From isolation to inspiration: The psychology of writing in communities
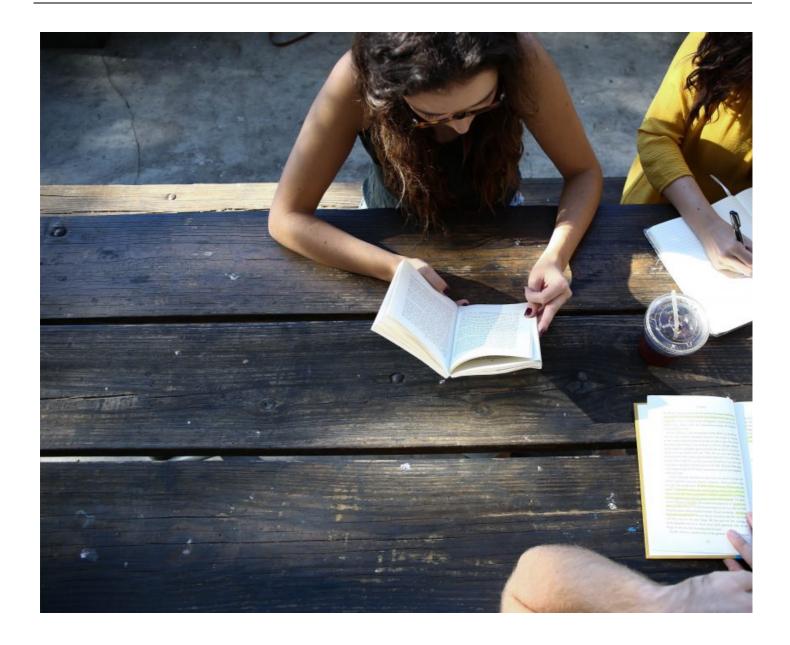
*Writing in communities, in the form of writing groups and writing retreats, has become immensely popular in the last decade. Despite COVID-19 putting a halt on face-to-face meetings, the new online writing group boom has helped academics to stay productive. **Nicole Janz** explores how writing in groups can provide an antidote to the competitive yet isolated aspect of academic existence and considers why, to retreat into ourselves, we need to be surrounded by others.*

It's 5.45am and I'm racing down Mill Road in Cambridge on my bicycle, faster, faster. I push past delivery vans that line up in the street, standing in the way between motherhood and writing. I have exactly two hours for myself. Back at home, well-fed minutes ago, my baby is sleeping in her crib. By the time I arrive at the city centre, I am awake and full of adrenaline. I enter Café Nero, with just enough breath to order a coffee and a Danish, and march upstairs where a large wooden table awaits me. It is quiet. All I can hear is click, click, click. Three friends from my writing group are already leaning into their laptop screens, fingers rushing over the keyboard with determination. I sit down and I open my laptop. No time for small talk. My laptop's keys are bouncy as ever, and my fingers remember the drill even after the long break. I'm back, finally finishing my dissertation. I have to hold myself together to not giggle with excitement.

This was six years ago. Finishing my thesis took another five months, but my writing group friends helped so much that I placed them in my PhD acknowledgements paragraph, right next to my supervisor and family.

Today, I have become a writing group enthusiast. And I'm not the only one.

Rowena Murray is a Professor in Education who has organised writing retreats for over 20 years and I'm one of those who keep returning to her events in Scotland. The typical writing retreat looks like this: At 9am, all writers share their goals for the day. How many words will I write? Which section will I tackle? When the timer starts at 9.30am, everyone writes quietly for an hour. No chatting, no social media, no emails. Toilet breaks are allowed, though you might find yourself throwing apologetic glances as you tiptoe out of the room. During timed breaks, everyone leaves the desk and participants talk about their progress over coffee. While the writing slots create accountability and peer pressure to focus on the writing task, the breaks carry an air of excitement and joy. I've often heard people say, bewildered, that they've never written more words than in the first hour at the retreat. People also open up about their challenges. "Talking about writing is not the norm at the academic workplace", says Murray, "academics worry that they are seen as weak if they struggle to write. At the same time, the pressure to publish can trigger acute anxiety."

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Writing retreats enable academics to disengage cognitively from other responsibilities and distractions. They finally engage in self-care and prioritise writing. "All the other noise goes away. There's a sense of relief and it occurs immediately when they arrive." That's why they have become so popular.

Until COVID-19 put a halt to face-to-face meetings.

A few weeks into the lockdown, my writing habit had ground to a despairing halt. The days blurred into each other, and I could not bring myself to write. I wrote down my goals. I set my self a timer. But I found myself staring at the blank page, paralysed for lack of words. Why weren't the structure and techniques working?

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So when Rowena Murray announced that she will offer a writing retreat online for free, to try out if it works, I was one of the first ones to sign up. On the day, 9am sharp, I logged in and found myself looking at over 20 faculty and students from different countries, waving from their video chat windows lined up across my screen. When Rowena explained the agenda of the day, I couldn't stop smiling. We followed the structured model as if we were in a face-to-face retreat. We still wrote down our goals, but this time shared them via the Zoom chat. During the timed sessions, we wrote quietly alongside each other, but we muted our microphones. It felt good to see the others working, and I glanced at their video streams whenever the temptation to check email loomed. Slowly, I felt the frustration from the first weeks of COVID-19 lockdown melting away. I was ready to write again.

I decided to team up with other facilitators to run virtual retreats. In one of our first sessions, an old friend and PhD candidate logged in. She appeared in her pink pyjamas and a bathrobe and immediately apologised: "Sorry guys, I need to excavate my desk before I start. That's my first task today!" Then she dashed back and forth, laundry flying to the side, and she was ready to write.

I talked to her a few days later. "Well, I knew I would either go online in pyjamas or not write at all," she said and laughed. "Maybe people thought I was eccentric, but I felt quite comfortable." She kept her video on despite the mess. "I want to be seen writing. I don't have anybody to hold me accountable otherwise."

After talking to her, I suddenly realised why I had failed to write by myself. I too need to see others working silently alongside me, even if they are strangers, and I need them to see me – even if it's only on the computer screen.

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I contacted Rowena Murray to talk to her about this community aspect. Murray had just written a book about that, *Writing in Social Spaces*. "There's a sense of 'we're in this together'. That's the glue," Murray said. She sees writing in communities as a social act, where people build relationships with each other. There is a sense of a collective. "You're not alone with your writing problems, and you can talk about them in a safe, neutral space." In the competitive academic environment collegiality, connectedness, and vulnerability need a place.

But can this work online in the long run? That's where educational research will turn next: analysing social processes of academic productivity, mental health and wellbeing in the online context. A group of academics and writing groups around Rowena Murray are now planning an edited volume to examine whether virtual writing meetings are just a fix during the pandemic, or if they're here to stay.

For me, joining and [running virtual writing retreats](#) has been a lifeline. I have seen so many friends and strangers over the last few months pop up on my laptop screen, and I've even taken a few screenshots for myself to sense the community when I'm offline. Don't worry though, I won't ever share screenshots of people in pyjamas and bathrobes.

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