

# Reflections On An In-House Academic Writing Retreat

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## Abstract

This paper outlines some of the contemporary challenges and opportunities facing lecturers in third level education in Ireland in the area of academic writing. It is argued that nurse academics in particular are charged with the imperative to write and publish in order to foster scholarly development of what has traditionally been regarded as a practice driven vocation. Some of the challenges to academic writing as identified in the literature are discussed as well as measures undertaken to support this endeavour. An account is provided as to how a group of academics in one third level school are attempting to overcome personal inhibitions and resource limitations through the use of a self devised writing support group and an in-house writers retreat. Reflections on the establishment and effects of these initiatives are presented and subsequent conclusions and recommendations are made.

**Keywords:** academic writing, writers' groups, writers' retreats, nurse academics, education

## 1. Introduction and background

The higher education sector in Ireland has developed exponentially in the past few decades. Societal and economic factors have driven these changes with increased demand for more permeable structures and flexible learning routes. Research and scholarly activity, once the province of a select few individuals and specialised groups, have now become the expectation for all academics. According to Lee and Boud (2003 p188)

'Of the recent changes in higher education, it is arguably the expectation for all academics to undertake research that has generated the greatest threat, as well as some of the greatest opportunities for change.'

This expectation is communicated through research assessment exercises and university rankings and has become institutionalised; embedded in workload formulations and criteria for promotions (Mc Grail, Rickard and Jones 2006).

As a result of these developments, academic writing now embraces and signifies a diverse range of activities; from developing modules and programmes using traditional and new media, to writing research grant proposals, tender applications, policy documents, doctoral theses, journal papers and book chapters. For the purposes of this paper, the academic writing activity under consideration is academic writing for scholarly publication.

Academics in nursing, a relatively new discipline in the third level sector, are acutely implicated in this vortex of changing imperatives. Although there was some integration of nursing in academia beforehand, pre-registration nurse education in the U.K entered the university sector in the early 1990s and Ireland followed suit in 2002. A major impetus underpinning the move of nurse education in Ireland into the higher education sector was to facilitate the development of

nursing from a traditionally positioned vocation, relying on a relatively informal, derivative knowledge base, to a research/evidence based profession with its own distinct knowledge. Paul (2002) asserts that establishing and articulating a body of knowledge is central to a developing profession. In this regard, nursing represents a fledgling academic domain, requiring further development of its professional knowledge (Keen 2007). Urgent calls for publication of professional research and practice are reflected in such article titles as *'Writing for publication: A guide for those who must'* (Burnard 1995) and *'Writing for publication: your obligation to the profession'* (Nelms 2004).

The work of structured gathering, curating and formally disseminating this knowledge has largely been undertaken by nurse academics. While most have been exceptionally well prepared through nurse tutor education programmes, for their roles in lecturing and supporting student education, this group have had much less preparation and experience in academic writing for publication. Lack of preparation in this regard is not just a challenge for nurse academics; Murray (2002) posits that lack of formal training/preparation in academic writing is commonplace among academics generally and that many develop their skills through a process of trial and error. Other challenges to the development of academic writing and scholarly activity identified in the literature include difficulties associated with finding time and space for writing, particularly for women academics given their wider responsibilities beyond their academic lives (Grant and Knowles 2000). Driscoll and Driscoll (2002) identify that lack of confidence in personal ability to write for peers and publication can be an inhibiting factor. Lee and Boud (2003) point out that although there have been significant completions of doctorates in nursing, undertaking a research degree, often on a part-time basis does not necessarily result in confidence and competence in research skills and academic scholarship. Additionally, the culture of the Higher Education Institutes (HEI) and the investment in supporting staff in the endeavours of research, scholarship and academic writing can influence levels of activity, competence and confidence in this regard. Moore (2003) asserts that given these challenges and imperatives, universities must play a central role in supporting staff in the

areas of academic writing and publication.

Various methods of supporting academic writing among lecturers have been identified and evaluated in the literature. There is a plethora of 'how to' guides (Heyman and Cronin 2005) concerning writing for various purposes, including publication. However, many reviewers agree that supporting academics in writing and scholarly activity goes beyond the instructional to include interventions that take account of individual and institutional contexts, possibilities and challenges. Structured formal support can take the form of academic writing courses or using writing coaches; both are viewed as beneficial. Taylor, Lyon and Harris (2004) attest to the benefits of an academic writing course which focused on the aims of improving confidence, writing and publication success. Through the use of personal writing projects targeted towards particular journals, participants achieved these aforementioned goals. Murray (2001) also positively evaluates a taught module on academic writing. For Baldwin and Chandler (2002), the use of a writing coach over an extended period as a means of providing 'emotional, informational, and instrumental support' (ibid p12) resulted in increased levels of empowerment and publication among academic staff. Formal supports such as these require institutional financial investment and tend to be outcomes focused; usually increased publication output is the marker of success.

Grant (2006) suggests that we are socialised to write in isolation. Belcher (2009) goes on to argue that writing groups disrupt this dominant culture in a productive way yet this form of peer collaboration takes time and space to develop and mature. Writing groups are the most common method of harnessing this collegial strength (McGrail et al 2006) and usually consist of a group of interested individuals who want to work on their own writing projects in the context of a supportive group. The group organisation and methods of working can vary from being highly structured with a set process and formal feedback mechanisms to less structured frameworks where people gather together to write alongside each other for specific periods with more informal ways of providing feedback. Numerous benefits of writing groups are cited,

including group sharing, learning and feedback (Murray 2005) as well as institutional sanction of protected writing time (where this is supported). However, according to Keen (2007), there has been little systematic research or evaluation of the effectiveness of writing groups as a method of supporting scholarly activity.

A structured approach to facilitating academic writing in groups is the use of writing retreats. This involves the group engaging in time limited writing activity (usually 3-5 days) which occurs in a residential location, commonly at a remove from the usual workplace. Writing retreats are regarded as a place and time of sanctuary, where permission is given to suspend usual work demands and focus completely on writing in a supportive community of practice, often with an external facilitator. The benefits of academic writing retreats in creating dedicated writing time, fostering collegiality and helping to sustain academic writing practices have been well supported in the literature (Moore 2003; Grant 2006). Murray and Newton (2009 p541) maintain that 'since publishing is a mainstream academic activity, it makes sense to mainstream this intervention in academic careers.'

## **2. The In-house Writing Retreat**

Existing research on methods of supporting academic writing demonstrates the success of working in groups, for example peer group activities, including peer interaction and support (Murray 2002), writers' retreats (Moore 2003; Grant 2006) and academic writing groups (Gilligan, Cretchley, George, McDonald, McDonald and Rankin 2003). However, the economic and academic climate within Ireland has changed dramatically since these publications. Financial restrictions and resource restructuring have culminated in increased pressure on academics time and availability of resources for professional development. This results in decreased opportunities to undertake formal training/support in academic writing skills development. Nevertheless, the importance of developing supports for academic writing remains.

A dedicated Teaching and Learning group within the School of Nursing and Human Sciences in Dublin City University sought innovative ways to address these challenges by developing an in-house writing retreat. The group comprises a number of individuals with a particular interest in researching and writing about teaching and learning issues. It was acknowledged that whilst there was much innovative work taking place within the school related to teaching and learning, this was not being disseminated more widely. Academics wished to access support to help them develop ideas and craft for publication existing drafts of research papers, book chapters or doctoral work. The process commenced by inviting a renowned expert in the area of academic writing to facilitate a workshop that explored common barriers to scholarly writing among academics. Participants were thus provided with an opportunity to reflect upon factors inhibiting their own writing and dissemination of practice. Out of this workshop emerged the idea of establishing an in-house writing retreat. This concept fits with the views of Moore (2003) and Lee and Boud (2003) who suggest that academic development needs to be conceptualised as a local practice, enabled through peer learning in the workplace. As such it should not be isolated from normal academic practice or the specific settings in which academics operate. This plan also took cognisance of current economic/resourcing restrictions within HEIs in Ireland.

Our three day writing retreat ran in September 2012 with 7 participants. It was scheduled prior to semester commencing to avoid clashes with academics teaching commitments. This initiative entailed pre-retreat work such as devising a workable timetable for the three days, encouraging group members to prepare for the retreat by selecting a discrete piece of work for sustained focus and booking a suitable venue in the university but away from our usual work location. In addition, some basic ground rules for the retreat were established to help participants engage in the work, such as limiting access to emails and mobile phones and adhering to the agreed timetable. This enabled the participants to focus on their writing tasks without interruption. The retreat was facilitated by a nominated member of the group who led

group planning and a structured group discussion each day. The retreat began with a brief overview of what each individual wished to achieve from the event and what (if any) support they would like from the group in this regard. For most participants this involved completing an unfinished piece of academic writing or preparing for a new publication, while one person wanted to complete a chapter for a PhD thesis. In terms of group support, participants wished to remain in the same room, working on individual projects yet writing alongside each other with the option of asking for/providing feedback on drafts as required. Participants went quietly in and out of the room occasionally for short comfort breaks however lunch was a communal activity offering us an opportunity to discuss our efforts and problem solve in a relaxed, informal way Progress was more formally reviewed at the beginning of the second day as a means of keeping us focused on our objectives. In this exercise, each participant shared an account of their activity so far and two participants asked group members for feedback on drafts. Work continued on the second day and the retreat ended on the third day with a discussion as to what each person had accomplished and plans for further development/dissemination of the work. During the retreat, four participants shared work with each other and provided feedback, with others sharing/emailing work after the retreat.

### **3. Evaluation of the retreat**

As the writing retreat was a pilot project for the group it was important to collate some feedback from the participants. Participants were invited to provide feedback on their experiences by responding to the following evaluation questions;

1. What were your experiences of the writing retreat?
2. What, if anything, did you gain from participating in the retreat?
3. What suggestions do you have for future retreats?

### 3.1. Experiences and Benefits

The feedback from participants identified a number of benefits from the retreat. One such benefit was establishing space to think and write, as expressed in the following comments:

“I found it enjoyable and freeing to take the time to think and write without feeling pressurized to be elsewhere doing something else.”

“It reminded me of the importance of academic writing and that when I actually get down to it I quite enjoy it.”

Hence, the retreat provided a protected space which enabled a new sense of freedom and continuity as opposed to the more commonly reported experience of fragmented, isolated and pressured academic writing. This is consistent with the view of Lee and Boud (2003 p196) who suggest that in ‘ordinary work’ little space is available for new activities and ‘new ways of being with each other.’ Working together in a group format involving group discussion and peer feedback also fostered the building of new relationships and helped to establish new meaning in existing collegial relationships, as exemplified below:

“It was good to do the work in a group as there was a sense of support and fun although we were disciplined in our approach.”

This sense of group support may also have been fostered in the pre- retreat academic writing workshop (previously described) where participants were encouraged to share concerns about feelings of inadequacy and performance anxiety. Collins’ (2004 p49) suggests that having a focused common purpose leads to ‘a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action’ in individuals that, in turn, results in collective group energy. Such

energy can have a motivating effect whereby group members strive to re-enact and repeat the experience, which may influence the group members to seek further opportunities to work together. The participant comment below suggests that the experience certainly renewed motivation to write.

“I sharpened my commitment to set aside dedicated time to write and to expand my writing in the area of teaching and learning in addition to clinically focused writing.”

In terms of achievements the group members reported that they had completed some outstanding work and / or commenced work that they had been planning for some time.

“I managed to complete a paper that had been in the making for some time and to commence gathering data for two papers on aspects of my teaching practice about which I have been curious.”

### **3.2. Suggestions for Future Retreats**

The participants offered suggestions that might enhance commitment to constructively use the protected time and sustain the momentum to write into the future. These recommendations reflect a strong desire to preserve the energy created by the retreat experience and put it to work in further endeavour.

“I suggest that after each retreat that dates are set aside for the follow up sessions and the next retreat. This would give a sense of the retreat being part of an ongoing process and engender enthusiasm and commitment to complete work that has been started.”

The participants viewed this in-house retreat as being grounded in and continuous with their own work context. We concur with Moore's (2003) observation that external writers' retreats can result in a lack of integration of a writing culture into the work context/regular practice. However, there are also pitfalls in holding retreats 'on site' as expressed in the following comment:

"My main suggestion for future retreats is to hold them in a place that is less convenient for popping back to the office to do other work in break time, which I think some group members did."

Once this time and space has been carved out, every second counts and it is notable that participants wanted support to help them to resist the powerful claims of every day work commitments. This indeed was a challenge to us, particularly at the beginning of the retreat with some ambivalence experienced by most participants as to whether they could really 'afford' the time and whether anything useful would be achieved in the 3 days activity. Similarly, some academics who were originally interested in participating in the writing retreat withdrew as the time approached, citing work pressures and lack of time for this activity. It is essential therefore, that academic retreats are carefully planned and managed so that participants can fully engage with and use this dedicated space for productive writing activity. This can be achieved by encouraging and supporting academics to free up this time and prioritise writing activity. Selecting a comfortable venue that is not too close to the familiar setting in which participants work and ensuring adherence to ground rules are also measures that are conducive to maintaining focus.

In summary, those who participated in the retreat have reported that they found this a positive experience in terms of reviving their motivation to write, refocusing their energy on completing work that had been postponed due to other work priorities and promoting a sense of togetherness and support among group members. They also identified areas for improvement such as planned follow up activities and ensuring strict adherence to boundaries established to protect the writing space.

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

'The contemporary challenge for academic leaders is increasingly to bring academics into productive relationships with each other, to identify and support fundamental values and activities, including research. ....In sum, there is a need to promote and develop new forms of academic practice, in order to facilitate development in directions strategically identified.' (Lee and Boud 2003 p190)

Lee and Boud (2003) posit that the potential of writing groups, even in current university climates, is robust and advise that it is important to tailor the group structures and operations to the unique local environment; ... 'there is no particular 'right' way or style needed for successful functioning' (ibid p198). This was certainly our experience and we would recommend giving thorough consideration to the needs and characteristics of the specific context in advance of planning support interventions. At first we were wary of deviating from prescribed writing retreat/writing group 'templates' but we discovered that some of the more formal practices did not suit us as a group already known to each other. In the retreat, we were delighted to notice how much could actually be achieved by writing alongside each other; that the actual presence of other people, individually, yet collectively engaged in similar activities and knowing they were experiencing similar struggles and blocks was in itself supportive and somewhat comforting. For this retreat, that was enough. However, we also realised that this alchemy did not happen spontaneously but required pre-retreat preparation

on the part of the facilitator and the participants as well as trust in and commitment to the process. Even an informal in-house writing activity such as this one required careful planning and managing.

Grant (2006) believes that writers' retreats are ongoing and cumulative in their process, claiming that they do not conform to the 'quick fix' culture that pervades institutional views of academic and professional development. We would echo this view and argue that a one off event has limited value in ensuring that academic writing becomes habitual for academics. This leads us back to the importance of a supportive writing group. Following Lee and Boud (2003), that there is no wrong or right way for writing groups to function, we would go further to suggest that the same applies to the development of writing groups. However, from our experience we have found that for a writing group to start and more importantly to continue and develop, there needs to be some level of intrinsic motivation to write among individual members. With this in mind we are continuing to preserve time and a place for writing (four hours once every two weeks in a designated space). Not every member of the teaching and learning writing group is able to attend each fortnightly session. Nevertheless the resource is available, free and is used by the group. Murray 2002 contends that for behaviour change to be maintained, academic writers require support and strategies for sustaining their new behaviours. We suggest that the newly established writing group will help to provide this support as we exchange and comment on each others' writing projects and drafts. We are developing our shared interests further and beginning to write together; this paper being our first collaborative foray. As they say: 'Watch this space!'

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