Writing in the company of other women: exceeding the boundaries

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In academic life, writing for publication is a significant responsibility. It can also be a rewarding private pleasure. This article reports on the effects of attending week-long writing retreats for a group of academic women in Aotearoa New Zealand. The residential retreats have been held twice a year since 1997, and attract women from different institutions, disciplines and at different stages in their careers. Through examining data gathered by open-ended questionnaires, the author explores the effects of attending the retreats on the participants’ academic writing productivity and pleasure, and on their sense of themselves as academics and writers.

Setting the scene

Academic writing can be exhilarating, or quietly pleasurable, or plain hard work. In common with our students, it is something we—academics—must do, usually alone. Sometimes we may feel ourselves resisting the imperative to write; at other times we may experience the frustration of planning to write yet never quite getting there. So much seems to come between us and our writing. Over the years there have been various reports of apparently successful interventions in academics’ writing practices (see, for instance, the work of Boice, 1987; Murray & MacKay, 1998; Berg, 1999; Morss & Murray, 2001; Lee & Boud, 2003), including some framed within feminist traditions (see, for instance, Aronson & Swanson, 1991; Broughton, 1994). This article adds to the literature by reporting on an evaluation of one such intervention, a live-in retreat designed to support academic women in finding more pleasure and productivity in their writing lives (this model has been taken up by others: see, for example, Moore, 1995). In what follows I consider some of the ways in which such an experience can be considered transgressive and explore the women’s perceptions of the effects of attending the retreats on their writing lives and selves, as well as their writing productivity.
While I have written about the writing retreats elsewhere (see Grant & Knowles, 2000; Grant, 2003), it seems useful to begin by giving a brief description of them. Twice a year women academics from across the higher education institutions in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand converge at the Tauhara Centre for a five-day residential writing retreat. Every retreat opens with a shared session that focuses on introductions, goal setting and programme planning. Four and a half days later it closes with a round of each participant’s plans to keep the writing going after the retreat, plus a shared evaluation of personal achievement against goals, and input into changes to the retreat design. Between the first and last session, the days are a mix of mostly dedicated writing time in communal rooms, plus an optional after-lunch workshop on some aspect of writing, and a requirement to present work-in-progress to a small group for 30 minutes after dinner. While, as the organiser, I facilitate some of the workshops, often participants take this role, focusing on sharing some aspect of their writing experience. We also offer writing exercises and games from time to time. There is fun and relaxation too—one of the strengths of the venue (apart from the marvellous food and the reasonable tariff) is its rural location and proximity to hot pools for evening soaking. Some women take the chance to enjoy extra solitude and sleep alongside the writing, an important restorative response to the demanding conditions of their lives (Acker & Armenti, 2004).

Just seven women attended the first retreat in 1997, but over the years the number has grown to a usual attendance of around 18. Overall, at the time of the evaluation (early 2003), 52 women had attended 11 retreats: 11 women four times or more, 18 two or three, and 23 just once. At the time of writing (early 2006), this number had grown to just over 80. Each retreat has a mix of about two-thirds returning women and one-third new. This unbalanced mix is an important part of maintaining the continuity of the retreat culture, as well as the collective ownership of the retreat, such that some retreats have taken place without me, facilitated instead by experienced ‘retreaters’.

In several ways the retreats are a transgressive form of academic or professional development. First, they are for women only and I regularly get challenged about this (as do other women who attend). ‘Segregating’ academic development along the gender fault line is contentious, maybe even risky (Grant & Knowles, 2000), despite clear evidence of women as a group occupying a broadly second-class position within the academy. It was on such grounds that the retreats originally got institutional sponsorship and it is somewhat dispiriting to realise that not much has changed in the intervening 10 years (see, for instance, the recent UK report from the Association of University Teachers, 2004). In spite of this, I often get quizzed as to why I don’t run retreats for men as well as women, in a way that suggests that the retreats are somehow unfair. In universities separation of groups on any grounds other than academic merit is viewed with suspicion. Yet a point persistently made by those who attend and return is the pleasure of the women-only culture of the retreats. Valerie Hey points out that there are ‘complex redemptive pleasures of female friendship in academic feminism’ (2004, p. 33): while not all the women who attend the retreats would call themselves feminists, many do, and of those who do not most would still claim the
importance of the women-only nature of the event. Among other things, it means we
can write in our pyjamas! In such ways the retreats also transgress the borders
between the private and public spheres of our lives, bringing them together in
productive ways. But the academic female friendship that Hey alludes to is complex:
它可以 be costly and disappointing just as it can be joyful and affirming (Holliday et al.,
1993).

Second, the retreats are inter-institutional and collegial, which means they cut
across a national ethos of competition between universities, exacerbated by the recent
adoption of a government-initiated zero-sum game research performance round. This
is no small thing. I was recently challenged by a senior woman at my university about
why I should be allowed to spend my time providing opportunities for academics
from other institutions to increase their research outputs—this in spite of a
fundamental interdependence between our communities for, among other things,
moderating each other’s graduate coursework grades, examining each other’s
research students’ theses, and preparing the collaborative research proposals much
favoured by our national funding bodies. To be honest, I found it hard to respond
sensibly to that challenge, probably because we were viewing the retreats through
incommensurable discourses.

Third, the retreats are ongoing and cumulative in their process. Thus they fly in the
face of a ‘quick fix’ culture that pervades institutional views of academic and profes-
sional development. While the ‘continuing importance of intellectual and emotional
growth’ have been remarked upon in relation to doctoral study (Leonard et al., 2005,
p. 146), there is no doubt that these are also important, although not necessarily
abundant, aspects of ongoing academic lives. Women who wish to return to the
retreats sometimes face the implication that they are not yet ‘fixed’, despite their
previous attendances, or that they need more help than others to achieve their writing
goals. Some must also negotiate the time away with their managers and find ongoing
funds to support their attendance.

Fourth, the retreats are away. Again I recently faced the suggestion (again made
by the same senior academic woman in my institution, but also reported to me by
other Tauhara women from their colleagues) that going on the retreats is somehow
irresponsible: illicit or frivolous, an escape from institutional and domestic respon-
sibilities. Yet academics have a responsibility to write and publish, and increasingly
we are measured in quite brutal ways on this account. For instance, in the recently
installed triennial Performance-Based Research Fund round, every academic in a
New Zealand university must present an Evidence Portfolio which leads us all to be
categorised as A, B, C or R researchers. Moreover, women frequently juggle
complex domestic responsibilities as well as a more pastoral orientation to their
academic role (Jones, 1997; Cotterill & Waterhouse, 1998), and so struggle to find
the place and time to write. Those who attend the retreats work hard to do so,
organising their familial and institutional responsibilities in advance; they work hard
while they are on retreat too. Just deciding to attend the retreats is transgressive for
many women: they are not used to putting themselves first for a week, or being
served food rather than serving, or leaving children and students. They may delight
in these unfamiliar experiences, but they are just as likely to feel ambivalent about them too.

Fifth, the retreats interrupt the dominant culture of writing in isolation (Holliday et al., 1993). From the time we were students, this is how most of us have written—first our essays, then theses, then journal articles and books. Commonly we only show our work to another when we have to—to examiners or reviewers. While mutuality has much to offer us, especially in the project of remaking our writerly identities (Lee & Boud, 2003), any form of collaboration takes time and space in ways that can be demanding and difficult.

Lastly, the retreats are transgressive in that they attract a range of participants by seniority and discipline. In the everyday silo-like culture of departments within universities, these groups often do not mix, certainly not to share experiences as researchers and writers. At the writing retreats they do: senior women contribute to workshops on gaining research grants and publishing books, and often attend other workshops by more junior women who are exploring aspects of the academic writing life. Women from computer science talk about their work to others from women’s studies or architecture. Sometimes serendipitous cross-fertilisations of ideas emerge; at other times diverse groups of women return to their institutions and form ongoing writing groups.

As the retreat organiser and facilitator, the writing retreats embody some of my convictions about what academic development should look like at its best. For one thing, it should be embedded in the real work of academics and sustained so that changes in understandings and practices do actually occur. For another, it should be collegial so that all those who participate (including the developer) learn from each other through ongoing conversations (Webb, 1996), and by developing networks and skills to enhance further conversations. Further, it should protect and nourish their capacity to think (McWilliam, 2002) by being ‘intellectually engaging’ (Gibbs, 1995, p. 17), and it should emotionally engage them as well. These values underpin the ongoing modifications that are made to the retreats as a result of discussions with the participants.

But it is not only my values as an academic developer that are important here—so too are my needs as a writer. I was motivated to start the retreats by my own struggles with writing, and by the need for a community of other academic women to participate with. So I engage in the retreats alongside my colleagues, undertaking the same tasks and exercises, setting and reporting on my goals. As a result, over the years I have established a very different relation with writing than I had at the start—one that is more patient with the ups and downs of the process, that has more faith in the response of readers, that is more pleasurable and productive than I could have imagined 10 years ago. At the same time, because the retreats are transgressive, or counter-cultural, they sometimes require energy to defend as well as to maintain. For a long time feminists have argued that the culture of higher education institutions needs to change (Baldwin, 1990; Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Park, 1996; Butler, 1998) but counter-cultural work is demanding even as it is immensely rewarding. Moreover, the gains are always precarious, as the ongoing existence of the retreats is.
Notes on methodology

From the first retreat I have gathered verbal feedback in the final meeting and sometimes written feedback in the weeks following. However, at the tenth retreat, I decided to carry out a more systematic, in-depth study of the participants’ experiences of the retreat, and their perceptions as to the effects of the retreats on their writing and their academic selves. At the next retreat I worked through a draft questionnaire with the women attending. During the discussion some questions were reworded to be more focused, and one whole section exploring retreats as feminist pedagogy was eliminated. We also had some strong debate about the value of the demographic questions (especially around age and self-descriptive category), and about whether or not I needed approval from my institution’s Human Subjects Ethics Committee. Overall, though, I was encouraged by the support of those dozen or so women present to go ahead with the evaluation. The final questionnaire comprised three sections: (1) eight open-ended questions evaluating the retreat experience, (2) eight open-ended questions exploring the impact of the retreats on writing selves, and (3) ten questions gathering demographic information. I emailed it to all 49 past participants still active on my email list in early 2003. Of those 49, 31 responded. The respondents reflected the diversity of the group: 13 women were relatively senior (senior lecturers, associate professors, professors), 13 were relatively junior (senior tutors and lecturers), and five were doctoral students and/or contract researchers/consultants.

Before analysing the 31 questionnaires, I subdivided them into three groups: nine questionnaires from women who had attended four or more retreats (of 11 possible returns), 13 from those who had attended two or three (of 16), and nine from those who had attended just one (of 22). In analysing the data, I have adopted a ‘realist’ stance towards the material. Following Patti Lather’s understanding of realism as an analysis that assumes ‘an empirical world knowable through adequate method and theory’ (1991, p. 128), I have taken the women’s responses at face value, interpreting their words as closely as I can to what I think their intentions were in writing them. In spite of this intention, the data were sometimes ambiguous, as I will show. Wanting to give a full picture of the effects of the retreats on the women, I have reported on all the responses to the particular questions of interest in this article. While I have not identified the respondents, there was never an intention that the returns would be anonymous to me as the researcher, because I wanted to gather demographic data that would make most, if not all, of the respondents recognisable. This factor may account for some of the 18 non-returns, and may also account for the absence of any strongly critical views towards the retreat. However, the lowest returning group was those who had only attended once, a trend that could just as well be explained by the questions searching for impact of attending retreats over time.

A final methodological point is that, in carrying out this evaluation, I invited the women into a slightly different relationship with me, somewhat critically beyond that of retreat organiser and participants (having said this, they were also used to being asked to give me feedback about the retreats). In both the questionnaire and the draft paper workshops, I was aware of the tensions of inviting collegial input from very
diverse disciplinary perspectives into my research process—we had some heated discussions that did not necessarily lead to a reconciled viewpoint. I acknowledge there are limits to a process in which the researcher is the researched. For instance, some respondents might not have been completely honest because they did not want to hurt my feelings. In spite of this possibility, many of the questionnaire responses offered frank and thoughtful criticisms of the retreat in ways that would allow the model go forward to better things. This is just what I was seeking, although it is not the focus of this article.

On writing regularity and pleasure

The goals of the retreat explicitly include increasing the women’s pleasure and regularity in academic writing. In responding to a question about this, most of the women (25 of 31) reported that attending the retreats had made a difference to their writing lives in some meaningful way—perhaps in learning new rituals, habits, skills or strategies for tackling the writing task, but also in some growing pleasures in writing:

Attending the retreats has made me more aware of the process—more pleased with good writing when I do it. I have begun to work on Sunday mornings—writing 7 to 11—to give myself writing time I can relax into (like Tauhara). (6/7—each respondent has a unique code: first, her serial number between 1 and 31, and then the number of retreats she has attended)

Yes [attending has had an impact]. We were always told that regular writing was the thing, but I find it easier now because it is more pleasurable and I have a range of strategies for getting started if things are feeling difficult. I very rarely have any problem getting started these days. I can always think of something to try when things are tough and/or feeling very fuzzy. (3/6)

It has had a dramatic (positive) impact on regularity and pleasure in writing; knowing that there is a specific time set aside for writing reduces anxiety and saves time. (I don’t try doing it at times unlikely to be productive.) I’ve always found the actual writing to be pleasurable, but getting started very difficult—the structure at Tauhara and the sense of a precious opportunity not to be squandered have dealt with that problem. (18/5)

[Tauhara has impacted on my writing] in many ways. I guess I feel more secure that it’s ok to think of myself as a writer, even though I’m still very much a beginning academic. I also really value writing time as ‘real work’ and can now take ‘writing time’ as opposed to leaving writing to last. (22/3)

I realise that I like writing and especially collaboratively. I now have at least two pieces of writing in process at any one time. One of these is often a collaborative writing project. I have found I write well with colleagues who: have a shared passion for the topic; fulfil our agreement on who writes what and when; can co-create and develop ideas as we write; have the capacity to see the funny side of things; and know good lunch places. (23/3)

There is a range of impacts visible here: from becoming more aware of the process of writing and thus setting up writing times differently, to having a wider range of strategies to call on when writing, to having a sense of writing as real work and thus a legitimate activity to prioritise, to learning that the social aspects of writing are
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enjoyable and helpful. One woman reported setting up the retreat conditions for herself in ways that made writing more enjoyable and productive:

I write regularly at the retreats and I schedule ‘mini-retreats’ for myself every month to keep it going. I don’t know if I’m at ‘pleasure’ but I certainly have greater ease and confidence. (9/6)

Over time, others have set up writing groups or organised shorter retreats with small groups of peers, some who have also attended Tauhara, some who have not.

Some (4) women gave more uncertain responses about the impact:

[Attending the retreats did not have as much impact] as I had hoped, but I think I needed to come back to Tauhara for a top up. I did find writing and editing much easier post-retreat and let myself enjoy crafting my writing more. (8/3)

I’m still struggling with that—need a few more retreats—but I have made the decision to just take time to write and not to do so much of the lower level admin. (29/1)

Two of these women had attended only one retreat; the other two said they thought coming again would be helpful. These quotes are ambiguous though, showing that the retreats had some kind of impact, but maybe not what the women had hoped for.

A further two women said the retreats had no impact:

Sadly [the retreats have] not yet had an impact. I need to be able to have sufficient time to commit to this but, with rapidly aging parents and their human frailty, it seems that I have just got beyond one block of young family commitments and now have a new time demand which precludes my claiming space to write the way I would prefer to, that is in substantial blocks of time dedicated to the purpose. … My pleasure though when I take the time to write is that I am better at it! I look for ways to entice the reader or listener. I take delight in the use of language and how it can deliberately be used. (13/2)

The week was great but I feel like I really need to come back for the retreats to have lasting effect. I remember you saying at the summing-up session that Tauhara can be a bit of an island one escapes to once or twice a year—and once back home one reverts to default mode and Tauhara retreats into the background. I guess that is how I feel about it—and I need to come again to refresh my memory. (27/1)

Like the uncertain responses, these both suggest that the women think that future attendance at the retreats would be helpful to them. They show that women write in complex circumstances in which there are many competing demands. Attending a first retreat is often accompanied by the slightly unreal feeling of being away from it all. While there, writing usually seems easier, but translating the benefits back into everyday working lives is not that simple (again, the data are ambiguous—while one woman (13/2) began her response by saying the retreats had no impact, as she wrote on some impact emerged).

On the sense of selves as writers

When asked if how they saw themselves as academic writers had changed as a result of attending the retreats, most of the women (25 of 31) agreed that this had changed for the better. Yet the kinds of changes they experienced were quite diverse, as illustrated here by some pairs of before and after quotes:
Example 1

[Before] I didn’t see myself as an academic writer. Indeed, I believed that I was illiterate, with all sorts of misgivings about fluency, style, originality of ideas left over from when I was a school-girl.

[AFTER] I believe I have something valuable to say and that I can, with hard work, write about my ideas in ways that are amenable and enjoyable to the reader. I am finding that I have more ideas for papers than I know what to do with and, because I still don’t enjoy writing, I find it hard to discipline myself and get the papers written—but I do get a tremendous sense of satisfaction from the final product. (5/8)

Example 2

[Before] My writing was a bit hit and miss, also something left til after other work was done.

[AFTER] Now writing is much more in the forefront. I’m more business-like, more professional, more ‘this is something I can do—get on with it’. (6/7)

Example 3

[Before] I saw myself as an impostor who did not ‘belong’, and as a ‘wannabe’ writer rather than one who actually did write.

[AFTER] My sense of myself as a writer is changing, but I’ve still a way to go. Completing the PhD was great, and I have had mixed success with getting published, and still struggle with freeing up time to write and not procrastinating because of the perfectionism that takes over. Overall though, I feel more sure of myself as a writer (on good days at least!). (8/3)

Example 4

[Before] I saw myself as unreflective but competent. A bit rigid in that sense.

[AFTER] Writing feels more pleasurable and creative—partly because I have more choices about what I do and how. It also seems less solitary because I have friends (other Tauhara women) with whom I talk about writing, share drafts and so on. I think I am also inclined to ‘polish’ my writing a bit more—take more note of sentence constructions, particular words and so on—to try and make it as interesting and lucid as possible. (3/6)

Example 5

[Before] Struggling—not as competent as I’d like nor as productive as I wanted.

[AFTER] I am braver—more fearless in my ability to get stuff down that is actually usable. Experiencing uninterrupted focused time on writing equalled a pretty good product at the end. … Great lesson in what exactly hinders writing and it’s often logistical rather than my own inadequacy. (25/1)

Some of these respondents experienced the change in writing self as taking a more businesslike approach, others in coming to approach writing with more confidence that they have something worthwhile to say. Yet others found writing more pleasurable. Sometimes it is a combination of these things. Notably, the shifts are not of the same kind and in the same direction. In spite of the many how-to-write manuals that suggest a certain mode of successful writing self, these data suggest a more transgressive picture in which there is no one right way to be a good writer, and no certain progression along the road from not-so-good writer to better one. The shifts are more about being different in relation to your earlier self, about overcoming or moving past older anxieties, rigidities, etc., that hampered writing in some way.
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Interestingly, the responses suggest that some women are moving in opposite directions in their shifts into a more desirable writer position—for example, while for some it is about becoming more businesslike about writing, for others it is the opposite, about becoming looser and more creative. This variety illustrates well the underlying philosophy of writing which suffuses the retreats; that if you are writing, and you are enjoying it some (or, even better, most) of the time, and you are producing writing that pleases you and your readers, then no matter how ‘weird’ your practices, they are ‘good’. What this philosophy means in practice is the desirability of having at your fingertips a variety of approaches to deal with different writing challenges and different states of mind and heart. This is one of the things the communal aspect of the retreats offers: the chance to hear about and take up a wider variety of practices than most of us have presently.

Five respondents were uncertain if the retreats had contributed to a shift in their sense of self as academic writers. Three had attended only once, and two twice. Again, a shift in sense of self seems to be weaker with less frequent attendance. As an academic development opportunity, the retreats are unusual in that they are designed for ongoing participation. Spaces are always offered to past participants first. This design feature acknowledges the value of repeated experiences for shifting established behaviours, such as those associated with writing and building ongoing social bonds (another unusual feature of the retreats is that they include really doing the activity that is ‘under development’). The findings of the evaluation suggest this feature of the retreats is by and large successful.

One person said the retreats had not made any difference to her:

I didn’t really see myself as an academic writer before attending Tauhara. … I don’t think Tauhara contributed to self identity as an academic writer—that has come more from my employment change [from social worker to lecturer]. I am not sure that I would regard myself as an academic writer still. (Time I came back for a refresher!!) Writing is basically a chore for me but it is something I know that I have to do in order to make a difference and get my ideas across to a wide audience. What Tauhara gave me was a sense that I am heading in the right direction with my writing and that I do have the ability to write. (7/2)

In reading this response, I can see that what has counted as a change in self for some respondents—for example, a growing sense that you can write—is also, albeit tenuously, present here. However, such a shift did not have the same meaning for this respondent.

On writing productivity and publications

To evaluate the impact of the retreats on writing productivity, I asked for two kinds of data: (1) whether or not participants thought that, over time, the retreats had made a difference to their writing productivity, and (2) what they had published since attending their first retreat and how much they thought the retreat experience had contributed.

Almost two-thirds (20 of 31) of the women thought that attending the retreats had made a difference to their writing productivity—this group included all but one (8 of
9) of the women who had attended four or more retreats, as well as women who had attended fewer. They explained why or how they thought the retreats had an effect on their productivity:

Yes, a huge difference because I consistently set aside these chunks of time—with four-day weekends monthly in between—which allow me to focus on writing for several hours a day for several days at a time. (1/10)

Yes, I have internalised many features and aspects of the Tauhara approach—free writing, structuring, goal setting. (6/7)

Yes, it helped to shift the paralysis I had about the Ph.D. (8/3)

The retreats have got me focused not just on short-term goals. I now have my writing plan/agenda that I developed at Tauhara. (17/2)

Where the respondents took learning—either practical skills or feelings about themselves—from Tauhara back into their everyday writing lives, this seems to have had an impact on their productivity. However, some (6) respondents thought the retreats might have made a difference but were unsure:

I believe so … [but it is] difficult to measure the extent that the attendance at retreat helped with [my subsequent publications]. (16/1)

I hope so, but as it’s been a while since I attended the retreat, the effect has worn out (then kicked back again after the women in leadership retreat). (12/1)

The first response illustrates the complexity of assessing the role of a particular event in contributing to productivity, an issue I will return to below.

The five remaining respondents had all attended only once (4) or twice (1). Three said it was simply too early to answer the question as they had attended their first retreat just two months prior to filling in the questionnaire; the other two said the retreat had not made a difference to their productivity:

Not really. Got too busy teaching and am still finding it very hard to achieve much in smaller pockets of time. (27/1)

The focus of the last discussion at every retreat is how to keep the writing going to enable greater productivity. We always have a round where we each declare our plans for making writing time in the next six months (for some women, attending both retreats each year is their main writing time). From the data it appears that the retreats have been successful in helping many women feel more productive in their writing but that this outcome is not shared by all. Again, the effect seems to be linked with how many retreats have been attended, and how much of what is learned there is taken back to working life.

The most problematic question was the question asking about publications as a result of attending retreats (the actual question was: ‘What have you published since your first retreat and how much have the retreats contributed?’) The data vary from substantial records of publications to none, records that are often incomplete and sometimes do not include finished Master’s or Ph.D. theses. The picture that emerges is that the retreats played a direct role in the subsequent output
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and theses) for nine women, while for another six the retreats played a big role indirectly. For others, it is hard to know because the data is incomplete, or they did not make links between outputs and the retreats (5), or they did not remember (3), or did not give any data (2). Four women had no publications, and two others said it was too early to say, having only recently attended their first retreat (three of these last six have theses ongoing). It was clearly difficult for many respondents to confidently trace the impact of attending the retreats on writing productivity as measured by publications—they simply did not remember or could not make a link between a given publication and a particular retreat:

I can’t make that kind of connection [between retreat attendance and publications], and have not kept those kinds of records. (31/4)

Despite the standard retreat goal (‘The purpose of the retreat is to produce an article ready for publication or for a conference, or a chapter towards a book or PhD’), many participants have found a week not always long enough to complete one piece of work from scratch. Although quite often in the closing round of the retreat women do report completing chapters and articles, some were already half-written. In other cases, publications and completed Ph.D.s have followed on from the writing work done at the retreats (from time to time I get notified of book launches, or sent publication details, reviews or covers of books that were worked on during a retreat). Moreover, in discussing a draft of this article at a recent retreat (Winter retreat, 2005), it emerged that different women engage with the standard retreat goal in quite different ways: some use the retreat time as an endpoint in the process of writing a paper, while others use it as the starting point to ‘get their heads’ around a new piece of writing. Others again use the retreat as a place to get recharged for the writing life outside. In this discussion, a strength of Tauhara was seen to be its flexibility in allowing these different agendas and processes to coexist.

Overall, because of the messy relationship between retreat goals and outcomes, it is very difficult to confidently gauge the impact of the writing retreats on publications, although there is evidence that, for almost half the respondents, the retreats did contribute to their publication outputs.

Some conclusions

The location was stunning. The beautiful view from my writing window over a mass of greenery and the native birds dropping by to suck the nectar with the misty lake and small mountains in the distance were calming and helped me to focus. … I appreciated the fact that there was only one compulsory activity. … The ‘women only’ gender group was a delicious environment to work in. I felt safe and that I could trust those around me to support me with their feedback as we went about our shared enterprise. My pregnant state was celebrated by the bonds that were formed with the other women. This has been the best professional development I have ever done. (24/1)

I hope you’ll manage to keep the retreats going for a long time—they are pretty special because they are so encouraging (i.e. both supportive and challenging): I can’t think of a better combination for professional development! (27/1)
This evaluation of the writing retreats is encouraging of their ongoing practice: the women report that attending them has made a difference to their professional lives, as indeed it has for me. Moreover, the findings highlight the value of repeated experiences. They also highlight the disjuncture between how academic writing is usually practised (in solitude, within busy schedules) and how it might best be practised (somewhat excessively, in community, with dedicated space and time). The price we pay for the practice of solitary writing is that we often doubt ourselves, we feel as if we lack courage or commitment, we find writing lonely and hard, we can’t get to it. By re-fusing the boundaries between individualism and community, between the public and the private, as the retreats challenge us to do, we can learn much about ourselves and our writing that can make a difference to the experience of writing in general. Most significantly this experience can help us forge new, more pleasurable and productive writing selves.

Finally, we (academic women) have often claimed that there is a need for culture change in universities away from the traditional individualism. The retreats are an example of such a deeply transgressive change. To be successful, they have required commitment and input from all who participate, as well as from me as the organiser. Even more, the retreats require a kind of patience, because they do not always go well at a particular time for a given individual, and their deepest and best effects seem to be experienced over time. On that point, I would like to close with the eloquent words of one of the women:

[My experience of Tauhara is that] it is a process of gradual re-orientation and coming more and more to think of myself as a writer and to disinter some of my buried hopes for myself as a writer and to dream up new ones. If my health continues to improve as it has (yay!!), I expect that I will become more and more creative and productive as a writer in my 50s and beyond, instead of tapering off as I might well have done without Tauhara and my beautiful writing group. Academic life does not nurture us very well as women and as intellectuals and Tauhara is one of the remedies. (31/4)

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