

## Incorporating writing retreat principles and practices into higher education teaching: A reflective note

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### **Abstract**

*This reflective note presents some preliminary thoughts based on the author's experiences of facilitating writing retreats over the past five years and subsequently integrating writing retreat-inspired activities into teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Thus far, writing retreats have mostly been used to provide students with the opportunity to prepare for written summative assessment over a focussed, extended period. To add to existing work, this paper suggests how micro-practices can also be incorporated into educators' daily pedagogy to transform the classroom into a productive writing space. Shorter, simpler writing retreat-inspired exercises are conceptualised here as tourist activities, which allow learners to explore, question, try and experiment with something new. In contrast, longer, multifaceted sessions are conceptualised as artist activities, spaces where learners create, produce, and hone their craft. Both tourist and artist activities can be used flexibly to meet learners' needs. The potential benefits of doing so include fostering students' reflective skills, increasing confidence, and helping them achieve their writing goals. Some of the factors which can influence whether writing retreat-inspired teaching is successful are also considered, and knowledge gaps identified. Rather than presenting a formulaic approach, readers are invited to consider how these might be tailored for applicability in their own discipline-specific context.*

**Keywords:** Academic writing, writing retreats, reflective practice

### **Summary**

Ranging from tranquil getaways in sanctuary-like locations at considerable cost to simple 'bring your own lunch' gatherings, writing retreats are an increasingly popular panacea to systemic threats to writing time in the neoliberal academy (Weibe et. al., 2023). Writing retreats are collectively characterised by a withdrawal from one's usual schedule to focus on a specific piece of writing for an extended time, in the company of supportive peers. Although they vary in form (for example, structured or

unstructured), writing retreats arguably share common principles of collegiality and the pursuit of productivity (Kornhaber et. al., 2016). Micro-elements of writing retreats may include focussed writing in 'blocks', goal setting activities, freewriting or use of sentence prompts, skills workshops, peer mentorship, reflecting on one's progress and even wellness activities (Bigelow et. al., 2022).

This paper explores how writing retreat principles and practices can be incorporated into higher education (HE) teaching. The discussion is based on my experience of facilitating academic writing retreats over the past five years, and subsequent experimentation with 'bringing the writing retreat to the classroom' at undergraduate and taught postgraduate level. I have applied these techniques primarily with students of sociology, social policy, gender studies and education studies, as well as staff learners on the Academic Professional Apprenticeship. Readers are invited to reflect on how the featured approaches would add value in their own disciplinary contexts.

The activities suggested here seek not only to contribute to students' achievement of learning outcomes, however, but also to spark an interest in (and maybe even a passion for) writing. This is a mutually beneficial process for learner and teacher. Indeed, the terms 'facilitator' and 'educator' are used interchangeably in this paper. This reflects the idea that HE teachers will sometimes instruct learners (for example, stipulating the topic of reflection or advising how to set writing goals), but at other times, they may simply 'hold space' and facilitate learners' writing journeys.

## Background

Academic writing retreats have been conceptualised as a wider subversive effort to pursue 'compassionate productivity' (Hinnie, 2023) and 'slow scholarship' (Bozalek, 2017) in HE, and as 'safe spaces' (Winberg et. al., 2017). Applying this conceptual framing to undergraduate and postgraduate teaching acknowledges the contemporary challenges faced by learners who may be subject to the same structural constraints as their tutors (Cunningham, 2022). Allocating time for learners to write reflects a feminist pedagogic approach which seeks to make visible the hidden work of academic writing.

While academics recognise both the frustrating and joyful elements of writing (Dwyer et. al., 2011), students often experience writing as painful rather than pleasurable (French, 2018). Academic writing can be part of an unfamiliar terrain of HE, causing fear, anxiety and a sense of exclusion for under-represented or marginalised groups including – but not limited to - mature students, disabled students, care leavers and students of minoritised ethnicities (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016). Protected writing spaces may particularly benefit those who face intersectional and systemic disadvantages in the academic environment, with direct implications for their writing practice (see Murray and Kempenaar, 2020 on gender; Campbell et. al., 2024 on minoritised ethnic identities; Beck et. al. 2018 on age). The provision of inclusive, welcoming writing spaces is therefore important for dismantling barriers to participation and attainment (Baer and Kearney, 2023).

## Discussion: The tourist and the artist

The benefits of writing retreats for doctoral students are documented in current literature, both as an initiation into discipline-specific writing practices (Murray and Newton, 2009; Paltridge, 2016, Tremblay-Wragg et. al., 2022) and as a space to cultivate an academic identity (Grant, 2006, Papen and Thériault, 2018). Less attention has been paid to the use of writing retreats as pedagogic technique for undergraduates and taught postgraduates. Nonetheless, structured writing retreats in the form of weekends away, or a series of events, have been found to be particularly useful for students preparing for capstone summative assessments such as dissertations and independent research projects (Edwards et. al., 2020; Rentzelas and Harrison, 2020; Sangster, 2021).

Given that students face challenges with academic writing skills and practices *throughout* their programmes of study, there is a case for incorporating elements of writing retreat practices earlier on, as well as before ‘high stakes’ summative assessments. Although the activities discussed here can be purposefully aligned to unit learning outcomes, their ultimate objective is to foster positive experiences of writing, since self-criticism and lack of confidence in formulating ideas are antithetical to productive writing. In this way, writing retreat-style sessions become a flexible, liminal learning third space (Garraway, 2017).

Reflecting on my own experience, introducing writing retreat-inspired practices to the HE classroom has generally taken the form of two kinds of activities, which I conceptualise here as *tourist* and *artist* activities. In introducing small-scale writing retreat-inspired practices to learners, I implicitly invite them to play the role of *tourist* – to explore, question, try and experiment with something new. *Tourist* activities are smaller, simpler tasks aimed at cultivating positive experiences of writing. These could take place as part of taught sessions earlier in a unit of study, while learners get to grips with the materials and meet session learning outcomes. For example, encouraging freewriting using sentence prompts can help students test their ability to clarify terms, articulate knowledge gaps and begin to write without judgment. For learners struggling to keep up with taught sessions, making writing spaces available on a voluntary extracurricular basis can support engagement.

In contrast, providing extended, multifaceted opportunities to focus on individual writing outputs encourages students to adopt an *artist* mindset – to create, produce, and hone their craft. *Artist* activities might include holding a structured whole-day writing retreat towards the end of a module, pairing a structured morning session with an informal afternoon drop-in, supporting individuals to set up their own writing groups, and teaching students how to set their own writing goals (for example, using verbs to decide exactly what they will do in a 30-minute writing block). These more substantial initiatives might take place towards the end of a unit of study in the lead-up to assessment deadlines. Although longer writing sessions can be scheduled into taught modules, for some groups, tutors may wish to consider running additional, non-compulsory sessions (during which the tutor may also focus on their own writing).

Reflecting the sociological principle of making the familiar strange (Gunderson, 2021), this model requires educators to encourage learners to begin from a place of non-judgmental curiosity. For *tourist* exercises, students of any discipline can write to sentence prompts; for example, to identify areas they are yet to understand or to question their assumptions. During extended *artist* sessions, facilitators can encourage learners to pay curious attention to their goals and progress. By considering what they were able to achieve during one writing block, students can learn to make necessary adjustments to goals for their next writing block.

### Prospective impact

While further research is needed to gauge the impact of writing retreat-inspired teaching below doctoral level, there do appear to be practical and intellectual benefits. Given the increasing awareness of caring responsibilities (Spacey et. al., 2024) and prevalence of paid work amongst university students (NUS, 2024), learners may find it challenging to protect time in their schedules for extended periods of writing, and benefit from structured, pre-planned sessions.

A key challenge when facilitating a writing retreat is supporting participants suffering from 'writer's block' - a condition for which freewriting exercises are often prescribed. Similarly, within a classroom setting, *tourist* activities such as freewriting provide micro-spaces for quiet reflection on specific topics. Importantly, students should be invited, rather than required, to share their freewriting. A pedagogic culture of choice, non-surveillance and psychological safety (Exley et. al., 2019) may particularly benefit neurodiverse learners or those prefer to free-write in another language to aid the flow of ideas. One masters student, who I had introduced to freewriting, articulated the transformative potential of teaching these practices:

*'During [module name] sessions, [author] would introduce us to a topic, encourage some discussion, and then set us a prompt to aid us in creating a piece of reflexive writing. This task would entail simply typing every idea, theory and question that came to mind without pausing to find 'the right words'. [Author] explained that this would help us to formulate our thoughts and begin to analyse any prior assumptions we might have had, but if it hadn't been part of the lesson structure I wouldn't have tried it. Luckily, the task was built into every session, and I have continued to use this style of free writing throughout my academic career. I find that removing the process of editing gives me the freedom to let my ideas pour out onto the page, which then allows me to begin to build an argument when I pull all the information together into a more structured format. As a neurodiverse student this ability to detangle my thoughts and find a way to focus is invaluable, and I will always be grateful to have learned the process from [author].'*

Earlier scholarship has focussed on establishing a link between writing retreats and academics' productivity (Rickard et. al., 2009, Singh, 2012, Bonnamy et. al., 2024). Over time, however, participation in extended (*artist*) activities is also shown to

cultivate intangible benefits including increased motivation and confidence (Cable et. al. 2013), satisfaction from setting and meeting one's own goals (Swaggerty et. al., 2011) and a sense of pleasure in writing (Grant, 2006). This suggests potential for transformative change in learners' self-belief and their feelings about academic writing. 'Tried-and-tested' formats can usefully be shared within and across teaching teams for learners' benefit. A colleague, who had adapted my materials to suit their cohort, reported:

*'Learners came prepared, thanks to the clear briefing document, and engaged really well with the session. The focus time was silent and learners appeared to be well engaged with their writing ... Learners gave positive feedback on the experience and said that they really appreciated the social side of the retreat, having a comfortable amount of peer pressure to focus them on writing and avoid distractions ... I will be using this again within my courses.'*

In turn, learners may then replicate writing retreat-inspired practices independently, as the same colleague explained:

*'A learner told me that they had independently adopted the writing retreat structure after our scheduled retreat and said that it had been a huge success. They had a morning of structured writing blocks and it was very productive. They also told me that some other learners have been doing the same with great results too so this is definitely a strategy that they will be continuing from now on.'*

Equipping learners to build their own habits and practices can be a collaborative process. Following one undergraduate writing session I was delighted to hear learners enthusiastically recommending relaxing writing-time soundtracks with each other. Where writing retreats have been found to foster collegiate relationships and team building amongst academics (Jackson, 2009; Lindholm and Isosävi, 2024), students may also experience an increased sense of belonging in their cohorts through writing together.

### **Suggestions for implementation**

When using writing retreat-inspired activities, I notice that several factors influence whether a session is successful. This may ultimately depend on group characteristics, learner motivation and the facilitator's approach. However, the following simple actions can increase the likelihood of writing retreat-inspired sessions being a positive experience for learners. Key tenets of academic writing retreats include punctuality, silence during writing blocks and treating fellow participants respectfully. Clear communication with learners is therefore essential to manage behavioural expectations and ensure a sense of safety during the session(s). Although these expectations may be grounded in institutional, cohort and individual values, educators play a central role in creating a warm and inclusive climate (Ambrose et. al., 2010) through an atmosphere of welcome, acceptance and collegiality.

An important aspect of the facilitator's role is to protect space for learners to think, reflect and write. Practically speaking, this involves devising a clear structure for the session (including adequate breaks) and sharing this with learners ahead of time. This is particularly important for learners with caring responsibilities, who will need to plan accordingly. During longer sessions involving multiple writing blocks, time should be protected for setting writing goals before each block begins and revisiting them at the end. This is a valuable way of empowering learners to set their own writing goals, and afterwards, to consider how realistic their goals were. Educators can also model this by providing examples from their own writing practice. To maintain a safe space for learners, it is important to make goal-sharing optional. However, if students are willing to share what they hope to achieve, and report back on their progress, this can be a valuable learning experience for the whole group.

For extended, structured writing sessions, educators should consider making participation voluntary, to ensure participants are invested and committed to the process. Indeed, intentional and enthusiastic participation is essential for longer writing sessions. As such, learners should be advised to decide what they will be working on beforehand, what textual or other resources they require, and how their physical needs will be met, for example by preparing food and drink.

## **Conclusion**

Future investigation into the value of integrating writing retreat principles and practices into HE teaching should seek to evaluate the impact on learners at all levels of study. Impacts might include skills development, behaviour change or even therapeutic benefits, as described by Cotton et. al. (2014) in the case of undergraduate care leavers. To this end, creative qualitative methodologies could provide ways for evaluating impact. This piece was inspired by the notable absence of facilitators' perspectives in current literature (for other narrative accounts, see Overstreet et. al., 2021, Sutcliffe, 2023; Damčević, 2023); future work could also consider educators' experiences of implementing these techniques.

The practices described here enable educators to normalise and make visible the struggles and joys of academic writing. Where academics' research activities and teaching practice can feel distinct and detached, sharing writing experiences with learners can help connect the two. The skills and habits academics role-model through these activities have the potential to help students navigate the opaque world of academic writing, equip them for the long term, and contribute to their ultimate academic success.

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