

Strengthening the Effectiveness of Writing Retreats in ODeL Institutions

Babalwa Ceki, Ph.D.
Adeyemi Adebayo, Ph.D.
Vusumzi Msiza
University of South Africa

Abstract

This paper aims to determine the challenges and recommendations of an effective writing retreat, investigated from the attendees' experiences and the facilitators of writing retreats held by an accounting college of an (Open distance e-learning) ODeL institution from 2016 to 2022. The researchers purposively sampled sixteen researchers for interviews from the attendees of the writing retreats, namely—four proven researchers, four emerging researchers, eight developing researchers—and two organisers. The researchers captured the participants' experiences during the writing retreats, challenges, and recommendations for an effective writing retreat. The findings reveal that writing retreats face budget approval issues, undefined objectives, noise, unfocused attendees and non-stop emails and calls from work. Recommendations for effective writing retreats were: organisers need timely budgetary support from the organisation, researchers need subject experts, peer review, ongoing support, accountability, clear retreat objectives, and attendees setting pre-retreat goals to improve the retreat's success. Additionally, a far-from-home venue and tranquil environment are important.

Introduction

Due to the limited volume of published academic research (Keen, 2007; McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006), academics face difficulties when writing for academic purposes such as publication in research journals or doctorate and master's theses. The difficulty is compounded by the need for instruction in scientific writing or the research process (Bourgault et al., 2022). Setting aside time to write, struggling to complete an article, having family commitments, and finding it difficult to juggle various tasks all add up to a difficult situation (Bourgault et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2020; Skarupski & Foucher, 2018; Stanley et al., 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016). There is a lot of pressure on academics to publish high-quality work in addition to their other responsibilities, such as supervising graduate students, applying for government funds, and teaching. Academics also face “publish or perish” pressure, community engagement and academic citizenship demands (Johnston, Wilson, Rix & Pit, 2014; Jackson, 2009; Grant, 2006).

Authors have proposed various solutions to help academics overcome the problems highlighted above. Collaborative writing, collegial support, regular group writing time (virtual or in-person), writing retreats, and research mentors are just some of the effective methods (Koulaxi & Kong, 2022; Skarupski & Foucher, 2018; Johnston et al., 2014; Jackson, 2009; Rickard et al., 2009; Keen, 2007; McGrail et al., 2006).

Literature also suggests that for a writing retreat to be effective, it must be held in a tranquil place, pre-retreat planning, and support during the retreat (for a summary, see Filippou & Plamper, 2021; Noone & Young, 2019; Fladd et al., 2019; Kornhaber et al., 2016). Even though qualities of a successful writing retreat and challenges faced by academics have been studied, it is surprising

that there appears to be a paucity of such studies in the context of South Africa, a country where writing retreats have been in use for several years, except for Keane (2017) and Singh (2016). These studies only focused on academics generally and not the different categories of academics such as the developing, emerging and proven scholars.

It is unclear from the literature what affects the participants of an Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) university's writing retreat because of the low research output experienced within the Accountancy faculty despite holding at least eight writing retreats within writing retreats held to support the academics. From this unclarity, this paper seeks to close that gap in the literature and provide recommendations on what can be done to improve further the effectiveness of writing retreats for Accountancy academics within an ODeL context. The research questions were:

Research question 1: what are the challenges experienced by academics of an ODeL accountancy faculty at a writing retreat and in planning it?

Research question 2: What are the recommendations for an effective writing retreat?

The research questions were answered through interviews with experienced, emerging, and developing academic researchers from the Accounting faculty who attended the retreats between 2016 and 2022. We discovered that the organisers of the retreat need timely budgetary support from the organisation, researchers need subject experts, ongoing support, accountability, clear retreat objectives, and attendees setting pre-retreat goals to improve the retreat's success. Additionally, a far-from-home venue and tranquil place is necessary for an effective writing retreat.

We continue with this paper as follows: Section 2 presents the literature, Section 3 presents the theoretical framework, Section 4 presents the methodology, Section 5 presents the analyses and interpretation of the results, and Section 6 discusses the implication of the study for academic career advancement and areas for further research.

Theoretical Framework – Containment Theory

According to Murray (2014), containment theory explains why people find it difficult and frequently impossible to prioritize writing over other professional roles and duties when writing is not the primary task. Lack of writing time was identified as a symptom of writing-related anxiety, also known as writer's block or failing to meet writing goals (Stewart, 2018). Writing-related shame and perfectionism may accompany this anxiety, resulting in feelings of remorse, fear, and dread (Murray, 2014). Writing retreats devote much time to writing, so anxiety associated with writing may be contained in situations where there is anxiety or other emotional components.

According to Murray (2014, p. 104), "*containment is about the processes that enable people to control (contain) unmanageable (uncontainable) ideas, feelings, and experiences.*" People can control (contain) previously uncontrollable (uncontainable) ideas, feelings, and experiences thanks to containment mechanisms (Murray, Steckley & MacLeod, 2012; Bion, 1962). People in a containment condition may frequently think, manage their sensations and emotions, and create strategies for handling conflicting duties. While a retreat can assist academics in managing conflicting demands and coping with anxiety linked to writing, it has been found that the retreat's facilitative leadership is crucial to this effect (Murray et al., 2012). The containment theory presented three fundamental ideas concerning writing retreats (Stewart, 2018; Murray, 2014).

The first is that writing retreats give a setting where writing is the main focus. If writing is not prioritized, there will be few opportunities for productive writing. The writing environment also

offers structure to promote beneficial behaviours. This includes techniques to lessen procrastination and writing anxiety, such as bulk writing sessions, group writing areas, and organized group talks. Thirdly, anxiety related to writing is usually present throughout writing retreats. Thus, it is generally challenging to focus on writing because writing-related anxiety is a regular problem that results in blocked or delayed writing. In general, containment theory explains why these components are crucial for productive writing retreats and how such a setting could affect the writing process (Stewart, 2018).

Containment theory is more pertinent for this paper since it clarifies how attending a writing retreat may overcome the above-described writing challenges (Murray et al., 2012). Containment theory is primarily based on the idea that writing retreats gain containment aspects about academic productivity. According to containment theory, understanding the challenges and providing recommendations for an effective writing retreat can lessen people's anxiety associated with writing. The goal is to transition academic distractions, such as teaching, community service, academic citizenship activities demands, family commitments, and anxiety about producing research output, to inspiring, progressive writing productivity.

In conclusion, the containment theory may be utilized to support, clarify, and address issues related to writing, and organized writing retreats provide a setting where writing can be productively contained (Stewart, 2018; Murray et al., 2012). Therefore, this paper used this theory to analyze the results from the writing retreat participants in answering the research questions.

Literature Review

In higher education, retreats are a group departure from daily life to focus on writing and increase research output in the form of publications (Benvenuti, 2017; Castle & Keane, 2017). Eodice, Geller and Lerner (2017) assert that an effective writing retreat enables participants to engage thoroughly with their writing, ideas, and research without distractions. According to Murray (2015), retreats help researchers produce more research and are an obvious approach to carving out time and space for writing.

Writing Challenges Faced By Academics

To succeed in an academic environment, a scholar must show research output in the form of publications in accredited peer-reviewed scholarly academic journals and a steady flow of producing postgraduate students (Papen & Thériault, 2018; Singh, 2016). Such research output better positions academics for promotion and recognition in the field. It is no wonder academics are searching for ways to improve research outputs, especially in journal publications. However, the issue of time constraints; the long and tedious publication processes drive academics and other stakeholders to seek strategies to ensure a steady flow of quality publications in the shortest time possible. It takes a long time to write research papers. Other authors mention the need to ensure that women are encouraged and supported to pursue careers as authors and address the challenges that gender presents (Singh, 2012; Swaggerty et al., 2011; Grant, 2006). As a result, the writing retreat model is a good model for increasing publication production without overburdening academic staff (Singh, 2016; Murray et al., 2012). Despite the writing retreat being a good model for reaching research productivity, its challenges should be noted and reduced. As the containment theory states, anxiety is related to writing at the retreat. Good planning and setting writing objectives before the retreat is important.

Organising the Writing Retreat

According to Dube, Maphosa, Mershon and Miner-Romanoff (2017), the success of a writing retreat depends on how well it is planned, defined, and disseminating its goals. Such prior planning will mitigate against the writing retreat discerning into chaos with participants pursuing different or conflicting goals (White, 2015). Participants should have pre-determined goals and work to achieve during the retreat. Davis, Wright and Holley (2016) advise that the facilitator should brief the attendees, encourage them to make goals, discuss and review these goals with others at predetermined periods, keep the retreat on schedule, and serve as an example of the writing process.

In a study by Price, Coffey, and Nethery (2015), participants were asked to set their own goals and were urged to prepare material in advance to maximise writing time during the retreat. The purpose of this activity was to give the day direction and to bind the facilitators and participants to a common objective. At lunch and the end of the day, progress toward achieving the objectives was evaluated on two separate occasions. Filippou & Plamper (2021) suggest that to fully concentrate on writing during the retreat, avoid answering calls and sending emails. Set automatic responses for the duration of the writing retreat, make goals for the retreat, and check in on progress after each day.

During the retreats, the participants were taught various strategies to enhance their writing skills, including a five-day writing course, structured writing time and free writing (Murray & Newton, 2009). The success of the retreats relied heavily on the structured writing sessions, deemed essential by several researchers (Cable et al., 2013). To cater to individual needs and preferences, the structure of the retreats was customized based on the findings. Short bursts of realistic and timely goal setting improved the participants' sense of accomplishment, and those who honed this skill during the retreat were more likely to apply it to their future writing habits and practice (Girardeau et al., 2014). Another important factor for reduced anxiety and improved writing effectiveness is the writing venue and environment.

Writing Retreat Venue and Environment

According to Eodice et al. (2017), a good writing retreat environment allows participants to thoroughly engage in their writing, thinking, and research. To have an effective writing retreat, the right venue in quiet surroundings, with no car sounds, only bird sounds, and a beautiful and peaceful landscape, is necessary (Myatt, Gannaway & Green, 2013). Quiet surroundings away from the buzzing city prevent distractions and promote emersion in thought and high writing productivity (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021).

The absolute silence in the venue and surroundings during the allocated time for writing is deemed beneficial by participants of previous writing retreats (Filippou & Plamper, 2021; Noone & Young, 2019). Grant (2006) states that the retreat's success depends on the setting, specifically its calmness, tranquillity, and detachment from the everyday. Participants prefer longer days or time for the retreat and lodging surrounded by nature (Filippou & Plamper, 2021). Organisational support for writing retreat organisers in securing a suitable venue is essential.

Organisational Support and Budget

Planning for the venue, costs, structure, and objectives of the retreat takes time and requires organisation support. To support writing retreats, organisations may lack financial resources (Girardeau et al., 2014; Singh, 2012). It may be challenging to find a suitable, affordable space

away from office distractions that are beneficial to writing and interacting (Cable et al., 2013). Organisation's support affects the writing retreats' success and the publications' subsequent output. The benefits of organisational financial support and investment includes having access to mentors with relevant experience and the availability of resources and ongoing support (Kornhaber et al., 2016). A successful retreat requires careful planning, adequate resources, and negotiating staff release (Girardeau et al., 2014; Grant, 2006; Swaggerty et al., 2011).

Jackson (2009) states that retreats are a better investment than other business-related activities. Additionally, some people put in significant time and effort to plan and lead the retreats (Grant, 2006; Singh, 2012). The benefits of those efforts would only be practical with organisational support. In addition to the organisational support for organising the retreat, participants value the support of writing even after the writing retreat.

Ongoing Writing Support

Kornhaber et al. (2016) assert that when participants are given continual help post-retreat, they produce more publications overall. Through the collaborative practice of regular writing, peer review, and discussion, writing retreats could contribute to helping new and mature academics construct their academic community (Koulaxi & Kong, 2022). The availability or absence of subsequent assistance mechanisms, such as writing groups and ongoing mentoring, was critical to the sustainability of writing retreats to increase publication outputs (Jackson, 2009; Rickard et al., 2009). Grant (2006), Singh (2012), and Swaggerty and their colleagues (2011) all noted that after retreats, participant productivity was hampered by work commitments.

Summary of Literature Review

To enable more excellent publication outputs, assessing the value and cost-effectiveness of supporting academic writing retreats is necessary. Planning and preparing before the retreat and financial support from the organisation are crucial. Kornhaber et al. (2016) echo that it is crucial to have writing mentors present to give prompt, constructive feedback in order to advance quality writing outcomes during the retreat and after the retreat. A quiet writing environment is recommended. However, it is unclear whether the writing retreats held by the Accounting faculty applied these recommendations from the literature. If they have, what challenges did the participants experience at the writing retreat, as attending has not increased their research output, and what do they recommend for an effective writing retreat?

Methodology

The authors adopted a qualitative approach to answer the research questions by interviewing the participants of the writing retreats.

Participants and Contexts

The population consisted of academics from the Accounting faculty who attended the writing retreats between 2016 and 2022. Two to four writing retreats occurred each year during this period except for only one held during the Covid-19 period (2020 and 2021). Fifty-six researchers attended a writing retreat during this period. Each writing retreat was held physically, lasted five days and consisted of eight hours with a one-hour lunch break and two 15-minute snack breaks.

Twenty participants were selected for the interview. Purposive sampling enabled the researchers to select participants in a strategic manner, that is, by sampling respondents relevant

to the research questions (Bryman, 2016). It is important to note that the sample size should not be too small as it hinders data saturation and information redundancy. At the same time, the sample size should not be too large because it makes it challenging to have a deep, case-oriented analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Sadly, there is no consensus in the literature on the appropriate sample size for qualitative studies. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) believe a sample size of less than twenty is ample, while Warren (2002) recommends a sample size between twenty to thirty participants. Given these conflicting sample sizes in the literature, we believe a sample of twenty participants provided the necessary data for this study.

The sample was divided into four groups: experienced, emerging, developing researchers, and organizers. Experienced researchers refer to professors with experience writing and publishing articles. The term “developing scholars” describes academics who are currently completing their master’s or doctoral degrees and writing articles related to their studies.

Accountancy academics are mainly qualified chartered accountants and are generally not research-inclined because they do not have a research background from the accounting curriculum. Several academics are still pursuing a Ph.D.; only a few are professors or experienced researchers. Therefore, four professors, two organizers, six emerging academics, and eight developing researchers were selected. Due to saturation as no new information was obtained (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003), the final sample interviewed was sixteen researchers (four experienced, four emerging, eight developing and two organizers).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The literature informed the interview schedule of questions (Saunders et al., 2016) and was grounded in the theoretical constructs of the containment theory. The interview questions were designed to prompt participants to provide detailed responses, ensuring that all relevant areas of an effective writing retreat are covered. The interview questions were the same for all academics, while organizers were asked additional questions on challenges and recommendations in organising the writing retreat. The schedule of interview questions is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Guiding Interview Questions

Guiding Interview Questions
Main questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What problems and challenges have you identified while organizing and facilitating writing retreats? • What suggestions do you have to address the challenges you experienced? • How many retreats have you organized or attended? • Which of the retreats did you attend? • What have you identified as effective and appreciated during the retreat? • What problems and challenges have you identified during the retreat? • How can the retreat be developed further? • What are the qualities of an effective writing retreat from your experience/ideally?

We solicited participation with a consent form. Ethical clearance was obtained from the ODeL university approving compliance with ethical considerations for interviewing the academics from the accounting college. Before the commencement of each interview, we read the interview information sheet to the participants and asked them to complete the consent form. The information sheet contains information regarding the purpose of the study; the method of data collection; participant's roles; risks (if any) involved; how we will use and store the information collected; as well as issues regarding the confidentiality of the data provided by the participants and their anonymity.

Data Analysis

In line with similar previous studies in this field (Keane, 2017; Singh, 2016), data were analysed interpretatively and manually to discover participants' opinions per question. Interviews were conducted and recorded online through Microsoft Teams and lasted between 40 minutes to an hour. After each interview, data was transcribed verbatim. The researchers transcribed the data and listened to all the recordings to ascertain the quality and accuracy of the transcript. Afterwards, the transcripts were sent to the interviewees to validate their accuracy. The next step was coding, a process of labelling concepts and developing themes. We identified patterns and relations and formed themes from the participants' responses. Both theory and content drove the analysis. Three main themes were identified, and data from each group of participants was discussed under those themes to gather a diverse view.

Results and Discussion

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this paper is that no observation data was collected on implementing writing retreats. Another limitation is that the researchers are also in Accountancy and have attended the same retreats, which may cause bias in interpreting results. The bias was mitigated by triangulating the results with literature and containment theory. Lastly, the participants' background, cultural background, and other personal factors that could have influenced them at the writing retreat were not collected during the interviews.

The data analysis of responses revealed three main themes: organizational support challenges and recommendations for writing retreat planning, challenges experienced at the retreat, and recommendations for an effective writing retreat. The organizational support and individual challenges answer the first research question, and the recommendations for an effective retreat are the second research question.

Research Question 1a: Organizational Support Challenges and Recommendations for Writing Retreat Planning

Writing retreat organizers shared their views on this theme. Late budget approval by procurement management led to an inability to secure the preferred writing retreat venue, causing the retreats to be held much later in the year instead of as early as possible. In this regard, Participant A argued that "the budget is approved late, leading to procurement difficulties whereby the least preferred venue is selected last minute." Therefore, organisational support, especially supply chain management support, is crucial in organising retreats as alluded by Cable et al., (2013). Both organizers shared the same sentiments on this matter. They suggested that budgetary

approval and procurement should be at the faculty level rather than at the supply chain management level and included in the faculty central budget for a particular academic year.

Research Question 1b: Challenges Experienced at the Writing Retreat

Lack of Setting Daily Writing Objectives

The organizers noted low concentration, participation, and attention levels for developing researchers at the writing retreat. Participant A pointed out that “some developing researchers do not know what they are supposed to do. They will just be making noise, moving up and down, not focusing.” This shows the importance of having a writing objective each day and a commitment each day from each attendee on what they will work on for the day, as Davis, Wright, and Holley (2016) suggested. That forces the developer to focus on research instead of responding to work emails.

Intimidation and Writing Anxiety

The organizers noted that developing researchers were more anxious, leading to demotivation. They were intimidated by being in the same retreat as experienced researchers, so it was decided to have a retreat for experienced researchers separately from that for developing researchers to mitigate this anxiety. The anxiety is expected per containment theory constructs (Murray et al., 2012). The case was different for emerging researchers; they were inspired by being amid professors who love research and were motivated to pursue their research. It is, therefore, better to have experienced and emerging researchers in the same retreat.

Lack of Physical Activity Incorporated into the Programme

A developing researcher noted that the retreats are long and can be exhausting, and the presentations by mentors providing guidance are also long. Incorporating physical activities, such as playing games, could refresh and recharge the developing researchers. In contrast, experienced and emerging researchers have already acquired the research writing discipline; they do physical exercise either before or after each day of the writing retreat to fuel energy in the brain.

Work Demands During the Writing Retreat

Proven researchers found that emails and calls from the faculty did not stop even though they notified the department that they were on a writing retreat. The recommendation is to switch off the phone and not open work emails at the retreat.

Research Question 2: Recommendations of an Effective Retreat

Objectives for Each Day and Accountability

Planned individual writing objectives for each day for participants were encouraged, as suggested by Davis, Wright, and Holley (2016), which will increase participants' focus at the retreat and reduce disturbances. Developing researchers appreciate a structure to be followed each day, where maybe on the first day, the focus is on writing the introduction of the article, the second day is a literature review, etcetera and giving feedback and accountability on where each participant has progressed each day. Proper planning by the attendees is needed to avoid unorderly behaviour and prior consultation with developing researchers on what they need presentations on

from mentors during the retreat, as Price, Coffey, and Nethery (2015) suggested. In contrast, experienced researchers are independent and do not require that structure. They prefer to work on their research without the disturbance of presentations from mentors. They would rather consult the mentors when necessary.

Environment

A peaceful environment was noted as necessary by all participants, as stated by (Filippou & Plamper, 2021). A venue far away from home to avoid attendees going home during the retreat was noted as important. Uninterrupted internet connectivity was also noted as important.

Availability of Theory and Methodology Experts Specific to Accountancy

Experienced researchers recommended the presence of research mentors who focus on theories applicable to Accounting topics. The participants agreed that for the writing retreat for emerging writers to continue being effective, the facilitator's presentations must focus on methodology and theories in addition to the usual motivation and mentorship sessions. Having a qualitative and quantitative methodology expert who can provide prompt feedback on your work was noted as crucial by experienced researchers.

Peer Review

Experienced researchers suggested that peer review from writing retreat attendees working on similar topics is helpful because it encourages academic discussions and can provide insights on how to improve one's article.

Community of Practice

It is suggested that the academics doing Ph.D.s and Masters be grouped in one retreat for encouragement and support. Developing researchers noted that being with other developing researchers helped. Participant C noted, "I think having time to interact with fellow Ph.D. candidates is of great help because we study in isolation and are still working from home. Sometimes, you do not pick up the phone and talk to someone else about your struggles. However, having a group of people with whom you can ask for their views on X, Y, Z and discuss over lunch." The sentiments agree with the comments made by Kornhaber et al. (2016) that writing retreats create a community of researchers who support each other.

In summary, the results above show that the challenge experienced by academics was a lack of preparation before the retreat, which led to a lack of focus and productivity during the writing retreat. Setting objectives for the retreat and holding developing researchers accountable by tracking their progress daily was recommended. Effective retreats are those where developing and experienced researchers are not in the same retreat to reduce the anxiety of inexperienced writers. All academics value mentors as they assist with methodological and theoretical issues and provide valuable feedback on attendees' research. Mentors who are experts in methodologies in the topics of Accountancy were recommended.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to answer the following research questions: what are the challenges experienced by academics of an ODeL accountancy faculty at a writing retreat and in planning it, and what are the recommendations for an effective writing retreat? Through semi-structured interviews with the Accountancy faculty academics, it was discovered that lack of organizational support related to late budget approval caused an inability to secure preferred retreat venues on time and early in the year. The challenges faced by developing researchers were not setting daily writing objectives, lack of accountability, affecting writing productivity, lack of focus, writing anxiety and fatigue due to lack of physical activity. Experienced and emerging researchers experienced non-stop working demands during the retreat, disturbing their writing. Recommendations for an effective retreat were pre-retreat planning and setting of writing goals, organisational support, and having separate writing retreats for developing and experienced researchers. The availability of theory and methodology experts specific to Accountancy is valuable to attendees; peer review and constructive feedback by peers and experts at the retreat improve the effectiveness of writing retreats. A peaceful environment far from home makes an effective retreat. Most of these recommendations benefit developing researchers; while experienced researchers are more disciplined and prefer to be left alone to write, they like to consult theory and methodology experts when necessary, instead of having daily presentations from mentors. These results contribute to the literature as they relate to the specific needs of an effective retreat for developing versus experienced and emerging researchers. Future research could investigate the types of support they require after the writing retreat to continue focusing on research when they return to their academic work.

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