

## **Community, collegiality and care: Academic writing and spaces of resistance.**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

Academic writing groups and retreats are a familiar feature of the contemporary academy. While no two groups or retreats are alike, all such interventions involve writers coming together and prioritise both process and products of writing. This paper reports on findings of three studies, each applying to a different academic writing group or retreat targeted at female academic staff between 2020-2024. A thread of community, collegiality and care weaves through the combined data. Using Massey's heuristic device of activity space, I theorise the writing groups and retreats in question as microenvironments radically different from the neo-liberal academy. I argue they are spaces of resistance to the geographies of power operating across universities and the wider sector, in which interactions of gender, space and power create spaces of shared endeavour.

### **Full paper**

### **PAPER**

This paper reports on findings of three studies into female participants' motivation for, experiences and outcomes of, targeted academic writing groups and retreats, between 2020-2024. A thread of community, collegiality and care weaves through the combined data. Using Massey's device of 'activity space' (2005), I argue these interventions are characterised by particular interactions of gender, space and power and are radically different spaces from the individualised, competitive neo-liberal academy.

Academic career progression and success are driven by written outputs, 'one of the principle means by which academics enact professional capital as experts and specialists in their disciplinary fields' (French 2020, p.1605). Yet finding the time to write productively presents challenges at all career stages. Relations between research (including writing for publication) and teaching are troubled by large student numbers and a focus on metrics.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, as teaching pivoted online and student pastoral care needs rose.

COVID-19 also highlighted longstanding gender inequality in the higher education (HE) sector. Female academics were disproportionately disadvantaged by the shift of paid labour into the domestic/household sphere, homeschooling children and restrictive shielding measures (Carruthers Thomas, 2023; Pebdani et al., 2023). Women remain 'underrepresented in senior positions in UK HE and overrepresented ... on part-time and fixed-term contracts (Advance HE, 2024, p.208).

Between 2020-2024, in my hybrid role as an academic and a diversity worker within a large, modern UK university, I ran two online writing groups (WriteSpace (WS) and ThirdSpace (TS)) and co-hosted two residential writing retreats (RR), all targeted at supporting female academics in writing for publication. Haas (2014) argues there is no fixed understanding of what constitutes a writers' group, but they typically involve writers coming together and improving both process and products of writing.

132 women attended one or more intervention. I used testimonials, online surveys, individual interviews and focus groups to gather data from 59 self-selecting participants. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, Terry and Hayfield, 2018) of the combined data generated three overarching themes: motivation, experience and outcomes, each with several sub-themes. I then considered the data through Massey's device of activity space, 'the spatial network of links and activities, of spatial connections and of locations within which a particular agent operates ... within each space is a geography of power '(2005 p.55). This enables a conceptualisation of the academy and individual universities as activity spaces each shaped by geographies of power including competition, capital, metrics, excessive workload and performance targets. As described above, gendered inequalities position female academics in distinct ways in relation to flows of power within these spaces.

Each study participant was motivated to attend a group or retreat to find protected temporal, physical and intellectual (head)space for their writing. However, a majority were also motivated by a wish to write alongside others, citing writing as part of a group, online or in-person as helpful for self-discipline, encouragement and reflexivity. Data supports Lee and Boud's argument that writing groups build on those aspects of academic writing that are collective and peer-based (2010, p.190).

Participants experienced a sense of community online and in-person. Opportunities for joint reflection generated a sense of shared endeavour. Despite the social isolation of the first COVID-19 lockdown, regular online meetings enabled WRITESPACE participants to connect. 'Getting to know others' goals and writing accomplishments week after week allowed a cheering community to flourish' (WS). Residential retreats brought women at different career stages together to write intensively, eat and relax for three days. An ethos of care resonated strongly for retreatants with caring responsibilities. 'I didn't have to

think about dinner. I was being fed' (RR). WriteSpace and ThirdSpace participants also referred to groups' structured facilitation as 'professional care'.

In addition to written outputs, every study evidenced intangible outcomes in which community and collegiality played a part, including changes in mindset: 'I found the presence of other people who were also struggling to write, took away some of my guilt' (RR). 'I started to get a sense of achievement for every paragraph written as opposed to a sense of failure that I had not completed a chapter' (TS).

Community, collegiality and care characterise these writing interventions as activity spaces radically different from the individualised, competitive neo-liberal academy. I argue that they are spaces of resistance to the geographies of power operating across universities and the wider sector, in which interactions of gender, space and power create spaces of shared endeavour.