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Beyond the word count: creation, frustration and innovation at pedagogic research writing retreats

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Abstract: Although evidence exists that writing retreats are an effective means of increasing writing productivity, it is not well understood why this is the case. Crucially, however, writing retreats appear to engender a number of developmental benefits in addition to simple 'on the day' productivity. The Centre for Innovation in Higher Education at Anglia Ruskin University has been running Pedagogic Research Writing Retreats since February 2017. Our study, which commenced in April 2019, analyses the longitudinal influence of attendance at writing retreats through analysis of evaluation data and semi-structured interviews. It explores whether attending a Pedagogic Research Writing Retreat has an ongoing impact on participants' writing practices and habits; their development of strategies for managing both the writing process and the anxieties associated with it; and how they embody and negotiate different disciplinary identities in their pedagogic research writing. This paper presents some broad themes emerging from the findings so far, including the acquisition of new techniques for managing writing and associated emotions; validation of the writing identity; and a deepened understanding of writing as process rather than a finished product.

Paper: Writing retreats work, but we do not fully understand why. Although the outputs of scholarly endeavour are prolific, the processes by which they are produced are much less evident. Academics' writing habits and behaviours form a hidden practice, usually undertaken in private and rarely studied: as Kempenaar & Murray (2016) point out, "The literature on academic writing in higher education contains a wealth of research and theory on students' writing, but much less on academics' writing" (p.940).

Retreats offer an opportunity to prioritise writing and to work in a shared space in a focused and productive way. Research suggests that the value of writing retreats goes further than simply giving participants dedicated time and space in which to work, engendering a number of longer-term developmental benefits in addition to 'on the day' productivity (Moore, 2003; MacLeod, Steckley & Murray, 2012; Murray & Newton, 2009). However, these longer-term benefits have not to date been well explored.

The Centre for Innovation in Higher Education at Anglia Ruskin University has run seven Pedagogic

Research Writing Retreats since February 2017. Our study, which commenced in April 2019, [explores](#) whether attending a Pedagogic Research Writing Retreat has an ongoing impact on participants' writing practices and habits; their development of strategies for managing both the writing process and the anxieties associated with it; and how they embody and negotiate different disciplinary identities in their pedagogic research writing.

A preliminary analysis of existing retreat evaluation forms (reported in Coonan, Pratt-Adam & Warnes, 2019, *forthcoming*) showed that while participants found the 'protected time' element to be the greatest benefit of attending a retreat, they experienced it in different ways. The most frequent response was freedom from interruptions, constraints and emails, but others highlighted the positive pressure (eustress) of feeling required to focus on writing. The value of sharing the space and a common focus with peers was also reported.

We subsequently embarked on a phase of semi-structured interviews to explore with participants

- anxieties, fears and confidence levels around writing;
- blockages they experience, and the solutions used to address them;
- experimentation with strategies for increasing writing productivity
- whether they develop a reflective awareness of their writing practices over time;
- how they maintain (or do not maintain) a writing habit after or between retreats;
- whether and how they move between disciplinary and scholarly identities in their pedagogic research writing.

Four interviews have taken place to date.

The impact of writing socially

For most of the retreat participants work individually, talking only at the end of scheduled writing slots and at breaks (although there is the option to talk or work together in a separate room). Despite this, the impact of sharing a space with other writers was highlighted by participants both in interviews and on evaluation forms as a significant benefit: "not just achieving writing but learning from others".

Interviewees spoke of acquiring new techniques - such as free writing - from others at retreats. Several mentioned the benefits to their thinking of being "forced" to step away from writing to take breaks, and their surprise that this actually increased their productivity. For others the experience of sharing their writing goals with colleagues was transformative: feeling accountable for achieving their stated aims assisted with productivity.

Validation of the writing identity

All interviewees so far have described feelings of anxiety around writing, which bears out Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins' (2009) claim that writing gives rise to difficult emotions including self-doubt (p.269). One interviewee referred to feelings of imposter syndrome associated with writing; another, to their anxiety that by attending a retreat they were "taking space away from someone doing proper

research".

Participants also spoke of their gratification at being invited to take part in retreats, perceiving the opportunity as a privilege. One even asserted that by attending a retreat "the other people's good habits rub off on me somehow". An important element of the retreats is therefore what one participant referred to as the "peer normalisation of writing" – internalising the permission to take time to write and talk about writing, and validating one's right to write by doing so.

Not writing as a writing strategy

A finding that was unexpected both to the researchers and to interviewees was how much time they spent on tasks preliminary to or associated with writing - in other words, how much time they spent *not writing*.

One participant described spending their first writing retreat on planning the teaching elements of a course to be researched and their second in analysing and visualising the data elicited. In one way they found this dissatisfying - "I have felt disappointed, actually, because I haven't written a lot" – but also recognised that writing as such occurs only when prompted by a looming deadline and "I'm not at that stage yet". A second interviewee described how they had prepared for a retreat in order focus on "pure writing" in order to complete a journal article, but "things pop into your head... you get side-tracked".

Participants' reactions imply that they may not have been consciously aware of the complexities and messiness of the writing *process*, as distinct from the finished *product*, before attending a retreat, nor of the power of "writing as thinking" (Cayley, 2014; Monroe, 2011). The interviews demonstrate a heightened awareness both of their own writing habits and behaviours, and of a new understanding that the difficulties they encounter are also experienced by others and may even be intrinsic to the creative act – that writing "can be messy, and that's OK".

CONCLUSION

Our preliminary findings already go some way towards explaining how writing retreats have a positive impact on participants' understanding of the writing process and awareness of their own writing practices and identity. Writing retreats enable participants to experience and consciously work through aspects of writing as process, not just writing as product, and legitimise its creative, messy and iterative nature. By acquiring new strategies, seeing how others address difficulties, and becoming accountable to their peers, participants explore their own relationship with writing, affirm their identity as writers.

NOTE

This study has been granted ethical approval by Anglia Ruskin University (protocol number: ESC-SREP-18-153).

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