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Hydrology and Earth System Sciences
Discussions

Interactive comment on "Improving together: better science writing through peer learning" *by* M. A. Stiller-Reeve et al.

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Improving together: better science writing through peer learning

Review: I Stewart

The paper is a descriptive account of the development of academic writing groups aimed at improving basic scientific writing skills for early career scientists working in climate science / geoscience. Although the paper does not attempt to provide a critical or quantitative appraisal of the effectiveness of the intiative, it is a useful contribution, sketching out a justification for improving academic writing and charting first-hand experiences of writing groups tied to the ClimateSnack online blogpost initiative. In that regard it is a potentially valuable account of an emerging approach that is likely to be of interest to the readership of this particular special issue. I certainly found myself trying

to imagine setting something like this, and so would appreciate a bit more clarity and detail on a number of fundamental points that I feel the authors have rather glossed over. Indeed, one is the actual origins of the ClimateSnack project tself, which is introduced rather unobtrusively (line 20, page 3) but I think a sentence or two about its background context would help the reader. The substantive points are outlined below:

Firstly, although the authors state that scientists '. . .must learn to better consider their audience, and communicate their science more clearly', for me, the paper wasn't especially clear on who precisly the ECRs are writing for. The paper implies the audience is both scientists within their own discipline and those across disciplinary boundaries,' so presumably the focus remains squarely on academic writing rather than drifting into popular science writing (for which there is a far richer science communication literature that is not called on here). I appreciate that there is a continuum of writing styles that can be invoked fo reach different audiences, but it would be helpful if the article could add a sentence making clear the specific readership that ClimateSnack participants are targetting, as that sets the rubric for ll that follows in terms of how they prepare and hone their contributions.

Secondly, and in a similar vein, although the scheme seeks to improve ' 'basic writing skills, and thereby also their scientific writing skills' it is never made explicit what are the deficiences that the initiative is trtying to redress. As the paper notes, there are plenty of academic voices bemoaning the quality of academic writing but precious few that actually dissect the problem in a meangingful way; one telling exception is Goben, G.D. & Swan, J.A. 1990. The Science of Scientific Writing. American Scientist, 78 (Nov/Dec), 550-558. While the authors direct the reader to papers that presumably shed light on the substance of this problem, that is not especially helpful for an inidividual interested in improving their writing. Given that this paper attempts to set out the theoretical basis for this practice, it is important to be as explicit and transparent about how those championing the ClimateSnack initiative preceive the fundamental weaknesses and limitations in mainstream academic writing. A short section or paragraph

on this should be added.

Thirdly, the reason that the basic deficiencies need to be made more explicit is that it is not immediately clear how - or indeed, if - the ClimateSnack initiative is addressing the core communication issues raised by practitioners working in climate science arena. This is alt is an arena that is pretty frequently addressed by those publishing in science communication. One prominent contributer is Richard Somerville, prof at Scripps and the science director of the nonprofit project 'Climate Communication', who has written and blogged extensively on this and highlights a range of issues that do not appear to feature in the ClimateSnack developmental process. For example, his review in Physics Today (Somerville, R.C.J. & Hassol, S.J. 2011. Communicating the science of climate change. Physics Today, October, 48-53.) critiques the conventional academic model of writing and presents some clear recommendations for making climate science writing more accessible. It may be that the authors would disagree with his contentions, but the point is that it is impossible to tell because there is no indication of to what extent the now pretty extensive critical literature on climate science communication is infusing and informing the ClimateSnack initiative. To put it bluntly, is ClmateSnack simply a self-help support group for a particular scientific cohort or is it actively carrying forward the experience of climate science communicators? If it is the former then OK but that more limited remit needs to be stated; if it is the latter then the paper needs to be far more explicit on how participants are building on what is out there.

Fourthly, could some indicative content from the site be included? It could be a screen-shot or two , or brief excerpts from posted articles. I found myself frustrated that all I was reading about what the process and could not view the product (at least, not without accessing the webpage - perhaps a deliberate ploy). I appreciate that it is a sensitive issue, but there must be exampes of 'good practice' that the team feel showcases what the ClimateSnack initiative can achieve in recasting academic writing.

Finally, many readers of this paper will lament the omission of some kind of empirical analysis of its efficacy. The informal 'survey' of why groups succeed or not simply adds

to the frustration of not getting a better sense of how effective this novel approach is; to make a useful contribution more specifics on what this survey involved should be given. Overall, I'm sympathetic to the nascent nature of the initiative and also to the difficulties in determining meaningful metrics, but I agree with the other reviewer that there are indicative measures that the authors could and should consider regarding readership and impact. On a related note, perhaps the authors could mention something more about the international community that has been fostered as a result of ClimateSnack?

In summary, the paper is an enthusiastic but rather uncritical account of one initative to counter perceived limitations in our current academic writing provision. While I share many of the authors' basic contentions and find the ClimateSnack an intriguing and welcome development, the paper as it stands lacks substance in key areas and I would ask the authors to attempt to address these in their revisions.

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