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Writers’ Retreats for Academics: exploring and increasing the motivation to write

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the literature on academic writing and collaborative learning and proposes, in the light of this literature, that the introduction of writers’ retreats for academics represents a valuable professional development opportunity. It is argued that such an intervention can be an important initiative, helping to support more productive patterns of academic writing among participating academics. Findings gathered during a writers’ retreat are presented, focusing on the positive and negative perspectives that participating academics expressed about writing for publication. The format and the structure of the retreat are described, along with the impact that such an intervention can be argued to have made on participants. Finally, a conceptual map is presented which relates the experiences and insights of the retreat to the ‘motivation to write’ among academics.

Introduction

Blaxter et al. (1998) and Murray and MacKay (2001) have recently noted that research into academic writing is very limited. While there are many ‘how to’ manuals, books and publications, much less attention has been directed towards research on the nature of academic writing and of its related challenges, motivations, moderators and experiences. Furthermore, the literature suggests that technical advice on writing may be necessary but is certainly not sufficient for establishing productive writing patterns among academics. As Murray and MacKay (2001) put it, ‘what … technical advice cannot do is take writers through the complex, combined strategies required for productive academic writing’ (p. 36).

The literature on academic writing that does exist strongly suggests that it is not an easy process, and that even the most experienced academic writers encounter difficulties, challenges and obstacles in their efforts to write effectively and productively. Grant and Knowles (2000) show that academic writing incorporates difficulties associated with finding time and space for writing, and that this may be particularly true for women academics due to the wider responsibilities they may be expected to take on both within and beyond their professional lives. Many academics in current university environments feel they lack experience and expertise in
writing for scholarly publication (Murray, 2001). Nevertheless, the assumption persists that if you are an academic, you are automatically both able and willing to write (Blaxter et al., 1998). As the profiles and backgrounds of university teachers become more diverse, this is an assumption that may be true only for an increasingly small proportion of academics.

Given the difficulties that at least some academics encounter in their efforts to produce scholarly publications, it is important that universities find ways to help. This is especially true given the increasing pressure that exists for academics to produce published work on a regular basis. Universities have a responsibility to facilitate academics in continuing to develop writing-related skills and orientations.

While more research is required about the nature and impact of writing-related interventions and supports for academics, several different approaches have been reported and evaluated in the literature (see, for example, Boice, 1987, 1990; Aronson & Swanson, 1991; Moore, 1995; Morss & Murray 2001). Boice (1990) predicts that scholarly output can be improved in the following ways: by providing momentum for writing projects, by counteracting self-censorship, by building confidence, by providing external motivation, by challenging the reasons for not writing and by developing specific writing-related skills. Given the limited research on the nature of academic writing and on the value of writing-related interventions, it is important we continue to investigate and explore both of these phenomena. The provision of writers’ retreats for academics has already been championed as a valuable intervention that universities can initiate (Grant & Knowles, 2000). This paper builds on this work by reporting the insights gained from participants at the beginning of a similar writers’ retreat run by the University of Limerick. Perspectives on the positive and negative aspects of academic writing are used to build a tentative model exploring ‘motivation to write’ on the part of academics. In addition, views on how the writers’ retreat experience helped to facilitate their writing activities are also reported and a typology of writing-related moderators/facilitators is outlined.

Collaborative Learning

Grant and Knowles (2000) propose that academic writing needs to be reframed. Instead of a solitary, isolated, solely competitive activity, it is more useful to approach it as a community-based, collaborative, social act. The benefits of viewing writing through such a lens are based on the same principles that have been found to prevail in research on collaborative and cooperative learning (see, for example, Cohen, 1986; Kagan, 1988; Slavin, 1996). People writing as part of a community of writers are more likely to learn faster about the conventions and challenges of writing, to support each other at times of blockage and to demystify the process of writing by sharing each others’ successes and failures. This approach challenges many of the cultural and competitive conventions of academic life. At the same time, the responsibilities associated with collaborative learning cannot be ignored. Johnson and Johnson (1984) have established that in order for collaborative learning to be successful, it requires two essential components. Firstly, each member of the community needs to be individually accountable for their own learning. Secondly,
group members need to establish ‘positive interdependence’ by providing reliable sources of help to one another.

It is with these principles in mind that the University of Limerick’s writers’ retreat was designed and developed. An account of the event and its characteristics are presented below.

**The Writers’ Retreat at the University of Limerick**

The University of Limerick’s writers’ retreat was structured with the following principles in mind: to create an atmosphere of trust and safety for productive writing; to help participants to learn from each other about the processes of writing; to create a multidisciplinary community of writers who would provide support and advice to one another both during the writers’ retreat and beyond; to explore the important links between teaching, research, writing and scholarship; to have a productive working experience in which each participant would commit to a specific writing goal and try to achieve it.

In line with the small group model for writing retreats outlined by Grant and Knowles (2000), participation was open to just 12 faculty members, and places were filled on a first come-first served basis. Most participants were experienced and regular writers, so the response and insights they provided that are summarised in this report may not reflect those of newer faculty or less active writers.

The writers’ retreat was a 5-day, residential writing ‘sanctuary’. While most of each day was devoted to individual writing time, the retreat also incorporated important opportunities for the exchange of shared writing experiences, and some structured advice on the writing process. The event was launched with a plenary meeting on the evening of arrival, after which each participant set up his/her own private ‘writing space’.

A team-building session was scheduled for the first morning, and each subsequent day started with a 1-hour morning workshop addressing different dimensions of the writing process (barriers to writing, structuring data, publishing, editing). In addition to quiet writing time, which took up the majority of each day, participants also had the option to meet with smaller subgroups to help to edit or comment on drafts of each other’s work. Participants gathered at the end of each day for dinner, which took place in a central location.

Before and after the retreat, the author gathered information about participants’ insights into the writing process. Pre- and post-retreat questionnaires were distributed to all group members to get their views about the writing process and about the possible benefits of participating in the writers’ retreat. In particular, participants were asked to identify dimensions of the writing process that they liked and disliked and to highlight the impact, if any, their participation had on their writing activities.

**Results**

The following are comments gathered at the beginning of the retreat: firstly, enjoyable and, secondly, negative aspects.
The writers’ retreat participants identified a variety of enjoyable dimensions that they associated with the writing process. Most notably, they referred to: the sense of achievement and satisfaction engendered by successful writing; the creative, original dimension of writing; the durability of their written work and the engagement or ‘flow’ associated with their positive experience of writing.

More than 50% of respondents referred explicitly to an anticipated sense of achievement. One participant summarised this by explaining:

I enjoy developing a theme or idea and following it through... finishing a piece of work and the sense of accomplishment that that entails.

Another talked about how achievement is linked with her own expression of ideas:

... you've shaped it your way and therefore there's this feeling of achievement.

Others referred directly to the feeling of having risen to challenges presented by their research and writing activities, and to the experiences of accomplishment, effectiveness and satisfaction that they associated directly with the writing process.

Several respondents referred to the importance of having produced something durable, of ‘making their mark’ as a result of having written up and published a piece of their work:

an important part of my job involves thinking, reflecting, exploring and testing ideas in various settings. To capture those thoughts and ideas in a coherent piece of writing that others may read, is extremely motivating and enjoyable even if it's not always easy.

A theme highlighted during discussions was that a lot of the output associated with academic work was short-lived in nature (e.g. the delivery of lectures, seminars, tutorials and presentations) and comments suggested that the tangibility of writing offered an ‘antidote to ephemera’ that was itself a motivating factor which encouraged writing activity: ‘It’s possible to create something that lasts and that others can deal with at their own pace’.

Respondents see that writing helps to produce creative ideas rather than reflect, summarise or describe creative endeavours that have preceded the writing. Participants who referred to emotions like ‘excitement’ and ‘enjoyment’ were most likely to link such emotions with the creative dimension of the writing process. Representative comments included the following: ‘It’s exciting to make interesting discoveries’ and ‘I enjoy the creativity that is engendered by the writing process itself’.

Being able to become totally engaged in writing was another common theme that participants identified as important. Many comments illustrated this, and some lamented the general lack of uninterrupted space and time for writing in their normal work context. ‘I used to adore getting into depth writing’ reported one participant, adding that he loved ‘getting into a flow of writing’. Others related positive writing experiences with the opportunity for ‘uninterrupted expression of ideas’ and ‘really being able to focus and stick with writing for an extended period.
so that the creative juices have a chance to flow’. Several mentioned how difficult it was for them to find time for uninterrupted writing and two specifically suggested that the experience of ‘flow’ was only possible once writing activity had been initiated for some time. Flow was a factor which was seen as being important for maintaining momentum and for enhancing creativity and commitment once a writing project was already underway.

**Negative Aspects of the Writing Process**

When discussing the negative aspects of the writing process, participants identified several themes. Most frequently, they referred to problems associated with: their own sense of confidence/competence; obstacles encountered when starting, maintaining momentum and finishing; the sense of external sanction and surveillance associated with academic writing; the pressures associated with deadlines either externally or internally imposed; the physical discomfort associated with dedicated periods of writing.

Issues of competence and confidence were the most frequently cited dimensions that respondents linked to negative aspects of writing. Participants said that they feared ‘not being good enough’ and reported that they worried about more specific problems with their writing, such as ‘lacking clarity’ or ‘producing uninteresting, bland material’ or ‘not really having anything new or fresh to contribute’. Others said they lacked a knowledge of or confidence in the techniques of academic writing. In addition, some implied that certain patterns of writing-related activity were hindered by a lack of confidence, complaining that they disliked, but suggesting that they could not avoid ‘agonising over small things’ or ‘the constant referencing of other people’s work, worrying about whether you have missed someone important’s work’.

In addition, the quotations below are illustrative of a strongly held view that the initiation, maintenance and completion of a writing project are often problematic.

Finding the right way or time to start a writing project seemed to pose problems for several of the respondents, who talked about ‘anticipation, reluctance to get started’ in negative terms. Similarly, ‘getting stuck’ was a common theme. Problems with momentum may at least in part be due to the difficulties associated with finding blocks of time in which engage in uninterrupted writing. As two other individuals noted:

[I have problems with the] fragmented, distracted dynamics that normally prevail. It’s so hard to overcome all the obstacles (space, time, distractions, fatigue) that it leads to such guilt when articles don’t get finished.

Many of the respondents referred to external sanction as a problematic, albeit inevitable, part of the writing process, finding it daunting ‘that someone out there will have to okay what I have written’ or ‘that these ideas will be justifiably challenged by others’. One individual noted that an aspect of writing that he disliked related to the fact that ‘often we are forced to write rather than writing of our own volition’. Other negative factors invoked were ‘pressure’, ‘panic’ and ‘stress’ some-
times associated with writing, as well as physical discomfort associated with extended periods of writing time.

These, then, were the perspectives on writing that participants expressed at the beginning of the writers’ retreat. It is reasonable to assume though that this may not have been a representative group of academics. Their voluntary participation in an initiative that required a significant time commitment on a residential basis could indicate some characteristics that might not be peculiar to or representative of wider academic groups: while the literature suggests that most academics experience difficulties when writing, a self-selected group embarking on a writers’ retreat may present an exaggerated picture of the challenges encountered by academics in this regard. It could also be argued that this was a group which was more committed to academic writing and perhaps even more likely to be reflective about their writing habits and their experiences with the writing process. It is important not to assume that the views of this group paint a representative picture. However, themes associated with academic writing that occur in the existing literature are remarkably similar to those expressed by the participants in this study. It is these echoes that lend a validity to the findings in this paper. It should also be said though that further research is required before more robust conclusions about the experience of academic writing can be established.

Outcomes of the Writers’ Retreat from the Participants’ Perspective

All participants agreed that writing in the retreat environment had been a much more pleasurable, motivating and productive experience compared to the writing experiences they normally encountered in their day-to-day working lives. When asked to explain why this might be the case, participants provided responses that together can be seen to constitute different categories of ‘moderators’ associated with effective writing. Moderators identified through an analysis of participant responses can be summarised as follows: the establishment of a collaborative community of writers; the legitimisation of space and time for writing; physical and psychological safety of the working environment; invoked sense of engagement and ‘flow’; opportunities for relaxation in the context of hard work.

Knowing that their fellow participants were engaged in somewhat similar struggles and sharing insights, ideas, advice and practice was seen to have been an important dimension of the retreat environment. Writing in the context of a collaborative, albeit small, community group seemed to remove the sense of insecurity and isolation that participants often experienced. Cordonning off time explicitly designed for creativity was also something that participants said they valued. To commit a week of work explicitly and solely to the activities of writing for publication was something that required considerable planning, but allowed individuals to focus on a central piece of work and to devote uninterrupted time to its completion. It is clear from comments provided by participants that this opportunity significantly speeded the pace and production of work and led to a more significant sense of achievement in the process. Focusing on health and relaxation in the context of hard work was seen as something that helped to enhance the participants’ writing activities. In
addition, feeling safe to share work in progress with supportive, constructive colleagues without fearing negative outcomes was also seen by participants to enhance their writing-related activity. Finally, what seemed like trivial luxuries (yoga and massage, which were available at certain times during the week) were highlighted as very important components of the retreat. Several noted that the physical discomforts of writing do not usually get explicit attention but that when engaged in the process of writing, a lot of time is spent hunched over computer screens, sometimes at the expense of posture, eyesight, neck and back health and so on. Participants mentioned that paying attention to physical health and relaxation in the context of a schedule of hard work was an important reminder to them and something that they now planned to integrate more centrally into their activities as academics.

In terms of written output, every participant reported having made significant progress on their writing project, though the nature of that progress differed greatly between individuals. Some completed full chapters or papers, others structured their writing, others refocused their work. Undoubtedly, the amount of work done prior to the retreat had an influence on how much was achieved, but each participant expressed satisfaction with the progress they had made. Many said that they now faced their writing tasks with more confidence and more pleasure than they had prior to the retreat.

Discussion

There is no doubt that participants speeded up their production of written outputs, and may have directed more creative energy to their projects than might otherwise have been possible. Of course, these specific tasks could have been completed without the help of a writers’ retreat, and to attribute their achievement solely to the intervention would be a mistake. It is also important to emphasise that feedback was sought at the end of the retreat, and so longer term writing habits and orientations that may have been initiated as a result of the retreat have yet to be explored. It is possible that the effects of the retreat are only short term. However, participants pointed to the collective discovery of overlapping interests and common struggles and to their commitment to establishing a longer term focus for this small community of writers.

Based on the insights and perspectives provided by participants before and after the writers’ retreat, a tentative conceptual map (see Fig. 1) highlights the relationship between different dimensions of the writing process as expressed by participants at the retreat. Statements were allocated under the headings of motivators or inhibitors if they referred to the factors participants identified as encouraging or prohibiting the initiation of writing or writing-related activity. Insights labelled as moderators were those factors that participants felt improved or enhanced their ability to write.

Other writers (for example Boice, 1990; Elbow & Belanoff, 2000) have noted, and this research also suggests, that the factors that motivate people to start writing (for example those factors that led to the initial commitment to participate in the retreat) are different from the factors that make the writing experience better or worse once
FIG. 1. Faculty motivation to write and publish: a tentative conceptual model.

...a writing project has started (for example those factors that made the retreat a positive experience). This reflects one of the paradoxes associated with writing: the skills, orientations and pressures that lead to initiating writing or writing-related activity are qualitatively different from the skills, orientations, pressures and supports that lead to their continuation and completion. The moderators in Figure 1 are those factors that are more likely to maintain efforts to write and to help academics move closer to the completion of a writing project. Like Boice’s (1990) insights, confidence is seen as a major inhibitor of writing and is something that needs to be addressed if academic writing projects are to get off the ground. Like the participants in the similar intervention reported by Grant and Knowles (2000), a lack of dedicated blocks of writing time was cited as a major reason why it is difficult to start writing. And like Elbow and Belanoff (2000), this study has shown that the fear of external censure can paralyse academics in much the same way as it does their students. The kinds of factors that encourage people to start writing seem to be internal drivers, but it is hard to imagine that they are not also linked to the external pressure to publish that is encountered by academics on an almost world wide basis. Once
efforts to write have been initiated, it could be argued that a set of moderators (environmental or individual) intervene to determine whether or not the writing task is completed effectively. This effective task achievement gives rise to intrinsic rewards (a sense of accomplishment, a pride in the output and so on) as well as extrinsic rewards (such as recognition, enhanced promotion opportunities, etc.). The expectancy model of ‘academic motivation to write’ presented here reflects some of the more generic models of human motivation such as those proposed in organisational literature by Porter and Lawler (1968). Such a model might provide a useful guiding framework for universities in their efforts to design appropriate interventions to help people develop the orientations they will need to accomplish a vital academic task.

Many insights shared during the week showed that writing in an academic setting can be an isolating experience. People may feel exposed if they admit to any fears or lack of confidence when engaged in writing for publication. Even very accomplished writers encounter crises of confidence in their efforts to write (Brande, 1934; Broughton, 1994). This may be especially true if there is no facility for providing a sanctuary, where faculty can get help, advice and input on their writing before exposing their work to external critics. Any intervention to help individuals to write more productively should address the issue of confidence (which may be more problematic for individuals other than those who participated in this study, many of whom were experienced writers). If not, practical, structured advice on ‘how to write’ may be a waste of time (Grant & Knowles, 2000).

In day-to-day university settings, it is difficult to ‘lock yourself away’ without reference to other responsibilities, pressures and requirements. Yet finding uninterrupted time is often necessary if significant progress is to be made in the development of ideas and creative insights (for example Deane et al., 1996).

It seems that the writers’ retreat environment made participants feel that their writing activity was legitimised more vigorously by providing the necessary supports for academics to focus on writing in an uninterrupted, self-structured way. The writers’ retreat helped to create an atmosphere in which people could choose to balance their private writing time, with interaction between other writers/researchers. This was important both from a symbolic and a practical perspective. Providing a pleasant, relaxing, secluded and even luxurious environment sent the message to participants that writing was important and that their university was prepared to provide resources in order to support it. In addition, the practical supports that allowed participants to ‘get on with it’ without the normal distractions created an ideal way for people to accelerate progress on written work in ways that might otherwise not have been possible.

**Conclusion**

In order to help academics to write more productively and with more success, it is important to do two things. First, we need to understand more about the nature of academic writing. Second, we need to design interventions guided by this understanding that will help academics to develop and achieve their writing goals. When
individuals write out of anxiety rather than desire, the process is driven by a negative and potentially damaging ethic. In the long term, this is unlikely to help academics to initiate or maintain productive, successful writing habits. For all participants the writers’ retreat was a productive experience, accelerating and improving scholarly work in a high trust, collegial environment. The initiation of writers’ retreats is not presented here as a panacea to the problems of academic writing. It could be argued that the provision of these facilitative environments might create a culture in which academics become dependent on large blocks of time in order to write, rather than fitting their writing into the schedule of a more conventional environment. Clearly, longer term evaluations of these kinds of initiatives are required. However, the positive outcomes reported by participants of this pilot initiative have demonstrated that such interventions may have the potential to impact on the writing habits of faculty in a way that could help to improve a wide range of academic environments.

References


