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Writing retreat as structured intervention: margin or mainstream?

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Academics across the world face increasing pressure to publish. Research shows that writing retreats have helped by creating dedicated writing time and building collegiality. A new form of ‘structured’ writing retreat was created to increase its impact by taking a community of practice approach. This paper reports on an evaluation, funded by the British Academy, in which participants were interviewed one year after structured retreat. They reported many changes in their approaches to writing and in their sense of themselves as writers and some of these changes were sustained on return to campus. This paper argues that structured retreat increases learning through participation and helps academics to mainstream writing in their lives and careers. We conclude by suggesting that, since publishing is a mainstream academic activity, it makes sense to mainstream this intervention in academic careers.

Keywords: community of practice; evaluation; legitimate peripheral participation; writing for publication

Introduction

Writing is a key academic skill and publishing is a priority in every university research strategy. By publishing, academics create new knowledge and improve career prospects. This is an important area of inquiry, not simply to add to our understanding of academic writing, but also to explore ways of countering the potentially negative effects of this aspect of academic work (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008).

Research suggests that writing retreats help. They create ‘imaginative space’ for writing and some academics enjoy writing with others (Grant & Knowles, 2000, p. 6). Retreats not only provide dedicated time and space for writing but also increase motivation to write (Moore, 2003). They can help individuals develop a sense of being part of a community of writers (Grant, 2006).

This paper deals with a new form of retreat that is underpinned by principles drawn from three areas. First, we drew on free-writing – private writing for short periods (e.g. five minutes), which has been shown to develop ideas and increase fluency (Elbow, 1973). Secondly, research showing that structured interventions are most effective in developing academic writing provided our rationale for a structured retreat (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006; Morss & Murray, 2001). Thirdly, we drew on the ‘solitary confinement’ model, which provided mainly individual writing time in separate rooms (Grant & Knowles, 2000, p. 12), to create a ‘typing pool’ model:

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- all writing together in one room for the whole of the retreat;
- structuring retreat time as a series of fixed writing and discussion slots;
- discussing writing-in-progress throughout the programme (Murray, 2005).

The design of this retreat was also influenced by communities of practice learning theory, specifically the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which seemed appropriate for academic writing. Using Lave and Wenger's (1991) model, writing retreat could be seen as a 'legitimately peripheral' (p. 36) activity, in the sense that it was used to move academics from a position of peripherality into a community of writers. Structured retreat was designed to provide the 'participation' required for this move.

Structured retreat was therefore developed for practical and theoretical reasons. The practical reason was the feasibility of regular discussion of writing-in-progress when participants were all working in one room. The theoretical reason was that sharing writing experiences in this way could create a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). Discussion throughout the programme could also surface relational aspects of learning about research and writing.

The setting for the structured retreat was a rural part of Scotland, an hour's drive from the city of Glasgow. The venue had no network coverage (neither Internet access nor mobile phone signal). Participants brought information and sources they needed on memory sticks or loaded onto laptops. Participants wrote at computer desks, arranged in a boardroom format. Meals and snacks were provided. Funding of £3,000 per year was provided by the Dean and three structured retreats were run each year for three years.

The retreat began with an introductory session on the evening before the first day, at which a facilitator with expertise in academic writing development introduced the programme and ethos of retreat, explaining how this model built on the work of Grant and Knowles (2000) and (Moore, 2003). This meeting was an opportunity for addressing questions, setting up equipment and confirming ground rules.

A five-minute writing task acted as a 'warm up' for writing and prompted participants to set and share goals both for retreat and for the first writing session at the start of day one. This sharing of goals, mutual monitoring and rehearsal of writing continued in fifteen-minute time slots throughout the programme and there was peer review of, for example, abstracts, outlines, drafts and stages in the writing process. More importantly, this five-minute task provided an introduction to the practice of using fixed time slots at structured retreat. The facilitator acknowledged that this was a new way of working and that it imposed a structure on participants' practices, but encouraged them to try it and reflect on it as they went along. Figure 1 shows the structured retreat programme, with alternating writing and discussion time slots.

The facilitator was responsible for establishing the framework; initiating and closing down peer discussions; and initiating and closing down writing sessions and offering suggestions on topics such as getting started, linking writing slots and topics for peer review and rehearsals of writing. The facilitator prompted reflection on these practices during breaks and took stock informally of participants' responses. Participants were encouraged to pair up with different people over the course of the programme for these discussions. The facilitator's role was, therefore, about leading and managing the group within the structure; however, participants worked within that framework, setting their own writing goals and monitoring their own and each other's progress.

Writing Retreat Programme		
Setting up	5.00–6.00	Welcome, introductions, housekeeping etc. Setting writing goals: long-, medium- and short-term Setting up equipment Writing ‘warm up’ and discussion of goals and sub-goals Setting goal for first session of day 1
Day 1	9.15–9.30	Discussion of writing goal for first session
	9.30–11.00	Writing session 1
	11.00–11.30	Break
	11.30–12.30	Writing session 2
	12.30–1.15	Lunch
	1.15–1.30	Discussion: setting/resetting writing goal
	1.30–3.00	Writing session 3
	3.00–3.30	Break
	3.30–5.30	Writing session 4
		Discussion: reviewing writing goals, setting new goals
	5.30–6.00	Printing/treatment/writing Dinner
Day 2	9.15–9.30	Discussion of writing goal for first session
	9.30–11.00	Writing session 5
	11.00–11.30	Break
	11.30–12.30	Writing session 6
	12.30–1.15	Lunch
	1.15–1.30	Discussion: setting/resetting writing goal
	1.30–3.00	Writing session 7
	3.00–3.30	Break
	3.30–4.00	Taking stock: extent to which retreat goals achieved Printing, goal-setting, feedback, final report, final writing

Figure 1. Structured retreat.

This programme may seem to involve over-enthusiastic monitoring of goals, but our ethos was ‘non-surveillance’ (Murray & Moore, 2006). Participants’ writing was not formally monitored during retreat. The rationale was to limit external scrutiny – of which there was already an abundance – and convey trust. Participants set their writing goals and reviewed achievements in their own terms. At the end of retreat they stated their outputs, in terms of papers completed or number of words written, for example. These outputs were listed, along with participants’ feedback, in a brief report for the Dean.

Evaluation

The institution involved in this study was a former teacher-training college that had merged with a university to create a Faculty of Education twelve years earlier. In this

Faculty academics were expected to become researchers and writers, although their professional identities were as teachers and teacher-educators. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts offered a way to explore the development of a community of writers in this context.

The aim of this study was to evaluate structured retreat, focusing on the first year of running it. Ethical approval was provided by the university ethics committee. In order to limit the potential for influencing respondents' views, a researcher was employed (funded by the British Academy) to conduct interviews. The researcher did not work in the Faculty and did not know respondents. She attended a half-day of one retreat in order to see how it was set up.

Forty academics, who attended one or more of six retreats between September 2005 and March 2006, were contacted by email and invited to take part in the study. All were sent an information sheet and consent form and asked to suggest a date and time for interview, if they were willing to take part. Three did not reply, two declined, three had left the university and five did not have time for an interview. Thirty-minute semi-structured interviews were held with 27 academics (15 female, 12 male), who were asked the following questions:

- (1) Do you see yourself as a more experienced or less experienced writer?
- (2) Which retreat(s) did you attend?
- (3) Tell me about your experience of the writing retreats.
- (4) Have you got anything to say about the venue?
- (5) What about the programme?
- (6) Have you got anything to say about the group?
- (7) What about the facilitator?
- (8) Did you achieve the goal(s) you set at the start of the retreat?
- (9) Do you feel that attending retreat made a difference to your writing practice?
- (10) Has it affected how you write in other environments, e.g. on campus?
- (11) Is there anything you feel we have missed about the retreat?
- (12) Do you have future plans for writing?

These questions were designed to explore their experiences with open questions (3 and 4), their thoughts on the structured programme (5) and on the group (6 and 7), their use of goal-setting (8) and the impact of the retreat on their writing in other environments (9 and 10), topics linked to community of practice theory. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. As the following analysis shows, some of these questions were given a slightly different form in interviews, in order to relate them to what respondents had said.

Analysis

Eighteen respondents had attended more than one retreat. When asked about their level of experience as writers (Question 1), three identified themselves as 'experienced', three as 'novices' and twelve as 'less experienced'. Drawing on the concepts of regimes of competence (Wenger, 1998, pp. 137, 100–101) and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) we looked for three themes in respondents' accounts:

- mutuality of engagement, in terms of engaging with and responding to other writers and giving and receiving feedback on writing-in-progress;

- identity of participation, in terms of building on mutual engagement to develop a new identity as a writer; and
- legitimate peripheral participation, in terms of experiencing the legitimacy of writing and legitimising the self as a writer.

If structured retreat were a community of practice, we would expect to find these themes in our analysis. The letters in brackets after quotations from transcripts in the next three sections signify individual respondents.

Mutuality of engagement: ‘you are there with people’

The practice of writing in the same room as other writers for the entire period of retreat is a unique feature of structured retreat. The structure dictates that everyone writes for the same time periods, all starting and stopping at the same time. While most respondents reported that they normally wrote in solitude, most said this ‘structure’ was key: ‘It is the structured process that seems to work’ (G). Most thought that this structure was both useful and necessary: ‘the structured, focused nature means you can’t just bow out’ (K). Many respondents used ‘structure’ to refer not only to the programme’s time slots, but also to the scheduled interactions with other writers.

This structure was transferred to respondents’ practices after retreat: ‘I have now used that structure myself at home when I’ve given myself a day and said I will work from 9.00–11.00, and I will have a break, the way [the facilitator] sets it up’ (J). In addition, a small number had returned to the retreat venue, alone or with partners, to write and had used the same room and a version of the structured programme.

Structured retreat involves regular review of writing goals. Most respondents felt that they were more productive in this way: ‘I achieved more in that one week-end than I had for the months prior to that’ (H). Most respondents achieved their writing goals during retreat and those who did not felt they had not prepared well enough for retreat or had set themselves unrealistic goals. These judgements had been developed and expressed at retreat, during mutual peer monitoring discussions. Those who had attended more than one retreat reported having a better understanding of what they could achieve at retreat and being better prepared for subsequent retreats.

Many reported that writing collectively in this way helped them develop persistence in their writing, while goal setting kept them focused. The presence of other writers in the room was not as distracting as they had expected:

Question: ... and writing all together in the same room?

I thought it would be very distracting because someone had described it to me as a typing pool and that brought back visions of typing classes when I was in high school, and I thought that is going to be awful, but it is actually very engrossing. You are there with people and you can hear them battering away, and you just get lost in what you’re doing. So it is not distracting at all. (V)

The benefits of writing in a group were repeatedly mentioned, expressed in various terms as a sense of having ‘a common purpose’ (F). Most respondents felt they were with ‘like minded’ people (G & M) who provided a network after retreat. Verbalising writing goals to peers was found to clarify those goals. Respondents felt that writing together in this way was energising and that writing flowed better at structured retreat

than in other professional and personal settings. For all respondents, writing in this way was a major change in practice:

What I used to do historically was always surround myself with books, surround myself with paper and I would write that first paragraph, scrunch it up, bin it, write it up again and bin it ... I would always start off by writing freehand so going on the retreat was very different for me because you were starting your writing straight on to the PC and you weren't really binning anything. You were just getting on with it and letting it flow. So for me that was very transforming, and I could see that it was modelling and practising what we had previously been talking about in terms of just letting it flow, generating ideas, generating words and language in written form that could then, at a later date, be connected to some of the theoretical perspectives and getting the citations right and all of that kind of thing. (G)

This type of reflection on writing practices occurred regularly in both scheduled discussions and informal time at retreat. This 'modelling' was an integral part of structured retreat, and it raised issues about academic writing and academics as writers:

Question: what did you enjoy about retreat?

I think just being away with a group of likeminded people, and they were all from this faculty, and you also get to know your colleagues in a different way as well. So you find out things about each other that you didn't know before, and sometimes it has been about professional issues and some aspects of actually taking your own thinking and research onto different places. You might not have spoken to people about these kinds of things because you don't get a chance, and sometimes it is just socially discovering sides of people that you didn't know. (M)

Unlike retreats with more flexible formats, structured retreat creates interactions between reflection and writing. These discussions were embedded in the writing process in the sense that they were immediately followed by writing. Responses provide insights into mutuality of engagement at structured retreat:

Question: do you think the group added to the experience?

Yes, being away with people from a range of abilities, so you have some people there who have been writing for years but still have the same sort of issues in terms of confidence, and also there is diversity in terms of the type of writing that people are doing. From where I come from, well, I thought it was a softer science background, but in comparison to everyone else there I come at it from a science background because my papers are sort of experiments with statistical analysis ... I'm away with people who are writing discussion or position papers which are very different from the type of writing I do. So to be able to review their work is often very interesting, just to see the different writing styles and really writing for your audience. That it is a very different thing to different people. (V)

These exchanges brought recognition of the value of peer review, in the form of feedback from colleagues prior to submission to journals. In particular, what we might call synchronous peer review – i.e. feedback that writers can respond to and incorporate, as appropriate, in immediate revisions – was highly valued. This meant that participants received peer review on writing-in-progress, from initial ideas, to draft abstract to outline to rough draft of sections. Feedback was not deferred until they had a full draft. These responses show that structured retreat provided more than simply time to

write: '[retreats] aren't about dedicated time for writing; they are also about sharing your writing and peer scrutiny and giving and receiving feedback' (G).

However, a minority of respondents (3) were not comfortable with the structured approach. They found the imposition of pauses for discussions and meals/snacks stressful, because they wanted to keep writing. They preferred to stop when they felt ready or when they had nothing more to write. However, they had agreed to follow the programme and monitor and discuss their reactions and at the end of retreat they said they had been productive.

Identity of participation: 'seeing yourself as a writer'

For structured retreat to work, participants had to have a writing project that they could start or continue during retreat. Since most of the programme was taken up with writing time, they were active writers, whether or not they saw themselves as writers from the start. For many, this change in practice created a shift in their writing identity.

Respondents reported that, since attending structured retreat, they had adopted a more disciplined and planned approach to academic writing: 'I am now actually more disciplined when it comes to writing' (M). This involved setting more specific goals than they were used to, before starting and after completing writing tasks: 'I have a much more realistic sense of what I can achieve within a set period of time' (F). Many associated this with increased confidence, as they achieved the goals they had set themselves. A recurring example of changing practice was 'writing in small chunks' (E), i.e. breaking a writing task down into sub-tasks and allocating each one to a specific timeframe. This involved thinking about the specific amount of time required for a specific writing sub-task. Generally, respondents said that this involved thinking in more specific terms than they had previously. They also changed how they used scheduled breaks: previously an 'avoidance strategy' (G), at retreat they were for 'recharging the batteries' (G).

Several reported that they had begun to fit academic writing into the working day on campus: 'the experience of being on the retreat has encouraged me to prioritise the writing and recognise it as a valid part of my job' (K). There was a wide range of changes in attitude to writing: the retreat was a 'catalyst for a change in thinking about writing' (G), 'seeing yourself as a writer' (F), writing seems more 'manageable' (C & G), increased confidence (F, J, O & U), 'legitimising and prioritising [writing]' (K) and 'it's not something I'm worried about any more' (Z1). Many reported that they were more likely to identify themselves as writers after structured retreat: 'Previously I would never have seen myself as a writer' (M), 'I'm more of a writer now than I was before' (U).

However, not everyone felt they could legitimise writing on return to workplace settings. The most commonly stated reasons were work pressure, emails and students. One respondent reported not changing practice but being 'more conscious about the choices I'm making' (A). Another expressed a common sense of ambivalence that came with self-identifying as writers: 'I have learned to say no and mean it ... you feel as if you are being selfish, but I am now much more confident in doing so, and I suppose it is one of the biggest lessons' (V).

Legitimate peripheral participation: 'looking to learn'

Many respondents said they were still learning about writing. This ongoing learning was associated with the demands of writing: 'change is really slow, especially when

it comes from ... deep-seated ... anxieties' (A), a response which, like many others, brought in the respondent's 'writing history'. This learning seemed to be initiated and supported by structured retreat:

I don't think I am the finished article yet as a result of a couple of retreats. I think I've got a long way to go, but one of the most important things, I think, when you're changing your approach and when you're growing and developing and looking to learn, is that you have adequate supports, and I think that one of the major forms of support is the writing retreat ... writing retreat is an important asset, helping me to grow and develop as a person and increase my output and productivity. (F)

This suggests that writers were aware that development in writing was about more than simply producing more publications.

For most respondents, structured retreat was a strategy for regular academic writing: 'if I had three or four retreats a year I would never ask for study leave' (A). One candidate said that if there were no more retreats, he or she would 'have to find some other strategy' (V) and many reported that writing retreat 'eases a lot of the angst about not feeling very productive during the year' (V). Another stated, 'I would like to ... [write] regularly, but in terms of being productive the retreat is the best method for me' (Z2).

However, issues with legitimising writing came up frequently, not only in this evaluation, but also during scheduled retreat discussions and in social time at retreat. The following extract from one transcript is quoted here at length because it characterises a strong theme emerging from interviews. Respondents took responsibility for their time management, but said that doing so was not straightforward:

Question: ... so you can't prioritise writing?

We certainly haven't been able thus far to do so, and I'm not saying it is the institution's fault, but certainly our working practice hasn't allowed that space There are possibilities there, but it is very much squeezing more and more out of the same staff. The cake is only so big, and the way that I've seen other people in the division be successful about their professional writing is to do their full-time job here and to do their professional writing in their own time, and whilst I've done that in the past ... I'm very aware of a work-life balance just now because places like this can take over your life, and as much as it's great fun and interesting I've got courses to run, I've got students to look after and I've got a life to have as well. Also my life in the university has certainly been my major priority over the last seven years, much to the detriment of other things. So I have prioritised my university life over just about everything else, but it is how much of the other time you want to fill with that, and certainly things like marking, course reviews, course preparation and module teaching tend to eat into personal time. So even my ability to use personal time to write has become quite limited ... that creates a tension ... a really difficult tension to try and resolve, and the writing retreat, whilst supportive in terms of pushing forward writing, can only do so much because the reality of managing the workload is elsewhere. I need to get a better balance, and I think there are moves to try and do something about that. How possible that is, is another matter, unless I start offloading work to other members of staff who are also trying to do exactly the same as me. (N)

This respondent presents a range of factors impinging on academic writing, including teaching, meeting students, marking assessments, course reviews, course preparation, 'the reality of managing the workload [that] is elsewhere' and 'life'. For this writer – and for other respondents – there were real barriers to increasing writing time, such as the potential impact of doing so on colleagues. Importantly, this response illustrates

awareness, shared with most respondents, of the impact of these factors on their writing, i.e. it is not the case that these writers lacked time management skills; instead, their responses convey the pressure of constantly negotiating competing demands so as to make time and space for writing. Responses also indicated collegiality – in terms of sensitivity to colleagues’ workloads – that was, for them, likely to be at odds with their own goals. Above all, responses show that these writers perceived themselves as still learning how to manage writing. In addition, the positioning of writing and writers in academic departments was the topic of many informal conversations. The above quotation and these conversations conveyed their attempts to move from peripherality to participation, while recognising that while the act of writing was central at retreat, it seemed to be peripheral in their workplace. The sense of community shifted to colleagues as mutual negotiators, even competitors, rather than as fellow writers. This quotation indicates boundaries that these writers negotiated in order to write. Structured retreat provided a space beyond these negotiations, while also developing skills and strategies for negotiating them in different ways, although, as this quotation shows, that was still difficult.

Discussion: learning through participation

Granting the newcomers legitimacy is important because they are likely to come short of what the community regards as competent engagement. Only with enough legitimacy can all their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion. (Wenger, 1998, p. 101)

The first section of the analysis suggested that structured retreat allowed the development of writing through mutual engagements with other writers (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35) and their writing during the writing process. Structured retreat created the environment where they could work as a community of practice, simultaneously generating drafts and reflecting on and adapting their concepts and practices. Understanding and experience – of both writing project and writing processes – were in constant interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 51–52). Moreover, respondents experienced the positive impact of ‘common knowledge, energy and a commitment to shared understandings’ that are features of communities of practice (Churchman, 2005, p. 11). However, the fact that a small number of these respondents returned to the retreat venue alone or with partners to write, along with the finding that many of them were using the structured retreat schedule in their own time and writing alone, suggests that the writers’ community could be virtual, imagined or internalised, once they had experienced structured retreat.

The second section illustrated the development of an identity of participation (Wenger, 1998, p. 137), as respondents said they had begun to see themselves as writers. This was achieved by working across disciplinary boundaries and across multiple communities of practice. There is space at structured retreat to reflect on these boundaries and to address the challenges they bring. This evaluation suggests that there is benefit in developing an identity that is aligned with writing – the act of writing – and not just with the writing produced in disciplinary communities. There is value in an identity that is provided by the writing process not just the published product. Both process and product shape writers’ identities, but attention to process at structured retreat helps writers construct identities as writers. However, many respondents were not able to transfer these benefits immediately to their work environments, suggesting

that the writing identity is at odds with community of practice concepts in academic departments.

The third section showed that structured retreat provided legitimate peripheral participation, in the sense that it was an ‘approximation of full participation that gives exposure to actual practice’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 100). Elements of Wenger’s theory that we found are, for example, decreased risk, explanations and vignettes becoming part of the writing process and actual engagement in writing. However, this does not tell the whole story. The study showed that structured retreat was not just working for newcomers, since only three of the twenty-seven writers interviewed in this study described themselves as ‘novices’. More experienced writers benefited too. Both novices and more experienced writers may still be ‘learning’ about writing (Carnell, MacDonald, McCallum, & Scott, 2008). This evaluation suggests that what Wenger (1998) called the ‘stumbleings and violations’ (p. 101) are not just characteristic of newcomers, but may be features of writing itself, but these features may be obscured if there is no discussion of writing-in-progress. Moreover, structured retreat is not just about moving into participation; given constraints imposed by their work contexts, some saw it as their only means of participating.

Three main points can be drawn from this analysis. The first is that structured retreat can be a mechanism for establishing a community of practice of writers and for enabling writers to position themselves in local, disciplinary and inter-disciplinary communities. In this way academics learn from participation in writing, while regular communication about writing surfaces understanding and consolidates writing identities (Wenger, 1998). Secondly, there are indications that structured retreat can prompt academics to change writing practices in ways that help them actively to manage academic writing better and to prioritise writing on return to campus. Thirdly, this evaluation shows that structured retreat can transform concepts of academia:

The role of the collegial community of practice may be to preserve their discourse of academia so it remains a way in which ‘academics’ and ‘academia’ can be acceptably and understandably represented in text, talk and in symbolic and signifying practices. (Churchman, 2005, p. 27)

Scheduled discussions at structured retreat provide more opportunities for this discourse than are available at other forms of retreat.

That there continues to be a role for structured retreat once participants have experienced its benefits relates to recent commentary on Wenger (1998): ‘One could argue that the site for the development of identities and practices is not solely *within* a community of practice but in the spaces *between* multiple communities’ (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006, p. 650). Structured retreat creates a space where writers can be both part of and apart from a community of practice. This positioning allows them to become members of a community that recognises their writing identity, a function that this study shows may be absent on campuses. It might also enable negotiation of their writerly identity in relation to other academic identities.

Perhaps writing retreat is a community of practice situated ‘*between* multiple communities’, crossing boundaries by including academics from different disciplines. That this may be problematic for writers is suggested by Handley et al.’s (2006) critique of Wenger’s (1998) theory:

Contrary to Wenger (1998) we suggested that this capacity of individuals to compartmentalize their identities and behaviours according to the community they were

currently 'in' might be difficult to achieve, especially given a desire to maintain a coherent sense of self. (p. 650)

Handley et al. (2006) argue that individuals maintain a sense of agency through adopting and adapting different types of participation and identity construction in different communities and that 'attempts to adapt will generate tensions within individuals and instabilities within the community within which they participate' (p. 650). This evaluation surfaced 'tension' and 'instabilities' that were not resolved by structured retreat; instead, structured retreat allowed these writers to engage with a process of negotiation that most of them have come to recognise *is* academic writing. The competence they are developing is in this negotiating process, legitimised at structured retreat.

Structured retreat provides a framework for this negotiation, within which each writer develops a process – perhaps modifying assumptions and practices along the way – while progressing a writing project. It imposes change from the start, with immediate effect – 22 of the 27 respondents had only attended two structured retreats, but they had immediately put the framework into practice. It does not simply provide time and space for writing, but develops a community of changing practice. This is less about 'apprenticeship', as defined by Wenger (1998), and more about establishing a community committed to changing its practices in order to overcome barriers created in other communities, particularly campus communities.

This evaluation sheds light on the identity work that this involves as academics move between their new identity at retreat and the roles and contexts of academic settings. It establishes the distinctiveness of academic writing vis-à-vis other academic roles. Structured retreat helps writers take a significant step forward in legitimising themselves as writers and legitimising writing in their lives.

Conclusion

If I had 3 or 4 retreats a year I would never ask for study leave. (A)

While research is a priority in every university strategy, the writing element of research is not universally experienced as a mainstream activity. While the centrality of writing for publication in academic life will seem uncontroversial to many, this study has shown that achieving and maintaining that centrality can be problematic. Moreover, it shows that the process of learning how to achieve it is not clear. Time and space for writing for publication are not universally or evenly provided; they must be carved out by each writer. However, this study shows that a solution may lie in structured retreat.

Structured retreat responds to the call for 'structured interventions' to support academic writing (McGrail et al., 2006). This form of retreat is different from those identified in the literature to date (Grant, 2006; Moore, 2003) in that it puts more emphasis on goal-setting, discussion and synchronous review. Continuous, mutual peer review on writing-in-progress was not available in other models (Grant, 2006; Grant & Knowles, 2000; Moore, 2003). While those retreats provided dedicated time and space, structured retreat imposes changes in how writers use time and space from the outset. This may not suit everyone, but all the respondents said they benefited.

One implication of this study is that structured retreat has a role in mainstream academic work. Rather than being exceptional or occasional, it could be part of a

department's research strategy. For example, one department at the university featured in this study now offers two structured retreats per year. This means that academics can plan their writing around retreats, as illustrated by the quotation from the respondent at the start of this section. In this way, as retreat becomes mainstream, academics can mainstream writing in their workloads and careers.

This approach addresses problems identified in Acker and Armenti (2004), who found that academics facing competing demands on their time will 'work harder and longer' (p. 16). Structured retreat provides an alternative. Moreover, strategies learned at structured retreat are similar to those identified by some of the most productive authors (Carnell et al., 2008; Mayrath, 2008).

Structured retreat, particularly over two or more iterations, can help writers to identify stages not only in the writing process but also in their development as writers. As 'newcomers' they experience 'peripheral participation'. In this new writing environment, they 'model' their behaviour on others'. They become incorporated into the scholarly community through discussions in which they position themselves as members. Future research could look at different forms of relationships of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56) developed at structured retreat. This might shed light on the formation of academic identities.

If academics are to participate in writing, there are likely to be different forms of 'situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). It may be that what is often described as the 'natural' ebb and flow of confidence and energy in academic writing may be redefined as 'renegotiation of meaning', which Lave and Wenger (1991) argue is *always* the basis of participation. Alternatively, it may be that we need to move beyond Community of Practice theory, since our findings suggests that developing competence through participation is only part of what is going on at structured retreat. This study exposes ambiguities and ambivalences associated with writing, both in terms of how it is positioned in institutions and in terms of how individuals articulate writerly identities.

Finally, evaluation of structured retreat must be ongoing, since this study has shown that, for some, its impact occurs over time: 'One or two retreats aren't going to have a miraculous huge change in practice ... these kinds of changes are gradual' (A). While the interviews showed that those who attended several retreats continued to develop their writing strategies, it would be interesting to interview them at a later stage, to assess development in their identities as writers and see if they manage to mainstream writing in their lives and careers.

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