

Negotiating research, other academic roles and life: An evaluation of a long-term approach

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Abstract

Research productivity plays an important role in academic careers. However, the process of negotiating research, other roles and life in competitive times has not been fully explained (Barcan 2013, Fowler and Proctor 2008, Leitch 2009, MacIntyre and MacIntyre 1999, Pollard and Oancea 2010). This paper reports on an evaluation of research development during nine writing retreats (Murray and Newton 2009) run at one university over one year. We collected and analysed responses of 67 participants' about written outputs and other outcomes. Participants reported changes in how they thought about their research, writing practices and their role as researchers through attending retreats. These retreats transformed their experience of working in a university and prevented a potential disconnect between research and other academic roles. This paper argues that this intervention enabled the articulation of research with other academic roles and life and created conditions for growing healthy research cultures at this university.

Context

Being research-active requires complex negotiations between competing academic roles. Where research is not externally funded, the negotiation may be even more problematic at this time in the UK. This paper reports on an evaluation of research capacity development at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), designed to enable academics to negotiate research, other academic roles and life. It concludes by acknowledging the plurality of approaches that emerged from a social approach (Murray 2015) to what is still a key role in higher education – developing and communicating new knowledge in writing.

Deploying an established strategy for developing research capacity

The process of negotiating research, other roles and life in competitive times has been discussed (Barcan 2013, Fowler and Proctor 2008, Leitch 2009, MacIntyre and MacIntyre 1999, Pollard and Oancea 2010), and research has shown that structured writing retreats provide spaces where these negotiations can occur (MacLeod et al. 2012, Murray and Newton 2009, Murray et al. 2012). However, the process of negotiation has not been fully explained. The aim of this evaluation was to gain further insight into these negotiations.

The UWS School of Education research strategy included monthly structured writing retreats, and nine took place in 2013. A total of 109 participants attended. Each retreat had between 8 and 15 participants, with an average of 12 participants per retreat. The 109 attendances were for 67 different individuals. Thirty-seven academics and students from UWS attended one or more retreats in January, February, April (2), May, October, November (2) and December. Fifty-seven participants attended one retreat, while 10 attended more than one. The majority came from UWS Schools of Education (n=17, 46%) and Nursing (n=11, 30%). Other schools represented included Business, Creative and Cultural Industries, Science and Social Science. In addition, 30 students and academics from eleven other UK universities and one from the National Health Service attended. Twenty of these attended one retreat, while 10 attended more than one.

Evaluation

Outputs

At the end of each retreat participants reported on their output in terms of progress they had made with writing projects they worked on at the retreat (Table 1). While many participants only wrote on one project, such as a thesis or journal article, many participants worked on multiple projects during retreats.

| Contribution to: | N |
|---|----|
| PhD | 71 |
| <i>Newly drafted</i> | 38 |
| <i>Editing of previously written work</i> | 17 |
| <i>Tables/Figures/References</i> | 5 |
| <i>Preparatory work</i> | 10 |
| Journal article | 37 |
| <i>Newly drafted</i> | 21 |
| <i>Editing of previously written work</i> | 8 |
| <i>Revisions of submitted articles</i> | 5 |
| <i>Preparatory work</i> | 3 |
| Conferences material | 20 |
| Book chapter | 15 |

Table 1. Main outputs

In addition, participants wrote sections for other projects, including reports, research proposals and grant applications.

Outcomes

At the end of each retreat participants were asked to describe the impact of attending the retreat. Several themes emerged from these descriptions, which are broadly similar to findings of other studies: for example, the importance of disconnecting from normal life and work responsibilities, internet and social media; how increased productivity provided a sense of achievement, which acted as a motivator to continue writing after the retreat; epiphanies or turning points in research thinking, particularly for those who attended the writing retreats regularly; and the benefits of talking about research and writing with colleagues from different universities, disciplines, levels of seniority, experience and different career stages. In order to sustain these outputs and outcomes, participation at retreat was not viewed as a one-off; instead, regular attendance at retreats was, and still is, recommended to develop research capacity and grow research cultures at UWS. At a cost of £170 per person per retreat this provides a good return on the university's investment.

Conclusions

While the findings of this evaluation match those of other studies, what is new is the long-term use of the structured writing retreat strategy. Running retreats almost every month not only gave more people more opportunities to attend, it also signaled university support for staff in their efforts to negotiate research, other academic roles and life.

A key finding of this evaluation is that, possibly as an effect of the long-term nature of this approach, the effects were – and still are – consolidated by writing groups, writing workshops and micro-groups (Murray 2014) meeting on campus and in other settings, set up by staff and students who attended retreats during this period. For example, there is a writers' group, initiated and run by PhD students from UWS, Glasgow and Strathclyde universities. This supports a community of practice, as staff and students transfer the culture of retreats to campus settings, and it sustains research collaborations and networks developed during retreats. Some will argue that this effect occurs because UWS is a beginner in the game of research, but these retreats and this study included participants from research-intensive universities.

Research is intensely competitive, and many academics are overworked and vulnerable – not just at UWS. As they and we work to negotiate research, other academic roles and life – and help others to do so – we need a compassionate approach (Barcan 2013). A continuous programme of structured writing retreats can provide a way of playing the research game that is healthy and sustainable for new and established players alike. Moreover, it shows how diverse approaches to a key higher education function may be fostered.

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