

Creating a Community of Writers: Participant Perception of the Impact of a Writing Retreat on Scholarly Productivity[☆]

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ABSTRACT

An important component of the academic faculty role is dissemination of knowledge through manuscript publication. Ways to facilitate this scholarship are important to academic career progression. One approach is a writing retreat, which is a structured time to write and receive peer review of writing occurring over multiple, sequential days. This paper reports on an annual multi-day writing retreat originally consisting of five days and four nights. This was a mixed method descriptive evaluation. Fifty-three of the 56 participants from the seven writing retreats from 2010 to 2016 were contacted via email to complete an on-line quantitative and qualitative survey. Thirty-one responded for a response rate of 59%. Eleven participants from the 2017 writing retreat participated in a focus group discussion. Qualitative comments were analyzed using thematic analysis procedures. The majority of participants agreed that the writing retreat enhanced their overall scholarly activity and reported their knowledge and motivation to write increased as a result of participation. Participants valued the dedicated time for writing, peer review of writing, and structured time for discussions about writing and publishing. This was especially true for participants who attended two or more times. A writing retreat has value in supporting faculty to complete dissemination of research and to accomplish academic promotions.

Scholarly dissemination of knowledge through manuscript publication is an expected aspect of an academic faculty role and of importance to progression of an academic career (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). Scholarly dissemination is essential to advance knowledge in nursing for both academic and clinician nurses (Keen, 2007). A variety of strategies to increase publication rates appear in the literature, including writing workshops (Kulage & Larson, 2016; Oman, Mancuso, Ceballos, Flynn Makic, & Fink, 2016), collaborative writing groups (Cash & Tate, 2008; Ness, Duffy, McCallum, & Price, 2014), writing retreats (Jackson, 2009), a writing coach or consultant (Heinrich, Hurst, Leigh, Oberleitner, & Poirrier, 2009; McGrail et al., 2006) or a combination of these (Rickard et al., 2009).

Writing workshops tend to have a structured instruction about writing and publication and participants may meet regularly over time, such as a six-month period (Wilson, Sharrad, Rasmussen, & Kernick, 2013). Oman et al. (2016) reported on a successful hospital-based six-month series of writing workshops that included structured presentations on the various phases of the writing process for publication as well as mentoring and peer manuscript review. They were able to replicate these workshops an additional two times and demonstrated successful

submission and publication as well as participant satisfaction with the workshops, mentoring and review process. Kulage and Larson (2016) describe a different workshop structure over an academic semester for small groups of faculty and students who already had a manuscript developed. Meetings centered around structured manuscript assessment and peer review. Participant satisfaction was demonstrated especially for providing motivation to complete and submit a manuscript. Wilson et al. (2013) also report on a series of four writing workshops for nursing faculty, students and clinicians associated with a university. Successful outcomes included increase knowledge about writing, confidence and motivation among participants. In these examples, individual success was linked to sponsorship by a practice or academic organization, which facilitated meeting logistics and scheduling over time.

Collaborative writing groups, similarly to workshops, may meet regularly over time and are typically arranged around shared work in an organization (Heinrich et al., 2009). Ness et al. (2014) described a small writing collaborative of academic nurse educators within an organization focused on writing and publishing co-authored manuscripts. While this type of collaborative may be limited by shared scholarly

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interests, outcomes reported included successful publications and emotional support. Houfek et al. (2010) also chronicle the development of a writing group that developed after participants attended a professional development session on writing which met weekly and provided mentoring and peer review. The group was supported by a written purpose and structure and process guidelines. Documented productivity of publications and grant proposal submissions were demonstrated.

In a systematic review of interventions to increase academic publishing rates, McGrail et al. (2006) reviewed 17 papers published in 1984–2004. Three interventions were identified which were associated with increased publication rates, psychosocial support and motivation, including a writing coach in to the workshops and writing groups already described. A writing coach or consultant was a strategy utilized in several reports (Baldwin & Chandler, 2002; Heinrich et al., 2009; Sanderson, Carter, & Schuessler, 2012) and can be an internal or external support to improve writing skill and scholarly output. In the above systematic review, a writing retreat was not identified as a strategy that appeared in the literature during this analysis.

A writing retreat occurs over multiple, sequential days and offers a more intensive experience, with structured time to write and receive peer review of writing (Jackson, 2009). Jackson (2009) described a residential multi-day writing retreat that paired novice writers with mentors. Peer review and support of novice writers were identified as integral to the outcomes of increased publication rates. Benefits of a writing retreat are that the structure and support can facilitate overcoming common barriers to writing progress identified in the literature, including uninterrupted time to write (Houfek et al., 2010), and can provide mentoring and peer support to increase confidence, motivation, and writing output (Jackson, 2009; Keen, 2007). Receiving mentorship and peer review of writing can improve confidence in writing, facilitate scholarly productivity, and assist in reducing publication rejection rates (Northam, Greer, Rath, & Toone, 2014; Sanderson et al., 2012; Steinert, McLeod, Liben, & Snell, 2008). This paper reports on ten years of experience with an annual multi-day writing retreat that was developed to facilitate faculty publication and scholarly output. We describe participants' perceptions of the impact of a structured writing retreat on scholarly activity, manuscript publication, and career progression.

Description of the writing retreat

The annual writing retreat, hosted on a university campus, began in 2008 with the goal of bringing a group of writers together to enhance publication productivity by providing peer review and building a community of scholars. It originally was scheduled each summer over four days and three nights and then expanded in 2015 to five days and four nights based on participant request. The two authors have led and organized the writing retreat since inception. Participants learn about the retreat through invitation and word of mouth approximately three months prior with a deadline to register two months before the retreat. A nominal fee covers the cost of a healthy lunch and snacks. Information is provided in the registration form about local housing options such as hotels and university housing for participants coming from out of town. To organize the peer review process, participants provide details upon registering on the title of their intended manuscript/project for the retreat.

A secondary goal of the retreat is to build a community of scholars. Several activities contribute to this goal, including daily lunch discussions about writing challenges and tips, healthy breaks for exercise, and social events. A “Frequently Asked Questions” document was created to assist those new to the writing retreat in understanding the retreat process. Table 1 provides text on common questions from participants; other requested information related to housing and meals. Options to participate in social events, such as morning exercise classes or evening theater or dinners, are included in the schedule.

The retreat is held on a university campus with a large communal

Table 1
Selected writing retreat frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Is this a workshop?	The writing retreat is a designated time for writing. Use this time to work on an article, a grant proposal, abstract, a presentation, review articles, create an outline for the article or work on any part of an article, etc. This is a structured time for you to write with the opportunity either before or after the retreat to get a review of your writing from two of your peers. If you request a review, you will also be assigned to review two papers. This isn't a workshop; however, we will have structured discussions during lunch on topics of interest to the group.
You asked me to send a draft to my reviewer before the retreat. What if I have not written down anything yet? Can I bring a draft document to get a review during the retreat? When and how do I share my draft with my reviewer?	It is ideal to send something to your reviewer before the retreat. Sometimes it can be a manuscript draft or it can be an outline or a concept paragraph of what you plan to write on during the retreat. It is helpful although not required to send something to your reviewers before the retreat. If you don't have a draft ready yet to review, when you meet your reviewers you can talk with them about arranging a review during or even after the retreat.
When do I meet my reviewer? What are the responsibilities of a reviewer?	You will meet your reviewer the first day of the retreat and will have an opportunity to talk about your paper then. We usually have the first review meeting after lunch so you don't have to coordinate the first meeting. You can then coordinate about reviews during and after the retreat. A reviewer can provide valuable feedback about the clarity of writing – even if you are not a content expert in the area, your feedback about the clarity of writing will help the writer immensely.
How do you spend your time at the writing retreat?	Plan to clear your schedule of meetings and other obligations as much as possible to make time for writing. The retreat is focused on your need for time to write – it is a luxury to devote dedicated time to writing while at the retreat. Use your time to your best advantage while at the retreat. The only structured time is the lunch session when the group shares a meal, catches up on each other's writing progress and discusses issues about writing that are of interest to the group present.
	A day at the writing retreat may unfold like this: 8:00 walk or Zumba or just get going on your writing; 9:00–12:00 write (may schedule time with your writing reviewer); 12:00–1:00 lunch and discussion; 1:00–5:00 writing (may schedule time with your writing reviewer). Evenings may include a play, listening to music at the park or dinner on your own or with a group. Some may use the evening to continue writing.

room available for writing, snacks, and lunch meetings. Private rooms are made available for individual work. The retreat is typically scheduled to begin at noon on a Monday and end at 1 pm on Friday, with full days of writing Tuesday through Thursday. Participants convene over lunch on Monday. Introductions occur and each participant discusses their writing focus for the week. The schedule of the retreat is reviewed and topics for lunch discussions are generated. During the remainder of the week, structured discussions of topics of interest to the group occur over lunch. Participants meet with their reviewers after lunch to discuss writing and set mutual follow-up appointments for further review.

Average attendance at the retreat is approximately 19 participants with a range 14–23 from multiple universities and clinical settings. Most commonly, attendees are from the discipline of nursing but other health professionals attend as well. There is also a diversity of writing that occurs at the retreat including books, book chapters, journal articles, grant proposals, and presentations.

Methods

This was a mixed method descriptive evaluation. The Institutional Review Board at Oregon Health & Science University determined that this evaluation was not research involving human subjects. The study was explained to participants and their response to the invitation to complete the survey or focus group constituted assent. Participants from the seven writing retreats from 2010 to 2016 were contacted via email to complete an on-line quantitative and qualitative survey; reminders were sent at two and four weeks to those who did not respond. The online survey consisted of eight demographic questions which assessed information about academic rank, current work (in academic or

Table 2
Survey items and focus group questions.

Survey questions
Demographics:
1. What is your current rank or the rank you last worked in an academic setting?
2. Do you currently work in a practice setting? If yes, please describe the setting you currently practice in.
3. Are you currently retired?
4. What is your discipline?
5. How many writing retreats have you attended in Ashland?
6. How many manuscripts have you submitted as a result of the Ashland Writing Retreat?
7. How many manuscripts have you published as a result of the Ashland Writing Retreat?
8. How many grants have you submitted as a result of the Ashland Writing Retreat?
Please rate your agreement with the following statements on a Scale of 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral – Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree
9. Participating in the Ashland Writing Retreat has enhanced my overall scholarly activity.
10. My career has progressed due to participating in the Ashland Writing Retreat.
11. I have been promoted in part due to the manuscripts published through participating in the Ashland Writing Retreat.
12. In general, participating in the Ashland Writing Retreat decreased the time frame to submission of manuscripts.
13. The peer review that was provided before and during the writing retreat was useful to my writing progress.
14. The dedicated time for writing was useful to my writing progress.
15. The discussions about writing that occurred with colleagues was useful to my writing skills.
16. The discussions about publishing that occurred with colleagues was useful to my understanding of the publication process.
17. Networking with colleagues during the writing retreat has been helpful to my career.
18. I received support and encouragement about my writing from participating in the Ashland Writing Retreat
19. My knowledge in publishing has increased as a result of attending the Ashland Writing Retreat.
20. My confidence in publishing has increased as a result of attending the Ashland Writing Retreat.
21. My motivation in publishing has increased as a result of attending the Ashland Writing Retreat.
Open-ended item:
Please comment on any additional benefits from the writing retreat.
Focus Group Questions
1. What do you see as the benefits of the writing retreat to your career?
2. What barriers to writing progress did the writing retreat help overcome for you?
3. Have the following aspects been helpful to your writing progress? If so, how? Have the following aspects been helpful to your career progression? If so, how?
a. Peer review
b. Dedicated time for writing
c. Discussions about writing
d. Discussions about publication issues
e. Networking with colleagues
4. Are there additional aspects of this retreat that have been beneficial to your writing or career progression that we haven't talked about?
5. Do you have any suggestions for improvement of the writing retreat related to writing or career progression?

practice setting), discipline, and publication rates attributed to the retreat. Thirteen Likert type scale survey items asked about participant perceptions of the impact of various aspects of the writing retreat on publication, scholarly activity, and career advancement. In addition, impact of the writing retreat on knowledge, confidence and motivation related to publication was measured. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements on a Scale of 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral – Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. An open-ended text box asked for comments related to additional benefits of the writing retreat. Descriptive statistics were measured and summarized.

Participants from the 2017 writing retreat were invited to participate in a focus group discussion to further explore benefits, barriers and aspects of the writing retreat that were particularly helpful. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the focus group. The online survey items and focus group questions can be found in [Table 2](#).

The focus group session was audio recorded and transcribed. Qualitative comments from the on-line survey and the focus group transcript were analyzed by two coders in Nvivo 11 using thematic analysis procedures developed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). The audiotape and transcript were reviewed for accuracy and to re-familiarize the coders with the data. Data were analyzed into initial themes. Constant comparative analysis methods were used to group themes into the most salient categories. Some themes were organized hierarchically into sub-themes if an overarching theme best described sub-themes. Data analysis continued until the two coders agreed on a final interpretation. Definitions were created for categories, themes, and sub-themes. Selection of vivid exemplars was coded as quotes to best illustrate the themes and sub-themes.

Results

Quantitative survey results

Survey data collection occurred in summer of 2017. There were fifty-six participants who attended the writing retreat over the period from 2010 to 2016. Valid email addresses were found for fifty-three of them. Thirty-one responded to the survey for a response rate of 58.5%. Fourteen respondents had attended one retreat while seventeen (54.8%) has attended two or more. Participants came from all academic ranks, with the most common academic rank being Associate Professor (41.9%). Nine participants (29%) attributed publication of one manuscript to the writing retreat and fourteen (45.2%) attributed more than one publication.

The summary of survey responses to the writing retreat impact can be found in [Fig. 1](#). Responses of participant who answered with “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” are combined and presented for all respondents as well as for participants who attended two or more retreats. Participants agreed that the writing retreat enhanced their overall scholarly writing activity (90.3%), the majority agreed that the writing retreat influenced their career (71%), with fewer endorsing the retreat as helping with promotion (38.7%). Participants who attended two or more retreats had stronger agreement with the statements that the writing retreat influenced their career (76.5%) and/or promotion (52.9%).

The strongest elements of the writing retreat were the support and encouragement participants received about their writing (96.8% agreement) and the dedicated time for writing (90.3% agreement). Other strong components for the retreat were the discussions with colleagues about writing (87.1% agreement) and publishing (80.7% agreement) and the networking (80.7% agreement) that occurred during the retreat. Participants who attended two or more retreats particularly valued the networking (88.2% agreement). The majority of participants (77.4%) believed the peer review was useful, particularly those who attended two or more retreats (88.2%). The majority of participants reported their knowledge (61.3%), confidence (61.3%), and motivation (74.2%) about writing increased as a result to the writing retreat. The writing retreat was viewed by most participants (64.5%) as helpful in decreasing the time frame for submission of manuscripts.

Qualitative results

Thirteen survey respondents submitted written comments to the survey. Eleven participants attended the focus group. There were four categories of themes that emerged from the data: 1) benefits, 2) barriers, 3) contextual influences, and, 4) recommendations. The category of benefits was defined as positive aspects of the writing retreat.

Benefits of the Writing Retreat (total % Agree or Strongly Agree)

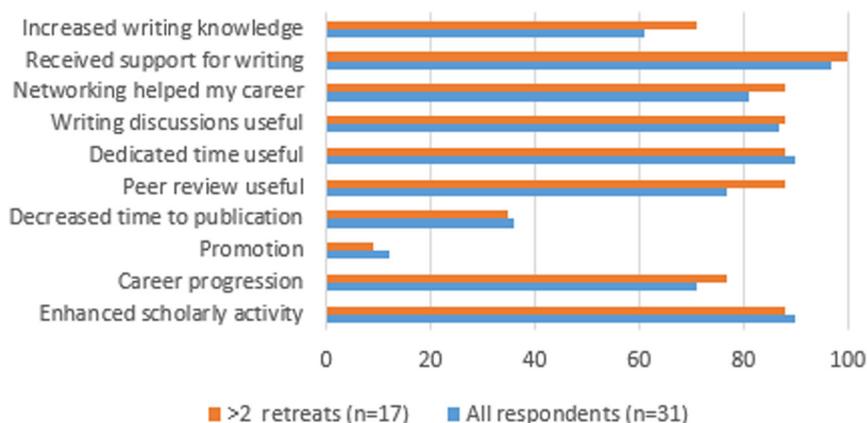


Fig. 1. Benefits of the writing retreat.

Barriers were situations or actions that impede full benefit of the writing retreat. The category of contextual influences was defined as actions or situations that may influence perception of the writing retreat either positively or negatively depending on the situation. Lastly, recommendations were suggestions to improve the writing retreat or to improve writing throughout the year.

The category of benefits had the largest number of themes and one theme had three sub-themes. The seven themes were creating a community of writers, making writing a priority, improving writing, providing inspiration, career advancement, social aspects and health habits. Creating a community of writers had three sub-themes: receiving guidance and/or mentorship, safe space, and shared accountability.

In the theme, creating a community of writers, participants described how the retreat brings writers together in a spirit of camaraderie and of sharing of knowledge or experience with one another. This was captured in this comment: “The camaraderie and sharing of what other scholars were doing was amazing. I enjoyed the opportunity and time to work with my colleague on getting a draft of the article written during the workshop and emphasis on getting it submitted for publication as the outcome of the workshop.” Participants reported that this creating of community occurred through receiving guidance and/or mentorship, the perception that the writing retreat was a safe space and that there was an expectation of shared accountability. Participants valued receiving guidance or mentorship to improve writing, which included advice and affirmation. They described the writing retreat as a safe space: comfortable, welcoming place regardless of level of writing experience. These two sub-themes were captured by this quote: “I also appreciate that mentorship that happens in this environment in a really comfortable way. So, it isn't that I walk in here and I feel intimidated because there are people who are these world-renowned researchers and have done this amazing work for all these years. And I don't feel that I don't have anything to offer to new graduates, people who are just starting their academic career. That we all come together and provide what we can when we can, but that we're all learning, too.”

The peer review and discussion over lunch of writing progress created shared accountability that helped to keep each other on track with writing. As one participant shared: “I've been to three different writing retreats, and I want to say the key about this one is that there is a piece of accountability that I haven't experienced at others where (at this retreat) you review for your colleagues, and your colleagues review you and like, ‘Susan (not real name), where's your next draft?’ At other retreats, it's like you work together in a room, but there's no shared accountability and keeping each other on track. That's what I find unique about this writing retreat.”

The next set of themes, making writing a priority, improving writing, and providing inspiration related to how the writing retreat directly influenced writing. In the theme making writing a priority, participants described how the writing retreat kept the emphasis on writing as described in this quote: “The retreat elevates writing as a priority and that makes a difference!” The retreat improved writing by contributing to writing skills, productivity and scholarly output. Lastly participants described the inspiration that occurred at the writing retreat which also influence productivity. Discussions and networking with colleagues contributed to productivity. As one participant reported: “Another benefit...is... the ability to have the lunchtime conversations...where we take very concrete recommendation and ... put into practice right then and there, it advances our productivity even more, but we learn so much and get so many ideas.”

Other benefits of the writing retreat identified that were not focused on writing were career advancement, social aspects, and healthy habits. Participants described how the writing retreat helps advance careers through networking, experiences, promotion, and/or new opportunities and connections. One participant shared: “There's somebody that was at the last retreat I was at in 2014 who ended up inviting me to work with them ..., and it was interesting because she said, ‘We met in 2014,’ and she remembered me. I think that in terms of career advancement that was really helpful just to have simply been in the same room with and know the names...” Participants also appreciated the social or non-writing aspects of the retreat that contributed to its overall benefit as well as supporting healthy habits, such as exercise, healthy eating, and healthy ways of working. One participant commented: “That we've given ourselves permission to not...no expectation of writing into the evening which is a very healthy sort of way to think about it. As opposed to how we often engage in writing when we're at home which is on weekends and late at night and giving up exercise and giving up health-related... And so, there's something about doing it in a healthy way that I think is really important role-modeling.”

There were three themes identified as barriers to impeding full benefit of the retreat: competing priorities, distance, and the imposter syndrome. Competing priorities were personal or professional situations or actions that vied for one's writing time. One participant commented: “It was difficult to disconnect and completely engage due to competing priorities.” Another said, “There have been logistical issues with getting here: classes and family”. Participants relocating to a more distant geographic location stated that distance to travel would be a barrier to attending. Participants also made references to the imposter syndrome as a barrier to attending the retreat thinking one does not have the level of writing experience to participate in the writing retreat.

This theme was especially voiced by participants new to the retreat.

Contextual influences were actions or situations that may influence perception of the writing retreat either positively or negatively depending on the situation. There was one theme in this category: Quality of the review. As one participant summarized, “The level of benefit (of the retreat) does depend in part to the quality of the review given by assigned reviewers.” Another participant commented: “I really get into this place where I feel like it's not ready yet to show somebody else. This (the peer review) forces you to send something, whatever you have. And I keep thinking that, well, how can I get good feedback when it's so far from being done? But I just sent my draft to my reviewers just to give them a sense of what I was researching, and they gave me feedback. I was like, ‘Ooo. That's really good!’ So, now I feel like, ‘Oh, I do have something more tangible.’ It really forces me to seek peer review which I probably wouldn't do.”

The last category, recommendations were suggestions to improve the writing retreat or to improve writing throughout the year. Most recommendations centered on how to prepare and support newcomers to the expectations of the writing retreat. Additional recommendations were to provide more clarity about the expectations for peer review and sharing drafts of papers. As one participant shared, “I would say, as this is my first time, I didn't know until the email came out in mid-June that the expectation was we would have something already, to some degree, to hand to reviewers before we came.” These suggestions were added to the “Frequently Asked Questions” in Table 1.

Discussion

The majority of participants agreed that the writing retreat enhanced their overall scholarly activity and reported their knowledge, confidence and motivation to write increased as a result of participation. Participants valued the dedicated time for writing, peer review, and structured time for discussions about writing and publishing. This was especially true for participants who attended two or more times. Additional benefits included the ability to network with colleagues which participants found helpful to their career progression. The social and emotional support and sense of camaraderie among participants were strong components of the success of this structured writing retreat in addition to the opportunity to make writing a priority. This social and emotional support may be especially beneficial to inexperienced authors who may encounter “the imposter syndrome” in relation to writing for publication. A surprising number of participants endorsed the item that this experience contributed to promotion, given that many attended only once and the retreat did not synchronize with the timing of all promotion reviews.

Barriers to receiving full benefit from the writing retreat were the inability to fully disconnect from personal and professional responsibilities and one's self-confidence in writing. Preparing new participants through the development of a “Frequently Asked Questions” guide was helpful to engaging those new to the writing retreat. A writing retreat contrasts with collaborative writing groups and writing workshops by the intense, dedicated time for writing over sequential days and the likelihood of engaging with colleagues across disciplines and organizations, which can have an additional benefit of networking.

Conclusion

This evaluation contributes to our understanding of the usefulness of a writing retreat, a strategy underreported in the literature, in facilitating scholarly writing for both new and experienced writers. Such a retreat is easily organized and can be adapted to multiple settings. This report focuses on a sequential, multi-day writing retreat; additionally, this strategy can also be adapted successfully for a one-day writing retreat. This strategy has value in supporting faculty to complete dissemination of scholarship through creating a community for writing. Dissemination of research, practice and education innovation is vital to academic success, increasing the importance of strategies to promote scholarly productivity and motivation, and to build writing skill among faculty. This writing retreat has demonstrated effectiveness in mentoring and promoting writing among faculty and reinforces the notion that writing, while an academic expectation, can be enhanced through structured support.

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