

Write Now!: Nurturing supportive communities for practice for distance learners

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

We sought to improve submission of assignments by offering pre-deadline online 'Write Now!' writing workshops on undergraduate modules at the Open University, however data from our pilot demonstrated that students placed significant value on the caring, compassionate peer support they experienced within those sessions. Students reported positive outcomes from meeting and working alongside their peers at the workshops, including reduced anxiety and increased confidence about their assignments. This approach therefore has the potential to provide additional support for students with, for example, mental health needs (c12% on A&H qualifications at the Open University); and also as a space in which community and belonging can be nurtured, which has been shown to be crucial for retention of students of low-socio-economic status. The initiative therefore provides a simple, adaptable and powerful model for using online learning spaces to combine study skills support with the nurturing of supportive learning communities.

Full paper

A body of scholarship (e.g. Moore, 2003; Grant, 2006; Murray and Newton, 2009) has established the benefits of writing retreats for academic staff and postgraduate researchers: aiding increased focus and productivity, and fostering support within a supportive community of peers engaged in the same process. Initially designed as in-person events, the Covid pandemic accelerated efforts to adapt writing retreats to the online space (Koulaxi and Kong, 2022) but less attention has been given to date to utilising this approach to support undergraduate students.

The Open University (OU) is a large, distance-learning institution in the UK, with teaching delivered almost entirely online. In the School of Arts and Humanities (A&H), we sought to enhance support for students with assignment planning and writing. Drawing on the

academic writing retreat model, we piloted live 'Write Now!' online writing workshops in two stages in 2022-24. We aimed to explore the impact of enabling students to become part of a 'community of practice' (Chavez et al., 2021) where participants can support each other to develop their competence and confidence as academic writers.

The initial stage of the 'Write Now!' pilot was carried out on an FHEQ Level 5 English Literature module during 2022-23. The sessions supported students' time management and writing strategies, through breaking down the assignment into multiple smaller tasks and writing activities employing the tools of structured – or 'focused' – freewriting (Li, 2007) and the Pomodoro Technique (Cirillo 2018). Each session was facilitated by a pair of tutors, who were encouraged to share their own experiences of writing and meeting deadlines, to help foster a sense of shared practice and normalise experiences such as anxiety and procrastination.

Attendance at the pilot workshops was optional, in line with OU policy, and student engagement was positive. 150 students attended at least one session (17% of the module cohort); 40 students attended three or more sessions. While most students identified support with breaking down the assignment as the most useful aspect of the sessions, many also valued meeting with their peers and realising that they were not alone in finding the writing process difficult. Students also reported that the sessions provided a 'safe space' which reduced their anxiety and sense of isolation, helping them feel more connected to other students studying the same module. These positive impacts on mental wellbeing indicated the sessions have wider benefits beyond supporting study skills, a pertinent outcome as the number of HE students declaring a mental health condition has risen sharply in recent years (e.g. Sheldon et al. 2021; Lewis and Stiebahl, 2024); c.12% of OU A&H students fall into this category.

These positive outcomes supported a wider-roll out during 2023-24, involving eight modules in multiple disciplines at FHEQ Levels 4,5 and 6, which established that the sessions are adaptable for different contexts and replicated the positive outcomes of the initial pilot. A feedback survey of attendees (n=354) demonstrated positive students' perceptions of the sessions, to the extent that they would continue to attend and recommend them to others. The survey revealed that those who attended more than one session rated *hearing of how other students are getting on* and the *working alongside other students* as significantly more important aspects of the sessions. This suggests repeated engagement with writing activities within a shared community of practice provides a valuable inter-personal experience which enhances students' study experience.

'Write Now!' workshops have now been fully embedded in the tuition of over 80% of OU A&H undergraduate modules, as well as a new Masters programme, and have also been adopted in other parts of the University. In addition, we have adapted the approach to foster student communities beyond module level, by introducing 'Big Write Now!' sessions open to all Arts and Humanities students. Attendees range from first year undergraduates to MA students, and students frequently comment during these sessions how much they

enjoy being able to connect with and work alongside their peers: 'I love knowing there will be people here also working, it makes me sit down and start in a way that feels friendly and communal, not intimidating'. It has also been satisfying to see students building on this experience to organise their own writing sessions, held in a newly-created online student common room. By taking ownership of this initiative, we can see students forming meaningful, supportive relationships with their peers across the School, overcoming some of the challenges of studying online at a distance through the nurturing of community identity and the value of shared communities of practice.