Booksprints as a Learning Format for Students in Higher Education: Teaching and Learning Collaborative Writing

Anja Voigt-Färber
European-University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder) / SRH Hochschule Berlin GmbH, Germany

Abstract

This article introduces booksprints as an innovative teaching and learning format for academic writing for undergraduate students. Booksprints foster writing with alternative concepts of authorship and enable students to collaboratively go through an almost authentic digital writing and publishing process in a minimum of time, and at the same time facilitate various future skills, such as written communication, coping with change, and digital literacy. Still being in a 'prototype' phase, booksprints are only just being tested as a potential educational format that is a bridge between subject matter and writing/teaching methodology. This article, therefore, presents the basic design of booksprints as well as some specific features, such as moderation of the process by the facilitator, explicit role assignments, visualized project management and the use of digital platforms, in order to introduce them as a writing-intensive learning setting for higher education.

Booksprints in Higher Education

Booksprints are an innovative teaching and learning format which enables students to collaboratively go through an almost authentic academic writing and publishing process, typically resulting in some textual product that is 'ready to be published'. The ideal outcome is a real publication in the sense that 'the book' is relevant beyond the examination context and potentially finds more readers than the teacher. The text to be written must be complete in terms of content and finalized accordingly. In the context of our project, this also applied, for example, to a blog entry, a website, an information flyer, etc. As the name suggests, book*sprints* are designed to produce such texts within a short period of time, usually a few days. This is made possible by a tightly structured schedule, that has been carefully designed by the leader(s) of a seminar in the respective subject area beforehand, but it also requires reflections on new conceptions of authorship, including, for example, the idea that the roles of project manager and copyeditor should be considered as equally important as the role of a writer (cf. Schindler & Wolfe, 2014). In essence, booksprints naturally provoke reflection on the writing process, but they also facilitate various future skills, such as written communication, feedback, reflection, collaboration, project management, and often also digital skills.

The very idea and the development of competencies that go beyond the confines of any one discipline still seem to be underappreciated in the conception of study programs at German universities. Students in Germany often find themselves lacking learning opportunities to develop what in module handbooks is often referred to as 'interdisciplinary competencies'. However, there should hardly be any doubt that any kind of disciplinary professionalism always comes to be as inextricably connected to skills of cooperation and communication, to self-organization and reflection competencies, and also the ability to approach problem-solving in a flexible and open manner. German higher education didactics and also the political demands

of recent decades focus very strongly on the development of students' skills ('Kompetenzorientierung') and place their learning processes at the center of attention. In addition, the role of the teacher is changing from a focus on instruction to the arrangement of learning environments or learning situations and learning advice (Wildt, 2006). Overall, it can be said that there is a growing awareness of the need for institutional responses to improve the teaching situation in German higher education. For some years now, the idea of competence-oriented teaching and the concept of key competencies have been supplemented by concepts of so-called 'future skills' (Ehlers, 2020; Stifterverband/McKinsey, 2021), which focuses specifically on the requirements of the rapidly changing world and thus includes new aspects especially those of digital and transformative competencies and how the question of values, attitudes, personality influences action competence.

From the perspective of writing studies, there is a second deficiency in academic education in Germany, one which can be circumscribed by the term 'writing-intensive teaching' (Emig, 1977; Lahm, 2016). As it stands, writing still plays a marginal role in university teaching in Germany, as it continues to be perceived and used primarily as a general mode of examination. Writing, despite being often described as an essential key competence in higher education, is far too rarely addressed as a self-contained aspect of academic education to be reflected upon in the curricula. In addition, the kind of writing which is often done in the context of seminars typically does not reflect the kind of complex and multifaceted practice writing really can turn out to be. Students still often write their texts all by themselves with no intermediate external feedback, and they perceive their grading teachers as the only addressees of their texts.

Booksprints in higher education, therefore, could offer an alternative for closing this gap, as they aim to provide a more authentic writing setting, insofar as they are related to a real-life communicative problem to be solved. It is not the institutionally defined controlling authority, as Bräuer and Schindler (2011) state, but the writer themself who assigns authenticity to the task. That is, one that more closely resembles the complex communicative and reflective process that writing in a particular discipline really is. At best, the text product should fulfil a real function and be more than a mere 'experienced' authenticity, as discussed under the heading of 'scenario-based learning' (e.g. Chisholm, 1993). One example of this is that students have produced a brochure on their own degree program in a booksprint, which is available online and in print for prospective students.

As booksprints still have a kind of 'prototype' status in the context of higher education and are only just being trialed as a potential educational format that connects subject and 'didactics', my aim in this article is to present the core elements of pedagogical booksprints. I would like to provide brief insights into the design and practical implementation of this new teaching format and outline this writing-intensive, publication-oriented, but above all learning-opportunity-rich learning setting for students. Before I explain the basic conceptual foundations of booksprints in practice, I would first like to explain how they have developed as a format in the context of university teaching.

Development of Booksprints in the Context of Academic Writing

A booksprint is a fast-track publication process, where the process of text production up to the finished layout is shortened to a minimum of time. Booksprints (i.e., 'book sprints') originate from method founder Adam Hyde (Altena, 2012), who has realized publication projects with his network booksprint.net mainly in the free economy. There are various other providers professionally organizing booksprints, especially outside the academic context. In the German speaking university context, Schön and Ebner (Schön et al., 2016) first paved the way with their sprint projects, where they brought together academic staff for the purpose of collaborative writing. For example, the revised version of the 2013 *Learning and Teaching with Technologies* textbook was written and published in a booksprint. Booksprints are now increasingly being used within academic writing teams, especially as the promise of a quick publication process associated with the booksprint can be particularly attractive to experienced writers and professionals who are heavily involved in their careers.

The main initial challenge in trying to transfer booksprints into the higher education framework was to transform a highly product-oriented format into a process-oriented, thus learning-centered, teaching format.

In 2018, Gina Henry and I adapted the booksprint format at European-University Viadrina for the first time to learning and teaching contexts (cf. Henry & Voigt, 2018, Schulz-Budick & Voigt, 2020). Our main aim was not to create an extracurricular program, but to develop a learning format for students that would be integrated into their subject lessons and create space for collaborative writing, with all its challenges, without neglecting the presentable academic text product. From a writing studies and writing didactics perspective, our two major goals for this 'student version' of booksprints were: First, to produce a collaboratively written publication in a very short time. Second and more importantly, to create a seminar setting in which students go through and reflect on an authentic writing and publishing process. These booksprint formats, which are explicitly aimed at students (and thus rather novice writers), focus on the learning activities of students with their individual writing, thinking, and working processes and emphasize the challenges of each individual and the group. The main idea is to make booksprints work as learning opportunities for students. The product remains in focus, but at the same time, and perhaps even more so, the students' competence development is to be explicitly promoted and given corresponding space.

In the SPRints project (writing, publishing, and reflecting integrated into subject teaching through booksprints; SRH University, 2023) at the Institute for Writing Studies, with which I am associated (SRH University, 2022–2026), booksprints were contextualized as explorative case studies in 2022–2023 and the format was tested at different types of universities and in different subject cultures. The aim of this project was to identify context-sensitive conditions for the successful use of the format and, based on this, to develop a didactic guide as an open educational resource, which has since been published by Arbeitskollektiv Schreibwissenschaft (2024), a working group of writing scholars and students from various disciplines and universities in Germany. This handbook not only contains many organizational tips and material for teachers on how to carry out booksprints, but also provides a detailed classification of writing and learning theory.

Booksprints attempt to combine interdisciplinary skills, above all social and project management skills, with subject teaching in order to prepare students for contemporary work contexts. They also enforce written communication skills in the form of an authentic writing arrangement ('Schreibarrangement' or 'Schreibaufgaben mit Profil'; Bachmann & Becker-Mrotzek, 2010, Bräuer & Schindler, 2010, 2011). In such writing arrangements, the writing tasks are related to a specific learning environment and are designed to specifically address the interests and prerequisites of the respective learners (Bräuer & Schindler, 2010, 2011). The disciplinary topics addressed at the booksprints are worked out by the students with their teachers beforehand. As usual, students work with their teachers to acquire knowledge or carry out small (research) projects in the subject-specific course. In the booksprint, the aim is then to transform the work done into a text product. A good starting point for the booksprint could be an exposé that briefly outlines the idea and important content. In that way, booksprints can be seen as a teaching setting that implements process-oriented didactics of writing, which models the production phases of scientific texts as authentically as possible. That means that the writing process is divided into individual substeps and subtasks. In line with Bräuer and Schindler's concept of authentic writing arrangements, the product ('book') in booksprint is the transfer text ('target text'), which is created via intermediate texts ('auxiliary texts') in the corresponding writing time. After the individual writing times, the intermediate texts are discussed with everyone in the group and then further edited in some form by people in other roles and functions. Booksprints therefore create a special collaborative writing situation, as they represent a new form of co-production of knowledge by teachers and learners (cf. Dürkop & Ladwig, 2016, p. 7). The booksprint as a collaborative writing scenario needs (and teaches at the same time) explicit project management, the base for students exploring new concepts of authorship. The intensive work with preliminary versions of a text is supported by written organizational texts ('straw documents', Schindler & Woolfe, 2014) that are used to stimulate discussions in the team and to launch feedback loops. Dealing with rough drafts and discussing

raw text versions is explicitly included in and promoted by booksprints as one of the learning goals.

The writing tasks set in booksprints are developed with strong reference to disciplinary thinking ('writing-intensive teaching'; Bean 2011; Beaufort 2007) and action or, alternatively, to possible concrete professional fields. Thus, subject teachers (with the support of writing center staff, i.e., facilitators) have to set out conditions for the text to be written, the booksprint product, as a real-life, subject-specific discursive contribution, thereby making it comprehensible within disciplinary requirements and logics. In this way, the writing tasks set in booksprints also have typical characteristics of writing tasks within publication-oriented didactics of writing (Sowa & Vode, 2022), which only recently have been introduced in German-speaking higher education contexts. Vode and Sowa justified this teaching method as follows: First, they are meaningful, i.e., they make a useful communicative contribution in an understandable context (cf. 2022, p. 13), which is also a motivating aspect of promoting professional writing in booksprints. The writing tasks are clear because they are oriented toward a specific publication, target group, medium, and schedule. Additionally, they involve interactive writing processes that encourage content exchange and incorporate feedback and revision and ultimately address an authentic task that presents an interesting problem for students, going beyond the mere application of rule knowledge (p. 18). At best, this results in a particularly intentional motivation to produce the text that is inherent to the booksprint (for the link between writing tasks and writing motivation in this context, see Schindler, 2022; Schunk et al., 2008). At the same time, a booksprint is also a large exploration space that reflects the students' physical and mental states, their attitudes and mindsets and constantly addresses their own willingness and ability to adapt, which appeals to their motivation, conflict and stress management and provokes many emotional and social (learning) experiences – a space in which the motivating promise of the text is just as prominent as the uncertainties to be balanced regarding one's own adaptability to the tasks, the team members, the master plan, etc. Booksprints therefore make a clear shift towards procedural knowledge as a learning goal and provoke 'new learning' (Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021; Matthes & Kleinsorg, 2024) in order to understand one's own learning as an active, constructive process that is guided by individual decisions and strategies of the learners (Zimmerman, 2000).

Booksprint Specifics

In booksprints, students jointly write a text for a real audience, for example, a research article, a popular science article, or even a blog post, and they do this within a very short time, usually 3 to 5 days. During that time, the students are supported by a facilitator's process moderation, which specifies the sequence of available writing and working days, explicit role assignments in the creation of the product, visualized project management, and the use of digital platforms. Each booksprint requires a moderator who is not part of the team of authors formed before the start of the booksprint during the subject lessons. They are solely responsible for the overall organizational framework; this in summary means to facilitate the whole process, to provide text feedback, and to support the teams. The facilitator prepares a master plan with deadlines, milestones, and goals, and moderates the whole process. The person is also responsible for providing methodological guidance and support for writing and working processes. Ideally, the facilitator is trained in writing didactics and offers writing consultations or involves the writing consultation service.

In booksprints, texts are created in collaboration. Students create either one overall text in which everyone participates, or several partial texts in smaller groups. The students usually work in groups of 3–5 members, each of which forms a subteam of the entire course group. Students work in the subteam either on their own product (e.g., a professional article or blog post) or on a partial product for the entire course product (e.g., a subchapter or entry for a shared wiki). Within this group, they take on alternating roles, but not all roles. Everyone is a junior author at the beginning, then switch to another role, for example, senior author or editor, sometimes switching a third time. Project managers must be junior authors, but may or may not take on another role. It is not a matter of evaluating the role, as writers may have different preferences for different activities These roles are:

- Project Manager, who keeps an eye on the overall process
- Junior Writer, who writes a first text version
- Senior Writer, who continues to write and finalizes the first version
- Reviewer, who reviews the texts of others
- Editor, who revises the text at an advanced stage and approves a final version
- Source Checker, who checks all the references
- Designer, who puts the text into a form ready for publication.

As I mentioned above, although all co-authors are jointly responsible for the overall text, they divide themselves into different areas of responsibility during the writing and development process. These tasks are reflected in the roles, which are based on the phases and tasks of writing-for-publication processes. In booksprints, the individual roles and their assignments during the creation process are precisely planned by the facilitator and coordinated in such a way that the text develops step by step. The aim is clearly to make use of the collaborative potential of the team in order to simultaneously advance the writing and the publication in a time-efficient manner. However, depending on the publication goal, learning objectives or anticipated group dynamics, certain roles may not be used at all, while other roles may need to be redefined. For example, the role of Project Manager may be shared between two people, or a 'feel-good' manager may be appointed to ensure a good atmosphere in the group. Furthermore, not all roles are active at the same time, and it can happen that some roles are paused, or that one person takes on several roles during the booksprint. These roles are therefore not rigid specifications but are intended to support text writing in groups as effectively as possible and are designed to mirror as closely as possible the tasks of the working world. Anything that makes the scenario authentic and as successful as possible is certainly a good idea. Depending on which learning effects one would prefer to achieve, one can either think of the roles and their tasks in a more product-oriented/publication-oriented logic, or give the individual roles and their writing learning experiences more space with a focus on the inherent processes.

The profile and tasks of the individual roles are summarized on handouts and serve as orientation for the students. In addition, there are some supplementary materials to facilitate the roles' tasks and to support their work processes. For example, Senior Writers receive advice on techniques and methods for their writing process. The role serves to continue writing and revising rough drafts and to clarify any ambiguities. The designation of the role has to do with the status of the text and does not refer to the age or expertise of the authors. Senior Writers focus initially on content and structure, while issues of style, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and layout are deliberately ignored for the time being. While the roles can be freely chosen according to preferences and strengths, the process of the entire booksprint and above all the submission of the texts by the deadlines are non-negotiable, regardless of the final status of the text and whether the requirements formulated with the respective writing task are fulfilled. For all roles to work well together and achieve the big goal of the respective booksprint, there is the master plan that everyone should stick to.

The master plan (see appendix A) is the schedule for the booksprint that brings together all the subprocesses pertaining to the various roles. It comprises all work sections, such as writing, feedback and reflection times, editorial meetings, and plenary times, and orders the overall timeline. It also should specify certain 'milestones' that must be achieved on the way to the final product (and that should be celebrated appropriately). All of these 'building blocks' (Arbeitskollektiv Schreibwissenschaft, 2024) are designed to ensure that students are enabled to write a text together for a real audience in a very short time, and at the same time learn a lot about their own writing and that of others. The master plan contains many different elements, which I will briefly present here to provide a deeper look into booksprint practice.

Tools
Visualized project management and digital platforms support the booksprint process. Milestones, tasks and the people/roles responsible are visualized in the room, and digitally, and collaborative, synchronous and asynchronous work on the documents is also facilitated. This is supplemented by video conferencing tools for remote participants.

Plenums

In plenary sessions, the entire group meets with the facilitator. These plenaries fulfil various functions.

- All processes are organized and coordinated and questions about the process are clarified.
- Predetermined knowledge on writing processes, scientific integrity, or methodological procedures is imparted. Particularly at the beginning, input on collaborative writing with its rules, opportunities and pitfalls should increase students' understanding of the processes underlying the organization of the booksprint. In addition, it is important for the writing and revision processes to make students understand that both feedback and revisions are initially focused on higher order concerns, that is, everything relating to content, structure, argumentation and content references, and only then are later or lower order concerns for finalizing the text increasingly taken into account.
- There is spontaneous input resulting from the impressions of the subject teachers or the facilitator, such as the linguistic integration of sources or summarizing oral feedback on the status of the process.
- The plenary sessions also fulfil a social function by facilitating tune-in and feedback, emphasizing breaks and celebrating successes.

Editorial meetings

Editorial meetings are important stops for students to organize their group work. They allocate roles and agree on content and procedure. Decisions are recorded in protocols. They work with group scriptbooks designed to support their peer learning.

Group scriptbooks

These are instructions for individual work steps prepared by the facilitator in advance, including references to materials that guide students through the next phase with timelines. They can be an important support, especially at the beginning, to internalize procedures for group meetings with moderation, minutes and results. However, these strict guidelines can also have a demotivating effect on those who would like to freely determine the group's actions.

Writing times

During writing periods, students work on the texts in different roles with the aim of reaching the next milestone step by step. Depending on the writing task, objective, time planning and writing experience of the participants, they are pre-structured and guided to a greater or lesser extent. However, there are always previously formulated subgoals for the individual writing times, so that at the end of the respective writing time there is a concrete goal. This can be several text parts, but also, for example, source checks, research or layout work.

Feedback

Feedback is an equally important part of the booksprint as the writing itself. Not only do the students give each other feedback by discussing text versions in editorial meetings and by taking on the role of reviewer, but feedback is also discussed as an integral part of the plenary session and its productivity is supported by the students agreeing on forms of feedback and receiving appropriate materials and support. In addition, the students receive formative feedback from the facilitator and/or the subject teachers at times previously defined in the masterplan. This feedback is very important for the progress of the group's writing project and is also one of the challenges but also learning opportunities for all booksprint participants, because the subject teachers should therefore have developed an awareness of productive text feedback in the preliminary discussion with the facilitator and know how to formulate it in such a way that it is concrete and clear on the one hand and constructive and appreciative on the other.

Conclusion

The booksprint is both an innovative and complex didactic setting for higher education. Students work on a joint text in a comparatively short period of time. The process is planned in

small steps and distinguishes between different writing roles and work phases. The format thus facilitates concentrated, collaborative writing work that is both process- and product-oriented. The booksprint approach thus responds to requirements in professional contexts, where it is often necessary to produce texts quickly and effectively. At the same time, the approach addresses students in their specific writing and disciplinary competencies and offers a learning scenario in which they can simultaneously develop professionally and socially relevant skills and attitudes. It becomes particularly clear that metacognition is a specific learning prerequisite in the context of self-directed learning, which refers to awareness and control over one's own thought processes and the ability to monitor and regulate one's own cognition in order to monitor and regulate one's own cognitive performance (Flavell, 1979). In the context of booksprints, this ability is crucial as it enables learners to actively adapt and optimize their learning strategies and processes. In addition, strong metacognition promotes the development of a positive attitude towards learning as well as the willingness to engage in self-reflection and improvement (Schneider & Artelt, 2010). While the writing pedagogy side of text production through scripts, writing methods, etc. is prepared in detail in booksprints, it is precisely the rather 'soft skills' area directly linked to learning ability that is perhaps still not supported enough didactically in this format.

Booksprints are considered at several German universities now as a possibility to convey important academic writing competencies and at the same time socially relevant future skills. Booksprints deserve even closer examination within the university landscape, but they seem to have the potential to meet some of the demands that have been made for some time from a writing pedagogy perspective – to design writing tasks that are motivating and have a recognizable objective for the writers, but also to create opportunities to implement collaborative writing.

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Appendix A: Example Masterplan

This document is an unpublished document from the project *SPRint: Schreiben, Publizieren, Reflektieren integriert in die Fachlehre durch Booksprints* of the SRH Hochschule Berlin, the University of Bremen and the Bergische Universität Wuppertal. It was created in the seminar "Fundamentals of Strategic Writing" by Prof. Dr. Katrin Girgensohn and is reproduced here with her permission.

booksprint: EXAMPLE MASTERPLAN

THURSDAY

TIME	THURSDAY
09:00	**Plenum**
09:15	Collaborative Writing
09:30	Writing as a Process / Strategic Writing
09:45	
10:00	Requirements & Formalities
10:15	
10:30	**Break**
10:45	**Editorial Meeting 1** — Foundation for Teamwork
11:00	Preparation of Collaborative Writing
11:15	**Plenum**
11:30	Strategic Academic Reading
11:45	
12:00	Sources as Foundation for Your Texts
12:15	**Activity**
12:30	**Lunch**
12:45	
13:00	
13:15	**Writing Time 1**
13:30	Zero Draft: Flow Writing
13:45	Descriptive Outline
14:00	
14:15	**Break**
14:30	**Editorial Meeting 2**
14:45	Evaluation & Planning: What stays, what goes?
15:00	
15:15	**Writing Time 2**
15:30	First Draft
15:45	**Activity**
16:00	**Plenum**
16:15	(Peer) Feedback
16:30	**Editorial Meeting 3**
16:45	In-group feedback on first drafts
17:00	
17:15	**Writing Time 3**
17:30	Submission First Draft
17:45	**Editorial Meeting 4** — Preparation for Friday
18:00	**Plenum**
18:15	Reflection & Celebration

FRIDAY

TIME	FRIDAY
09:00	**Plenum**
09:15	Reflection & Preparation
09:30	**Editorial Meeting 5**
09:45	Distributing Roles
10:00	**Plenum** — HOC/LOC
10:15	**Writing Time 4**
10:30	A) Trans-Group Review
10:45	B) Source Police
11:00	C) Senior Writing
11:15	**Editorial Meeting 6** — Integration Reviews
11:30	**Writing Time 5**
11:45	A) Senior Writing / B) Source Police
12:00	C) Layout
12:15	**Editorial Meeting 7** — Drafts for Ian
12:30	**Plenum** — Celebration
12:45	**Lunch**
13:00	
13:15	
13:30	**Writing Time 6**
13:45	A) Senior Writers / B) Editing
14:00	C) Layout
14:15	**Plenum** — Receiving Ian's Feedback
14:30	**Editorial Meeting 8**
14:45	Integration of Ian's Feedback
15:00	**Writing Time 7**
15:15	A) Senior Writers / B) Editing
15:30	C) Layout
15:45	
16:00	**Editorial Meeting 9**
16:15	Publication
16:30	**Plenum**
16:45	Reflection & Celebration
17:00	

Appendix B: Example Session

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Script: (EXAMPLE) Editorial Session 5

2:30 – 3:15 pm

Time	Steps and Assignments	Resources
2-3'	Determine the group facilitator for this session.	
in your own time (but keep track!)	**Decision making: what stays, what goes?** Work in pairs or threes on your assigned topic. Share your results from your 1st writing time with each other. Discuss what you would like to keep, and why, and what you do not want to further proceed with. In discussing this, be appreciative of each others work efforts. Use the writing techniques "5-finger-technique" and "Table of Aspects" for your decision making process.	Your descriptive outline zero draft Handouts 5-finger technique & Table of Aspects
in your own time	**Preparing your 2nd writing time: first draft** Each of you is going to write a first draft of either your whole glossary entry or a chapter of it. Decide amongst yourselves which works best for you. For writing the first draft, you are going to use the writing technique "Writing Relay". Prepare your understanding of the technique by reading the handout carefully and sharing your discussing it with your team members	Handout Writing Relay
15:15 - 16:00	**2nd Writing Time** **Begin your 2nd writing time before or at 15:15.**	Handout 2nd Writing Time