was important to engage forward-planning and prompting in order to ensure it all ran to time.

A technical challenge was to adapt the WordPress blogging platform to the needs of the writing sprint, and to create an interface which looked as dynamic as possible, where dialogues between contributors were as visible as possible. We were not, perhaps, able to make the dynamism of the exercise quite as visible on WordPress as we would have liked, given the limitations of the platform, and this is an area for further development when we next engage in such an activity. Finally, what might be thought to be a challenge – the collaborative aspect – was in fact very positive, and getting authors to work together turned out to be smooth process.

Overall, the writing sprint proved effective in bringing academics out of their silos and working collaboratively across geographical distance, by virtually connecting colleagues at various institutions in the UK and worldwide, and across different academic disciplines and departments. The sprint also provided opportunities for reflection as part of the process, since it was an iterative practice that developed over the course of the week, allowing all contributors to reflect as the piece took shape. We were able to record the process as much as the end result, something that almost never happens

with a traditional book chapter or article. At the end of the week, we not only had the finished piece, but also the record of how we had got there, which was enlightening in itself.

Finally, we achieved a much richer output, since input from experts in different but related fields meant new perspectives were gained on some of the key concerns we are all grappling with. It is almost certain that a single-authored piece would not have achieved this same richness, since no one person combines all the different skills and expertise that our participants brought collectively. In this way, by working collaboratively we were able to come up with a much more rounded, much more profound piece of work than had each one of us written our own individual piece.

For us the writing sprint was an exciting way to enable collaboration, and to encourage authors to think about new ways of presenting their research.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Claire Taylor is Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Liverpool. She is a specialist in Latin American literature and culture, and has published widely on a range of writers, artists and genres from across the region. Her particular geographical areas of interest are Colombia, Argentina and Chile, although she also worked on literature, art and culture from other regions. Within Latin American cultural studies, she takes a particular interest in the varied literary and cultural genres being developed online by Latin(o) Americans, especially hypertext novels, e-poetry and net art. She has published numerous articles and book chapters on these topics, and is the co-author of the recent volume *Latin American Identity in Online Cultural Production* (New York: Routledge, 2012), and author of the recent monograph *Place and Politics in Latin America Digital Culture: Location and Latin American Net Art* (New York: Routledge, 2014). She recently held an AHRC Follow-On Funding grant for a project on Latin(o) American Digital Art, which included a series of impact and engagement events, and a book entitled *Cities in Dialogue* (LUP 2016). Her ORCID iD is: [0000-0002-8661-3910](#).

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