

23 Spaces to write: temporal, physical, digital. What can we learn from the experiences of female academics attending writing groups and retreats during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper reports on ongoing research into the experiences of female academics participating in academic writing groups and retreats, online and in-person, between 2020 and 2023. It considers how these interventions addressed challenges participants faced in writing for publication during the pandemic. Findings to date show that writing groups and retreats, whether online or in-person, create not only temporal, physical and digital spaces for academic writing, but importantly intellectual and professional space to expand and strengthen academic identities. The creation of spaces to write continues to matter 'post-pandemic'. Not only are participants trying to catch up on writing goals disrupted by COVID-19, but the pressure to publish ('or perish') continues in the face of academic workloads dominated by teaching, student pastoral care and administration. The paper argues that research findings demonstrate both need and potential for post-pandemic institutional policy to create space, in the broadest sense, for academic writing.

Full paper

Introduction

This paper reports on research into the experiences of UK female academics participating in academic writing groups and retreats, online and in-person, between 2020 and 2023. It considers how these interventions addressed challenges participants faced in writing for publication during the pandemic and argues that research findings demonstrate both need and potential for post-pandemic institutional policy to create space, in the broadest sense, for academic writing. (66)

Contexts

What, where and how often academics publish their research is vital currency of an academic career, yet 'while research is a priority in every university strategy, the writing element of research is not universally experienced as a mainstream activity' (Murray and Newton 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges of finding time and concentration to produce high-quality academic writing. As working women shouldered the burden of care when paid work shifted into the home, Boncori (2020), Pebdani et al. (2022) among others, document disadvantages female academics faced in sustaining research productivity during lockdowns. Emerging research (Clark, 2023) shows that the negative impact of the pandemic on female academics' publication output continues two years after the lifting of the last (UK) lockdown.

Writing groups and retreats are frequently deployed to support academic writing for staff and students. Haas' typology (2014) notes that no two are like, but all 'involve writers coming together to support each other, and ... share the common goal of improving both process and product of writing (2017, p.2). They also serve to 'disrupt the commonplace ... fantasy of writing as a solitary activity' (Gere, 1987; Brodkey, 1996). Although terms are sometimes used interchangeably, the literature distinguishes writing groups from retreats, the latter being 'structured events during which a group of people write in the same room and share their aims, progress and difficulties over several days' (Aitchison and Guerin 2014; Murray 2015). The pre-pandemic assumption was that participants shared

common physical space during the event. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated what had been a more gradual move towards the use of online platforms.

Method

This paper prefigures fuller findings of ongoing research investigating the experiences of female participants in four academic writing interventions between 2020-2023.

- WRITESPACE (June-December 2020) - online writing initiative for female academics employed at a large, modern UK university;
- THIRDSPACE (January-March 2021) - six-week international online writing programme, part of the SRHE Professional Development Programme;
- RESIDENTIAL 1 (February 2023) and 2 (June 2023) - two three-day retreats

Data gathering from participants of RESIDENTIALS 1 and 2 will complete in October 2023 when the full dataset will comprise:

- 5 written testimonials (WRITESPACE)
- 28 online, post-programme surveys (THIRDSPACE, RESIDENTIALS 1 and 2)
- 8 transcripts of individual, semi-structured interviews (THIRDSPACE)
- 2 transcripts of facilitated online discussions (RESIDENTIALS 1 and 2).

Findings to date

Findings to date show that writing groups and retreats, whether online or in-person, create not only temporal, physical and digital spaces for academic writing, but importantly intellectual and professional space to expand and strengthen academic identities. The forging of protected space for writing was particularly important during pandemic lockdowns, as already porous work/home boundaries became increasingly blurred. Online groups provided digital spaces separate from constrained physical circumstances at home. Data shows that pursuing a shared endeavour with increasingly familiar strangers contributed to meaningful connections which participants found helpful in developing a writing 'habit'. Findings also indicate that session structuring and timekeeping by a peer facilitator played a significant role in 'holding' a positive space for participants to write.

Data from RESIDENTIAL 1 participants indicates the creation of space to write continues to matter 'post-pandemic' as participants try to 'catch up' on writing goals disrupted by COVID-19. The pressure to publish ('or perish') continues in the face of academic workloads dominated by teaching, student pastoral care and administration. The seemingly simple act of visibly blocking out electronic calendar space both deters other colleagues from interrupting and claiming time and gives the writer herself permission to give time to writing. Analysis of the full dataset will enable further comparison of online and in-person interventions.

Implications for policy?

The conference presentation will argue that as long as academic writing is not mainstreamed in the academic workload, those who carry the burden of care within the workplace and the home will be disadvantaged. It will call for an institutional policy approach which a) acknowledges the COVID-19 pandemic's unequal impact on women's research productivity including writing for publication and b) creates protected space for academic writing for those who were disproportionately disadvantaged eg: through workload allocation models and supported interventions.

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