Writing Workshop – Organizational and Institutional Change

By: Sarah Birrell Ivory, Doctoral candidate, University of Edinburgh Business School

Edinburgh, Schotland
Thirty-five doctoral students and faculty gathered at the University of Edinburgh Business School in Scotland. We came from as far afield as USA, Canada, India, South Africa, Israel, Ireland, Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, France, and Switzerland, as well as from across the UK. We were grouped with senior academics Jennifer Howard-Grenville (University of Oregon), Gerry George (Imperial College), Mike Lounsbury (University of Alberta), Nelson Phillips (Imperial College), Paul Tracey (University of Cambridge) and John Amis (University of Edinburgh) to discuss our papers relating to organizational and institutional change. Over lunch, coffee, and eventually wine and beer, topics veered to broader issues of academia and PhD trials and tribulations.

Writing workshops such as these are rarely just about specific feedback for a paper you are about to submit to a journal. They provide a forum for each of us to get a glimpse of the academic writer that we want to become. We see our paper through other people’s eyes and realise they didn’t interpret it how we thought we had written it. We read other people’s papers and see obvious improvements that they were blind to because they became so embedded in the work. Hearing people explain their paper in 5 minutes often cleared the fog of what their paper was trying to say. More than once I thought (about my own work as well as others) “if that’s what you meant, why didn’t you write that?” (see Rule 1 below). I heard people say – and I said myself – “I didn’t realise what my argument was until you told me what you thought it was after you read my paper” (see Rule 2 below). It is a classic case of how do I know what I think until I hear what I say – or in our case, until I see what I write.

Travelling for a whole day, and being away from your computer for the best part of a week, in order to get a 45 minute review of your paper doesn’t appear to make sense from a cost-benefit perspective. But it often happens that 45 minutes of good comments trumps 3 months of vague, non-committal, or polite comments from people who haven’t really looked at your work. That 45 minutes of feedback can change the direction of your thinking, the theoretical foundations of your article, the ambitions for your data, or the confidence in your scholarship. Writing workshops aren’t necessarily about making a specific paper ready for publication. More often they are about making a specific author a better writer and communicator for the future. Perhaps this is the greatest lesson from a Writing Workshop: sometimes, when we are stuck, we need to just write. Not for an audience, a journal, or a deadline, but for ourselves, for our understanding, and for the clarity of our argument.

The keynote from Gerry George gave the audience an outline of the journal submission process and an understanding in particular of the *Academy of Management Journal*. In my view, though, it did much more than this. It showed us that academia as a field can be guided in different directions, and has different potentials. Gerry encouraged us to consider the practical implications of our work, and centre our work on questions that business needs answered. Not, he hastened to add, at the expense of solid theory, well-supported scholarship, or rigorous
empirical method. However, as an applied field it is our role to provide a better understanding of business and management.

It is essential to thank those senior academics who took the time to organise and lead this Workshop. These scholars have incredibly busy calendars and it is a credit to their commitment to the next generation of researchers that they carve out time for doctoral Writing Workshops. I’m sure I speak on behalf of all the students who attended the event in thanking the group leaders.

A special note of thanks should go to Nelson and John who were the organisers of the event, and to event sponsors:

- Organization and Management Theory Division of the Academy of Management
- Academy of Management Journal
- University of Edinburgh Business School

Finally, I have summarised two key rules that I have taken from the Writing Workshop held in Edinburgh. These may be useful in your writing endeavours:

Rule 1: Write what you want people to hear, in language that ensures they understand what you are saying.

Rule 2: Know what you are trying to say, otherwise rule 1 becomes defunct.

Photos of the event can be seen on the OMT Facebook page!