Writing Retreats to Improve Skills and Success in Higher Qualifications and Publishing

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Overview

In this guide we discuss how residential writing retreats support academic staff, particularly those from the institute of technology and polytechnic (ITP) sector, to improve academic writing skills and to progress a writing project towards publication. Success in scholarly written expression is, of course, an important end goal in and of itself for academics, and the outputs described here testify to the initiative's effectiveness. However, a key motivation in our review of participants' experiences was our interest in the follow-on effect of how improved research and writing skills contribute to their teaching and student outcomes. Feedback from staff who had attended the four writing retreats offered to date by our institution, and also from staff who had participated in a parallel inquiry into the research/teaching and learning nexus, suggested a strong connection between these two things, partly as a result of learning about giving and receiving feedback. Achievement of higher qualifications and publications creates confidence and extends content knowledge and a sense of credibility. Further, said our participants, it provided them with the tools to develop the same awareness of language and writing style in their students. Staff sharing their own learning experiences allowed students to see that they were 'walking the talk', and modelling the link between the classroom and the wider canon of knowledge in their field.

Introduction

Increasingly, institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs) find themselves offering an expanded suite of provision, stretching from traditional trade-based and practical certificates and diplomas to degree and post-graduate programmes, which require staff to be research-active and themselves more highly qualified. Staff are often recruited outside academia for their industry knowledge and experience; once they join an ITP, teaching loads can be heavy and developing a publication record is not a priority, nor is it easy. Yet, all too often, managers and colleagues assume new academic staff members will be able to write at a scholarly level, as well as develop research skills, although they may not have been previously required nor had opportunity to do so, and institutional resources to support the development of these skills are relatively limited.

In the Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–2015, the Ministry of Education (2011) lists strengthening research outcomes as a key priority; most tertiary education providers will have incorporated this aspiration into their own manifesto. There is also the imperative established in the Education Act 1989 that degrees are taught primarily by research-active staff. Within our institution, the Research Centre was charged with developing a research culture and extending research capability. However, despite a backdrop of active engagement in research, conference presentations and industry liaison, when we began our writers' retreats in 2007, few staff were publishing their research in books and academic journals, and many reported stalled progress in their study and professional development plans. This situation, says Klinkum (2006), is typical; for ITP staff to engage in research and produce academic outputs, they need time and opportunity to develop a community among researchers.

One successful and proven strategy to foster the motivation, confidence and skill set to write is an off-campus, residential writers' retreat.

Writing retreats: An overview

The literature provides considerable evidence that allowing time and space for academic writing, creating a collaborative community and providing on-the-spot guidance and feedback can increase productivity (Elbow & Sorcinelli, 2006; Grant, 2006, 2008; McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006; Moore, 2003). Retreats can offer a scaffolded approach in assisting staff who are writing novices to start to develop an academic voice and move from "legitimate peripheral participation … into full participation" (Smith, 2009: 4). With competence, comes confidence and outcomes, says Smith, since there is an "intimate connection between knowledge and activity" (page 7).

Off-campus workshops and retreats offer participants a supportive writing framework and available, uninterrupted time not easily found in day-to-day job performance (Bellacero, 2009), to focus on writing and overcome a raft of barriers. These include a lack of momentum (McGrail et al., 2006), self-censorship, low confidence, lack of external motivation, and a lack of specific writing-related skills (Jackson, 2008; Moore, 2003). Belcher (2009) adds confusion of focus, a relaxed sense of timelines, and insufficient feedback to the challenges of solo writing efforts, which can be redressed by attending writing retreats.

These issues are not confined to novice academics: more experienced writers and senior staff may struggle to keep writing central to their role due to administrative and managerial demands on their time (Kelly & Mercer, 2006). Indeed, McGrail et al. (2006: 2), in their study of Australian universities, concluded that "publication rates were low and variable" and that a small number of individuals were often responsible for a large proportion of publications. These authors noted that the importance of publishing and the undesirably low rates of publication among academics are widely recognised in the literature, but they advised that writing interventions can improve both the number and the quality of manuscripts developed. Writing retreats can, therefore, address a range of issues that manifest at different stages of an academic career.

Barbara Grant (2006), who has been running residential writing retreats for women in academia since 1997, considers having a mix of newcomers and experienced writers from a range of disciplines as a key strength. She also notes the importance of including both junior and more senior academics, who are able to share experiences and tips, and occasional "serendipitous cross-fertilisations of ideas" (page 486).

Different proponents of writing retreats proffer a range of models: some are driven by the attendees' preferences and are highly self-directed (Bellacero, 2009; Cameron, 1992; Elbow & Sorcinelli, 2006); others are more structured with an overt focus on the interaction between reflection and writing (Murray & Newton, 2009). Yet common to all, there is a widespread confirmation of the link between academic writing and community, recognising that many staff have few links with colleagues that are not related to either teaching or institutional business, such as sitting on committees. Retreats provide intellectual stimulation and opportunities for collaboration, and they remove the sense of working in isolation. They can foster a sense of community that lasts long after the immersion experience has concluded.

Most of the literature we found on writing retreats evaluated their value in university settings, where the importance of staff writing for publication is overt; few articles investigated their value for staff in ITPs and none linked staff writing for publication to any improvements in teaching and learning. The literature on the research-teaching nexus is also inconclusive with regards to the relationship between these (Marsh & Hattie, 2002). However, these authors also note that research can feed directly into teaching, with active researchers being more likely to teach critical thinking skills and to bring a sense of excitement to the classroom (Marsh & Hattie, 2002).

How research and academic writing affect teaching and student learning

In a recent study of how staff research contributes to student outcomes, one of us (Heather) interviewed 25 research-active polytechnic staff, including some who had attended a writing retreat, asking them open-ended questions about how their research activities had contributed to their teaching and to student outcomes (Hamerton, 2010). Several specifically commented on the value of attending a writers' retreat and noted that improved skills and confidence in their academic writing meant they were better placed to assist students. One person referred to how it helped with giving feedback to students:

The best thing is the feedback I've had on my own writing, then you start recognising it in other people's writing too...you can make suggestions.

Another tutor noted that the reading she had done as part of writing up her research had informed her teaching:

For the first time I'd read more than the students had. I felt like I knew what I was talking about.

Other participants talked about the need to write about their practice and document new initiatives to provide evidence of what works. Sharing this with students adds authority, since, as one retreat attendee who subsequently achieved his first publication stated:

For the students it actually adds value, more mana to what I'm talking about...I still discuss it a lot now when I work with students on an individual basis and we're talking about research.

These excerpts demonstrate staff perceptions that writing up their research has benefits for students, through enhanced subject knowledge and credibility and by assisting the teaching of academic writing skills. Staff report they are better teachers, and better professionals, for it.

In another study, which aimed to determine the value to students of doing research as part of their study, information was collected via an online survey from ten students. Students gave mixed responses to a question that asked how important it was to them that their tutors were involved in research; some reported that they valued learning about their tutors' research, while others did not think it was important for their tutors to be
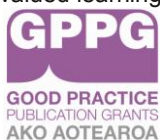
research-active. However, most of these students wanted their tutors to be knowledgeable and well-regarded in their field, something often achieved through publication of research and presentation at conferences.

The Bay of Plenty Polytechnic model

When the inaugural Bay of Plenty Polytechnic writers' retreat was held in 2007, there were two key goals which we shared with all staff who showed an interest in attending:

- developing participants' skills in writing for publication
- assisting completion and publication of research outputs.

These two goals have both been important over the years because many participants have been first-time writers wanting to develop their skills in the company of more experienced writers. In addition, as we started to gather feedback from participants, we noted that staff also reported that the skills they gained from the retreats were assisting them in their teaching. Although the retreats were not promoted specifically for their contribution to teaching and learning, this useful benefit became for many an important professional learning.

Over the four years of running writers' retreats, we have adapted the guidelines of other retreat facilitators discussed in the literature to suit our ITP context. In our first year, we booked a motel with conference facilities; more recently, we have rented two neighbouring beachside holiday homes for a week and combined out-sourced catering with some communal cooking. The retreats are held in teaching breaks, funded primarily from participants' own professional development allocations; given the outcomes – both in measurable research outputs and in the less tangible but no less important impact on teaching and learning – we believe that the retreats are arguably the most cost-effective professional development an institution can offer. Both the specific publication and higher qualification achievements, and the participants' perceptions of the impact of improved academic writing skills on their classroom teaching and their students' outcomes, are discussed below.

Each year, we have asked participants to provide anonymous feedback and suggestions about the retreat through a questionnaire using open-ended questions about their goals, expectations, experiences, and achievements. We ask about what helped or hindered progress on their writing projects, about any personal factors they have become aware of that impact their writing, and about the environment, the facilitator, and the workshops. For the purposes of this review, we also conducted extended interviews with a number of volunteers. Drawing on both these written and verbal testimonies, seven principles for practice have been derived, as described below. These principles will have the greatest relevance for staff working in ITPs, although the literature shows that most of them have also been identified as important across the wider tertiary sector. In reporting on these principles, we have used direct quotes from either the interviews or evaluation questionnaires as supporting evidence.

Principles for Practice

1. Creating time and space away from work and home is an essential ingredient for success.
In ITPs, teaching staff tend to have high teaching workloads, so finding time for research and writing during term time can be very difficult. Participants have valued the sense of freedom and focus engendered by a physical distance from their office space and busy home lives. They also thought that being able to focus on writing for extended periods of time was important.

Very useful, since finding time and incentive to write without distraction is the main thing holding me back.

The best writing experience I've ever had – the easiest paper I've ever written as a result.

I need the mental space. I've no time to focus at work when I'm managing others' progress and issues.

2. The retreat programme needs to provide both structure and flexibility.
In collaboration with participants, we negotiate a timetable that includes plenty of writing time together with shared workshops on writing topics, individual feedback sessions, and peer review.

Using the best times of the day for me...knowing when I'm most effective.

A clever balance of structured formal events, and flexible, unstructured time. Didn't have to conform to a specific style or timetable. Could be yourself and choose how to make the most of the time.

3. Skilled facilitation ensures smooth running of the retreat and support and mentoring for participants.
We have trialled external and internal facilitators; both arrangements have worked well. The key is to have the appropriate person to fix the dynamic of the retreat and ensure that all participants have the maximum opportunity to progress their writing.

Gave a sense that whatever amount of help was required, it was available. No defined limit.

I still remember some of the pointers – like not to use too many words – to keep my sentences as tight as possible.

Facilitators working too – modelling the discipline of writing.

Have to manage people who can interfere with others' time and space.

4. Participating in both structured writing tasks and communal activities, such as shared cooking, promotes a sense of community among participants.
Approximately a quarter of participants have attended more than one retreat, which allows a continuity of practice and grows the number of 'experts' who are available to model peer review and mentor others. Many of these staff have become our champions in the institution, encouraging colleagues to attend. Participants are united by a common interest, rather than prescribed roles.

Feeling that all of us were on an equal footing, with as much respect and authority as we earned, not conferred upon us.

The people – what a gift to be able to spend dedicated time with other people who are also interested in research, methodology, and publishing. Brilliant to be able to discuss things with like-minded people.

Conversations – the many tips I picked up from other people at the retreat.

5. Including participants from a broad range of disciplines and institutional roles fosters learning and improves feedback.
In our institution, it can be difficult to build collegial relationships across faculties, campuses, and administrative, academic and managerial roles. Common to many professional development initiatives – workshops, seminars
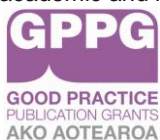
and study tutorials –participants value the opportunity to learn from one another and share responses and solutions from different fields of expertise.

When my IT papers were read by non-IT people, the questions they asked and the feedback I got really helped me not make the paper too technical.

I really liked the abstract exercise when everyone commented – it gave me a really good paragraph at the end and I learnt a lot by looking at other people's.

Hearing others talk about their work. Could see the cross-overs, new approaches, same concepts in different contexts.

6. Writers retreats provide a useful opportunity for novice writers to develop both their writing skills and confidence in their ability to write.
Participants in our retreats told us that they valued being able to address issues as they arose.

The retreat was essential – I didn't know where to start or how to go about writing like this.

The environment in which a wealth of knowledge was available and people focussed on helping you.

Clarifying the mystery of publishing and what an editor looks for.

7. It is important that participants establish clear objectives for themselves beforehand and come to the retreat prepared to write.
We contacted prospective participants before each retreat to gauge their level of preparedness and to discuss their intended writing projects. It is important that preparation such as data collection and literature searches have been conducted prior to the retreat so that the five days are allocated to writing, rather than concept development or project organisation. Where appropriate, participants were encouraged to identify suitable journals as targets for their writing.

Focus, concentration, no distraction. You look at the others – they're all busy, helps you get a system going.

It needs good preparation before the retreat – because it's a big investment – to go over the components of good research, clarify theoretical constructs, check on evidence and preparation. It's like creating a charter – [you need] shared core values.

Outcomes

Table 1 records the outcomes for 38 attendances over four retreats; due to some participants attending more than one retreat, the actual number of individuals who have been impacted by the initiative is 27. As shown in the Discipline/Role column, participants traversed a wide range of teaching programmes and service/management responsibilities.

From 38 attendances, the most common writing project was the preparation of conference presentations, with 14 entries. Of these presentations, six were accompanied by papers accepted for publication in refereed conference proceedings, with another still in review, and one made available online in the conference's (non-refereed) proceedings. The retreats have produced four published New Zealand journal articles and five international journal articles, with two in review. Further, participants tell us that the work begun at the retreats has contributed to another New Zealand journal article, an international journal article, two conference presentations and two

book chapters. For those who used the retreats to progress aspects of their study towards higher qualifications (7 attendances), all have since completed.

Although not all participants met their stated goals during the retreat itself, many continued to make progress on their writing tasks after each retreat. Sometimes outcomes (especially publication outcomes) took longer to achieve than anticipated. However, the outcomes signal improved completion of research write-ups and better quality outputs, since a number of participants have told us that the writers' retreats have spurred them on to aim for journal publication or conference presentation rather than simply completing an unpublished summary research report.

Table 1: Outcomes from the writers' retreats

	Participant	Discipline/Allied role	Writing Project/Aim	Aim met?	Direct outcome	Contributed to
2007	Heather	Research manager	JA, training as Fac	Not met	Did not complete	
	Cath *P*	Research leader	CP	Met	NZ Ref CP publication	
	Lin *P*	Student services manager	As above	Met	As above	
	Gloria	Academic advisor	Internal report	Met	Completed	Institutional policy development
	Jude	Learning advisor Business	CP	Met	NZ Ref CP publication	
	Keith	Marine science	Technical report, JA	Met	Both completed, NZ JA publication	
	Justin	Learning advisor Business	CP	Met	NZ Ref CP publication	
	Richard	Business development leader	HQ	Partially met	Proposal development	PhD proposal submitted
	David	Business	HQ	Met	PhD chapter	PhD completed 2012
	Participant	Discipline/Allied role	Writing Project/Aim	Aim met?	Direct outcome	Contributed to
2009	Heather (Fac)	Research manager	CP	Met	Int CP, published on website	
	Cath (Fac)	Research leader	CP	Met	NZ Ref CP publication	
	Berni	Learning advisor	CP	Met	NZ Ref CP publication	
	Shirley	Learning advisor Maths	CP	Met	NZ Ref CP publication	
	Trish (Waikato)	Social Work	2 x JA	Partially met	NZ JA publication	Chapter in book publication
	Keith	Marine science	CP, 2 x Interim reports for overseas research partners/sponsors	Partially met	Int CP, Reports completed, research ongoing	
	John	Environmental science	4 x JA at different stages	Met	2 NZ JA publications	NZ JA in press
	Mike	Sport science	CP and industry magazine article	Met	Int CP, magazine publication	NZ JA
	David	Business	HQ	Met	PhD editing	PhD completed 2012

	Participant	Discipline/Allied role	Writing Project/Aim	Aim met?	Direct Outcome	Contributed to
2010	Jan	Business	HQ,CP	Met	NZ CP	Post-Grad Dip completed
	Clark (non-staff)	Research associate	JA	Met	Int JA publication	
	Heather (Fac) *P*	Research manager	JA	Exceeded	Int JA publication	Second Int JA in review; 2 x Int CP
	Christine (Waiariki) *P*	Nursing	As above	Exceeded	As above	
	Cath (Fac) *P*	Research leader	2 x JA	Met	Int JA ublication, Int JA review	
	Judi *P*	Staff development manager	As above	Met	As above	
	Sam	Business: ICT	CP, JA	Exceeded	Int CP, Int JA publication	
	Tania	Health studies	HQ	Met	Literature review edited	Masters completed
	Shirley	Learning advisor Maths	CP, HQ	Met	Directed studies	
	Rod	Financial accountant	Ministry workbook	Partially met	Workbook completed	Seminar series delivered
	Liz (Waikato)	Environmental science	CP	Exceeded	3 x NZ CP	Book chapter in review
	Simon	Marine science	JA	Met	Int JA in review	
	Participant	Discipline/Allied role	Writing Project/Aim	Aim met?	Direct outcome	Contributed to
2011	Heather (Fac)	Research manager	Research proposal	Met	Completed	Research in progress
	Cath (Fac)	Research leader	CP	Met	NZ Ref CP in review	
	Christine	Learning advisor	Research report	Partially met	Report in progress	
	Robyn	Business: Law	JA	Not met	Did not complete	
	Peter	International manager	JA	Partially met	Ongoing	
	Hannah	Learning advisor Computing	Research report	Not met	Did not complete	
	Shirley	Learning advisor Maths	HQ	Met	Directed study	Post-Grad Dip completed
	Sam	Business: ICT	JA	Exceeded	Int CP, Int JA publication	

Conclusion: Teaching and learning benefits for individuals and the institution

To date, all our writers' retreat participants have expressed a sense of satisfaction and progress, with many noting an enhanced confidence in writing skills and an appreciation of what productive habits in research, writing, and critical reflection actually look like. They report that the support, encouragement, and motivation from facilitators and fellow writers have increased knowledge and skills that remain long after the week is over. From an institutional point of view, this cost-effective professional development initiative has contributed significantly to annual research outputs, including peer-reviewed publications by several participants who had never achieved this previously. The retreats have supported PhD candidates to advance their work, and demonstrated the way in which a thesis can generate a number of linked articles and establish the framework for a career in academia.

The feedback from participants about how their research and writing experiences have strengthened their classroom teaching and confidence has been exciting. While the focus of the retreats was originally on providing professional development for novice writers, we believe there is good justification for making improved teaching and learning skills an explicit focus for future retreats. The process of evaluating this staff development initiative has, therefore, been extremely useful in highlighting this natural evolution for our practice.

Writing is hard work, but spending a week in a community of writers means there is at least the chance to exchange tips, canvass suggestions, and sample new perspectives. We believe that attention to the six principles for good practice discussed above has the potential to ignite an interest in research and academic writing for other ITPs, and is broadly applicable to other higher education contexts. Even better, the collegial relationships that form through attending these retreats mean that there are plenty of cheerleaders to exhort fellow writers to maintain the momentum, celebrate success, and take the next step forward.

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