Write away from it all! The Value of Running a Writing Retreat for Doctoral Students

Geraldine Davis, Hazel Wright, Debbie Holley*
Anglia Ruskin University, Bournemouth University*

Abstract

Doctoral candidates often struggle to write at doctoral level. This struggle has many causes, but includes finding the time and support to write. We analyse a doctoral writing retreat aimed to encourage doctoral candidates to develop their academic writing and offer new insights into successful retreats.

A comprehensive review of the literature about writing retreats and how these have been conceived and devised, includes the international literature about development of academic writing and the range of retreats. We identify the approach to writing within the UK and the limited references to retreats to support doctoral candidates to develop their writing.

The writing retreat we devised is considered in detail. Features of the retreat which were valued by participants are identified and explored including specific skill development, a supportive environment with time and space to write. The findings extend the knowledge and understanding within the existing literature about doctoral writing retreats.

Key words
Doctoral writing; writing retreat; academic writing.

Introduction

The authors of this paper are university academics who support doctoral candidates to attain the appropriate academic level during their doctoral journeys, through supervision and through structured workshops. We have all supervised doctoral candidates through to successful completion of their theses. The feedback we have received from these candidates identifies the struggle many have to find time to write, and the value they place on feedback from academics to help them develop their writing. The candidates indicated that they write more effectively when dedicated time and quiet space are available, with guidance available from academic staff and we were keen to develop additional support for these doctoral candidates' writing.

We applied for and obtained Alumni funding to run an off-campus writing retreat for doctoral candidates in April 2015. We structured this retreat based on our own experience as well as our knowledge of the literature on this topic. This paper starts with a consideration of the literature about writing retreats. We provide an explanation of the structure of our retreat and use evidence to consider the value of this one day retreat. The discussion draws together some of the lessons learned and our thoughts on how to improve our practice. The paper concludes with our recommendations for development of doctoral writing workshops.

Citation

The Literature on Writing Retreats

Within the contemporary literature the first significant account of a Writing Retreat is that of Grant and Knowles (2000). This paper describes both Australian Writing Group and New Zealand Retreat. The Retreat was first set up in 1997 with university funding to offer women academics the time and space to write away from the pressures of work and home where they were continually 'juggling' competing demands. Many of our doctoral students are part time, with full time professional careers, and are similarly juggling life and work but with the additional burden of studying for a research degree alongside their already-full lives. Reflecting after the tenth successful Retreat, Grant (2006) describes them as 'transgressive'. Within their women-only structure they aimed to pamper their members, fostering camaraderie in a relaxed but stimulating environment that intended to encourage the intrinsic motivation to write. Taking place over four and a half days, the Retreat began with introductions and goal setting but beyond that the participants were left to choose whether they worked in communal rooms or alone and whether they attended an after lunch skills workshop. The Retreats are held in beautiful natural surrounding with 'views over a mass of greenery' (p.493). Within its gendered limits, the Retreats aim to be inclusive, mixing staff of differing levels of seniority from a number of institutions and catering for a mix of newcomers and returning 'Retreaters'. The atmosphere is informal and there are opportunities for 'fun' and 'relaxation'. As Grant jokes, being women-only means that participants can 'work in their pyjamas' if they so wish (p.485). The successive Retreats are popular and focus on the women's needs. Offering a restorative environment and the chance to 'enjoy extra solitude and sleep' are scarcely instrumental objectives (p.484) yet when Grant decided to study the participants' experiences she found plentiful evidence that the Retreats had positively affected the women's writing lives – often in meaningful ways as well as through generating greater productivity,

An American Writing Retreat of the same year described by Robin Wilson (2000) was also clearly situated within a liberal educational framework. This week-long Retreat was instigated in 1999 by JoBeth Allen, a Professor of Language Education at the College of Education in Georgia to encourage doctoral students to focus on their dissertations so is particularly relevant to our own initiative. It was set up with an instrumental purpose - to reduce the number who join the ranks of A.B.D. (finishing with an 'all but dissertation' classification) as they failed to complete these when left to work in isolation. But it was also designed to make the process enjoyable. Wilson believes that many students attended because they are aware how the 'pressure to publish is intensifying' (p. A11); publications are now a pre-requisite for academic tenure. Fourteen students from the University of Georgia stayed in a lodge in Unicoi State Park, a location set among woods and mountains. Attendees were mainly working in the qualitative domain, using narrative inquiry methods that required writing to be carefully crafted; a methodology that was still seen as unorthodox. Many had collected data but found the actual writing process challenging and, in particular, had difficulty in starting to write. So JoBeth held a daily consultation with each of the students to help them find direction. Others were just starting the doctoral journey, needing time to write and refine proposals, so the group was mixed in terms of experience – and gender. Jo Beth also incorporated reading activities, recommending that students read accounts of successful biographic studies to better understand what they were aiming to achieve. The Retreat was largely funded through a university grant but students were asked to contribute a nominal sum and to buy their own food to cook in their shared cabins that housed four to five students together. Wilson describes the Retreat as 'part writing workshop, part motivational seminar, and part group therapy' (p. A11) Students chose their own spaces and times to write, free to walk in the woods when they needed a break, and coming together to discuss their day's work in the evenings after eating. JoBeth notes that

the students were content to listen to each other's work but slow to offer public criticism. Feedback was more rigorous when they were encouraged to work in pairs. At the time of publication, the Retreat was only in its second year and it was not clear whether a week of intense contact was sufficient to generate continuing interactions but the first cohort had set up a group email to facilitate further discussion. However, the Retreat acquired longevity through publicity, for the article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* brought it to the attention of other academic groups. Academics at the College of St Catherine, the largest women's college in the USA, cite it as the inspiration for their own successful Retreats.

St Catherine's is a small Catholic college of about 5,000 students, in the process of becoming a university at the start of the New Millennium, so interested in developing a more academic profile. The Dean of Professional Studies read Wilson's account and invited three colleagues from the English department (a department already focused towards successful writing) to 'think about it with her' (p.16). So from the outset, the development of their Writing Retreat was collaborative and supported by someone with a leadership role and access to decision makers – factors that may have enabled its initiation. Publishing in 2009, Farr, Cavallaro, Civil, and Cochrane look back on nine-successful years of Writing Retreats and offer an account of how these were developed and how the college found ways to embed good writing practice within the everyday working lives of their academics. The Retreat received financial support from the College but the organisers recognised that they needed to be frugal. Yet, they adopted a liberal approach, striving to encourage the intrinsic desire to write by providing 'comfortable accommodation, recreational facilities and good food'. The Retreat became a 'five-day hiatus' where about twenty staff can retreat to a conference centre and engage in a flexible but lightly structured series of activities (p.16). Initial retreats were not always in such favourable locations (but must have been sufficiently attractive for the Retreat to continue to be popular!)

St Catherine's Retreats are organised around two, two-hour dedicated or 'Sacred' writing sessions, one in the morning, one in the afternoon; and attendees have the option of writing in parallel in a central room or retreating to their own rooms to work alone. At the Retreat participants can engage with whatever scholarly activity they need to carry out so it is acceptable to brainstorm ideas, carry out research, crunch numbers, enter data, drafting, or proofread text; the onus is not writing *per se*. There is Wi-Fi throughout the centre and sufficient sockets to charge laptops; also an available printer. Just before lunch each day the three facilitators hold small-group meetings that enable problem-solving and goal-setting (but also incidental progress monitoring) and there is a requirement that each participant will book an individual meeting with a facilitator (choosing a designated time) at least once during the Retreat. Thus the retreats offer some structure and support but do this with maximal flexibility. Participants determine their own goals and activities and are able to choose their own 'ways of working' (Wright, Cooper and Luff, in press). The Retreats are deliberately labelled *Scholars' Retreats* not *Writers' Retreats* and the facilitators see their role to include demystifying the writing process, making suggestions, dealing with logistical issues, and more broadly doing anything required to 'help scholars to develop their work within a supportive community' (p.18).

The Retreats are deliberately inclusive, interdisciplinary, cross-campus, and attended by a mix of experienced writers and novices, regular attendees and new participants. This works well but the facilitators suspect 'the true secret to the success of the program' to lie with their evening activities (p.16) for there is an expectation that people will share their efforts, reading their work-in-progress aloud for others to 'question, prod and praise' (p.16). Initially this must surely be daunting but once achieved will reinforce the sense of community. There

is an expectation that participants will stay together to drink wine, chat and play games after these readings so that the bonds are strengthened informally. 'In short, we play together' (p.16). The sense of 'belonging' is further promoted through low-cost 'special touches'. The facilitators provide inexpensive gifts (pens, bags, notebooks), and instigate writing rituals (like haiku challenges and collaborative writing tasks) to add interest to the proceedings. They hand out certificates in a closing ceremony, create photo-montages of the events, and send a thank-you to each attendee – to make the retreats more memorable. They also collect evaluations from participants to support annual improvement.

Despite avoiding instrumentality, the facilitators report a great deal of success in embedding a writing culture. This college managed to recreate 'the supportive atmosphere of the retreat on campus'. There is a faculty study in the library (something that UK universities might consider) and it has been possible to dedicate this on Wednesday afternoons to 'Sacred Writing Time' so that potential collaborators can easily meet to work together. On a daily basis, there are informal early morning and early afternoon drop-in sessions in this room so that those who are free from timetabled teaching can talk together if they so wish. A free lunch is provided to support these meetings (which would be difficult to justify over an entire English university but each department could offer their own space). The college management also support twice yearly 'Writing Weeks' on campus (in January and June) when all other meetings and activities are cancelled to enable academics to research and write. These 'jump start' new scholarly activity before academic staff take time-off. These weeks are in addition to the annual Scholars' Retreat off campus.

We have discussed these ideas in detail because the discourse around academic writing within the UK is significantly more instrumental, largely focused on how to get all academics to write and publish and how to embed these practices within our everyday regimes. It is useful, therefore, to examine the long term benefits deriving from a less instrumental approach. However, the first Retreat described in the more local literature was based in Limerick in Eire, well beyond the influence of English managerialist practices. Moore (2003) carried out a study of academics' motivation to write and in particular examine how a Writer's Retreat within her university encouraged this process. Her work is contextualised within the existing literature around academic writing, noting Blaxter et al.'s (1998) claim that this was very limited. Indeed, Morss & Murray (2001) consider Boice (1987) to be one of the few researchers to have carried out empirical work. Boice is a psychologist investigating solutions for academics 'suffering' 'writers' block' and Moore makes reference to this seminal paper. She also draws directly on Grant and Knowles' (2000) account, inferring from their findings that if women academics find it difficult to find time and space to write 'academic writing needs to be reframed':

> Instead of a solitary, isolated, solely competitive activity, it is more useful to approach it as a community-based, collaborative, social act
>
> (Moore, 2003:334).

Like learning, writing can benefit from collaboration and cooperative practices (Cohen, 1986; Slavin, 1986; Kagan, 1988) and Moore points out how this approach contradicts the 'competitive convention of academic life' (p.334). She also draws on the premises articulated by Johnson and Johnson (1984) that each member of a learning community needs to be *both* accountable individually *and* positively interdependent on other members and the Limerick Writers' Retreat was established on this premise. So again we see that issues of trust and safety are paramount. Mutual support within a multi-disciplinary group was a core goal, and participants were limited to twelve faculty members on an egalitarian

first-come-first-served basis. This was a five-day retreat and most of the participants were already experienced writers so the motivation was rather different from that of the College of St Catherine. However, it is described as a writing 'Sanctuary', so the notion of privileging writing is shared. The structure was similarly gently facilitative. Each morning different aspects of the writing process were addressed in a one-hour workshop and writers were asked to form small subgroups to discuss their work in more detail at intervals. But the majority of the time prior to the 'social' evening meal was dedicated to individual writing, so this retreat operated within a liberal regime.

Moore collected feedback from the participants and analysed this to ascertain their views of the writing process and the Retreat, in particular. Their negative feedback related to general writing practices, particularly internalised problems around confidence and commitment, and the difficulties inherent in the pressures to work to deadlines and meet external expectations to write. They also complained about the physical discomfort of writing for long periods. On the positive side all found writing at a Retreat more enjoyable, liking being part of a collaborative community with its inherently protective atmosphere and opportunities to work and relax with others. In particular, they noted that the Retreat legitimised the writing process – it was okay to concentrate on writing when granted specific time to do it. It seems that being aware that others are also struggling to overcome barriers to writing makes it easier to persist when it is hard to get started or to continue, demonstrating an additional if 'parallel' benefit of writing in a shared space. There was evidence, too, that the attendees made significant progress with their writing at this event. Yet Moore (p.342) felt there was still a 'need to understand more about the nature of academic writing'.

Within the UK (but at times working in Australia, too) Rowena Murray was already doing just that. She has made the nature of academic writing and the strategies to support this her major specialism. Her work adopts and adapts Boice's framework to encourage non-writers to engage so it takes an instrumental stance from the outset. Robert Boice's (1987) seminal work is frequently cited as the starting point for promoting academic writing (Morss & Murray, 2001; Moore, 2003; Grant, 2006; Murray et al., 2008; Murray & Cunningham, 2011; MacLeod, Steckley & Murray, 2012), particularly by Rowena Murray and colleagues. Boice found a combination of four principles effective. Writing could be promoted through 'free' or spontaneous writing (after Elbow, 1973), 'contingent' or forced writing, efforts to reduce the impact of internalized negativity and external criticism, and by encouraging writers to seek support. With a number of colleagues, Murray has systematically worked to develop an effective pedagogic approach to writing development. She first focused on the Writing Group (Murray & MacKay, 1998), moving on to develop Writing for Publication Programmes (Morss & Murray 2001) and an individualised strategy, the Writing Consultation (Murray et al., 2008). With Newton in the UK (Murray & Newton, 2009), and with Cunningham in Australia (Murray & Cunningham, 2011), she developed the structured Writing Retreat, which adopts a 'typing pool' model with participants writing in parallel in a single room. These Retreats follow a rigid schedule with writing slots interspersed by planning activities and/or breaks. The Retreats targeted academics rather than doctoral students and were found to encourage rates of publication and collaborative activity. However, they were slow to change academic's perceptions of themselves as writers and even slower to embed writing in daily lives.

The Structured Retreat requires effective management. Murray, Steckley & MacLeod (2012) secured funding to investigate the leadership role within the Retreat, and identified five specific functions. The leader was to brief the participants, encourage them to set goals, and

to discuss and evaluate these goals with others at specified times, keep the Retreat to schedule, and model the writing process themselves. One of our writing team has experienced this process as a participant. She found that having a leader who writes and manages creates an emotional vacuum. The leader is strangely 'absent', making the structured retreat very impersonal. If the leader finds multi-tasking difficult, this creates a tension in the room that can be counter-productive to full concentration on the writing task.

Articles on Academic Writing Retreats are limited but there is evidence of new initiatives. Dickson-Swift, and colleagues (2009) describe a successful Australian non-residential three-day retreat. This was planned along structured lines offering opportunities to write alone and to come together as a group. They considered a residential event, or, as Grant phrased it, 'full immersion', but chose not to offer accommodation. Recognising that many of the women staff would find overnight absence from the home difficult, they decided instead just to go 'off campus'. So this was very much a 9-to-5 initiative and consequently much cheaper to run. Other academics have set up more informal retreats. Price, Coffey & Nethery (2014), seeking to form new academic networks, found colleagues favoured a residential retreat over online engagement and short CPD sessions. Their Retreat was informed by Grant's (2006) and Moore's (2003) accounts. With her colleagues, Price sought to create a relaxed and intimate space where writers could choose the extent to which they interacted with others. Participants were asked to set their own goals but requested to prepare material in advance to maximise writing time during the retreat. Roberts and Weston (2014) describe a more sustained initiative. They sought to create a writing culture in their post-1992 university, establishing a one-year Writing Support Programme that culminated in a two-day Writing Retreat. Very little is said about how this was arranged but the feedback was generally positive showing that the facilitators were successful in creating 'a feeling of mutual endeavour and support' (p.710).

Of all these accounts, only Wilson (2000) described a Retreat for Doctoral students. The other Retreats discussed here were all designed for academic staff. This probably reflects current academic agendas, particularly the pressing concern that all academics should research and publish, but there may be an economic reason too. Institutions may choose to focus finite resources on their employees rather than their degree students. However, it is possible that some of the Writing Retreats included PhD students among their participants but the researchers did not feel it necessary to specify this. As in our own case, many participants may actually have been staff undertaking doctoral study. Discussing the outcomes of the Melbourne Retreat, Murray & Cunningham (2011) made incidental mention that three of the participants had subsequently achieved their PhDs.

Overall this literature review has drawn attention to the differing expectations for retreats, showing that some were quite flexibly organised, others highly structured. Probably a binary division is too simplistic; the different retreats more likely occupied positions on a continuum from structured to unstructured. Whatever their style, facilitators commonly introduced a change of tempo by interspersing writing sessions with paired and group activity and provided refreshments to keep the group together during breaks in the writing schedule. It is likely that the retreats also varied in the degree of formality but differences may be inflated by the style of write-up; some accounts are more journalistic than others. The reports also differed in the ways that participants were expected to set goals. Sometimes these were pre-specified, sometimes co-determined in an introductory session. Goal-setting could be the responsibility of the individual alone, decided through peer discussion, or in consultation with a facilitator. Structurally, the retreats also varied in length and frequency, in the number of participants attending, and in their gendered nature. In the

Handbook to Academic Writing, Murray & Moore (2006) claim that Retreats are attended by a disproportionate number of women, suggesting that they find the format more attractive than their male colleagues, perhaps because they find it harder to 'disengage' (Murray, 2013) from their everyday responsibilities.

The Structure of our Writing Retreat

The retreat was open to all doctoral candidates within the department (N=50), and was advertised by individual email to each eligible candidate. Clear dates, timing, aims and location of the event were provided in the email, together with a deadline for requesting one of the eighteen (18) available places. Our funding was sufficient for an off-campus location, but not enough to enable the retreat to be residential. Prospective participants were required to identify a piece of writing to bring to the day, and to nominate their preference for a structured or unstructured activity. It was made clear that participants were expected to attend for the full day, which did not incur a charge to participants. The advanced notification of preferences enabled planning of rooming and the number and type of activities.

The setting for the event was a small local hotel/conference centre, within an extensive park, with gardens immediately outside the main room and two smaller rooms available for quiet work. We had considered this important based on others' success (Wilson, 2000; Grant, 2006) but also based on our own individual experiences of writing and writing retreats and the feedback we had received from doctoral candidates. Participants (n=18) brought their own laptops or tablet devices to the retreat, together with any materials they considered they might need, such as books or references. The setting was unfamiliar to the majority of participants (n=16) and unfamiliar to two of the three facilitators. Refreshments on arrival, mid-morning and mid-afternoon, as well as a sit-down lunch, were included in the funding for the day.

Participants were from various stages of their doctorate programme. One full time candidate had commenced studies only three months previously, several participants were within the first year of their part-time doctoral studies, and several were in their final year. Both PhD and Professional Doctorate candidates attended as participants in the workshop.

The day started with a short introductory session, with all participants writing their 'name and aim' on a post-it note. The aims were related to a specific piece of writing identified and brought to the retreat by each participant. These aims covered some general desire to 'improve writing' of a previously prepared piece, as well as some specific goals, such as 'to complete a draft journal article' or 'to complete chapter 2'. Some participants brought articles, either hard copy or electronic, from which to write elements of their literature chapter. This activity served to provide focus for the day and to commit both the participant and the facilitators to a goal. Progress towards achievement of the aims was considered on two occasions during the day, at lunchtime and at the end of the day.

Following the introductory session, those participants who selected to attend the structured writing activities remained in the main room, with one facilitator leading the structured activities, while those participants selecting the unstructured activities moved to the quiet rooms.

The structured session

The structured session was based on the theoretical work of Peter Elbow (1998) and the concept of 'free writing'. This form of accessing complex ideas and concepts is based on

short supported steps of writing, encouraging positivity and reflection before embarking on a writing task the author may perceive as onerous. It enables the writer to write at length without fear of censorship, offers the freedom to explore a topic, and encourages understanding, all without the usual writing concerns of correct spelling, punctuation, grammar and word selection. Two main elements formed the structured session.
The first element, selected by ten participants, began with a writing activity for five minutes using free writing principles. The participants were requested to write about how their doctoral topic was 'spurring them on to write and write, what I like about my practice is …'. This short piece then informed three reflections about: their reaction to a positively framed writing task; why they stopped writing; and what they liked about their own academic practice (a key area for professional doctoral candidates). Each reflection was captured on a coloured post-it note and added to the writing task papers, thus offering an individual and unique resource for each participant to take with them at the end of the session. The participants shared their writing with the rest of the group and were encouraged to read aloud. In pairs, the participants then developed ideas to assist with framing writing in the future, and shared three of these ideas with the wider group. The session closed with a walking circle, each participant looking at the ideas, notes, post-it notes and visual material created by the other members of the group, and considering whether any practices could be useful in their own writing.

The second structured element, undertaken by seven participants, was themed around 'the paragraph as dialogue', drawn from Burns & Sinfield's (2012) doctoral workshops. Each participant spent five minutes brainstorming to plan some key words, phrases or ideas for their paragraph. The participant then wrote a paragraph to the facilitator, starting 'Dear …' and answering a series of conversation prompts. The work was then shared with the rest of the group. By reading aloud, the participants suddenly became aware that they had completed an element of writing, for example an abstract, part of an introduction, an explanation of a concept, or the articulation of an area of difficulty or concern. Once again, participants were given the space to reflect on how others approached their writing. Time was then allowed to complete the writing task.

These two elements of the structured session were conducted through the morning session of the writing retreat, with refreshments provided on an informal basis.

The unstructured session
The nine participants who elected for unstructured writing found a space with their materials (laptop, notes, books, etc.) in one of two quiet rooms. Within these rooms there was agreement that there would be minimal talking so that the participants could focus entirely on their writing. Two facilitators were available in the vicinity for discussion and questions, and for one-to-one tutorials as required. Some of these tutorials had been pre-booked but there was also availability for drop in tutorials on the day. As the day progressed more of the participants moved to the unstructured session, and during the afternoon only unstructured writing was available, with the main room and garden becoming a flexible space for discussion and tutorials as well as for individual writing.

Lunchtime provided a halfway point for reflecting on aims and re-thinking the days' objectives. Before resuming writing after lunch, participants reviewed their initial aim and recorded their progress. At the end of the day a short summary of the extent to which aims had been achieved was produced by the participants. An overall evaluation of the day was completed.

Easy access to Wi-Fi, plentiful electrical sockets to plug in devices, and regular refreshments supported uninterrupted activity.

Outcomes and Discussion

During the day data were collected from the participants to identify their perceptions of their achievements and learning and the perceived value of the day. This data included: participants' statements of their aims and their perceived progress against these aims; examples of writing from the structured activities; written evaluation forms. The data were analysed to evaluate the specific structured and unstructured elements of the retreat and also analysed thematically to draw conclusions about the overall retreat.

The structured activities supported participants in starting to write and in the development of specific writing skills:

> I learnt the importance of writing frequently and at length, without hesitation, and then edit later

> I learnt about other sources of help, e.g. phrase bank, I started to look at this and actually used it in my early draft

> The structured session was very informative and I enjoyed having some time to dedicate to my own writing (within this)'

> I learnt 'the value of more descriptive adjectives in writing

> I learnt to leave blanks in order to speed up writing

The theme of confidence in the process of doctoral writing, developed during the retreat, was evident from many participants, including both newer and more experienced doctoral candidates:

> The process has given me confidence and strategies to write at doctoral level

> I achieved more confidence and inspiration in relation to myself as a researcher and writer

The theme of 'a supportive and inspiring atmosphere' emerged as particularly important to participants. This 'atmosphere' included the nature of the facilitation, encouraging writing activity and personal development rather than focussing on what had not yet been achieved. Also noted was the availability of one to one support where required.

> I liked the purposeful, focused atmosphere, no distractions and a supportive environment

> It was good to … reflect on my professional development
> Thank you so much for today, it was very helpful and inspiring
> I was pleased to have time to go through my writing in detail with a tutor

All participants indicated short term benefits from participation on the retreat and all had met their aims for the day. Several participants identified that they had achieved more than they expected. Specific achievements cited included:

> I completed chapter 2 new version and augmented this with chapter 3. An excellent
> day.
> I achieved my target of editing the research design table. I managed to revise this too
> and make theoretical links.
> The most productive session for me to date.

Our retreat was never designed as a women's only retreat, however the majority of attendees (n=15, 84%) were female. Within the faculty 64% of eligible candidates were female. This could be viewed as supportive of Murray's (2013) claim that this style of event is more attractive to women. We are unable to draw firm conclusions as to the reasons for this but feedback from the attendees suggested that the women participants found the 'escape from home and all its constraints' very important. All of our participants concurred with Grant & Knowles (2000) and Grant (2006) in identifying the environment, its calm, its peace, and its separation from the day to day, as important for the success of the retreat for them. Asked what they liked about the retreat, participants commented on:

> The space and time to write

> The setting – good to get away from usual place of work and study

In response to the question 'Was the setting of the retreat important to your achievements today?' participants were universally affirmative in their responses, stating the lack of interruptions, the focus on writing, but the need for this to be in an environment which they considered to be beautiful and relaxing:

> It was 'conducive to writing and thinking and writing and thinking …

> It was inspiring and peaceful

> It was quiet, serene and beautiful

In our retreat participants identified the beauty of the garden environment and the freedom to go outside and think in this environment, supportive of the findings from Wilson's (2000) review. Participants' sense of being 'special' or pampered within our retreat, because of the nature of the venue and the good food as well as the supportive environment, concurs with the work of Grant (2006) and of Farr et al. (2009). While a longer and residential retreat would have been desirable, several part time doctoral candidates identified that they would not have been able to attend for longer than one day due to family and work commitments. They did express a desire for additional one day retreats. This is an important finding, as more and more of the doctoral candidates have busy, full lives with other responsibilities.

The value of the community and collaborative activity during the retreat discussed by several authors (Cohen, 1986; Slavin, 1986; Kagan, 1988; Moore, 2003) was much stronger than we expected within our writing retreat. We had expected the structured activities to be valued most by the newer doctoral candidates, and the quiet space to be most valued by the more experienced candidates. We had not specifically planned to support a community of practice for writing, rather we were focussing the retreat on development of individuals and their writing, with the participants bringing their separate writing tasks to the retreat. However, the feedback clearly identified the value participants placed on being part of a group striving to write more and to write better:

> I liked meeting people who were further ahead (with their doctoral studies)
>
> I enjoyed the networking
> I felt privileged to be part of a diverse group. (I) shared ideas too, and explored options for research

The quiet rooms for the unstructured writing were valued by participants, and the flexible space in the afternoon provided by the main room was useful for mixed activity including discussion between participants. Three participants identified that they would have liked to have a room which was more flexible during the whole day. International students within the group found the experience valuable in developing their confidence as compared to others within the group, understanding that the issues they were facing with their writing were being experienced by other doctoral candidates, including those who were native speakers of English. This is an important element of our experience, a community can be created even on a one day retreat. We had not designed the retreat to support this element, but could build in greater opportunities for collaborative working in future retreats, for example ensuring the choice of flexible space throughout the day.

As a result of the day retreat, participants expressed positive developments in both the quantity and quality of their writing. We did not specifically assess the work produced at the retreat, this assessment occurred through the normal processes available to doctoral candidates, for example submission of written papers for the professional doctoral candidates, submission of draft writing to supervisors for all candidates, submission to Confirmation of Candidature assessment (to confirm doctoral level before submission of thesis) or submission of thesis for examination. It would be useful to follow up the participants to identify the outcomes of their doctoral study, and also to ask them with hindsight whether the writing retreat was effective in supporting their writing. We have not yet undertaken this follow up work.

We followed BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011) throughout this project.

Conclusions
Based on our experience, a one day writing retreat can be a valuable opportunity for doctoral candidates and this retreat clearly had short-term benefits for all participants. We are not able to identify longer-term benefits at this point but expect that some of the short-term benefits from the event will translate into improved writing which will impact on longer-term outcomes. Of note was the accessibility of the retreat to part time doctoral candidates who had work and family commitments. The intense single day event was something they could commit to, but a longer event was not possible for them. We recommend this approach where such commitments may impact on the ability of candidates to engage with the writing process.

We required funding to run this retreat, to support the venue and the refreshments. Our time was given freely. It is impossible to say whether or not the same outcomes could have been achieved without the venue and the refreshments, but the participants did express their feelings of being 'special' and linked this to more productive writing.

We regularly support doctoral candidates to improve their writing, for example through skills sessions, through academic review of draft papers, and through peer review of draft writing. While all of these are evaluated positively, the more prolonged supported retreat is

valuable in initiating and establishing good writing practice, in providing the time for writing, and in initiating a community of practice for the participants.

References

BERA (2011) *Ethical guidelines for educational research*. London: British Educational Research Association. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2011 (Accessed: 25 November 2016).

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (1998) 'Writing on academic careers', *Studies in Higher Education,* 23(3), pp. 281–295.

Boice, R. (1987)' A Program for Facilitating Scholarly Writing', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 6(1), pp. 9–20.

Burns, T., Sinfield. S. (2012) *Essential Study Skills: the complete guide to success at university.* London; Sage.

Cohen, E.G. (1986) *Designing Group Work for the Heterogeneous Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E.L., Kippen, S., Talbot, L., Verrinder, G. and Ward, B. (2009) 'A non-residential alternative to off campus writers' retreats for academics', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 33(3), pp. 229–239.

Elbow, P. (1973) *Writing Without Teachers.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing with Power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. (2nd ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Farr, C.K., Cavallaro, J., Civil, G., and Cochrane, C. (2009) 'Taming the Publishing Beast: The College of St. Catherine Scholars' Retreat', *Change*, pp.14-19.

Grant, B.M. (2006) .Writing in the company of other women: exceeding the boundaries., *Studies in Higher Education,* 31(4), pp. 483-495, DOI: 10.1080/03075070600800624.

Grant, B., Knowles, S. (2000) 'Flights of imagination: academic women becoming writers.', *International Journal of Academic Development,* 5(1), pp. 6–19.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T. (1984) *Learning Together and Alone: co-operative, competitive and individualistic learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kagan, S. (1988) *Co-operative Learning: resources for teachers*. Riverside, CA: University of California.

MacLeod, I., Steckley, L., Murray, R. (2012) 'Time is not enough: Promoting strategic engagement with writing for publication', *Studies in Higher Education,* 37(6),pp. 641-654. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2010.527934

Moore, S. (2003) 'Writers' retreats for academics: exploring and increasing the motivation to write', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 27(3), pp. 333-342, DOI: 10.1080/0309877032000098734 .

Morss, K., Murray, R. (2001) 'Researching Academic Writing within a Structured Programme: insights and outcomes', *Studies in Higher Education,* 26(1), pp. 35-52.

Murray, R., (2013) '"It's not a hobby": Reconceptualizing the place of writing in academic work', *Higher Education,* 66(1), pp. 79-91.

Murray, R., Cunningham, E. (2011) 'Managing researcher development: "Drastic transition"?', *Studies in Higher Education,* 36(7), pp. 831-845. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2010.482204.

Murray, R., MacKay, G. (1998) 'Supporting Academic Development in Public Output: Reflections and Propositions', *International Journal for Academic Development,* 3(1), pp. 54–63.

Murray, R., Moore, S. (2006) *The Handbook of Academic Writing: A Fresh Approach.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Murray, R., Newton, M. (2009) 'Writing retreat as structured intervention: margin or mainstream?', *Higher Education Research & Development,* 28(5), pp. 541–553.

Murray, R., Steckley, L., MacLeod, I. (2012) 'Research leadership in writing for publication: A theoretical framework', *British Educational Research Journal,* 38 (5), pp.765-781. DOI: 10.1080/01411926.2011.580049.

Murray, R., Thow, M., Moore, S., Murphy, M. (2008) 'The writing consultation: Developing academic writing practices', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 32(2), pp. 119-128. DOI: 10.1080/03098770701851854.

Price, E., Coffey, B., Nethery, A. (2014) 'An early career academic network: What worked and what didn't', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 39(5), pp. 680-698. DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2014.971106.

Roberts, A., Weston, K. (2014) 'Releasing the hidden academic? Learning from teacher-educators' responses to a writing support programme', *Professional Development in Education,* 40(5), pp.698-716. DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2013.835277.

Slavin, R.E. (1986) *Student Team Learning: an overview and practical guide.* Washington DC: National Education Association.

Wilson, R. (2000) 'How a week in the mountains can jump-start a dissertation', *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 21 July , pp. A10-11.

Wright, H.R., Cooper, L., Luff, P. (n.d.) 'Women's ways of working: Circumventing the masculine structures operating within and upon the University. Special Issue on Collusion', *Women's Studies International Forum, (in press).*