

288 Understanding Wellbeing: The Affective Response of Writing Retreats in Academics and Postgraduate Students

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Writing is a core skill for academics and postgraduates. Working online may increase productivity, but, for some, it increases stress and negatively impacts on their ability to write. Writing retreats provide a means to escape these stresses, and this study is investigating their impact on participants' wellbeing. We explore the affective response of two cohorts of academics and postgraduates who attend writing retreats, online or in-person. Participants complete the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) at the start and end of a writing retreat. Questionnaire data are inputted in SPSS and analysed using paired samples t-test. Semi-structured interviews will be offered to participants. This study aims to identify if attending a writing retreat impacts the affective domain: reducing stress and improving wellbeing. We will explore the implications for improving academic wellbeing environments, specific to the core task of writing.

Full paper

Introduction

Writing is a core skill for academics and postgraduate students, but many struggle to write. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic many academic activities, including writing, moved online. While this improved productivity for some, others struggled with independent variables that negatively impacted on their ability to write (Janz & Murray, 2021; Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020).

Writing retreats can enable changes in writing behaviours, leading to increased productivity (Murray, 2015; MacLeod et al., 2012; Murray & Kempenaar, 2018; Murray & Newton, 2009). However, productivity is not the only benefit. Participants regularly report that they feel more positive and less stressed during and after writing retreats, although they struggle to sustain these benefits in other environments. This study focuses on emotional changes experienced at writing retreats because these are important for sustaining their positive impact.

Methods

Ethical approval was provided by the University of the Highlands and Islands. Participants will be recruited from writing retreats run by collaborators in this project. Residential and online participants will receive information about the project, including why they were selected, what they will be asked to do and how their data will be used. A pilot study is underway in June 2023 and the main study will take place at three subsequent retreats.

The questionnaire is based on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988), originally developed as a twenty-word schedule that generally described feelings and emotions. We have adapted the PANAS for the writing retreat context. First, we integrated the words into sentences that aligned to writing retreats. For example, instead of asking participants to identify how interested they were generally, we asked them to identify how interested they felt in progressing their writing at the writing retreat. All twenty-words were adapted in this way and are available on request. Additionally, we removed the word jittery from the PANAS, as this emotion was captured in the question asking participants to identify how nervous they felt about writing. Furthermore, to understand differences in environmental spaces during residential writing retreats, two additional questions were added: participants were asked to identify how inspired they felt about their writing environment, and how motivated they felt to engage in writing due to their writing environment. Finally, we changed the wording of options for defining

how participants were feeling. For example, instead of using very slightly or not at all, a little, moderately, quite a bit, and extremely, we used not at all, slightly, moderately, and very.

Participants will complete the online questionnaire at the start of the retreat, participate in the retreat and at the end of the final day complete the questionnaire again. Participants will also be offered the opportunity to take part in an individual interview. PANAS data will be analysed using SPSS and interview transcripts analysed using Nvivo and Microsoft Excel.

Discussion

This is a work-in-progress empirical study. We expect participants to express reduced negative affect and increased positive affect. This will provide evidence of the positive emotions that are often expressed informally at retreats.

If writing retreats can foster wellbeing, even in relation to one of the most challenging aspects of academic work, writing, then they can provide healthy environments for this aspect of academic work, particularly if they are held in places where participants have access to 'green and blue spaces' (McDougall et al., 2021). However, if positive affect is to foster sustained wellbeing, one-off writing retreats will not offer the long-term exposure to green spaces that can improve health and wellbeing (Gascon et al., 2018). Furthermore, while Ahern-Dodson and Dufour (2023) argue that we need a new model of faculty writing support to counter the normalization of escalating standards in academic work, our study could provide new insights into how we might create a wellbeing model of academic writing.

Conclusion

Health and wellbeing have become the focus of higher education research in response to the intensifying stresses and lack of support in contemporary workplaces. Writing retreats can be a haven from these stresses. This study will provide us with insight into participants' emotional responses when attending writing retreats. Positive affect is important for sustaining academics' and postgraduate students' health and wellbeing, and, in turn, is likely to sustain productive writing behaviours. There are many implications for academic institutions: for positive affect to be sustained, institutions should adopt and invest in the writing retreat model. This is one way to enhance staff and student wellbeing.

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