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Writing together alone: Digitally connected 'snack writing' for progressing academic writing

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Background: 'Snack writing' is a term coined to describe regular short bursts of writing on a larger academic writing task. There is extensive research on academic writing, but research on 'snack writing' is limited. Moreover, the idea of 'snack writing' in an online environment is not evident in the literature.

Objectives: The study objectives were: (1) to evaluate the effectiveness of an online 'snack writing' group, and (2) to identify what might enable or constrain productive academic writing amongst group members.

Method: A reflective evaluation approach was used, in which participant researchers studied online chat data over a 6-month period. The study was framed by Activity Theory, in which digitally connected writing is understood as a new mediational means within an academic writing system.

Results: 'Snack writing' in a digital environment was found to be effective when the writing task was focused, appropriate to the time available, and connected to a larger writing task. Goal setting, debriefing, and reflecting kept writers focused, while seeing a writing task develop over time enhanced confidence. Including writers with different levels of experience was effective for developing and sharing writing practices.

Conclusion: Regular participation in digitally connected 'snack writing' is effective as it builds a supportive writing culture.

Contribution: The study contributes to an understanding of how short bursts of writing in a digitally connected space could benefit academic tasks. The findings are therefore of use to postgraduate scholars, academics, and all those who want to progress an academic writing task when time is limited.

Keywords: academic writing; activity theory; online chat; online writing group; postgraduate scholars; research supervisors; 'snack writing'; time management.

Introduction

Higher education is currently undergoing an 'academic revolution' that has largely been driven by massification (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2019). Academics are, consequently, confronted with increasing numbers of undergraduate students, many of whom require academic support. Academic staff have also had to take on the responsibility of supervising an increasing number of postgraduate students (Gray, Madson & Jackson 2018; Petrucka 2019). In universities of technology, where more and more degree programmes and postgraduate specialisation are offered, pressure is placed on academics to attain higher degrees, to conduct research, and to publish their research findings. The ability to undertake academic writing projects is, in fact, central to the work of academic staff and postgraduate scholars. Writing and publishing are the route to tenure and promotion in academia (Matthews 2022), while for postgraduate candidates, mastery of academic writing is key to the successful completion of a thesis (eds. Hardy & Clughen 2012). When academic writing is experienced as a barrier, usually combined with feelings of isolation, this is associated with dissatisfaction with an academic career and non-completion of postgraduate study (Tremblay-Wragg et al. 2021). So how might academics find time in their busy schedules to progress their own academic writing, as well as support their postgraduate students as they tackle the daunting task of writing a thesis? How might academics build a writing culture in which to 'publish and flourish' (Gray et al. 2018), rather than struggle in the existing, stressful culture of 'publish or perish?' (Amutuhaire 2022).

Several studies suggest that the collegial environment of a writing group, whose members meet regularly to spend time writing, and to discuss their writing, could enable academics and postgraduates to develop their writing in a way that is supportive, rather than stressful

(Gray et al. 2018). Such writing has been called 'snack writing' (Hislop, Murray & Newton 2008) or a 'power hour', that may take place online (Zihms & Reid Mackie 2021). In this article, we evaluate a 'snack writing' intervention that had the dual aim of supporting academic staff and their postgraduate students in their academic writing projects. This study, therefore, has the objective of evaluating the effectiveness of the online 'snack-writing group', and identifying what might enable or constrain productive academic writing amongst group members. The research question guiding the study is: How, and why, might productive academic writing in a 'snack-writing group'' be enabled or constrained?

Literature review

'Snack writing' is a term first coined by Hislop et al. (2008) to describe a strategy for tackling academic writing tasks when time is limited. 'Snack writing' entails writing in short time slots. It has been found to be a productive strategy that works on many levels, including 'generating text, boosting confidence [and] getting into the writing habit' (Murray 2014:6). Drawing on the concept of 'snack writing' Gardiner and Kerns (2012) describe the practice of regularly writing in more detail in limited time. They define 'snack writing' as writing for 'about 1–2 h a day for graduate students who are writing a dissertation, and about 45–90 min a day for researchers trying to increase their publication output' (2012:256). 'Snack writing' can be contrasted with 'binge writing', that is, writing only when one has a whole day, or more, allocated to a writing task. Gardiner and Kerns (2012) claim that 'snack writing' is more productive than binge writing. Some academics have taken issue with the term 'binge writing' as it implies an eating disorder, and more recently Murray (2020) substituted the term with 'feast writing', but continues to use the term 'snack writing'. Combining feast writing, that is, writing in large chunks of time, and 'snack writing' that is, writing a little often, for example in 30-, 60- or 90-min slots, is 'an effective strategy for making time for writing in academic or professional schedules', while 'still having a life' (Murray 2020).

Murray states that a 'snack writing' task is dependent on the actual time available, for example, some academics and postgraduates might 'snack write for as little as 10–15 minutes, or sometimes for as much as 90 minutes' (2014:6). Like Gardiner and Kearns (2012), Murray (2014) claims that 'snack writing' is more productive than feast writing because it is 'less daunting and more productive to write little and often' (2014:6). While 'snack writing' is generally agreed to be effective, there are differences with regard to the optimal time allocated to, and frequency of, 'snack writing'. It is a long-term writing strategy that enables writers to adopt new writing behaviours, develop a support network, as well as overcome external barriers to writing (Hislop et al. 2008). Murray argues that successful snack writers also need a detailed design for writing before they can allocate writing tasks to the available time slots. Without such a detailed design, it will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to undertake productive 'snack writing'. This is because large semi-defined writing tasks (~3000 words) require large chunks of time, while smaller well-defined writing tasks (~500 words) can be done in short sessions (Murray 2020:124).

Gardiner and Kearns (2012) believe that 'snack writing' should not involve editing tasks, such as 'revising wording, perfecting grammar or refining referencing. It is regular and uninterrupted time spent solely putting words on a page' (2012:129). They also recommend 'snack writing' as a process in which 'the writer does not edit or read or format' (2012:241). They explained that 80% of the writer's time will be taken 'to edit, format, check facts, find references and so on' (2012:240), and that this work should not be done in the more focused time allocated to snack writing. 'Snack writing' should be reserved for 'the most difficult work'. Murray (2014), however, feels that both writing and revising are important tasks for snack writers. While there are differences in what 'snack writing' comprises, researchers agree that 'snack writing' should be used to advance a single academic writing task, such as a thesis chapter or a journal article.

There has been extensive research on academic writing (De Caux 2021; eds. Hardy & Clughen 2012; Paltridge 2020), including social writing on writing retreats (Murray 2012; Tremblay-Wragg et al. 2021 Winberg, Jacobs & Wolff 2017); however, the research on 'snack writing' is limited. Moreover, the idea of 'snack writing' as a form of social writing that could occur in an online environment that includes both academics and their postgraduate students, is not evident in the literature. It is this form of digitally connected 'snack writing' that this study investigated.

Theoretical framework: Activity theory

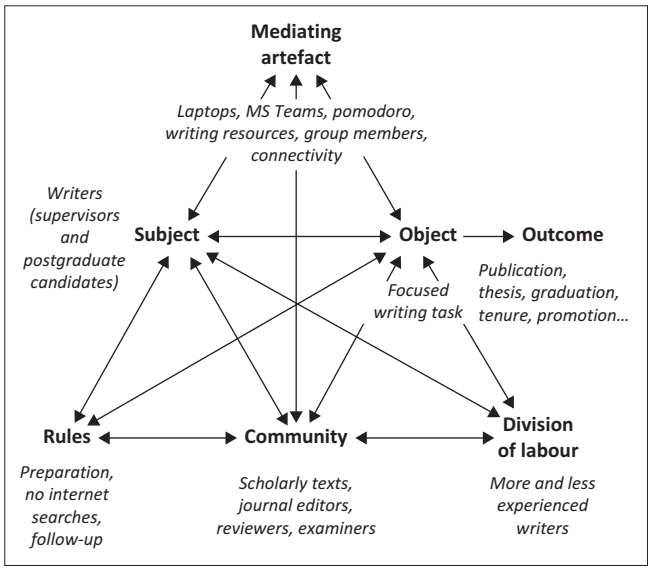
The study was framed within the Activity Theory (Engeström 1999). The Activity Theory is useful for understanding a new practice, as well as tracing the historical roots of the practice. It raises awareness of the importance of the larger system at work in the accomplishment of human activity (Engeström 2014). In this study, the lens of the Activity Theory provided a systemic view of 'snack writing' as a social practice. With the Activity Theory is understood that human activity is always undertaken by subjects, mediated by tools and embedded within a social context known as an activity system. The Activity Theory is particularly appropriate for the analysis of academic writing, as it foregrounds the social and contextual embeddedness of writing as a human activity (Russell 1997). In an academic-writing activity system, the subjects are the writers whose purpose (or object) is to produce a high-quality academic text. The object can be given or projected, and at the same time may also be anticipated and constructed (Engeström, Puonti & Seppänen 2003). The first principle of activity is that the object drives the activity (Engeström 1999); and to work successfully on this object, tools or mediational means are needed. Tools and mediational means in an academic-writing system would usually comprise: data, sources, references, templates, guidelines, laptops, and facilitators. In this study, the digitally connected 'snack-writing group' was understood

as a new mediational means of facilitating writing within a larger system of academic writing.

Figure 1 represents an academic writing system in which the subjects (in this case the writers, both supervisors and students) work on the object (a piece of academic writing). In order to achieve the object (which might be producing around 300 words of text), they need mediating artefacts – sometimes referred to as 'tools' or 'resources' by activity theorists. The tools and resources would include a laptop (or other device), the guidance of more advanced others (such as more experienced participants in the group), references and other texts – and the space and time (ideally planned space and time) for doing the writing.

Academic writing is deeply embedded within academic cultures, which is represented by the lower half of the activity triangle. The division of labour usually separates supervisors and students, as the students write and the supervisors assess the writing. In this case, however, the supervisors were not present as supervisors, but as fellow writers. This is different because supervisors do not usually share their own writing practices with their postgraduate candidates. In our 'snack writing' activity system, the supervisors and postgraduate candidates were more equal participants in a shared online space, each working on their own individual writing tasks. The community is also represented by other academic writers who are present in the form of other scholars and their texts, reviewers and potential examiners.

The 'rules' include the generic rules for academic writing – how it is presented, structured, the kind of vocabulary that is expected, as well as the institutional rules that might include a thesis template, and how supervisors and examiners are selected.



Source: Adapted from Engeström, Y., 1999, 'Activity theory and individual and social transformation', in Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen & R.L. Punamäki (eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory*, pp. 19–30, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK

FIGURE 1: The 'snack writing' activity system.

Research methodology

This study is a formative evaluation of an online writing intervention. Formative evaluation is important in contexts where the continual improvement after an intervention is expected, such as in an online writing group (Flagg 2013). In educational evaluation research, there are intersections between educational research and educational practices and between researchers and practitioners (Nevo 2013). This was the case in this particular study. The description of the research methods below explains the different strands of the writing intervention and the evaluation research project, as well as their inter-relationships.

The online 'snack writing' intervention

Between 28 April 2021 and 30 April 2021, a university institute for professional education research facilitated a 3-day online writing retreat for academic staff and postgraduate candidates. Following the writing retreat, participants were keen to continue meeting online, and the institute initiated a 'snack writing' intervention that included postgraduate scholars and academic staff, most of whom were also supervisors. There were approximately 30 participants in the 'snack writing' group. Attendance was voluntary, and hence the number of attendees per session fluctuated somewhat. Over time the group consolidated into approximately 20 participants who attended regularly. These were mainly, but not exclusively, from departments in the education faculty. This research study arose from the decision to evaluate the educational intervention after a 6-month period.

The 'snack writing' meetings took place on Wednesday evenings from 18h00 to 19h05, although the final debriefing and reflection often continued for an additional 10–30 min. The 'snack writing' sessions were based on the pomodoro time-management method (Cirillo 2018). The Pomodoro technique is a time- management method developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s. It uses a kitchen timer to break work into intervals, typically 25 minutes in length, separated by short breaks. Each interval is known as a *pomodoro*, from the Italian word for tomato, after the tomato-shaped kitchen timer Cirillo used as a university student. This particular pomodoro of a 25-min focused writing session is followed by a short break.

The weekly sessions were made up of two pomodori comprising two 25-min intervals of uninterrupted writing, with each participant stating his or her goal for the evening beforehand. At the start of the online meeting, there was a 5-min input, usually a writing tip. After the first 25 min, participants briefly shared their progress, highlights, and challenges, either orally or in the chat, before continuing for another 25-min session. After the second pomodoro, participants briefly reported on their progress, be it successful or not. During the writing sessions, supervisors and students shared the same online space for slightly more than an hour, working on their individual academic writing tasks. These tasks varied from writing a journal article to working on a

specific chapter of a Masters or Doctoral thesis. There was no supervision in the writing group, only the sharing of ideas, practices and writing tips. Supervisors and postgraduate scholars were writing together in a digital space where the traditional power difference between supervisors and students was considerably reduced.

The research evaluation study

We studied the online chat data of the writing group on the experiences of academic staff and postgraduate candidates in their roles as writers during 'snack writing' sessions over a 6-month period. The data for the formative evaluation were sourced from the chat commentary that was posted in MS Teams as part of the process during the 'snack writing' sessions. MS Teams was chosen as the online platform for the 'snack writing' meetings. As MS Teams is the institutional platform for online meetings and engagement, both staff and students were familiar with its standard features, such as posting in the chat, raising a hand to speak, or sharing a screen. A less familiar form of technology might have distracted the writers. The licence conditions allowed the researchers to extract an attendance report, as well as the chat data for each of the 'snack writing' sessions. The study participants comprised 24 members of the writing group who posted in the chat during the period of the study (26 May 2021 to 01 December 2021). The participants were categorised as follows: six postgraduate supervisors, eight academic staff members who were undertaking Doctoral or Masters studies, and nine postgraduate students. As can be seen in Table 1, the group had a majority of female members.

The authors of this article are four postgraduate supervisors who constitute the core of the online 'snack-writing group'. They were participant observers of the group, and included their own comments and reflections on the weekly sessions, which were described as 'writing alone together' because writers write on their own, but with an awareness of the group that they are a part of. Usually one of the four authors played the role of facilitator. The queries, comments and reflections posted in the chat provided input from week to week, and helped the facilitators to select relevant resources to share with all group members. The writers grew together as a cohesive group of academic writers who shared the challenges of scholarly writing and celebrated their achievements.

Online chat data have frequently been used in educational technology research (e.g. Aragon et al. 2009) and have been used to study online cultures (Chen & Wang 2019), as well as online practices (Strobl et al. 2019). Chat data are generally understood to be qualitative data, and thus subject to analysis in the same way as interview data (Archibald et al. 2019). The chat data contained participants' names and email addresses, thus needed to be anonymised. After anonymisation, we analysed the data, drawing on Saldaña's (2021) two-step coding process, namely *in vivo* coding followed by theoretical coding (see Table 2).

TABLE 1: Participants who posted in the online chat.

Participant category	Female	Male	Total
Postgraduate supervisors	5	2	7
Academic staff	6	2	8
Postgraduate students	6	3	9

The first phase of data analysis involved becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the extracted chat data. Thereafter initial *in vivo* codes were manually generated by writing notes and highlighting interesting and recurring aspects of the data. The data were then interpreted through the lens of the Activity Theory, enabling the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and practices over time as online snack writers. The writers were engaged in a collective (yet individual) activity that was embedded within a larger system of academic writing. The Activity Theory enabled the researchers to unpack the complexities of this community of writers in which all were writing individually to further personal writing goals, but benefiting from the shared space, support and care of others who were writing collectively in the larger academic-writing activity system.

Ethical considerations

At the time when the decision was made to conduct research on the programme, it was necessary to obtain ethics approval. Hence, prior to extracting the chat conversations from the weekly sessions on MS Teams, an application was submitted and, following review, an ethical clearance letter was obtained from the Faculty of Education's Research Ethics Committee (reference no. EFEC 2-03/2022). The purpose of

TABLE 2: Example of the two-step coding process.

Number	Post	*In vivo* code	Activity category
1	I am structuring a new article and by the end of today's session, I want to have the complete structure in place with a mind map for the literature review	Structuring … (writing is also about structure)	Object (engaged in the work of 'structuring')
2	I used a program called Ginger to help me re-phrase the paragraph https://www.gingersoftware.com/ Ginger Software – English Grammar & Writing App Improve your English using wisdom of crowds	Ginger (sharing knowledge of new technology that supervisors did not know about – provided URL in chat)	Mediational means (paraphrasing technology – unknown to supervisors) Division of labour (flattening the hierarchy)
3	My first session was free writing as suggested. The 'pause' was good to break with one own thoughts for a while, come back and have a fresh eye on what I have written. I made changes and felt more satisfied. Now I can check with other sources.	The 'pause' was good … (showing how the 'pause' between pomodori can be useful in focused writing)	Mediational means (significance of the 'pause' as tool)
4	Wrote 173 words. ideas running away	Running away … (in the flow)	Object (progress towards bigger goal)

the study was explained to all the participants during the introductory section of several of the 'snack writing' sessions, and all members of the group provided verbal consent. In addition an email was sent to all registered members of the 'snack-writing group' in which they were informed that all information would be anonymised and that prior to anonymisation they could request in writing that their data should not to be used, if that was their wish. The confidentiality of participants was maintained by removing names and other identifiers from the data, and randomly applying participant numbers. This anonymisation of the chat data meets ethical standards, as well as the South African legal requirements prescribed by the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA).

Research findings

In this section, the key findings from our analysis of the online chat data are presented, drawing on the framework provided by the Activity Theory. 'snack writing' seems quite simple: a group of people get together online for approximately 1 h and spend most of the time writing in silence – but the tool is a little more complex than it seems. This is largely because of what happens before, between, and after the sessions.

The object drives the 'snack writing' activity system

The weekly writing goal (or object of the 'snack writing' activity) was something that writers set individually, usually a writing task that was achievable in the two 25-min sessions, such as writing a section of a paper that contributed to a larger writing outcome, i.e. a journal article. This gave writers (the subjects in the activity system) autonomy and control over their actions as their goals were individually formulated and then shared. Thus at the start of the writing session, the participants set their writing goals. Studies of postgraduate writing have shown that putting your goals into writing and sharing them with others helps you to achieve those goals (Huang 2015; Schippers et al. 2020), provided that the goals are appropriate. Writers, then, wrote in silence on their own – but very importantly – with an awareness of colleagues being here in their own space writing all together. In the first weeks of intervention, many writers underestimated the time and dedication needed, as in the following example:

> 'I have collected all the data … so I just need to start writing the article.' (Writer 1)

Writer 1 initially expected that writing would be easy. During the first few meetings, writers generally tended to set unrealistic goals, such as:

> 'I'm working on my methodology chapter and an article simultaneously. If that is possible!' (Writer 2)

By session eight, the same writer had modified her writing goal as follows: 'I would like to summarize my methodology chapter', and by session 10, her writing goal was reduced to writing 'one paragraph in my methodology chap'. Goals thus became progressively more focused, as well as more connected to the larger writing task, as shown in the following chat entry:

> 'I am completing the writing task which I started yesterday. The goal was big so I will probably complete it sometime tomorrow. I am breaking it into small manageable chunks.' (Writer 3)

Writing goals also became more varied as writers expanded their understanding of what writing involved, as in the example below:

> 'I want to write some thoughts by hand tonight. I want to write it down, annotate it, scribble all over it and then make sense of it.' (Writer 4)

Writer 4 engaged in brainstorming 'by hand', which was followed by annotation – both of which he understood to be forms of writing; Writer 5, in the example below, similarly understood structuring and mind mapping as writing:

> 'I am structuring a new article and by the end of today's session, I want to have the complete structure in place with a mind map for the literature review.' (Writer 5)

By the end of the 6-month period, the writers had come to identify forms of writing that happened at all stages of the writing process.

'Snack writing' is a new mediational means

Each 'snack writing' session opened with a short input by the facilitator on the theme for the meeting, which was usually based on a question, or on feedback from the previous week's meeting. Following the brief introduction, the writers worked on their writing projects in silence. Between the two pomodori was a 5-min break in which writers could connect with each other. These spaces enabled the sharing of writing tips and writing experiences. For example:

> 'The 'pause' was good to break with one own thoughts for a while, come back and have a fresh eye on what I have written.' (Writer 2)

Participants used the break between pomodori to share writing tools that were useful, such as an academic word bank, a free online grammar checker, or reference manager. Responding to a discussion on paraphrasing tools, one of the participants wrote:

> 'I wrote 197 words and used a program called Ginger to help me re-phrase the paragraph. After using it, I concluded with 211 words.' (Writer 6)

Participants also shared other research tips. For example, in an online chat about transcribing interviews Writers 6 suggested that 'voice-to-text technology can help'.

Unlike a writing workshop, in which a variety of writing tools and techniques might be shared over an intensive 1- or 2-day period, tips and techniques were spread out over the

6 months of 'snack writing' meetings. The information provided, from writing theory to writing tips, was therefore not overwhelming. Writing concepts, such as coherence and cohesion, made more sense to writers who were in the thick of dealing with coherence and cohesion issues. One of the writers felt inspired to 'check for coherence' following the session in which this was briefly discussed, claiming: 'I found gaps or lumpy paragraphs … so I'm attending to this now' (Writer 7).

Much of the online conversation was about sharing practice, such as the extent to which writers used structure (e.g. headings, sub-headings) and how they created these structures (e.g. from a theoretical framework) to guide their writing. Writers also discussed how much time they spent on free writing, as opposed to focused writing. Academic writing is a social practice (Murray 2012), and through sharing their practice, more experienced writers inducted new writers into academic-writing practices. There were short exchanges during most writing sessions; sometimes novice writers needed advice or support, and other times they needed reassurance, as in the following statement:

> 'I am struggling to code my first interview. The codes overlap! I never knew it took so long. Is it normal?' (Writer 8)

Colleagues could empathise with Writer 8's challenges and recommend resources, such as a coding manual. Inevitably, not all 'snack writing' sessions were successful:

> 'All I did was stare at the screen [*and think about nodes*] but it's helping.' (Writer 9)

The combination of empathy and writing advice created, as one writer put it, is 'an amazing support structure' (Writer 2), which the following writer elaborated on:

> 'Psychologically it also feels as if you are holding on by attending this group! You don't feel so guilty and it keeps you thinking, even if you have so much other work, even if you just think about things subconsciously.' (Writer 10)

Many of the comments in the chat expressed writers' acknowledgment of the support that they received through sharing their progress and challenges with the group:

> 'Very inspiring writing knowing others are also writing. Managed to write about 200 words and I'm very focused.' (Writer 11)

There is something magical about writing in the company of others, knowing that all are encountering similar challenges, and that we can share both our struggles and our victories.

Participating in a larger community of writers

The larger community of academic writers is always present through other texts, journal editors, and reviewers, as well as potential examiners. While the group members were the primary community, there were times when the larger community was foregrounded, as in the following exchange that occurred in Session 13:

> 'Please help me to understand the following comment of a journal: 'Why would scholars outside of SA want to read this article – relate to emerging economy'?' (Writer 12)

> 'Reviewers often say that if they feel that your study is too context specific. So the way to get around that is to explain that the study is transferable to other similar contexts (e.g. emerging economies) or is relevant in all contexts that have whatever your focus is – e.g. first generation students. Also refer to the international literature in your discussion so that you 'internationalise' a bit …' (Writer 13)

In the exchange above, a more experienced writer shared her strategies for dealing with reviewers' comments, but the exchange also reminded participants of the wider community in the academic writing system, and the implied audience of the text one is producing. The presence of more and less experienced writers helped to demystify academic-writing processes.

The flattened hierarchy

Introducing 'snack writing' as a new tool into the activity system impacted the system as a whole. For example, 'snack writing' showed postgraduate candidates that supervisors were also writers. As academics, supervisors must be writers, their academic careers depend on it. Including postgraduate writers and academics in the same writing group, powerfully demonstrated to the postgraduate students that academic writing is an important activity that takes time and dedication. The discovery that academic writing takes time and hard work was often remarked on. Writer 1 found 'that I am rewriting and rewriting, but I suppose that is how it goes?', while Writer 2 expressed the hope that it would become 'easier to find the right words when you are in the field for a while'; 'it takes me so long!' she complained.

It was not only the novice writers who encountered challenges. One of the supervisors wrote:

> 'I have a challenge with some data that is contradictory. I understand what we need to be saying but must find the words to express this. I want to use this session to play with this. It is only a paragraph in our paper but important.' (Writer 14)

It is an act of extreme self-discipline to give up evening time and family time to work on a piece of writing. The postgraduate candidates saw and experienced the challenges that their supervisors encountered in their own writing. They saw the difficulties that supervisors had in meeting their word count targets. They saw the time it took to edit and polish, and edit and polish again. Nothing flattens the hierarchy quite as much as writing in the company of postgraduate candidates and their supervisors, when the candidates offer advice on online tools and supervisors struggle with an academic-writing task.

'Rules' to support 'snack writing'

There are several studies of snack writing, which we have learned from. But as a community of online writers – writing together

alone – we arrived at our own set of 'rules' or guidelines. Firstly, writing goals should be short, specific and appropriate to the time at hand (it is clearly not going to be possible to write an article in a 1-h 'snack writing' session). Many of the writers confirmed the importance of a short and focused writing task, for example, a writer posted the following into the chat:

> 'I'm surprised at how quickly time passed. I overestimated what I would be able to complete.' (Writer 15)

The comment below offers an example of what is achievable in a snack writing session:

> 'I managed to introduce a sub-section of the literature. It is more-or-less 150 words, but I am happy with the result.' (Writer 16)

Secondly, preparation is necessary. This usually required the writer to carefully select a piece of writing that was part of a larger writing project (e.g. an article or a thesis chapter). The careful selection of the writing task enabled the writer to be productive and focused in the 'snack writing' session. For example, a writer might post a goal in the chat that she intends 'to finish a subsection I started on Monday' (Writer 17).

Third, writing should be meaningful, that is, part of a greater whole (e.g. a thesis chapter) – there have been occasions when a member of the group used the 'snack writing' time to review an article or write a report – but usually realised that the hour of writing in the company of others is a time that is too precious to waste on more mundane writing tasks. Many writers posted in the chat that they 'enjoyed the moment on my own and being focused' (Writer 6). One writer reflected on writing meaningfully:

> 'I can see that I make many subconscious decisions when analyzing and writing makes me realize and think about this!.' (Writer 18)

Fourth, while it seems that the average writer achieved around 150–300 words per pomodoro (25 min; and less if they are producing new text, more if they are revising) – it is not the number of words, but the quality of those words that matter. In this regard, follow-up is also necessary – this might entail checking on a reference, going back to the data, or doing editing and polishing. Several comments in the chat indicated that the writer was going to continue writing:

> 'Using 'concluding a paper' [*by*] Pat Thomson … will work till late tonight … no NETFLIX.' (Writer 19)

> 'I am picking up the pace now, so I will continue for another hour to benefit from this momentum.' (Writer 20)

A writer explained that the snack writing 'sets one up' to continue the practice of writing during the week:

> 'I think the beauty of this approach is that it sets one up for further writing, like a ladder climbing slowly but surely.' (Writer 21)

Our final rule is 'no going down the rabbit hole' – which means that we usually leave the internet off as that is a dangerous place to go when you are trying to focus on a complex writing task. A writer noted the progress made by turning off the email:

> 'Today I made some good progress and realised that I can make some good progress if I stop checking in-coming emails.' (Writer 22)

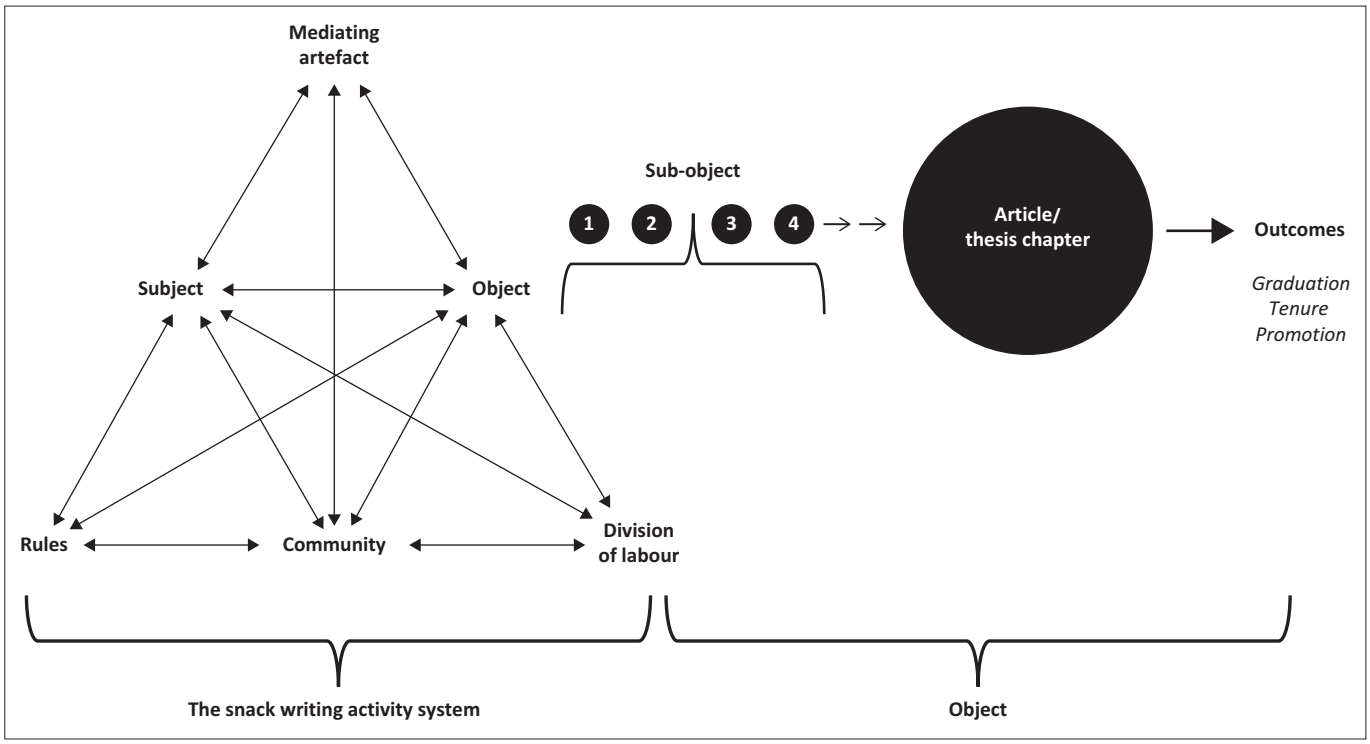
Another writer discovered the benefit of writing without searching for literature:

> 'Wrote a page on 'resilience'. Trying to write without looking at the literature, so will go back to literature tomorrow to see how it resonates. First time just trying to go for own opinion and voice.' (Writer 23)

Discussion of the findings

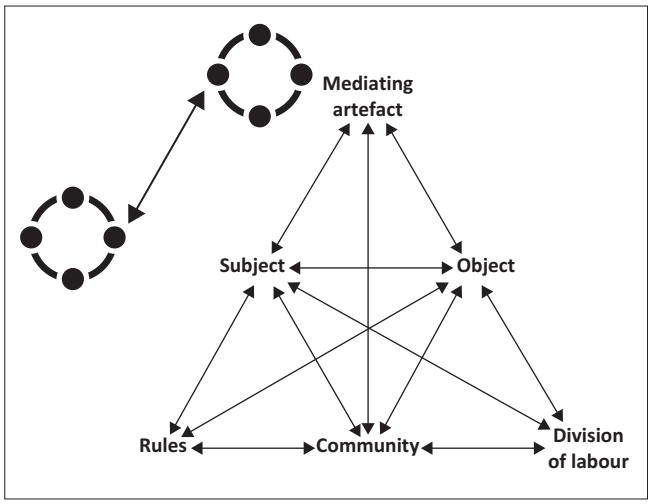
The first principle of the Activity Theory is that the object drives the activity system (Engeström 1999). This became very clear with regard to the kinds of 'object' that the writers engaged with in the pomodori. The writing object needed to be focused, but related to the larger object, that is, the larger writing project. Successful 'snack writing' requires writers to break down a larger writing task into smaller sections. This requires careful planning. Small pieces of writing are more manageable than a large writing task, but without adequate planning there is the danger that these bits of writing will be disjointed. Writers needed to have planned the whole writing task, the larger object, in order to appreciate how the short writing tasks are connected to the bigger writing project. The small writing tasks enabled writers to be focused, and the 'snack writing' sessions created opportunities for writers to achieve their writing goals within the time allocation. Lack of focus, which is common when the writing task is overwhelming, may hinder a writer's progress, resulting in wasted hours of writing time (De Caux 2021). Over the 6-month period, writers developed a deeper awareness of the object of their writing activity, and of the connection between any two writing tasks.

Following the analysis of the data, we could refine our initial understanding of 'snack writing' as an activity system (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows how the larger object of the writing activity, such as an academic article or a thesis chapter, lies beyond each individual 'snack writing' session, which is why 'snack writing' needs planning before the session, attaining focus during the session, and also needs follow up. The follow up occurred in the form of writers continuing with their writing after the session was over, as Writer 6 explained: 'I will continue for another hour to benefit from this momentum'. But follow up also involved working consistently on a related writing task outside of the weekly 'snack writing' session. This routine provided a sense of stability and enabled writers to complete their larger writing projects. As one writer explained:



Source: Adapted from Engeström, Y., 1999, 'Activity theory and individual and social transformation', in Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen & R.L. Punamäki (eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory*, pp. 19–30, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK

FIGURE 2: The main object lies beyond the 'snack writing' activity system.



Source: Adapted from Engeström, Y., 1999, 'Activity theory and individual and social transformation', in Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen & R.L. Punamäki (eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory*, pp. 19–30, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK

FIGURE 3: The writing subjects and the writing mediators constantly switch roles.

> 'I think the regular meeting is a kind of deadline – it keeps me focussed and ready for productive writing for 1 hr every Wednesday.' (Writer 12)

In order to advance the larger writing task, writers needed to develop a writing routine beyond the weekly 'snack writing' sessions. These sessions laid the foundation for the kind of productive writing practice that would enable writers to accomplish the larger writing task.

The presence of a supportive group meant that writers could ask for help, and help others. General writing tips were provided at the start of each session to benefit all writers, and more specific suggestions or tips were provided in response to individual writers' queries. In the 'snack writing' activity system, the supportive group could be understood as participants switching rolls, sometimes being the writing subject and sometimes providing the mediational means for other writing subjects. According to the Activity Theory it is understood that mediational means to include human mediation, such as facilitators, in this case, supportive group members.

As writing subjects became writing mediators, new learnings could be applied to their writing, enhancing their writing skills. The online community of practice allowed for the sharing of personal ways of undertaking writing tasks, thus peer learning took place. The 'snack writing' activity system could therefore be considered a form of continual professional development. Supportive online communities are able to foster 'well-being, a sense of control, self-confidence, feelings of more independence, social interactions, and improved feelings' (Barak, Boniel-Nissim & Suler 2008:1867). Sharing good practice in the sessions created a sense of accountability among writers and enhanced their focus. Writing together lessens the feelings of isolation that are experienced by many writers and creates opportunities for them to share their frustration with others who are experiencing the same negative feelings (Boix et al. 2021). The 'snack-writing group' became a social network that all participants could benefit from.

The mediational means of the pomodoro, to a certain extent, addressed the challenge of limited time and the issues around time-management that confronted postgraduate

scholars and academics alike. Everyone complained about insufficient time for writing. However, as Murray (2014) and Gardiner and Kerns (2012) repeatedly point out, 'snack writing' is more productive than 'feast writing'. This is counter-intuitive, thus the initial perception of writers was that two 25-min writing spurts would not result in meaningful writing, because to write meaningfully, requires longer periods of time. However, this perception changed over the 6-month period. Although the time-period was short and writers often commented that they could not believe that 25 min had passed, they also achieved real progress, despite the short time allocation. Writers would comment, for example, that: 'I wrote more than 400 words in my article' (Writer 11). Writers experienced a sense of accomplishment when their goals were met, as in the following comments: '… my goal is achieved!' (Writer 8) or 'I had a productive hour' (Writer 13). Understanding what can be achieved in a short time allocation enables writers to gain a new perspective on the productive use of time (Boix et al. 2021).

Conclusion

The focus of this study was on the practices of an online 'snack-writing group' that was intended to assist academics and postgraduate scholars with their academic-writing projects. We addressed the research question: How and why might productive academic writing in a 'snack-writing group' be enabled or constrained? We found that the writers' who regularly attended the online writing sessions, benefited by progressing their writing projects. Some finished articles, others made substantial progress on a thesis.

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of academic writing as a social practice that could be changed through the mediational means of an online writing community and through the flattening of the traditional hierarchy of research supervision. The online writing group is necessarily embedded in the social context of the wider academic community and its rules for academic writing. These rules have resulted in the publish- or-perish culture (Amutuhaire 2022), but through more collective agencies and actions, academics and postgraduates may take steps towards achieving a publish-and-flourish culture (Gray et al. 2018).

The research study also contributes to practice by showing the benefits of 'snack writing' as a supplement to traditional research supervision and as a supportive space for academic staff to progress their writing projects. The findings have implications for how supervisors and postgraduate scholars could become part of an online writing community that is committed writing, thinking about writing, as well as engaging in writing activities. As many postgraduate candidates are part-time students, and have limited time for their studies, 'snack writing' could help them to carve out a small space of time for their writing, and then to build a regular practice of writing.

The study raised implications for further research. The participants in the study comprised a core group of approximately 20 writers who attended regularly over the 6-month period during which data were gathered. However, there were many more writers who participated irregularly, or who left the group after only attending a few sessions. Further research is required to find out why some writers felt motivated to stay and others chose to leave. It would also be useful to research in more detail the preparatory and follow-up 'snack writing' practices of successful postgraduate scholars and academics.

In conclusion, the research study shows that engaging in an online community of writers, as well as taking individual responsibility for writing outside of the group, is key to progressing a writing task. The 'snack writing' meeting was an important small space in a busy week where academics and postgraduate scholars prioritised 1 h to focus on a specific writing task and connect with others doing the same thing. This precious time helped the group to achieve big writing goals, one pomodoro at a time.

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Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

C.W., H.D., P.E-H., and H.P. equally contributed to the writing and research of this article.

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Data availability

Anonymised data are available from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's Library data repository (https://digitalknowledge.cput.ac.za/).

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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