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"It's exciting and rewarding!": Structured mini writing retreats as a tool for undergraduate researchers

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"It's exciting and rewarding!": Structured mini writing retreats as a tool for undergraduate researchers

A good research base exists on the benefits of structured writing retreats and similar provision for academic staff and postgraduate researchers, but to date little has been published about the worth of such events for undergraduate students. This is despite the fact that undergraduate student researchers also experience external pressures, distractions and ambivalent or negative feelings towards writing just as academic staff and postgraduate students do. This paper reports on a mixed methods study of a structured writing retreat programme with third year undergraduate students over four academic years. The resulting data confirmed that one of the biggest challenges for students was finding time and space to write, which mirrors the findings of studies focused on more experienced researchers. The group of writing retreat participants had a very different experience and data revealed the power of these events for this group of students. The data presented here suggests that retreats should much more widely offered for undergraduate students in the latter stages of their degree programmes.

Keywords: undergraduate writing; structured writing retreat; writing support; academic writing; communities of practice

Introduction

Academic writing retreats have been shown to have a significant number of benefits for those partaking (Kornhaber et al. 2016) and they are, therefore, becoming increasingly popular, as individuals working in academia feel ever more pressure to increase research outputs (McGrail, Rickard, and Jones 2006). There is now a strong research base around understanding the benefits for academic staff and postgraduate researchers, but to date little has been written on the value of this kind of writing support for undergraduate students.

Most research about supporting undergraduate writing is in fact focused on students who are second language learners of English, typical of the deficit model that is applied educationally to these students (Ippolito 2007). Research around what are usually termed 'home' students in the British tertiary education system has tended to consider what has become known as 'academic literacies' development (Lillis et al. 2010) and has also perpetuated a deficit discourse (Malone et al 2020), with writing development interventions usually seen as remedial, which may feel infantilising in nature and lead to a lack of active engagement on the part of students.

The current paper explores undergraduate students' attitudes towards writing and focuses on a group of students who were offered a programme of structured writing retreats during their third year. These writing retreats were facilitated by an academic member of staff, who also worked on her own research and writing during the time slots, and were frequently attended by other academic staff, which added significant value. The following section reviews the literature on academic writing support for undergraduate students followed by a review of the research conducted with regards to the benefits and challenges of structured writing retreats for academic staff to bring these two fields to bear on the research questions and study design.

Academic writing development support for students

The literature on writing for undergraduates has typically focused on technical aspects, with individual strategies discussed (Torrance, Thomas, and Robinson 2000) as well as the challenges of learning how to write effectively for an audience of academics within a particular discipline (Hewings 2004). Research has also concentrated on isolating particular features of successful and developing undergraduate writing (Hyland 2004). Various analytical approaches to mapping these features for the benefit of teachers working to enhance writing skills in broader cohorts of college and university students

have been investigated, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics (Hood 2006) and elements of the Appraisal framework (Miller, Mitchell and Pessoa 2014).

Coffin and Donohue (2012) work to draw together this more feature-based approach to academic writing in students with the other prevailing approach to English for Academic Purposes, which is the Academic Literacies model mentioned above (Lillis et al. 2010). The Academic literacies model has typically sought to critique traditional academic practices around the development of students' writing and to try to address the particular challenges faced by students from backgrounds less typically associated with advancement to Higher Education (Lillis 2003), typical of the participants in this current study. It focuses on dialogic approaches to developing confidence in writing at tertiary level, and on working with educators around issues pertaining to giving valuable and positive feedback on written work (Lillis et al. 2010).

The academic literature on the process of writing the dissertation (the final research project) on an undergraduate degree model (the stage that the groups researched with for this current study are at) has to date focused more on the teaching, learning and assessment aspects (i.e. those relevant for tutors rather than the students writing them) with limited focus on supporting and motivating students through this challenging period (Sangster, 2021).

The more affective aspects of writing are further discussed by French (2018) in her paper which asks lecturers to consider these factors more deeply, after noting that her students report emotions such as fear, frustration and exhaustion over high-stakes writing tasks and can be extremely adversely affected by negative feedback on their work. It has been noted that students are alienated by the deficit model approach to academic writing support currently practiced by many institutions, which fails to cater for those who most need it (Smit 2012, cited in French 2018). French (2018) suggests a

more community-of-practice based model of writing support would be of significant benefit to many students. The recent publication of a limited number of studies addressing the notion of writing retreats as a community-based academic pedagogical activity for third year undergraduate students has been long overdue, therefore.

Studies referring to writing retreats for undergraduate students

The only mention of writing retreats in one recent guide to academic writing success comes through a skim reading task that asks students to read a paper on the topic of retreats (Murray, 2008 cited in Day 2018: 79), which suggests that writing retreats for undergraduates are still in their infancy. However, the study of retreats was investigated as part of a broader study on developing an armoury of approaches to writing for students (Malone et al 2020) and there are a number of recently published papers that offer investigations of annual residential, multi-day or full-day retreats of various kinds. Sangster (2021) notes that the studies on writing retreats for academic staff and postgraduates demonstrate that the benefits should also be transferrable to undergraduates and investigates this in her recent study on the use of a multi-day writing retreat for Geography dissertation module students. Rentzelas and Harrison (2020) have explored the benefits of a full-day 'writing retreat' embedded in a Psychology dissertation module, which actually contains included a complete programme of teaching and learning activities as well as a short, structured writing retreat. Elsewhere, a study on rural retreats for Geography undergraduates (Edwards et al, 2020) offered a broader community-building experience for those dissertation students, which included the option of a writing retreat style event, although the researchers noted that, with the free structure inherent in their plan, the students tended to prepare more for writing during this event than actually write, suggesting the event offers something different to the structured writing retreat under consideration in this

current study. What these studies have in common with this paper is in acknowledging and investigating the desirability for something more community-based in the latter stages of an undergraduate degree.

Communities-of-Practice

Lave and Wenger's development of the notion of communities-of-practice and of 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991) has been important in education, industry the study of multiple informal groupings, including those of academic writing retreats (Kornhaber et a. 2016). Communities-of-practice all have three elements: a domain (the common identity and purpose), a community (the social fabric of the group) and a practice, which includes mutual engagement, the development of a shared repertoire and a joint enterprise (Wenger 1998). From the perspective of academic staff and postgraduate students in writing retreats, and of participants in this current study, a key aspect is the power dynamic shift in creating this joint enterprise, and the development of more informal structures for operating within, crossing and disbanding hitherto strong hierarchical and lecturer-student boundaries. This shift can lead to students becoming actively engaged agents in their own academic development.

Academic writing retreats in the research literature

Research studies on academic structured writing retreats have now been conducted all over the world, including in academic groups in the UK (Murray and Newton 2009), Australia (Kornhaber et al. 2016), the USA (Cable et al. 2013), in New Zealand (Grant and Knowles 2002; Lambert 2006) and South Africa (Benvenuti 2017). Researchers have typically focused on the impact of such retreats for postgraduate researchers, Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and, especially, women. As Murray and Kempenaar (2020: 1016) note, structured writing retreats do not remove discrimination and the particular

challenges of being a woman in academia but they 'can provide a space where women can produce the types of work needed for career progression, rather than waiting for structural and systemic inequality to end'.

Types of writing retreat

Writing retreats take a number of forms; they include structured options (Murray and Newton 2009), which can be conducted either through a 'typing pool' or a 'solitary confinement' model or some hybrid version (Murray 2013). The importance of the facilitator and their role is discussed at length; sometimes they are there to simply keep to a schedule and motivate writers, but there are other retreat styles with more of a mentorship model (Cable et al., 2013), especially in the context of working with postgraduate researchers or ECRs. Mattsson et al. (2020), in their study of spontaneously developed writing groups of postgraduate researchers and post docs, noted that the challenges of facilitating writing groups were not to be underestimated.

Whilst many researchers talk of the importance of writing away from the university campus, as a 'treat' (Castle and Keane 2016: 216) in pleasant surroundings (Garaway 2017) with meals provided (Murray and Newton 2009) in order to remove the mundane, often gendered, every-day labour of preparing food from the equation, others do point to the adequacy of a less luxurious and non-residential offering (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009) when funds are under pressure.

Benefits and challenges of academic writing retreats

The benefits to academic staff and postgraduate researchers discussed in the research literature include the aforementioned development of a community of practice and collegiality amongst colleagues (Castle and Keane 2016), an increase in productivity (Grant 2006), the blossoming of mentoring relationships (Cable et al. 2013) and the

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importance of a sense of accountability for achieving it (Mattsson et al 2020). But being away from the demands of everyday academic life is key (Garraway 2017) and the efficient focus of the protected time and space of the retreat is the positive benefit most often associated with writing retreats (Murray and Newton 2009; Kornhaber et al. 2016).

However, emotional challenges can also be seen in the testimonies of academic staff talking about writing programmes such as retreats (Garraway 2017) so the experience isn't always universally positive, with writing anxiety remaining a concern for many academic staff and postgraduates (Huerta et al. 2017; Lee and Boud 2003) and the pressure of a retreat perhaps being a step too far for some (Garraway 2017).

Rationale and aims of the current study

Many undergraduates, even within the traditional 18-22 age group, have the same time, space and anxiety issues to contend with and very similar themes are found in the responses of participants in Moore (2004). Additionally, a significant proportion of undergraduate students now undertake paid work alongside studying, rendering them time-poor, just as academic staff perceive themselves to be (Malone et al 2020). This is exacerbated further for those students, often mature students, who are carers or parents, although the collation of statistics on those affected by this has been noted to be insufficient (University of Edinburgh, 2018).

As we have seen, limited work has been published to date on the value of regular structured non-residential writing retreats geared towards undergraduate students, with the focus of any current studies being on annual pedagogical or multi-day, residential retreats, so this current study aims to address this scarcity by exploring the following research questions:

1) What do the participating groups of third year undergraduate students state as their main writing challenges as they start their final research projects?

2) What do the students who participate in weekly on-campus structured writing retreats report as the principal benefits and to what extent do these tally with those reported in the academic literature for postgraduate students and academic staff?

Whilst it may no longer be the case that studies on writing retreats for academic staff needs to focus solely on 'evaluation research' (Garraway 2017), there remains a strong case for such research in the more nascent field of exploring the undergraduate student experience and the following section details the approach taken in this current study.

Research design

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for this current study to capture both attitudes with regards to academic writing and to explore the potential of and value in a programme of structured writing retreats across four academic years (2017-2021) in tackling the challenges inherent in academic writing for undergraduate students at this final stage in their programmes. A mixed-methods study here offers the benefits of being able to see clearly the patterns of attitudes from the quantitative data of the whole-cohort surveys alongside the more explanatory open-ended and qualitative responses from the writing retreat participant groups. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the university's research committee (approval code: RECll00012) and students were informed that participation was both voluntary and anonymous.

Context

Since 2014, third-year students in one academic subject area (Language and Linguistics) at a northern English post-92 university have been offered the opportunity

of participating in a series of structured mini writing retreats on the university campus, usually comprising weekly half-day writing sessions across their final semester at university, with more occasional full-day options. Many of the students at the institution in question come from areas that have been targeted for Widening Participation support and are often the first in their family to go to university. Retreats are facilitated by an academic member of staff with whom they are familiar and, although significantly shorter than the typical multi-day structured writing retreat, they adopt, to as great an extent as possible, a similar structure of goal-(re)setting discussions, writing time and evaluation as Murray and Newton (2009) propose. The structure includes a 15-minute goal-setting period at the start followed by a one-and-a-half hour writing session. A comfort and discussion break follows (usually for 15 minutes) and then there is another one or one-and-a-half hour writing session. The retreat finishes with a 15-minute reflection on goals achieved and an opportunity to set goals for the week ahead.

The facilitator is experienced and trained in offering both residential and non-residential writing retreats for academic staff and postgraduate researchers within the institution and she also writes during the period, as well as often being joined by other members of the academic team. Mattsson et al (2020) note that participants in their study reported a more negative experience when group sizes grew to be more than ten. In line with this, numbers attending these student retreats have never been particularly high, with generally a core group of between six and eight students becoming a strong community-of-practice every year from a usual starting point of around twelve. This differs from other studies that have researched retreat-style activities for undergraduates, which have tended to have very high numbers of participants (Rentzelas and Harrison, 2020; Sangster, 2021). Most participants were women, with a

maximum of one or two each year being men, mirroring the typical kind of participation patterns seen in retreats for academic staff (Murray and Kempenaar 2020).

Instruments and participants

Data for this study comes from four different questionnaires, seven audio-recordings of conversations and informal interviews, and fourteen open-ended, student-written evaluative journal-style notes, totalling approximately 2,100 words (see Table 1 below for a visual distribution of this data and participant numbers across the years of the study).

The two questionnaires from the 2018-2019 academic year were designed to capture participants' writing attitudes and the questions were adopted from a range of scaled surveys on writing apprehension (Daly and Miller, 1975) self-efficacy (Huerta et al, 2017), and the writing process (see appendix 1 for the full questionnaires). The survey was piloted with a small group of academic/ personal tutees to ensure clarity in the questions and no changes were subsequently made.

The first survey was completed during an induction session for a dissertation module in September 2018 by 79 third year (level 6) undergraduate students. The researcher was the module director and therefore was able to ask all students to participate during this session whilst making it clear that such participation was voluntary. The second survey was a condensed version of the first and was completed by the 30 of the same students who attended a session on presentation skills for the same dissertation module in May 2019. For the purposes of this current study, the key items in both questionnaires relate to the scaled questions on attitudes towards finding time and open-ended space for writing and feelings about writing itself.

A volunteer research assistant was recruited from within the group of undergraduate students who took part in the non-compulsory writing retreat programme

after a call for expressions of interest. She was responsible for undertaking a participant-observer series of recorded conversations adopting a relaxed manner and capturing moments in discussion as they occurred, rather than scheduling formal interviews. It was felt that this more emic approach offered a greater likelihood of avoiding a social desirability bias that would have come from the lead researcher conducting interviews (or even 'casual' conversations). Seven recordings were taken from students between November 2018 and March 2019, both from those who regularly participated in retreats, and from those who were irregular participants or did not attend at all. In addition to these recordings, students across all years of writing retreats (2017-2019) were asked to write short, journal-style notes about the value that ascribed to structured retreats so a wider range of views have been captured through this process. When writing these notes, I advised that students could do any of the following things: make notes and include statistics about their writing achievements in any given session, reflect on how writing retreats have helped in writing, consider the anticipated and eventual challenges of writing in a retreat format, and explore how they feel they might write in the future as a result. Finally, students who attended writing retreats during the academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 completed a questionnaire about writing and writing retreats containing both closed and open-ended questions. The research instruments and numbers of participants in each cohort is also presented in tabular form below (see Table 1).

Table 1 here.

Analysis

The quantifiable responses to survey items were tallied and totalled in a spreadsheet to better observe patterns and trends in the responses. Analysis of the qualitative data sets from within this data corpus was undertaken adopting a thematic approach (following

Braun and Clarke 2006), coding and categorising the responses from the various sources with the intention being to be able to corroborate and support the numerical data, as well as to explore the key perceived impacts of writing retreats on the student cohorts.

Findings

Survey responses

Considering first the attitudes of the participants towards writing, the vast majority of students (67%) at the beginning of their third year reported that they did enjoy writing. Nearly 20% of participants commented that their enjoyment is, unsurprisingly, enhanced by being interested or passionate about the topic. Of the more select group who participated in the survey at the end of the academic year, this figure was even higher, with only 13% of participants reporting that they did not enjoy writing. However, more than 10% of the participants in the first survey explicitly mentioned negative feedback from previous assignments as being key in their apprehension around writing, as we saw reflected in French (2018). Therefore, it is of value to pursue investigations into a more community-based approach to developing writing skills, as suggested by French (2018), the writing retreat model being one option and being that under consideration here.

Participants in the first survey were negative about their capacity to protect their writing space and time, with only 23% saying they felt they were good or very good at doing this, and 48% reporting that they were poor or very poor. Importantly, in the second survey of the same group later in the year, this percentage had got worse, with 56% of that group of thirty participants reporting that they could not adequately protect their writing space and time. This may be, in part, due to the lack of scheduled contact

time a dissertation student has timetabled, so the time they have to write is too unstructured for some of them to handle well.

When asked about whether they were able to schedule adequate breaks when writing for a long period of time, almost half of the respondents in the first and two thirds in the second survey said they could. However, these seemingly positive figures need tempering with some of the qualitative responses, as some participants discussed how this capacity can mask issues. One wrote:

'I do more 'taking a break' than writing'

It was noted in cross-checking responses that reporting negatively on the question of protecting time for writing correlated frequently with a seemingly positive report on being 'able' to take frequent breaks when writing. This demonstrates the value in a mixed-methods approach to this kind of study.

The second survey concluded with a question about whether students had attended a writing retreat over the course of the year. Of the 30 participants, 28 responded to this question, with 18 saying they had not, and 9 reporting that they had. They were asked to indicate why in an open-ended text response. Three were explicit in saying they preferred to work alone, but there were more ambivalent responses around not 'feeling ready', as well as timing and commuting issues, and uncertainty over what to expect and what the pressures of such a session might be. These uncertainties are worth facilitators of writing retreats reflecting on to ensure that all who might benefit get the opportunity to try them.

All nine students who reported that they had been to at least one retreat session were positive about them, even those who didn't return, one saying:

"Yes, I came to one session – it was good and I should have continued"

The other responses from more regular attendees can be seen in the table (table 2) below.

Table 2 here

These responses hint at aspects of the broader range of themes developed in the next section, which explores the qualitative data from the smaller groups of retreat participants across the four years.

Writing retreat participants' data

The participants in the smaller surveys and those who produced the reflective evaluative writing data were all core members of each year's community-of-practice. They therefore demonstrate the commitment to the Domain of the CoP and understand its purpose and identity, as can be seen in the responses to the survey question in the previous section and the unanimously overwhelmingly positive response to the question *How valuable have you found the writing retreats this year?* in both the 2020 and 2021 surveys. The participants therefore spent longer reflecting on themes that relate more to the development of the Community and the Practice elements of their community-of-practice.

The support and pressures of goal-setting

The concept of goal-setting in writing retreats, seen as key for their success by most adherents (Moore et al. 2010; Kornhaber et al. 2016) and being an important element in the mutual engagement of the CoP, arouses a mix of responses from these cohorts of students. In the 2021 survey, goal-setting issues were mentioned as the most challenging aspect of writing retreat attendance by four out of the seven respondents. Some assume that goal-setting will feel intimidating (RW2.3 2018) and perhaps make one feel *"reasonably unintelligent"* (RW2.3 2018). This is sometimes because, in stark contrast to the work of an academic at a writing retreat, students can often find

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themselves working on the same assignment so the intimidation comes from anxiety that other people may be *"further along"* (SS 5 2021). This can lead to a sense of pressure, but some respondents were able to articulate doing the work to rationalise this and fight the feeling of intimidation:

> *"It pressures you because you can see that people are ahead of you but you have to remember that that might be because you've been doing different stuff in a different order. And maybe the pressure is part of the point"* (Audio 2018).

Trusting in the goodwill of the Community is therefore key, here, as is the growing realisation that one is a valued, and increasingly core, participant in it.

For some, there is an explicitly stated reluctance to set clear goals – perhaps indicating a greater sense of peripheral involvement in the writing retreat community and its shared purpose:

> *"Like, […] what's your goals because then I don't have any goals for the day I just want to see that's like part of the goal so I'll just want to get something written some sort of words words yeah, words written down"* (Audio 2018).

Of course, in the excerpt above, there is actually a goal stated ("*some sort of words*") but it can take students some time to understand what goals actually are in the context of a writing retreat and how they best work. Some respondents are aware that they also self-sabotage, by not being honest with others:

> *"So the problem with that is that I lie, I lie. So, I lie, I'll be like, okay, I'm gonna do this and this, like, I'll say it to the group I'm like yeah, I'm gonna finish this and then I don't and lie"* (Audio 2018).

There are others who struggle to be honest even with themselves, but this perhaps stems from not having yet developed the trust in others to allow for making oneself vulnerable in the community:

"I am not very good at goal setting because I lie to myself and pretend I am further on than I am, maybe because I feel like other people might be judging my progress." (RW2.2 2018)

Once participants are full members of the writing retreat community-of-practice, as can be seen in the reflective writings and surveys that are captured towards the end of the academic year, the shift in discourses about goal-setting and the supportive nature of the writing retreat shared practice can be seen. Setting the goals becomes not just a commitment to oneself, but also to the group. One participant wrote about the challenge of "*having to force myself to complete the goals so I wouldn't let the group down*" (SS 7 2021) and another noted that if a goal was too ambitious it could lead to you feeling "*ashamed and upset with yourself*" (SS 6 2021). This rather problematic viewpoint seems not to last for long into the early days of establishing the community-of-practice, fortunately. Participants note that they "*found the first few times I didn't really have the best targets for the session but I became a lot better at setting them the more I went to the retreats*" (RW 2.8 2018) and that goal-setting made them feel "*professional and empowered*" about their work (RW2.3 2018). The internal satisfaction of achieving one's goals is enhanced in a writing retreat, however, by the additional support from others, one participant notes how enjoyable it is when "*everyone celebrated with you when you hit your daily target*" (RW2.2 2018).

Shared values and support

The value of the community-of-practice as a domain in which a shared practice occurs is clear in the sense mentioned regularly across the data set of being "*all in the same boat*" is a real motivator for participants. It really "*knits you together as a group*" as one participant said (SS 2 2021) and "*spurred*" members on (RW2.2 2018). The "*same boat*" evokes a metaphor for the shared sense of space in the community-of-practice.

The writing retreat finds its own physical (or virtual) space, of course, but the data also contains multiple reflections on the concept of "space". The physical is a "*space where there are no distractions and everyone writing around me*" which feels "*intense so I certainly feel quite a bit of pressure to meet my objectives*" (SS 3 2020) and we also see this in the references from the survey data in the previous section of "*a silent space*".

However, there is also the sense of the mental "space" in participants' reflective writings and responses and that helps students tackle some of the challenges in their writing:

> "*the session gave me the time and space to quietly refocus my direction and work out what I need to do next*" (RW2 2017).

As the community-of-practice strengthens during each year, the participants reflect that it offers "*a safe space*", a "*space to discuss stresses with work*" (RW1.2 2018) which feels "*calming*" (RW1.1 2018) and "*non-judgemental*" (RW1.7 2018) and this can be seen across all the cohorts:

> "*I feel like the writing retreats gave you a space where you could air out any stresses or worries you had whilst getting encouragement from people who were in the same position*" (SS 6 2021).

The power of power shifts

Participants throughout discuss how encouraging they find sharing the community-of-practice with other academic staff. The facilitator brings her own writing to the retreat and other colleagues regularly join in. Participants reflect that, initially this feels unnerving and then becomes motivating, applying a pressure to work:

> "*I think that actually encouraged you to write as well, because [...] I better get on*" (Audio 2018).

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Once this presence and shift in dynamics is normalised within the community-of-practice, it begins to take on another aspect too, which is a levelling and an appreciation of the student's value of their writing. As one participant reflects it made "*the group felt that their own work was important, working alongside academic staff*" (RW2.1 2018).

Time

The rhythms of the joint enterprise of a student writing retreat community-of-practice have been important for many participants in that "a routine [is] lack[ing] in third year due to no timetabled sessions" (RW1.3 2018) and that the retreat provides a "nice regular working time" (RW1.8 2018) to make up for it. This was comforting in terms of setting a weekly routine, and particularly valued in the 2021 cohort because the set retreat time was a Monday morning, which participants felt established a good rhythm to the whole week as a result. Beyond that the lack of timetabled sessions in third year can be challenging socially and many participants made comments such as this:

> "*I enjoyed the retreats mostly when we didn't have lectures to go to so we barely had contact with anyone from the course. The retreats let me catch up with people and see how they are all doing and see if I'm at a similar stage to them*" (RW2.8 2018).

Overall, therefore, the data demonstrates how positive an experience the participants across the four years of the study have found becoming a core member of the writing retreat community-of-practice. As one student wrote, it was:

> "*One of the best things I have taken part in and some of the most productive writing I have done throughout my full 3 years at [university]*" (SS 7 2020).

Some participants say that they wish this type of provision had been available in their earlier years as an undergraduate.

The impact of Covid-19: online retreats

A key factor dictating the experience for the final two groups of participants in this study, of course, was the impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic. The 2020 group switched to an online (Teams) writing retreat from March 2020, after having already established a good dynamic in the physical community-of-practice but the 2021 group only ever existed in the virtual arena. Some participants in the 2020 observed that the online retreats actually worked better than initially expected so that perhaps in the future hybrid groups are an option. However, over half the group felt that online retreats were only moderately useful as opposed to their rating of the in-person retreats as unanimously extremely useful. This participant's comment perhaps sums up this most effectively:

> "*Online WRs were harder to stay focused with because you could check your phone without others knowing, or you could pet the dog and nobody would know, so it felt a bit less productive than in person*" (SS 2 2020).

However, others noted the benefits of managing time, other responsibilities and commuting patterns better because of the online options, so, in common with many other communities and institutions, thinking is needed to move beyond this Covid-19 period to ensure we do not lose the observed benefits of joining such communities from our homes.

Beyond the CoP – longer-term impact

The final theme to be explored from the open-ended survey and reflective writings is the impact of becoming a core member of these writing retreat communities-of-practice on the participants outside of the facilitated structured retreats.

A number of participants observe that attending writing retreats have helped them learn more about themselves, and their capacity:

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"*I now know my boundaries and writing, how long I can solely dedicate to writing and how long I need a break*" (SS 3 2021).

The approach they learn in writing retreats together can also be something they take well beyond the retreat and incorporate into the rest of their lives:

"*Before the retreats started I used the top floor of the library, it worked in a similar way however didn't have goal setting and that is something I've carried on in other aspects of life*" (RW2.6 2018).

Each year around Easter, the groups tend to take on a life of their own as the facilitator takes annual or research leave and the core members take ownership, generally organising additional retreats in the facilitator's absence. These are generally productive sessions and they certainly increase confidence in the community-of-practice but the role of the facilitator is often missed as seen below, echoed in reflections elsewhere from this particular cohort:

"*The core group of attendees took it upon ourselves to facilitate our own retreats at any available opportunity, especially in times like the Easter break when there were no scheduled retreats. Of these student-led retreats, the concentration level was slightly less focused than in the ones run by [the usual facilitator], however we still used timed writing periods and I still found these sessions a more productive use of my time than if I had chosen to spend a day in the library on my own*" (RW2.1 2018).

Discussion

We have seen from the exploration of the data from surveys across three cohorts and reflective writings from the four cohorts of participants that the development of a community-of-practice for writing retreats for late-stage undergraduate students mirrors to some extent that of other academic groups, like early career researchers and

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postgraduates, and even more established academic staff. The desire for time and space dedicated to writing is valued by all groups (Grant 2006; Murray and Newton 2009), and the capacity for these communities to help tackle writing anxiety and the stresses associated with the production of written work is also seen across the board (Huerta et al. 2017).

The benefits that we discussed earlier for academic staff in terms of developing collegiality (Castle and Keane 2016) are seen in the students' enjoyment of the changes in power dynamic, and the undergraduate cohorts positive testimony about the productivity of their retreats mirrors absolutely that from the evaluations of academic staff (Grant 2006; Murray and Newton 2009), with the value of a sense of accountability for achieving it (Mattsson et al 2020) also being explicitly acknowledged.

There are differences for undergraduates. The chances of those in the groups working on the same assignment are higher than in groups of postgraduates and academic staff and this could cause additional challenges for some due to comparing themselves negatively to peers, for example. The timescales for the work are also very different so these communities-of-practice are often more short-lived. It is worth noting here that both these aspects would be significantly exacerbated if a facilitator was to consider undertaking such writing retreats with undergraduates at an earlier stage in their programme. This does not mean that rolling out a programme of writing retreats for all undergraduates would not have merit, but that those particular issues would need some consideration by the facilitator, in terms of managing the goal-setting stages.

Conclusions

This study has sought to address the following questions:

1) What do the participating groups of third year undergraduate students state as their main writing challenges as they start their final research projects?

2) What do the students who participate in weekly structured writing retreats report as the principal benefits and to what extent do these tally with those reported in the academic literature for postgraduate students and academic staff?

The data showed that finding time and space and protecting this was one of the biggest challenges for the participating group as they started their third year at university and commenced their final research project. The data from the cohort at the end of the academic year showed that the majority had not made any progress in terms of getting better at protecting time and space for writing. However, the groups that engaged in developing a community-of-practice of writing retreats with a staff facilitator report a very different experience.

The participating students reported a number of benefits to becoming a core member of a community-of-practice around writing, including increased productivity, increased sense of support, an ability to protect time and space for writing (both in and out of retreat), and an increased capacity to set goals effectively. These tally strongly with the stated benefits from the literature on academic writing retreats for established academic staff, early career researchers and postgraduates. The implications of this are that writing retreats should be more widely offered to undergraduate students since the remedial and deficit approaches to writing support do not adequately address the challenges the cohorts face and a more community-based approach should be adopted (French 2018).

This paper offers an exploratory evaluation research study, but future research would be valuable to explore more the role of the facilitator, to further theorise the community-of-practice development of undergraduate writing retreat groups and how

best to ensure that any positive changes to writing behaviours are sustained. Studies

should also explore retreats across multiple discipline areas and address how best to

ensure all students who would benefit from such retreats are able to access them, by

investigating the aspects that inhibit participation.

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There are no declarations of interest to declare.

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Appendix
Appendix

Survey 1

Facilitating writing for undergraduates in the ████████████████████

I am undertaking a study into the practices of undergraduate students with regards to writing for assessment in the latter stages of a degree programme. This study will adopt a mixed-methods and this questionnaire will form part of it.

By completing this survey on your identity as a writer and your beliefs about the writing process you consent to me using the results as part of a broader data set for potential publication in peer-reviewed publication, and other academic dissemination routes. The survey is completed entirely anonymously, and you can contact me at any time to remove your survey from the data set using the identifier code you will give at the end of the survey.

Thank you for your time! Please ask if you have any questions.

███████████████

Answer the following prompts, simply ticking yes or no

I avoid writing	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I have no fear of my writing being evaluated	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I look forward to writing down my ideas	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated	☐ Yes | ☐ No
Handing in an essay makes me feel good	☐ Yes | ☐ No
My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on an essay	☐ Yes | ☐ No
Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I like to write my ideas down	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I like to have my friends read what I have written	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I'm nervous about writing	☐ Yes | ☐ No
People seem to enjoy what I write	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I enjoy writing	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas	☐ Yes | ☐ No
Writing is a lot of fun	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I like seeing my thoughts on paper	☐ Yes | ☐ No
Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience	☐ Yes | ☐ No
When I hand in an essay, I know I'm going to do poorly	☐ Yes | ☐ No
It's easy for me to write good compositions	☐ Yes | ☐ No

I don't think I write as well as most other people	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I don't like my essays to be evaluated	☐ Yes | ☐ No
I'm no good at writing	☐ Yes | ☐ No

For the following statements, choose an answer on a Likert scale 1 – 5 where 1 = not able to do this task at all *to* 5 = able to do this task very well

I can come up with examples from the reviewed literature quickly to illustrate an important point.

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I can construct a good opening sentence quickly.

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I can protect my writing time/ schedule.

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I can obtain the appropriate feedback I need, during various stages of my writing project.

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I can stop reading/ researching and begin writing even if I don't feel completely ready

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I work on my writing project little and often.

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I take frequent breaks when I write for a long period.

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I give myself small rewards when I stick to my planned writing schedule.

<div align="center">☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5</div>

I spill out really rough drafts and don't try to perfect every paragraph before moving on

<div align="center">

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

</div>

I freewrite to generate ideas, particularly when I feel stuck

<div align="center">

☑ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

</div>

And finally, please answer these questions about your experiences with writing during your life.

When has writing been particular successful or exciting for you?

Who or what has had the most positive impact on your writing?

And who or what has had the most negative impact on your writing?

What is your ideal writing space, where you would be most productive – imagine what it looks like, who you would be with, what you would need.

Now, describe your typical writing situation.

Write three or four truths about you as a writer.

Please give yourself a unique code/ password that you would be able to remember (so that you could use it again if you were to complete another survey for me, or if you wish to withdraw from the project): _____

Survey 2

Facilitating writing for undergraduates in the ███████████████████████

I am undertaking a study into the practices of undergraduate students with regards to writing for assessment in the latter stages of a degree programme.

The study has adopted a mixed-methods and ethnographic approach and has had ethical approval granted by ███ ethics committee.

You took part in the first stage of this project last semester and I would be grateful if you could complete the following shorter survey which will bring the project to a close.

By completing the survey, you give your consent to participate but you can withdraw at any time by contacting my with your identifier code and asked to be removed from the data set.

Thank you for your time!

███████████

████████

Your identifier code (as chosen in the survey last semester):

_____

Please answer the following prompts about your feelings towards writing (circle the best response):

I like to write my ideas down   Yes

    No

I'm no good at writing

    Yes   No

Handing in an essay makes me feel good   Yes

    No

I avoid writing   Yes

    No

I don't like my essays to be evaluated

    Yes   No

I enjoy writing   Yes

    No

I take frequent breaks when I write for a long period   Yes

    No

I spill out rough drafts and don't worry about trying to make my writing perfect at first

    Yes   No

I can protect my writing time/ schedule

    Yes   No

I can begin writing even if I don't feel completely ready

    Yes   No

I have found a good way for me to be productive   Yes

    No

Writing my dissertation has helped me become a more confident writer

    Yes   No

Do you have any comments to make to expand on any of the above statements?

When has writing been particularly successful or exciting for you?

Who or what has had the most positive impact on your writing?

And who or what has had the most negative impact?

What is your ideal writing space?

Describe your most typical writing space

Write three or four truths about you as a writer

Have you sought any training on writing from Study Development this academic year?

If yes, what type and was it useful? If not, why not?

Have you taken part in any of the writing retreats offered by me this academic year? If

yes, how useful have they been and why? If not, why not?

Do you have any other thoughts on your writing or writing experiences that you would

like to share?

Tables

Year	Data type	# of participants
2017-2018	Elicited reflective writings	9
2018-2019	Questionnaire 1 (Appendix 1)	79
	Questionnaire 2 (Appendix 2)	30
	Audio recordings	8
	Elicited reflective writings	5
2019-2020	Questionnaire 3 (Appendix 3)	7
2020-2021	Questionnaire 4 (Appendix 4)	7

Table 1: Data collection tools

Qualitative survey comment	Initial theme
Yes, most of them. I love to work in a silent space and I have realised it helps to set goals	Goal-setting/ Silent space
Yes, most of them. A different space to write in. reflective silence	Silent space
Yes partly – I work better when I don't have other people around me but they were useful in drafting ideas and bouncing ideas off other students	Collaborative space
Yes, very productive and structured which I like	Structure/ Productivity
Yes, they were OK helpful and good to have as an option	An armoury of support
Yes, a quiet space where there are no distractions.	Tackling procrastination/ Silent space
Yes, they have been extremely helpful as I get significant amounts done	Productivity

Table 2: Qualitative survey responses about the benefits of writing retreats for undergraduate students