Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

Edited by

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41. "It's a bit like academic me-time": Can virtual mini writing retreats contribute to a more joyful, creative, and humane Higher Education?

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Abstract

Academic writing is often a lonely and challenging activity, but writing retreats can reduce isolation, enhance studying effectiveness, and help foster scholarly communities. While existing literature discusses the effects of face-to-face writing retreats, there has been little evaluation of virtual mini writing retreats, which offer increased accessibility and the potential to embed effective writing habits into everyday academic life. This reflexive chapter, co-authored by two lecturers and two MSc students, explores the experience of participating in nine weekly virtual mini writing retreats, drawing on diary entries as a key reflective tool. The retreats provided a supportive and encouraging environment where staff and students felt empowered to be critical, honest, and creative in their writing. Participants also shared and discussed writing practices and tips, and noted

improved focus on their writing even outside of the sessions. In conclusion, brief virtual writing retreats may contribute to a more joyful, creative, and humane academic experience.

Keywords: writing retreat; academic writing; student engagement; community of practice; self-regulation; creativity

Introduction

Individualist deficit model vs supportive community approaches

Academic writing can be a lonely and challenging activity for staff and students alike. One of the challenges is finding the time and space to write (Cunningham, 2022). It is not unusual to procrastinate when working on a research paper or assignment or to be distracted by more pressing deadlines. It has been suggested that the ubiquitous deficit model, where students are told mainly what they have done wrong, is not the best way to support students in their studies; a more community-based approach is needed (Cunningham, 2022).

An example of a community-based approach is the practice of organising writing retreats for groups of students and staff, where writing sessions are interspersed with social and academic-skills-discussion sessions. Typically, writing retreats can last two (Sangster, 2021) or three days (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021; Quynn & Stewart, 2021), and can take place on campus (Quynn & Stewart, 2021; Sangster, 2021; Cunningham, 2022) or in a different location altogether (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021; Stevenson, 2021). In some cases, writing retreats are enriched by academic skills and time management workshops, as well as recharging activities (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). Participants of the retreats can be undergraduate students (Sangster, 2021; Cunningham, 2022), graduate students (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021; Quynn & Stewart, 2021), or a combination of graduate students and staff (Stevenson, 2021).

Benefits of face-to-face writing retreats

A review by Rachel Kornhaber and colleagues (2016) suggested that writing retreats can have personal, professional, and organisational

benefits. The personal benefits include increased motivation, confidence, engagement, pleasure in writing, and a reduction in writing-related anxiety levels. The professional benefits include the enhancement of writing skills, teamwork, and the development of a community of writers. Organisational investment is the extent to which an organisation can support the participants of the retreat, for example, by providing experienced mentors. Although developing personal and professional skills can lead to organisational benefits, organisational investment is important for greater writing productivity and generally for the success of the writing retreats (Kornhaber et al., 2016).

The social aspect of the writing retreats appears to be an important reason why they are beneficial (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Murray & Newton, 2009); the sessions provide not only professional, but also socio-psychological support, which can enhance the wellbeing of students (Stevenson, 2021; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). Rowena Murray and Mary Newton (2009) suggested that the very beneficial community of practice created during the retreats encourages the development of a shared vision, collegial support, mentorship, continuous mutual peer review, and social interaction. Similarly, Emilie Tremblay-Wragg and colleagues (2021) showed that the community of practice created during and after the retreat can reduce feelings of isolation and enhance academic skills for graduate students, thus tackling two issues that often hinder graduate students' academic development and can lead to delaying or even dropping out from their studies. Furthermore, Heather Sangster (2021) showed that a two-day writing retreat on a university campus can enhance motivation, increase confidence and encourage a more optimistic outlook towards the writing up of the third-year undergraduate dissertation. In summary, writing retreats can provide the personal and professional support that undergraduate and postgraduate students need to progress with their writing.

Establishing a writing habit with regular writing retreats

Interestingly, Kristina Quynn and Cyndi Stewart (2021) mentioned that graduate students found it difficult to maintain a writing habit outside of the retreat. Similarly, Murray and Newton (2009) noted that writing retreats do not tend to be experienced as a mainstream activity. This

is an important point and brings into question the efficacy of one-off, long sessions of intensive writing in helping students establish a writing habit.

One way to integrate writing retreats into academic life could be to organise regular sessions. A recent study showed that weekly half or full-day face-to-face writing retreats had multiple personal and professional benefits for third year undergraduate students (Cunningham, 2022). More specifically, the results showed that these regular writing retreats helped bring about a shift from an individual responsibility for goal setting to a group commitment, which made it easier to complete writing goals. Participants also noted that the support and pressure to write was very useful for the development of their writing. There was also a sense of a power shift, as students and academics worked together on their writing, which made students feel their writing was important. The students also noted that the writing retreat provided regularity and rhythm for their writing and an opportunity for socialising. Finally, there were some indications that the writing retreat made students realise the importance of goal setting, which they used beyond the retreat. Interestingly, the students also organised writing retreats without the facilitator, which were almost as effective, and increased student independence.

Online sessions

Even if the retreats are regular part of academic life, it is not always possible for the students to attend if they are face-to-face sessions. Making the sessions online could encourage more participation. An important question is whether online writing retreats can be equally as effective as face-to-face sessions. Clare Cunningham (2022) noted that online writing retreats had mixed reviews. Some participants felt that it was more difficult to focus on online writing retreats, and the sessions were rated as less useful than face-to-face writing retreats. However, some of the participants noted that online writing retreats were very accessible. We also recently reflected on the positive outcomes of using one-hour virtual weekly writing retreats within a personal tutoring group (Paltoglou et al., 2023). More evidence is needed to explore the effectiveness of virtual mini writing retreats in reinforcing beneficial writing habits.

In summary, whist there is some evidence that face-to-face writing retreats are beneficial for students, there is little evidence or evaluation of the effectiveness of regular virtual mini writing retreats. Online mini writing retreats are important because they have the potential to be more accessible, and they could help to integrate writing retreats and writing habits in academic life. Typical writing retreats tend to be peripheral to academic life (Murray & Newton, 2009), and not everybody has the time or resources to attend them. Murray and Newton (2009, p. 549) suggest that the "community could be virtual, imagined, or internalised once they had experienced [a] structured retreat". This indicates that an online retreat is a viable way to create a community of practice and more specifically a writing community.

The co-authors of the current reflexive essay participated in a weekly virtual mini writing retreat, which took place online in Microsoft Teams. The hope was that the participants would get a considerable amount of writing done and that they would feel part of a writing community. In the current essay we aim to reflect on the experience of participating in a mini online writing retreat, based on the diary entries of author Aspasia Eleni Paltoglou (henceforth, AEP).

Context

The module where the activity took place was a full-time dissertation module for the MSc Psychology Conversion course at Manchester Metropolitan University. Students are asked to work largely independently for this module, and they often delay working on the project to work on other modules, as other deadlines are usually more pressing; this suggests that students need additional incentives and support in order to prioritise the dissertation. Author AEP hoped to increase the motivation of students to prioritise the project by creating an optional writing retreat.

Two out of sixteen students joined the writing retreat (authors Alison Williams (henceforth, AW) and Arriarne Pugh (henceforth, AP)), as well as a member of staff (author Rossella Sorte (henceforth, RS)). Author AEP was project supervisor for AW and AP, but also the module leader for the dissertation module, and RS was a supervisor of other students in the module.

Author AEP created a Microsoft Teams group for sixteen dissertation students she supervised, and within that, advertised the writing retreat, and posted the Microsoft Teams link for it. It was made clear to the students that the activity was entirely optional, and that it would run once a week. Typically, each writing retreat session had two to four participants. The retreat typically lasted just over an hour. More details about how the sessions are usually organised have been described elsewhere (Paltoglou, 2022; Paltoglou et al., 2023). In brief, the sessions consisted of 5–10 minutes of discussion goal setting and/ or evaluation, followed by 25 minutes of writing in silence. Typically, there were two writing slots and three discussion slots. Author AEP noted down the gist of what was said in nine different sessions, as well as some personal thoughts about it, which were shared with the sixteen project students.

Discussion

This section summarises some of the most important points that came up in our discussions (as captured in the notes of author AEP) during the sessions and relates them to relevant literature.

Personal benefits

We pondered that, when writing alone, we sometimes go into a downward spiral of self-deprecation. One of us suggested that the writing retreats were "academic me-time"; they could create a warm friendly, positive, encouraging, and relaxing environment for writing, where the participants could connect with each other. They could also give participants the headspace to work on their writing. We reflected that although participants needed to state what they were going to work on, and declare how it went to the other participants, there were no expectations or very prescriptive instructions which could potentially inhibit writing and creativity. In other words, there was an atmosphere of friendly accountability. The writing retreat felt like a reward and as something to look forward to. Furthermore, we felt inspired and part of a writing community.

The above reflections suggest that participating in the writing retreat

enhanced self-regulation. Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage one's own behaviours and emotions effectively, especially when the tasks are not pleasant and overwhelming feelings may occur. Higher self-regulation for university students has been linked with positive outcomes (Park & Sperling, 2012). Self-regulation in the writing retreat was the result of the co-regulation achieved with other members of the group who were committed to the same purpose.

These reflections and observations also suggest that regular virtual mini writing retreats could create a community of practice, which includes a shared vision, collegial support, mentorship, and social interaction (Murray & Newton, 2009) and that being part of the writing retreat community could enhance the wellbeing of students and academics and make writing less of an isolating experience (Stevenson, 2021; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021; Kornhaber et al., 2016). It has also been suggested that these short online writing retreats can increase motivation and confidence (Kornhaber et al., 2016).

Professional benefits

One of the important issues that came up in the discussion was that writing and working on a dissertation can feel too challenging, and that sometimes leads to procrastination (Steel, 2007). However, the rituality of the writing retreat helped reduce this procrastination. At the same time, the writing retreats created a space where we could be critical and honest with our writing, because we could verbalise and share ideas and thoughts about our writing with others. So, the writing retreats somehow gave the participants enough support and safety to empower them to be critical with their writing, something that was highlighted by Cunningham (2022).

Typically, students struggle to find large chunks of time to work on their assignments, perhaps the same way that academic staff struggle to find time to work on their research when they have to complete their teaching and administrative duties. Interestingly, we were all surprised as to how much we could achieve in an hour. We also highlighted that the retreat helped us focus on our writing; we felt that we would not have been able to do that outside of the writing retreat. This highlights the notion that we do not necessarily need long writing retreats away

from our everyday environments; simple, inexpensive, brief, online writing retreats that fit within the students' and staff's busy lives could potentially be equally beneficial. However, systematic research is needed to explore this further.

We often shared writing tips during the writing retreat sessions. For example, we talked about how helpful it could be to initially write down ideas with pen and paper, away from the computer. We also discussed the difficulty of deleting one's writing, and that sometimes it helps to save different versions of the paper, so that the writer can go back and find some of the deleted sentences if they change their mind. That gives the writer the courage to delete their writing when that is needed, and thus develop it further. We also talked about the benefits of starting a piece of academic writing by making a plan first, rather than just brainstorming. Furthermore, we discussed the pros and cons of focusing on one writing project versus focusing on several projects and alternating between them. We noted that different ways could work for different writers, including neurodivergent writers.

This discussion on writing tips resembles somewhat the workshops included in the retreats that previous studies showed to be very beneficial (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). In our case, students and staff were co-creators of the discussion, as opposed to students being taught in a workshop. This reduced the power imbalance between students and staff and could potentially increase the confidence among the students (Cunningham, 2022).

Overall, our reflections further support previous studies on writing retreats and extend those findings, by suggesting that virtual mini writing retreats can have several personal and professional benefits (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Cunningham, 2022; Sangster, 2021; Stevenson, 2021; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021; Murray & Newton, 2009). The reflections also highlight the importance of positive emotions and emotional regulation strategies for creativity and productivity (for a discussion on emotion and higher education see Paltoglou et al., 2022), and suggest that virtual mini writing retreats can not only create a positive environment for writing and learning, but also encourage effective emotional regulation for staff and students.

Limitations

Very few students took part in the writing retreats. We acknowledge that students have many demands on their time, and mature students who also work or have families may find taking part in writing retreats challenging. It is also conceivable that the sessions could sometimes have a detrimental effect on lecturers' time. Cunningham (2022) suggested that the sessions could be organised solely by the students, but that might not always be possible. Further exploration of this issue is needed. This links to the importance of organisational investment for writing retreats to be effective (Kornhaber et al., 2016). As we have noted elsewhere, virtual mini writing retreats can be used in a variety of contexts, including within a personal tutoring group (Paltoglou, 2022; Paltoglou, 2023).

Conclusion

In summary, mini online writing retreats could have similar personal and professional benefits as face-to-face, longer writing retreats, although systematic studies are needed to explore this. Virtual mini writing retreats could enable students and academic staff to create a meaningful scholarly community and could help develop a more joyful, creative and humane education.

Steps toward hope

- Consider regular virtual mini writing retreats to create accessible, supportive spaces for both staff and students to develop effective writing habits.

- Foster a friendly, encouraging environment during retreats to empower participants to be critical, honest, and creative in their writing.

- Integrate diary-based reflection into writing retreats to capture participants' experiences and track the impact on writing focus and productivity.

- Facilitate the exchange of writing practices and tips among participants to build a collaborative and resourceful scholarly community.

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