Research leadership in writing for publication: a theoretical framework

Rowena Murray, Laura Steckley & Iain MacLeod

Available online: 12 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Rowena Murray, Laura Steckley & Iain MacLeod (2011): Research leadership in writing for publication: a theoretical framework, British Educational Research Journal, DOI:10.1080/01411926.2011.580049

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2011.580049

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Research leadership in writing for publication: a theoretical framework

Rowena Murray*, Laura Steckley and Iain MacLeod
University of Strathclyde, UK

Academics experience difficulty in managing competing tasks, particularly in relation to writing for publication. In a study conducted on a writing retreat, analysis of data obtained from academic writers revealed that facilitative leadership provided at a writing retreat was central to managing task complexity and writing-related anxiety. The question remains, however, about how this leadership can be modelled in campus settings in order to continue to support academics in managing the complexity of their multiple roles as teachers, researchers and writers, beyond purely technical-rational approaches. This article outlines one approach to answering this question: it explains how containment theory was used to shed light on the leadership role at the writing retreat, and it proposes a model—strategic engagement—for the leadership role in writing for publication in campus settings.

Background

Recent discussion of academic leadership has been dominated by debates about new managerialism (Deem, 1998, 2005). There seems to be widespread concern about the shift from autonomy to accountability that is associated with managerialism and there is a potentially unsettling tension between leadership that motivates and management that constrains and makes accountable. These developments may have particular impact on academics’ research and writing, which depend on the collegiality that may be eroded in the managerialist and competitive culture of higher education:

People-related problems arise from self-doubt, especially for those with academic capital under pressure to be research active in the quest for scientific capital and career progression. Such problems can also be compounded where faculty support is limited and the nature of the work ‘isolating’, where there are research cliques or where there is a perceived absence of collegiality. (Holligan et al., 2010, p. 14)
While some academics may thrive in a managerialist and/or competitive culture, for many its impact on relationships—so central to effective academic work and management—can be negative and its impact on writing for publication can be destructive (Hjortshoj, 2001).

Much of the discussion has focused on academic leadership, rather than research leadership specifically, and consequently it is not clear what research leadership in this new managerialist culture involves or how it might be theorised. Historically, research leadership was provided by the professoriate, but professional managers have begun to take on this role (Rayner et al., 2010). More recently, debates about academic leadership have focused on the importance of context and relationships. A relational model of leadership has been positioned as appropriate for academic settings: leadership as a set of relationships among and between those who lead and those who are led. It has also been described as relational in the sense that it relates to every aspect of context, so that leaders should not develop generic competence but ‘tailored processes that recognise the contingent, relational and negotiated reality of higher education leadership’ (Middlehurst, 2008, p. 337).

A theme that emerges in the margins of this debate is that both formal and informal leadership are important and must function well. Both are important theoretically and practically, since universities generally operate both formal and informal modes, but research has not yet fully explained what each of these modes involves or how, or whether, they may be combined. Is this potential hybridisation a feature of what is now known as distributed leadership or are different forms of research leadership operating and able to be theorised?

In addition to these questions, a key problem for research leaders is that academics can experience difficulties in managing competing tasks, particularly in relation to writing for publication (Murray & Newton, 2009; Moore, 2003). Writing for publication is often in direct competition with other academic tasks and the competition between these tasks can be overwhelming (Hjortshoj, 2001).

Containment theory, which has been applied in a range of settings, explains how these difficulties may be overcome through a writing retreat. The modern form of writing retreat developed for higher education is an approach to supporting academics’ writing that was initially developed by Grant and Knowles (2000), Moore (2003), Grant (2006) and Murray (2009). Currently, it is used in different ways across the higher education sector, for example in the Centre for Academic Writing at Coventry University and by the Thinking Writing Programme at Queen Mary University of London. This approach involves academics going off-campus for dedicated time and space to write. Of the various formats available, the structured retreat (Murray, 2009), where participants write in the same room using a fixed programme of writing, has a relational dimension, in the form of brief discussions of writing-in-progress, mutual peer support, feedback on goals and outputs and facilitation of the group process.

Containment processes enable people to manage (contain) previously unmanageable (uncontainable) thoughts, feelings and experiences (Bion, 1962). People who are in a state of containment are usually able to think clearly about and man-
age experiences and emotions and develop ways to manage competing tasks. While a retreat can help academics to manage competing tasks and deal with writing-related anxiety, the facilitative leadership provided at the retreat has been identified as central to this effect (Murray et al., 2010). This suggests that further research should analyse the leadership qualities that participants think are important. Research should also explore how these might be modelled in campus settings in order to help academics manage role conflict in relation to writing for publication, beyond purely technical-rational or managerialist approaches that do not facilitate and, for some, may even inhibit writing (Hjortshoj, 2001).

The leadership role provided at the structured writing retreat involves five main functions:

1. briefing participants, explaining the rationale for the retreat’s structure, describing the schedule and suggesting ways of making the retreat work;
2. prompting participants to set writing goals and align them with scheduled writing sessions and to discuss goals and achievements with each other;
3. prompting discussion of goals and achievements during breaks;
4. holding a fixed schedule of writing and discussion sessions;
5. modelling the process of writing within the group.

By maintaining the boundaries and structure of the structured retreat programme, the facilitator provides containment. This article explains this containment role not only in order to develop understanding of leadership at the retreat but also to construct a model, which we call strategic engagement, for leadership in writing for publication outside the retreat setting. This article concludes with a description of the strategic engagement model that emerged from this study, providing a theoretical framework that integrates concepts of leadership and containment.

**Research methods**

Having secured funding from the British Academy we developed three research questions to explore this subject:

1. Within the context of the writing retreat, what role and function did leadership have in removing barriers to writing for publication?
2. Is there evidence of significant differences between leadership within a structured writing retreat and leadership in campus settings, in relation to the production of writing for publication?
3. Is there evidence of containing processes, as experienced by participants, within structured retreat and, if so, is there a relationship between the role of the leader at retreat and these containing processes?

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Strathclyde. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of 30 minutes duration were carried out
with 27 respondents (15 females, 12 males), who had attended one or more structured writing retreats, usually in groups of 8 to 12. This grouping included both novice and experienced writers from a mix of academic disciplines. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed by three researchers working independently, who crosschecked coding. Two used NVivo in independent analyses.

Theoretical framework

The framework for analysis was Ruch’s (2007) model of ‘holistic containment’, which defines the dimensions of containment and suggests how these may be promoted at an organisational level. The model has three dimensions: (1) emotional containment, focusing on how unmanageable feelings can be made manageable; (2) organisational containment, focusing on how policies, procedures and organisational practices impact on organisational, professional and managerial clarity; and (3) epistemological containment, focusing on forums that enable members of the organisation to think about, discuss and make sense of contentious, uncertain and complex issues in their work. All three combined comprise holistic containment. Holistic containment offers a theorised, systemic approach to understanding the interdependence of individuals and their collective contexts. It helps to explain how organisational practices can facilitate containing work environments and engage members of the organisation.

This study focused on a model of structured writing retreat that is facilitated and led (Murray & Moore, 2006). Having established the containing function of this model (MacLeod et al., 2009), we then applied Ruch’s (2007) model of containment to explore the leadership function both at the retreat and in the academy. Transcriptions were coded for the core constructs where there were specific references to ‘leadership’ or ‘facilitator’ and/or emotional, organisational, epistemological and holistic containment.

For this analysis, emotional containment was defined as qualities or experiences of the retreat that appeared to enable respondents to think about or manage unthinkable or unmanageable feelings. Organisational containment was defined as practices within and related to the retreat that appeared to contribute to increased organisational, professional and managerial clarity. Epistemological containment was defined as experiences of the retreat that appeared to support respondents in making sense of their writing for publication, their approach to writing for publication and/or seeing writing for publication as central to their academic role and function. Holistic containment was defined as experiences of the retreat that appeared to integrate these emotional, organisational and epistemological dimensions. Respondents who described each of the three dimensions of containment at some point within the interview (though at different points within the interview) were identified as part of the analysis of holistic containment, as well as those who integrated the three dimensions in a single response.
Research findings

The responses of the participants in this study suggested that all three dimensions of containment were operating within the context of the structured writing retreat. Furthermore, the role of the facilitator was central to participants feeling contained. Comparison of participants’ experiences after retreat indicated that containment related to writing for publication was not operating through leadership in their academic settings. The challenges of managing competing and conflicting tasks as part of their normal role as academics, in their normal workplace settings, provided a stark contrast to task performance within the structured retreat.

While a minority of respondents were able to recreate, on a smaller scale, the containing functions of the writing retreat by meeting to do their writing for publication in cafés, for example, the majority said that the facilitator was central to the retreat effect. This was a strong theme coming through in the data, with numerous responses indicating that by providing a clear focus, maintaining a disciplined approach to writing and modelling writing, the facilitator had a significant role. We now provide a detailed discussion of these themes within the framework of Ruch’s (2007) holistic containment. This discussion reveals interrelationships between the themes. The numbers after quotes are those allocated to participants’ transcripts in order to preserve anonymity.

Emotional containment

More than two thirds of the respondents identified anxiety-provoking difficulties related to writing for publication, either connected to writing generally or to competing primary tasks or both. Almost all respondents described emotional containment in their accounts of the retreat(s) they had attended. More than half depicted the general retreat atmosphere as supportive, friendly, relaxing, focused and conducive to thinking/writing.

The facilitator was seen as playing a key role in setting and maintaining the tone of the retreat, and an interesting combination emerged when respondents were asked for their views on this. Overall, the facilitator was characterised as supportive, encouraging and helpful, on the one hand, and a task master, ‘cracking the whip’, on the other:

[The facilitator] had quite a big input...supporting us and talking about the pieces of work that we were writing at the time, and I certainly found that useful. (Respondent 10)

But I think the way she does it, she’s relatively strict...Just kind of like keeping people on track...that does help a lot. (Respondent 2)

I think having a facilitator who is very focused...is absolutely essential...[it is] very much the leadership, you need someone who is sympathetic, who is focused themselves and who you can turn to, who you can ask questions but who won’t be sidetracked. (Respondent 24)
This combination of support and focus appears to both contain anxiety and interrupt its by-products, described by respondents as avoidance, procrastination or a lack of discipline. Another important element of facilitation, modelling, was also highlighted:

...the retreat leader herself wrote alongside you, and I think that made a huge difference because she wasn’t saying, ‘Right, I’ll be back in an hour’. She sat there the whole time, and she was writing alongside as a colleague, and that really made a difference, and also you knew that [the facilitator] had major publications. It gives her credibility. (Respondent 24)

This modelling seems not only to legitimise a structured time and space for writing; it also demystifies the formerly invisible act of writing for publication. Writing-related struggles become public, particularly during pre- and post-writing discussions and respondents identified this as useful. The facilitator and the more experienced retreat participants normalised these struggles and modelled working through them.

Almost all of the respondents also mentioned the importance of the group in relation to emotionally containing aspects of the retreat, not only in terms of modelling but also in the sense of collegiality and motivation:

The first retreat we went on...[was] friendly...We certainly connect professionally on a daily basis, and had there not been a facilitator there, or even a weaker facilitator...We would have distracted each other...we wouldn’t have got the writing done...And the facilitator is key to that, because what the facilitator does is keep you on track, keep you focused, and sometimes that appears quite forcing, in that saying ‘it’s time for a break’, ‘it’s time for a stretch’, ‘it’s time for’ [pause] we don’t always see in ourselves the need to have a break. (Respondent 7)

The facilitator’s ability to hold the group, maintaining its focus, was seen as central to keeping the group dynamics from becoming a distraction from writing. Many of these comments are relational in both tone and content and show the importance of the relational component of research leadership.

Organisational containment

It was clear across all of the participants’ responses that the structure of the retreat was significant to and impacted on the writing process. Through participation in the writing retreat there was recognition of the barriers to writing and how these could be and were overcome within the retreat. The contribution that the facilitator makes was also evident in the majority of responses:

I think the facilitator was absolutely central...I think having a facilitator who is very focused, who knows exactly what it is that she wants to achieve and who knows exactly what the pattern in the routine is and keeps you to that is absolutely essential. For me it was the discipline that I perhaps didn’t have myself that was there. (Respondent 24)

[The facilitator] manages to combine an encouraging supportive role with a kind of role modelling because she writes herself but also with an absolute crystal clear...
understanding that things will be done and things will be achieved, which is quite a difficult balancing act. (Respondent 26)

These responses show that the role of the facilitator in maintaining a focus on the activity of writing and modelling the activity of writing is clarifying for most participants. This supports the notion that within the retreat professional clarity emerges as a function of facilitation and leadership within the group. In addition to the role that the facilitator plays, the distinctive structure of the retreat is also key in providing this focus:

[The facilitator] kept us on task and provided a kind of discipline in the sense that sessions started at a certain time and finished at a certain time, and unlike unsupervised writing it wasn’t possible to say I’ve had enough. So it meant that for two hours there was nothing else to do other than write. (Respondent 25)

[The facilitator] just keeps you on task. I think if you are left to your own devices some people would do it, and you might do more in chunks and less at other times, but I think the structure of that is necessary. Otherwise, I think overall the effectiveness of it would be difficult to measure. (Respondent 27)

These responses suggest that there is more to engaging with writing than finding the time and the space to do it. The practice of the facilitator, combined with the clarity of the writing retreat structure, provides organisational containment that promotes focus and discipline within the group.

That this practice was not the norm was conveyed by those who said that when they first attended structured retreat they saw it as ‘alien’ (although only two participants used this specific term):

Given the structure of the programme, there had to be somebody there to say, here is what we are doing. Start now. Finish now. But that was alien to me...that experience of somebody setting the scene and then saying, ‘Right, it’s time to start’, and... ‘Everybody stop talking and get down to the writing task’. And that I didn’t enjoy. (Respondent 9)

I think I found the whole thing quite horrific when I heard about it. Six people sitting in a room writing, and I thought that just sounds to me like some typing pool from hell, and it was nothing like that in actual fact. It was a really supportive atmosphere, and I think the facilitator was very, very focused while we were on task, but when we were off task she then went into the relaxed mode, and it wasn’t as if you felt you were on all the time. [The facilitator] made very clear differences between your leisure time and your working time, and I think that was really good as well, that during your leisure time you didn’t talk about the work, you talked about other things, so you had some down time as well. (Respondent 24)

These respondents capture a frequently-expressed sentiment: it conveys a degree of discomfort with the practice and structure of writing retreat, which can initially appear counterintuitive. However, even where the respondents expressed discomfort, there were also clear indications that they found that staying with the ‘alien’ process promoted engagement with writing and resulted in ‘writing through’
difficulties. The following respondent makes the connection between working within this retreat’s structure and the productivity that it can generate:

You keep going and you keep going. And it’s quite alien to us, and particularly in [our department], to have a programme that is quite as focused. But it’s essential...well, I think it’s essential because I buy into these experiences. I think it’s essential to keep the productivity, to retain that focus and keep the productivity up. You need to have...or the role of the facilitator there is about...ensuring that you maintain that focus. (Respondent 7)

Those who had utilised the structure and practice of this writing retreat were on the whole positive about the benefits and had attempted to transfer its practices to their individual writing sessions:

I’ve taken away a few good points, one of which is doing a pre-writing task before I start writing, and I try to do that before I sit down to write, which I think is good. I also try to be a little bit more self-disciplined, in that instead of saying, ‘Oh I don’t know how to do this’ and just getting up and walking away, I try and stick with it and say, ‘Right. If I’m starting writing at 11 o’clock, I’m not going to get up from my seat until 12.30pm’. So I’ve actually tried to employ that self-discipline a little bit. It’s not so easy when you’re on your own, but that chunking thing works, and it is just a matter of trying to keep focus when doing it. (Respondent 24)

In concluding this study’s exploration of the significant aspects of organisational containment, we looked for evidence of changes in practice following the retreat. The picture that emerged was of limited success in modelling the retreat practice for other settings. We explore this further in our consideration of holistic containment.

**Epistemological containment**

Almost half of the respondents spoke of benefits of the retreat in terms of space and support for thinking through and making sense either of their own writing projects or of writing for publication more generally. Of these respondents, almost all identified the importance of receiving feedback on their writing, and many referred to the centrality of the facilitator to this impact:

... she was very helpful in terms of when I got stuck with things she was there to answer questions. She took away a piece of work that I had written on the Saturday night and brought it back on the Sunday, which allowed me to continue. And I think I wouldn’t have been able to produce as much as I did if she hadn’t been there. (Respondent 10)

Again, this suggests that the tone set by the facilitator is important in creating an atmosphere of collegiality, while, at the same time, holding a space that is conducive to focusing on one’s own writing. The availability of ‘synchronous peer review’ (Murray & Newton, 2009, p. 546)—i.e. formative feedback that can be incorporated at various stages of the writing process, rather than deferred until completion of a full draft—was identified as highly useful in helping writers to
think through issues, clarify ideas, make new connections and think more creatively. Respondents also spoke of developing a better understanding of writing for publication, of its place in academia and of themselves as writers:

... giving and receiving feedback was very important, the idea of actually just sharing your work, having other eyes, exposing yourself—for want of a better description—to others and to the views of others, because other people’s views then help to change and shape and modify what you were involved in writing, and also that just that notion that [the facilitator] was there as a kind of spirit guide or a kind of, you know, leveller also in terms of keeping us focused... And it changes your thinking having verbalised it, as opposed to just having written it... but [the writing retreats] have a different purpose as being the catalyst for a change in thinking about writing. (Respondent 7)

While the facilitator was not responsible for providing all the feedback for all the conversations that clarified participants’ developing identities as writers, her modelling and tone-setting were identified as key factors in this effect across most interviews:

Did you find the facilitator useful? (Interviewer)

Yes... I had done the academic writing course with [her], so I know her style, and there is no doubt just actually having that space, I think more creatively. You know, when you’ve actually got that space, and you actually start writing, there are other ideas that come up, as other connections come up. So I like [her] way of working. (Respondent 13)

This illustrates what most participants saw as the strong association between the facilitator and the ‘space’ for productive conversations about writing at the retreat. In structured retreat, the facilitator holds participants to the programme, so that discussions of writing-in-progress occur regularly, and prevents these discussions from encroaching on the writing time.

These responses suggest that the facilitator helped participants to manage unmanageable emotions (emotional containment), provided a clear structure and expectations (organisational containment) and helped participants to work through competing tasks, to make sense of their writing projects, to make sense of their writing more generally and of the place of writing in their academic role (epistemological containment).

Holistic containment

Almost half of the respondents discussed benefits of the structured retreats that, taken together, can be seen as holistically containing (i.e., fulfilling all three dimensions of containment—emotional, organisational, epistemological). Experiencing such holistic containment is associated with higher levels of productivity (as reported by most respondents) and supported gradual changes in the way participants thought about and responded to the primary task of writing for publication:

And therefore, having bought into it, the retreats become part of a bigger thing for me. And also how I interpret what’s going on with me personally and professionally within
the retreat is that it should be transforming. No, because it is transforming...the expectation from me is that I will change. (Respondent 7)

In addition, higher levels of energy and optimism appeared to be freed up by holistically containing experiences:

...it’s significant that when I have set aside a day for writing, for instance, a lot of energy goes into being self-disciplined to do the writing...stopping and starting is very difficult....To have somebody else to take care of all that for you actually then frees up a huge amount of psychic energy to go into the thinking and the writing...[and] also the constructive side of talking through things, with people being a sounding board...and I certainly appreciate [the facilitator] taking the role of that...having gone on the retreat and getting something almost done and then finishing [the writing project] within the week or two that followed did something again for me psychologically about. [pause] Whereas before that I think there was this underlying belief that I wasn’t ever going to get it done....But I’ll also say change is really slow, especially when it comes from, like, deep-seated procrastination anxieties....There is always more to do than there is time to do it. So it’s what do you choose to get left undone? And I think that it’s probably the writing retreats and the writing group that have helped me to become more conscious about the choices I’m making...if I had four of these a year, I’d never ask for a study leave. I would much rather do it this way. (Respondent 1)

The leadership role within the retreat setting has been illuminated by respondents, but some comments also brought issues of the leadership role outside of retreats into sharper relief. Some spoke of attending a retreat on their weekend and paying for it themselves, whereas others had attended on weekdays and/or had the costs covered by their departments:

I think also we were very lucky that this was a sponsored writer’s retreat...

How does that make you feel? (Interviewer)

First of all it made me realise that the university valued what we were doing....If it was a case of paying [for it myself] and working a full fortnight without a break, then that would be something that would maybe cause me to think twice. (Respondent 25)

All those who spoke about payment equated its presence or absence with the relative value that the faculty or department leadership placed on both writing for publication and supporting them in their writing. Interestingly, most of those who spoke of attending weekend retreats did not identify working through their weekend as a similar indication of value. Many appeared to think of writing as an activity to be done not only outside the work setting but also outside regular working hours:

...it felt a bit of a luxury to be able to spend a weekend writing...I think for me the advantage of the weekend is that you’re not having to set aside other responsibilities. (Respondent 25)

This respondent, though, went on to reflect about prioritising his/her writing:

...but that also may be a function of me being fairly new to this. Maybe in one sense I’m not becoming self-focused enough at this point in my career to say, ‘No. This is
important, more important than attending a meeting’. At the moment I don’t like to hand my classes to other people, so it may just be a function of my novice status as an academic. (Respondent 25)

This suggests that rather than being another way of contributing to the work of the academic department, writing seems to be constructed as self-serving, requiring an abdication of other responsibilities. Other respondents also made subtle and/or explicit links between prioritising their writing and being selfish. Such constructions of writing may be embedded in departmental cultures and unwittingly reinforced by leadership that sends mixed messages about writing for publication. Where this is the case, it seems that an unreasonable demand is being imposed on academics: to fulfil the primary tasks of teaching, administration, research, writing for publication and knowledge exchange within reasonable working hours. In such cultures a self-fulfilling prophecy can arise: academics who publish will be those who are willing to do so at a great personal cost and/or at the expense of their colleagues and students.

Understanding the sources and impacts of anxiety on clear thinking and productivity is extremely relevant to the relational and contextual dimensions of leadership. Holistic containment not only frees up focus and energy formerly siphoned off by anxiety; it is necessary for academics to make sense of their competing demands in constructive, effective ways. Structured writing retreats offer a potent example of how holistic containment can be achieved and relational leadership can be developed.

Discussion: introducing the concept of strategic engagement

Effective academic leadership in the area of writing for publication depends on leaders who understand the process of writing for publication. The structured writing retreat reveals this process, illuminates some of the impacts on academics and enables them to develop related understanding and responses. This retreat format exposes competing primary tasks and suggests how they might be managed. Leadership within the context of retreats facilitates clarity about and focus on the current primary task, which in this case is writing for publication.

However, on return to campus, this engagement typically is not facilitated and other tasks impinge on the writing process. Respondents in this study said that they were almost never able to write on campus, and they generally held themselves responsible for this ‘inability’ or ‘failure’. However, an alternative attribution is that there was a lack of leadership to support them in making writing the primary task or even to legitimise it as such. Clearly, it would impractical for department heads and other academic leaders to make writing the primary task at all times for all academics; nor would it help, as was established more than 20 years ago (Boice, 1987), simply to increase time for writing. Yet, to argue that the complexity of the academic landscape is such that attempting to determine what the primary task is at any given time is impossible, is to create a situation where the pressure of competing tasks on the individual will be overwhelming. Instead, our
analysis suggests that effective leadership is about understanding the sources and impacts of anxiety and providing reasonable containment for them. In contexts where definitions of ‘strategic’ and ‘primary’ are not fixed, research leadership involves supporting academics as they negotiate priorities and strategically define the primary task. This does not mean managerialist regulation of academics’ choices, but relational management, with research leaders in containing relationships.

Research leaders can, and should, therefore, be instrumental in the containing effect: at the very least, they can be clear and congruent in their messages about the place of writing for publication within the wider academic role. They can also support and even facilitate forums within which academics can be supported to manage and make sense of the complexities associated with writing for publication while meeting other primary tasks. Leadership in writing for publication is not, therefore, about expecting individual academics to develop holistic containment for themselves; it is about providing containing environments, thus sharing responsibility with the academic for managing the impacts of this aspect of academic work.

Specifically, this may take the form of physical, temporal and/or relational spaces for writing. For example, this would mean providing a physical space for writing that is pleasant, available for writing only (at least at certain times) and perhaps with refreshments provided. This would require protected time for writing—protected from spontaneous demands on the writer’s time from colleagues, students or administrators and without wireless Internet access, in order to protect from email interruptions. Leadership involves supporting and even participating in these spaces, endorsing the process of switching off from other activities in order to focus on writing, working with the campus estates office to ensure provision, validating use of these spaces and working with colleagues to find ways to make a space for writing in workloads, thus providing further validation of writing in academic life and providing relational space. When these spaces are provided, individuals are supported to perform informal leadership, as groupings of academics meet to support each other’s writing. In this way, informal and formal leadership can mutually support each other, not as a managerial function, but in the type of relational function that is characteristic of effective management. These types of relationships can be developed in such spaces.

Otherwise, lack of organisational containment may undermine emotional and epistemological containment. How much impact can emotional and epistemological containment have on writing in an organisation that is unclear or incongruent in its policies, procedures or practices related to the place of writing for publication within the wider academic role (i.e. lacking in organisational containment)? Is it possible for the individual academic to maintain emotional and epistemological containment in a setting that is not providing organisational containment? While we are not yet able to answer these questions, and while we need to explore this area in more detail and with more academic writers and leaders, the findings of this study do begin to explain why academics struggle to make writing for
publication the primary task, even when they have experienced ways of doing so at a structured retreat.

The challenge for higher education management and leadership is to enable strategic engagement with competing primary tasks. Strategic engagement, a new concept we developed in this study, builds on Mayrath’s (2008) research on successful academic writers, which established that managing competing tasks is a key component of productive writing. Our study suggests that academic leadership involves holding boundaries between the different facets of the academic role, ensuring that other tasks are not always in direct competition with writing for publication and that teaching and collegiality are not mutually exclusive.

The concept of strategic engagement furthers thinking about the development of the academic role and the management of competing primary tasks. It goes beyond an unhelpful teaching/writing-for-publication dichotomy, making room for an integrated academic identity that can hold both. This goes beyond technical-rational models that focus on improving writing skills or managerialist models that focus simply on increasing published outputs. The ability to identify, prioritise and engage with a given primary task at a given time, and to move between primary tasks, is the essence of strategic engagement. To strategically engage requires a temporary but complete disengagement from other tasks that compete for one’s focus. For this to be possible, anxiety must be contained not only by the individual but also for the individual by the organisation to the degree that clear thinking is not compromised. Having established that this is a function of effective academic leadership, we propose that supporting strategic engagement is a model for research leadership.

In one of the first critiques of managerialist approaches in academic settings, Deem (1998) argued that new managerialism was probably seen as a quick fix for a funding crisis (although it seems to have stretched over more than one ‘crisis’ cycle in higher education). One strand of her argument was that a key weakness in performative cultures is their failure to measure process. We propose that supporting strategic engagement is one way to ‘out’ the writing for publication process and thereby provide leadership within managerialist cultures.

Rayner et al. (2010) found that there was a dearth of research on the role of the professoriate, so that their leadership roles were, and still are, poorly understood. Worryingly, they saw this as a consequence of the drift towards professional and away from academic leadership, which Goodall (2009) also sees as problematic. They argued that in the current managerialist context what higher education needs is ‘strategies that will facilitate institutional leadership and management in the context of a professional culture that eschews being managed’ (p. 627). Our study reinstates the case for academic—rather than professional—leadership, linking the leadership role much more closely to the performance of writing for publication.

In one of the few studies on research leadership, Ball (2007) found that there was evidence that formal leadership roles were not always effective: ‘The failings of formal research leadership in the case studies for directly leading academics have implications’ (p. 475). He argues that there needs to be much more
investigation of the research leader role. While he advocates job descriptions for formal research leaders, we have investigated the role of informal research leaders, those with no formal remit for research leadership, as in the structured writing retreats, since there is now evidence of the significant, positive impact of informal leadership there.

Middlehurst (2008) also makes the case for understanding ‘informal and emergent leadership’ (p. 327): ‘There is a need to examine leadership “beyond authority” and outside formally designated leadership roles’ (p. 335). In a table she constructed to show current leadership challenges, one of the potential consequences of the changing nature of higher education contexts—which is one way to describe the current state of higher education—and changing types of leadership—and at this time traditional, managerial and hybrid systems are all operating at the same time, often in the same organisation—is that ‘positional power [is] less relevant’ (p. 332). In other words, at times of great change, different sources of power and leadership emerge. However, important as it is, informal leadership has been much less researched and is consequently much less understood than formal leadership. Yet it is clear from our study that informal, ‘beyond authority’ leadership has an important role to play; we also contend that those in formal leadership positions could learn from the informal leadership described in this article. This would be one response to the call for ‘leadership learning’ that is Middlehurst’s (2008) main argument.

Most researchers and theorists agree that academic leadership is, or should be, relational. For Bolden et al. (2008) this means that leadership is a process that emerges from interactions among people. We propose that creating relationships around writing and having interactions around the writing process—as is the established practice at a structured writing retreat—is one way of sustaining writing for publication. Supporting such interactions is therefore a vital component of research leadership. It is not enough to provide practical, technical-rational guidance; effective research leadership involves creating interactions around writing-in-progress. Containment occurs in the context of relationships and structured retreat is one way of providing that context and creating those relationships.

Conclusion

...the writing is not valued, the publication of it is ticked off against your record, but the actual process of it is not supported very well. (Respondent 21)

The facilitative leadership provided at a structured writing retreat can provide the containment needed for academics to develop the ability to manage competing primary tasks and writing-related anxiety. However, sustaining containment and maintaining the level of productivity achieved at the retreats in campus settings is problematic. This may be because, while leadership at structured retreat is containing, leadership on campus is not. As the quotation at the start of this section

14  R. Murray et al.
suggests, when retreat participants return to their normal working environments on campus, the writing process is ‘not supported’.

If containing leadership is a factor in the retreat effect, the implications for academic leadership roles more generally must be considered. We suggest that the model of containment and the concept of strategic engagement have particular relevance for research leaders in a higher education context characterised by ‘dis-integration’, supercomplexity and fragmentation (Barnett, 1999; Åkerlind, 2005; Clegg, 2008) and that this model can be applied in a range of disciplines. Our specific contribution to the epistemology of academic performance is in offering a theoretical framework where this is explicit and managed through strategic engagement. This model may have particular relevance to disciplines where there is currently an imperative speedily to increase research outputs, but it may also be relevant in disciplines where sustaining productivity is the goal.

The value of thinking in terms of ‘primary tasks’ may be in getting people to engage with public discourse about what they do as academics. Leadership involves getting people to engage in this discourse. The process of raising unconscious processes to a conscious level is a key component of strategic engagement. This can be achieved at writing retreats, as our analysis shows, in the shift from ‘the organisation is telling me to do this’ to a collective, collegiate approach with improving outputs—all via containment. There are implications here for those in research leadership positions. In our study, when a leader stepped out of the leadership role, the containment disintegrated. Why this occurs could be further explored.

Developing research leadership that is containing is an integrative process: people in the midst of anxiety (in this case anxiety that often goes unacknowledged) are generally less able to think clearly and focus—capacities that are essential for writing for publication. If these impacts are not addressed, there is a risk that research identities may not develop. Writing retreat participants who said they simply did not feel able to prioritise their writing may have been responding to mixed messages in their campus workplaces. Some, however, may also be conflicted about or even resistant to developing an academic identity that is compromised, at least in part, particularly among those who hold the belief that it is not possible simultaneously and consistently to teach well, be collegiate and write for publication. The anxiety provoked by such a position, particularly in the current climate that increasingly stresses the importance of published outputs, can be debilitating.

For all of the reasons we have highlighted, anxiety is a constant, and a key element of research leadership is about understanding and managing it. In exploring these issues, this study responds to Holligan et al.’s (2010) call for ‘a deeper understanding of the complex social and emotional factors that impact on academic well-being’ (p. 1) in the performance of writing for publication.

It could be argued that increasing the number of publications is akin to a ‘zero sum game’: what is the rationale for equipping academics to increase their output when there is a finite number of opportunities for publication? Doing so will only lead to yet more academics facing rejection. This article presents a different point
of view. While the metrics of publishing in high impact journals will continue to be significant, we explore how individual and collegiate gains may be achieved through the provision of containment, both at structured writing retreat and in campus settings. Gains are expressed through the achievement of epistemological and pedagogical clarity, which emerges as participants engage with the writing projects. Enhancing the clarity and quality of academics’ thinking may indeed contribute to improving the quality not only of academic writing but also of other academic activities. The sharing and shared space of containing environments brings collegiate gains, as the generation of ideas becomes part of the experience of all participants. Thus, the outcomes of participating in writing are not exclusively aligned with the win/lose, ‘zero sum’ game of publishing in refereed journals.

Moreover, in containing spaces, either at retreat or on campus, academics have opportunities to make sense of writing more generally. The ‘zero sum game’ can be seen as an imperative for academics to focus on and prioritise the most significant contributions they want to make, in terms of joining the dialogue, adding to the debate or shaping discourses. Academics require spaces to think about and discuss this dimension of their work. It is within the context of writing that academics are more likely to be tuned into and discuss their projects, the way they think about research and writing, and the place of writing in their discipline and in higher education. Containing spaces, where academics can discuss these issues and think about them clearly, might, in fact, be an antidote to the ‘zero sum game’.

It seems odd to be discussing informal leadership at a time when higher education leadership is dominated by the formal roles constructed by managerialism and it seems dangerous to be discussing the uncoupling of leadership at retreat and leadership on campus settings, but that is not what we are proposing. Instead, we hope to see new links developing between formal and informal leadership and between research leadership at retreats and research leadership in campus settings.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference in Warwick in 2010 (Murray et al., 2010). The authors would like to thank Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (Coventry University), Sarah Moore (Limerick University) and Adrian Ward (Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust) for generously giving their time to read drafts of this paper. We also thank the reviewers for their particularly helpful, thoughtful and constructive feedback.

References
