

more wary of innovation and need some convincing as to the validity and worth of new approaches that may seem burdensome to them.

In preparing the second year of operation, currently being delivered, some structural changes have been made. The roles of the different levels have been made a little more open, with Level 3 students being framed as facilitators rather than managers. Level 3 are also no longer involved in group assessment, and instead produce individual reports that reflect on their facilitating role and also address the substantial academic themes. However, this does mean that the group reports as produced by Level 1 and 2 students will perhaps lack some of the critical perspectives that level three brought, and might therefore be of less value to practitioners. In this instance, the tutor team is clear in its prioritisation of the learning experience over the usefulness of any output for an external audience.

Overall, the project was designed to have real-world relevance, addressing a problem that faced the Local Authority as it grappled with constructing its strategy for sustainable development under Local Agenda 21. Confronting the realities of sustainability in local communities, and augmenting academic theory, proved to be instructive to students. Knowledge of local networks, features and personnel was increased enormously.

However, the team roles and group nature of the exercise produced tensions and stresses in the learning process. Simple refinements and changes have removed most of these concerns. From the tutor perspective, although the project is in some ways difficult to facilitate, it has all sorts of valuable learning outputs, many of which feature heavily in the QAA benchmarking statements for ES3. It provides the sort of learning experience which genuinely allows ES students to use all aspects of their knowledge and skills base in a synthesising way, and as such expresses and reproduces the culture and ethos of Environmental Studies at Sunderland.

For more information on this activity, please feel free to contact any of the authors below.

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Helping academics to write: experiences and insights from a writers retreat

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This paper describes the initiation of an annual 'writers retreat' at the University of Limerick. The purpose, format and outcomes of this initiative are discussed and explored. In addition, the learning and teaching implications and the link between learning and teaching and research are discussed. The initiative reported in this paper was open to all disciplines at the University of Limerick. However, it would be possible to adopt/adapt this type of exercise for specific disciplines, such as Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences. Moreover, retreats can be used for all kinds of writing including teaching materials as well as pedagogic and subject-based research.

The initiation of an annual writers' retreat at the University of Limerick

The process of writing is essential to good teaching and good research. Indeed, with increased pressure for research output and developments associated with the rapid growth of emerging educational technologies, the discipline of writing is becoming an even more essential dimension of academic competence. Moreover, retreats can be used for all kinds of writing including teaching materials as well as pedagogic and subject-based research.

The writer's retreat has several aims:

- 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 provide a productive working experience in which each participant would commit to a specific writing goal and try to achieve it.

Structure of the retreat

(1) Participants

Twelve faculty members from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds participated in the first retreat. Places were advertised and filled on a first come, first served basis, and take-up was greatest in the humanities. Participants were advised to do as much pre-work as possible, building a file of resources that they intended to use and planning to arrive at the retreat 'ready' to write up a specific piece of work.

(2) Format

The retreat was a five-day, residential writing 'sanctuary'. The week blended individual writing time with more structured seminars to share writing experiences, and explore aspects of the writing process. A plenary meeting initiated the retreat at the outset, and each participant set up his/her own private 'writing space'.

In addition to quiet writing time, 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 a shared evening meal. 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.

Perspectives on the writing process

(I) Enjoyable aspects of writing

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;
- the engagement or 'flow' associated with their experience of writing.

(i) Enjoying the sense of achievement

On the sense of achievement associated with writing, one participant summarised the experience by explaining: *'I enjoy developing a theme or idea and following it through. I like developing arguments and suppositions. I particularly like finishing a piece of work and the sense of accomplishment 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 writing activities, and to the experiences of accomplishment and satisfaction that they associated directly with the writing process.

(ii) Enjoying the durability of writing

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....To capture those thoughts and ideas in a coherent piece of writing that others may read, is extremely motivating and enjoyable';

'It's possible to create something that lasts and that others can deal with at their own pace'.

(iii) Enjoying the originality and creativity of writing

On the originality and creativity associated with writing, participants said:

'When something good comes out, you feel like you have given birth or put a little seed, an idea to be developed',

'[I like] the communication of my own ideas, the creative element';

'[I like] creative breakthroughs';

'It's exciting to make interesting discoveries';

'I enjoy the creativity that is engendered by the writing process itself'.

(iv) Enjoying being engaged in creative 'flow'

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. I love getting into a flow of writing, but haven't been able to do this for quite a long time'.

(2) Negative aspects of writing

Participants also identified several negative 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 tracts of writing.

Even very accomplished writers encounter crises of confidence in their efforts to write (Brande, 1934, Broughton, 1994) and obstacles associated with the writing process are not restricted to novice writers. On problems associated with a sense of confidence and competence, participants said:

'[I] fear ... not being good enough, lacking clarity or producing uninteresting, bland material and not really having anything new or fresh to contribute';

'I lack confidence in the use of academic writing techniques';

'[I dislike] ...not being good at it';

'[I dislike]... the constant referencing of other people's work, worrying about whether you have missed someone important's work'.

Evidence from many university contexts suggests that a lack of confidence may permeate the experience of even the most talented of academics. Any intervention to help individuals to write more productively should address this issue. If not, practical, structured advice on 'how to write' may be a waste of time (Grant and Knowles, 2000).

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

'[I encounter difficulties with]... the anticipation, reluctance to get started';

'When I get 'stuck' in the middle and seem to have lost my way or have lost confidence or interest in the material'.

Problems with momentum may at least in part be due to the difficulties associated with finding blocks of time in which to 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) and it leads to such guilt when articles don't get finished'.

Many of the respondents referred to external sanctions as a problematic, albeit inevitable, part of the writing process:

'The likelihood that these ideas will be justifiably challenged by others.'

Some of the responses indicated that an intrinsic motivation to write is a much more effective driver than external pressure. 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 the 'pressure', 'panic', and 'stress' sometimes associated with writing, as well as the physical discomfort associated with dedicated tracts of writing time.

Links between teaching and research

Recent discourse in educational development and improvement highlights the need to link teaching, learning and research more closely together under the overarching university missions of scholarship, critique and creativity. Scholarship is a more important and super-ordinate concept that needs to be applied equally to teaching and research activities. Indeed, it is the concept of scholarship that bridges the false gaps that are often perceived to exist between teaching and research activities, a division that has undermined rather than strengthened the effectiveness with which universities achieve their goals.

In order to understand faculty perceptions more clearly, participants were asked to think about the links between their writing / research activities and their teaching during the week. A question was included in both the pre- and post-retreat questionnaires. Analysis of these responses to this question gave rise to the identification of two common themes reflecting much of what the emerging literature in educational development is starting to recognise:

(1) The circularity and similarities between teaching and research

Participants clearly identified important links, similarities and synergies between teaching and research activities. Comments revealed a perception that not only does research nourish and substantiate teaching but also that teaching can trigger important ideas for research. Several respondents reported having gained important impetus for their research and writing through the essential teaching role that they play. Equally, many referred to the impact that primary research and writing had on their teaching. One respondent summed up many threads of this debate by saying:

'Research and teaching are both part of the same circle, not flip sides of a coin... In a primary sense, I don't differentiate between research and teaching. In order to be an effective teacher one needs to reflect, to read, to digest and to disseminate information in a meaningful way to a discrete audience. The more you research / write / publish, the more you learn and therefore the more you have to impart to others.'

(2) 'Banging your own drum' –the power that original, first-hand research can bring to the classroom

Several respondents mentioned the importance of engaging in original research or writing to strengthen and to energise teaching skills and processes. There seemed a strong conviction among this group that creativity and originality in the writing process can bring distinctiveness to subsequent teaching activities. Specific statements suggested that this was brought about both by higher levels of enthusiasm

communicated by the originator; and higher levels of motivation invoked in the listeners.

Perspectives on the retreat

(1) The sense of community

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. This is 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. Indeed, this is the function of good supervisors and mentors, but one that is often overlooked when it comes to the professional development of university teachers.

Feedback received from participants referred to the value they derived from feeling part of a community of writers while on the retreat. Brodkey (1996) asserts that the experience of writing in a group provides the foundation for feeling integral to a community, even when subsequently writing alone. This is a positive aspect of the experience that several of the participants highlighted both during and after the writers' retreat.

(2) Valuing and focusing on writing in an uninterrupted, self-structured way

Finding uninterrupted time is often necessary if significant progress is to be made in the development of ideas and creative insights (e.g. Deene et al., 1996). It is clear from comments provided by participants, that the writers' retreat allowed for levels of concentration and focus that may otherwise be difficult to achieve.

(3) A focus on health and relaxation

What seemed like trivial luxuries (yoga and massage, which were available at certain times during the week) were highlighted as important components of the retreat. 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. Paying attention to physical health had a positive impact on the writing habits of participants.

(4) Tangible outcomes of writers' retreat

Each participant finished the specific writing project that they had set for themselves at the beginning of the week. Of course, these specific tasks could perhaps have been completed without the help of a writers' retreat, and to attribute their achievement solely to the intervention would be a mistake. What was most significant was the writing speed and confidence that participants reported, as well as the establishment of a community of writers, which they felt would provide a supportive writing context when they returned to the University.

Recommendations

Writing needs to be seen as a creative process. In the drive to produce more academic publications among third level institutions, the implicit motivations of faculty to write is an important starting point. 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 faculty to initiate or maintain productive, successful writing habits.

Universities need to legitimise safe space and time specifically for writing through the initiation of writers' retreats, days or events, and by creating non-threatening mentoring systems among networks of faculty. Once a supportive writing network has been established, such groups should be encouraged and supported in their own efforts to organise creative space for their specific writing projects.

This pilot project suggests strongly that the initiation of writers' retreats may have the potential to impact upon the daily writing habits of university faculty, to unlock positive, formative dimensions of academic communities and to energise the culture of scholarship in research and teaching to which we should subscribe.

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Copies of the full report of the writers' retreat are available from the University of Limerick's Centre for Teaching and Learning by contacting the authors below:

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The 'statisticar': driving data collection and analysis

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Statistics is a subject that creates trepidation for a significant number of students in the GEEES disciplines. This article explores the teaching of statistics and associated techniques for data collection to large classes (150 – 200) of first-year students studying for degrees in a variety of specialisms (e.g. human geography, physical geography, GIS, ecology) in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences at the Manchester Metropolitan University. These students have a range of academic and social backgrounds, in terms of the nature and grade of academic qualifications, vocational experiences and age. The challenge of increasing numeracy skills, such as those related to learning basic univariate statistics, is ongoing at all levels of degree programmes. The intention of this article is to provoke discussion around this subject in the light of the changes occurring in higher education.

Background

This is the first time we have run our first-year module in Data Collection and Analysis, although it is developed from a sequence of exercises run previously in the Department. Experience of the former exercises and feedback from current students indicate that we have achieved some success in teaching various learning skills (numerical and IT), using a knowledge base relevant to several subject areas and adopting user-friendly resources. More specifically, students are becoming familiar with statistical 'outputs' and gaining an understanding of the importance of variation in data sets. Arguably most important, students are becoming less 'afraid' of this discipline. A brief look at advice from teachers of 16-18 year olds (e.g. Garbutt, 2001) echoes our findings that approaches should:

- include practical work (i.e. student connection with data points);
- be critical of data sets (i.e. challenge data collection techniques; examine distribution of data);
- stress the multi/interdisciplinary importance of statistics (and make exercises relevant to student interests).

Experience of our undergraduates' preferences and those of employers has led us to avoid a mechanistic approach beginning with probability, and binomial/Poisson distributions etc. Our emphasis has been on training students to design appropriate investigations based on suitable analytical techniques and to interpret/communicate subsequent findings. In addition, it is important that students begin critically to appraise the work of others, including the design, data set and analyses involved. After all, many graduates will not be required to carry out statistical procedures, but will have to use the results in decision making. Therefore, we have taught them in stages as a response to practical work. We have had many (heated) debates concerning the balance between teaching statistics from first principles, as opposed to a tool for research. This debate is not new (e.g. Hawkins *et al.*, 1992) and we have found previous approaches that taught statistics from a traditional standpoint both 'switched students off' (due in part to a perceived

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