



Re-thinking virtual writing retreats in the Covid-19 higher education environment

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the role of virtual writing retreats in supporting postgraduate students and enhancing the quality of their learning experience in the COVID-19 higher education environment. Besides treating the writing retreats as sessions exclusively organized to foster writing productivity for established academics and doctoral students, the first lockdown in April 2020 demonstrated the various ways in which virtual writing retreats can support postgraduate students. The discussion draws on a five-month intense (auto-)ethnographic work involving 15 Master's full-time students and Graduate Teaching Assistants from the London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom). From April to September 2020, we ran 44 writing retreats on Zoom for a total of 352 hours. Responding to concepts of community of practice, social support, productivity and isolation/alienation, we have explored virtual writing retreats as a way to: 1) build a community, 2) create a virtual library, 3) combat isolation, and last but not least, 4) maintain productivity, in a context of crisis (and beyond). According to qualitative feedback and online participant observation, virtual writing retreats can create communities and generate emotional support—something that has fostered student communication and interaction despite physical distance and social constraints. Writing retreats can create a virtual library that helps maintain productivity, overcome writer's block and enhance students' learning experience. Based on this, we propose that the emotional support and productivity enhancement that emerged through and by virtual writing retreats, improve the quality of student learning experience—catering to both students' wellbeing and academic performance.

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Introduction

The first lockdown in April 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to students in the UK higher education environment. Especially, Master's students who usually come from various backgrounds across the globe and decide to pack up their lives and move to another country for a year, struggled significantly following the announcement to move all teaching online. Living in a 10m² accommodation room has made students' life harder since leaving the familiarity of working on campus and at the library. Turning your kitchen table or even your legs into a desk is definitely a challenge, especially for those who engage in academic work. Given these complications, we ask the following question: How can educators assist postgraduate students maintain their productivity levels while building a community online during a pandemic? Virtual writing retreats were the answer.

In our capacity as Graduate Teaching Assistants at the London School of Economics and Political Science, we share our findings based on our initiative to run virtual writing retreats for our Master's students since the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020. Inspired by existing literature on writing retreats in higher education, we will firstly synthesise ideas that address them as communities of practice, social support and writing productivity. Given the uncertainties that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought, we critically examine the usefulness of online writing retreats for postgraduate students in relation to the ethnographic study we conducted.

Academic writing: What is so difficult about it?

Existing higher education literature has addressed the hurdles of academic writing for both doctoral researchers and established academics (Murray, 2001). The individual nature of writing, lack of structure, time management and self-discipline alongside isolation are the most commonly reported challenges. Despite university initiatives that vary from one institution to another, academic writing is always associated with the aforementioned issues. Even though writing constitutes an integral element of PhD students and academics' everyday working reality, postgraduates struggle (Roberts, 2010) due to a lack of academic writing expertise (Murray, 2001). While most universities offer resources on practical skills for students' dissertations, there is limited support during the crucial period when there is the need for interaction and connection with peers. What happens when such existing obstacles are further exacerbated with the existence of a pandemic that demands social isolation and quarantine?

Possible solution: Writing retreats

Recently, writing retreats have been extensively employed as a solution to low (writing) productivity and present personal, professional and organisational benefits to participants (Kornhaber et al., 2016). According to Murray (2015, p. 57), "a writing retreat is an obvious way to make time and space for writing. It provides dedicated writing time". A writing or

study retreat is a space where you can read, write, take notes or simply reflect on your work. Albeit possessing a different personal writing goal, retreat participants share the same collective goal—to boost their writing productivity and help one another achieve the general objective. Successful retreats are the ones that achieve to increase 'scientific publications output' (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021, p. 98). It is through collective practice of regular writing, peer review, and discussion that writing retreats could potentially contribute to helping both fresh and mature academics to construct their academic community.

Community of practice and social support

In higher education literature (Annala & Mäkinen, 2017; Ryan, 2015), by exploring students' participation in group projects, it is found that in the process, an individual student's thought, emotion, and action are aligned with the collective, which is theorized as a form of 'community of practice' (Wenger, 2011). Firstly, in terms of thoughts and meaning, albeit personal differences and discorded opinions, keen participants are aiming to reach their common objective of the assigned task. Based on a shared intention, students' expression and discussion are meaningfully surrounding a shared concern. They are able to connect with, and understand one another. Furthermore, from an experiential and emotional perspective, through participation, students are not only heading to the practical outcome of the task, but also co-creating a shared experience, thus allowing individuals to align with others in the collective and forge a community. Complemented by studies of social identity and collective identity in community studies (Wenger, 2011), when doing the same thing together, individual's concerns, actions, and feelings are identified with and connected to others of the same group. A we-community is forging, in which positive emotions of a collectivity, including sense of belongings, mutual support and dependence, and satisfaction are generated. And, dialectically, because of positive emotions of collectivity, participants found the experience of collective practice enjoyable, which has made them even more willing to help out one another in the we-community. As we can see, the notion of community of practice facilitates positive emotions, which are found to be experienced in the setting of communal studies in libraries.

Library studies and writing retreats as communities of practice

Retreats in higher education is a collective withdrawal from everyday routine for the purpose of writing productivity (Benvenuti, 2017; Castle & Keane, 2017). Aligned with its essence, studying in a library—retreating from business, and working with others with the same intent, in the same space, at the same time—also touches upon the notion of retreat and community building. In library studies (Bryant et al., 2009), it is found that the action of studying with other people in a library, who intend to stay focused, boost productivity, and perform the same behaviour with the physical presence of others, is a kind of community practice. The architectural and environmental setting of a library has strategically made a community of practice possible—as

actions of those studying in the library are shaped by the setting of the communal space. The adoption of sound-proof material, and the setting of independent, partitioned study areas, create a space for individuals to focus and study without distractions in silence. At the same time, given individuals' physical presence in the library, a sense of mutual accountability and collective presence emerge. Besides the silent study area, the social area of libraries allows individuals with a common goal to study, interact with peers, and take regular breaks. In the process, a study community evolves based on interaction and communal practice. According to studies (Nickel & Back, 2020), attending writing retreats in the physical space of a library allows academic faculty to enhance their writing productivity within a set time frame and build connections with their colleagues. In times of COVID-19, when libraries are not accessible, can online writing retreats reproduce the experience of library studies to facilitate MSc students' learning experience? Do writing retreats play an additional role, besides one that emphasises the importance of the 'time to write' (Morss & Murray, 2001)?

Isolation in pre- and during COVID-19 times

Informed by educational literature on student learning, our study draws on ideas of isolation and alienation in an attempt to address the challenges that students frequently face when entering an academic community with its own dynamics, and the feelings of alienation which sometimes accompany this process (Case, 2008; Mann, 2001; Peel, 2000). Peel (2000) has argued that first-year undergraduate students are "isolated learners", as they enter a different institution and find it difficult to create support networks with peers and teaching staff. Case (2008, p. 323) defines alienation as "a disconnection in the context of a desired expected relationship". As the focus is solely on Master's students, the 'fitting in' dimension that Case mentions is important for the current study. Limited teacher-student interaction (because of the time constraints and teaching staff commitments) can be interpreted as a characteristic example of why students feel alienated (Stephen et al., 2008).

Given the broader feelings of isolation reported due to lack of interaction with faculty, what has not been addressed yet is how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these feelings and in what ways can online writing retreats mitigate them. A survey conducted by Wonkhe and Trendence has shown that during Michaelmas Term in 2020, compared with Lent Term in 2019, "the proportion of students who felt lonely daily or weekly is much larger (50% compared with 39%), and a larger proportion of students do not feel part of the university community (50% compared with 40%)" (Office for National Statistics 2020). Also, based on interviews with thirty Asian college students, George and Thomas (2020) found that most students in the study were suffering from anxiety and depression in relation to social isolation and long-term quarantine during the lockdown.

In light of this, how could educators adjust approaches of writing retreats to mitigate students' loneliness and isolation?

What's missing?

Although existing literature has demonstrated the usefulness of offline writing retreats for academics and doctoral students, there has been less attention on the various roles exclusively online writing retreats play for international postgraduate students. Different from doctoral students and academics, MSc students have less experience doing independent research and dissertation writing, but are required to conduct a small-scale project; most of them were new to research processes such as reviewing literature, designing research methods, and analysing data. The idea for the online writing retreats emerged as, for the first time, students could relate to doctoral students, and started to experience the life of early career researchers: isolation while researching and writing. While previous studies on online learning platforms have investigated chat rooms and discussion forums as objects of study, they do not rely on interaction, structure, time management and collective participation (Mercieca & McDonald, 2021; Peeters & Pretorius, 2020).

Our study has a strong contextual dimension: while existing studies on writing retreats mainly focused on their offline (Castle, 2017; Singh, 2012), face-to-face nature, the COVID-19 pandemic presented international students with new challenges including alienation (Hall, 2020; Hu & Wang, 2022) and low productivity (Grant, 2006; MacLeod et al., 2012) alongside academic pressure, and personal and professional anxieties. Due to social distancing, online writing retreats shed light on a new exploratory angle that this study aims to contribute to. Besides treating the writing retreats as sessions exclusively for established academics and research students (Murray, 2001), our aim is to rethink their role in the hard-hit by COVID-19 Higher Education setting. To do so, methods of (auto-)ethnography and qualitative feedback analysis were adopted, which will be discussed in the next section.

Methodology

The discussion draws on a five-month intense (auto-) ethnographic work involving 15 MSc full-time international students and Graduate Teaching Assistants from the London School of Economics and Political Science (UK). Students' countries of origin included Hong Kong, Chile, Canada, Taiwan, China, Costa Rica, the United States, Italy, Nigeria, Azerbaijan and India – a sample that adds values to studies which approach intercultural education practices. The majority of participants consisted of female students: 12 female and only 3 male participants. Neither of the MSc students had attained an undergraduate degree in the UK higher education system. Three of them were mature students¹. Half of the sample had not written a similar assignment (undergraduate dissertation) in their previous institution. It started as an initiative from the two Graduate Teaching Assistants and was promoted on various learning

¹ According to UCAS, the term 'mature student' refers to anyone going to university or college after a period of time out of full-time education. See <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/mature-undergraduate-students#who-are-mature-students>

platforms (such as Moodle), but was not formally introduced in the department or the School. We had the privilege of already knowing the majority of the students from seminars. This means that we had already met most of the students in the physical space of the university campus. The optional virtual retreats took place twice a week on Zoom, from 9:45am to 5:30pm with a two-hour long break in between. We ran 44 writing retreats from April to September 2020. Being very similar to the Pomodoro Style, our Virtual Writing Retreats followed this structure: 1) working on mute until the timer rings after 45 minutes, 2) taking a 10-minute break and then 3) repeating. The impact of the retreats was captured both during the actual sessions and through qualitative feedback received following their completion in September. We imported and analysed our fieldnotes and participants' qualitative feedback on Nvivo that generated the four themes.

Participants' feedback was obtained with the use of Qualtrics that included the number of times each student attended the sessions approximately, evaluation of the session and reasons for the respective evaluation, potential improvements for a future format, thoughts on formally introducing retreats in the Department and moments from the sessions they wanted to share. Although the request for qualitative feedback was sent to students after dissertation submission (when most of them were moving out from accommodations, went on holidays and travelling to reunite with family), nine out of 15 students responded. Students that filled in the evaluation form attended approximately 30 sessions which accounts for 68% (of all retreats). Since all data are based on writing retreat experience on Zoom, it is important to highlight certain features of the Zoom platform that are relevant to the effective running of online writing retreats.

Zoom

Firstly, from a visual perspective, like Longhurst's (2013, p. 44) study of Skype (video conference call software), Zoom projects the user's face on-screen, allowing users to view the "Self in the Box", which could be turned off and on according to the user's preference. Also, depending on selected display, the projection of other participants could be presented in gallery mode, meaning all faces presented in 'boxes' in a gallery mode; or the speaker's mode, meaning the speaker's face in a maximized window; or, a minimized version of the speaker's mode. This setting allows participants to visually present oneself, meanwhile seeing the faces of the speaker and other participants. Besides viewing, in terms of audio, users could choose to enable audio reception, and mute and un-mute their audio output. During the sessions or breaks, the chat facilitates interaction via instant messaging.

In short, these features of Zoom allow users to visually present themselves, and verbally communicate and semiotically interact with one another. Such affordances enhance interactivity and contribute to creating the experience of writing retreats, as we will discuss in the forthcoming section.

Results

Community building

When students were asked about the whole experience, a prevalent theme that emerged was that of community building, amidst challenges brought by the pandemic. As stated by Student 3 (2020), which was echoed by other students (Student 1, 2020; Student 2, 2020; Student 5, 2020; Student 7, 2020), "having experienced the weight of a pandemic and the process of completing a dissertation simultaneously was extremely difficult." Relating to the literature review, in times of a pandemic, international students were facing additional challenges because of social isolation and a sudden cut-off from accessible social support, which created "extra pressure" (Student 2, 2020) alongside their academic concerns.

However, responding to the concept of community of practice (Wenger, 2011), during the retreats students were able to communicate with others sharing the same social identity about their academic concerns, including deadline pressure, dissertation writing blocks, the difficulties of understanding certain concepts, and health uncertainties. In terms of understanding, they were able to realize that their individual concerns were, in fact, commonly shared among others. As Student 1 (2020) has put it,

I didn't feel alone or left behind because I was able to hear other people's experiences and know that other people were experiencing the same things that I was experiencing (Student 1, 2020).

Because of an identification of commonalities in the process of communication, which was relatively limited in times of social distancing, students were able to relate to one another. According to them, when participating and discussing with others regularly in the retreats, "a family" (Student 1, 2019), and "a community of people" (Student 4, 2020) was formed, creating a sense of commonalities, togetherness, and social support:

It was like a family or a community of people that I could relate with... I like the way we were willing to help one another to reach our goals, to offer support to one another... like sharing resources (Student 6, 2020).

In sum, by connecting socio-professional identities in a regular and consistent way, a special bond was developed in the group that brought students and facilitators closer to each other albeit physical distances.

A virtual library

Relating to the notion of the community of practice, students recalled the experience of writing retreats as studying at a 'virtual library'. According to the literature, a library is deliberately designed for individual studying, yet in the collective presence of one another. As the physical library was closed during the lockdown, students lost the option of studying in an appropriate working space. However,

according to students, virtual writing retreats recreated an ambient atmosphere that fostered concentration and motivation by enabling a quiet yet visual presence of other students. According to them:

I usually study in the library and cherish that feeling of working in an environment where everyone is in the same mood, something that I lost during quarantine. But the retreats helped me to achieve that (Student 5, 2020).

I really like the way we were 'watching' each other... there was a sense of presence, that you have to focus, and you can't look at your phone because others are watching you (Student 3, 2020).

It is so different from working alone... I felt the time went much faster when I'm working with others in the retreats... I am way more focused and less drifted... I won't look at my phone or social media (Student 2, 2020).

According to the analysis of data, during the retreats students preferred retaining the visual display of other participants' faces (albeit on mute), which is a function enabled by the setting of Zoom. Being able to 'watch one another', the studying community becomes visible. The virtual visualization of the student body and the individual writing on mute generated a sense of collective presence resembling the atmosphere of the physical space of the library. In short, physically speaking, though working individually from their respective (student) hall/room the student was connecting to, and studying with, other participants at the same time and in the same virtual space. Therefore, writing retreats recreated the atmosphere of a library for collective and individual studying. Because of a sense of collectiveness, students reported that writing retreats also helped combat isolation, which will be discussed in the next subsection.

Combating isolation

The need to mitigate feelings of alienation and isolation mainly emerged from online participant observation and not so much from participants' feedback, feelings that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated for all staff and students in this context. In line with existing literature that has frequently researched transition into higher education (Case, 2008; Mann, 2001), feelings of alienation were frequently reported, especially when it comes to largely individualistic goals such as researching and writing up.

For some of our regular students, the retreat time was the only social interaction they had during the day, as the majority lived in student accommodations or private halls. Others had moved with their parents in their home countries. According to Students 6, 9 and 15, they felt 'less isolated, alone, and disconnected', because people in the group can 'support and help one another' and 'engage in conversations' of 'what [has] made their lives easier in lockdown'. They were able to exchange numbers and finally meet as soon as the

lockdown was lifted. Based on our findings, the socialising dimension that was developed during the retreats reiterated the significance of the "informal, selective and spontaneous social structures" (Stroebeak 2013, p. 391) in the creation of student communities of coping in the fast-paced academic environment:

When we are in the retreat, I never feel alone. All my flatmates were gone. I live on my own, but when we're all working together, I feel we're in this together (Student 7, 2020).

We all have our cameras on. And suddenly, you're not alone in the room. You see so many faces and you think 'I'm not alone' (Student 10, 2020).

The gallery view on Zoom that showed participants in one screen was our participants' favourite setting. They were able to see everyone at the same time. During the breaks, students exchanged ideas on everyday things, such as cooking or movies:

The sessions were really useful. I particularly liked the fact that there were breaks in-between to help us take a breath before continuing. The breaks gave us an opportunity to ask questions, share ideas, talk about our cooking, hobbies and to an extent keep company to one another (Student 13, 2020).

Not only did communication about academic and non-academic interests during a retreat mitigate loneliness intensified by the lockdown (Segrin & Domschke, 2011), but it also functioned as a wellbeing intervention (Eardley et al., 2021). By creating an online working space where students can connect and interact with their peers, feelings of alienation and isolation might be less likely to be experienced.

Maintaining productivity

Our findings showed that staying motivated and productive during the COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a challenge for students who spent most of the time in their (student) halls or made efforts to catch up with their classes from the other side of the world. 'I am thankful for the caring and amiable atmosphere that helps me write my dissertation!', said a writing retreat participant. We observed, during that time, that our consistent, uninterrupted and prolonged writing retreats were effective in maintaining students' productivity where the campus experience was limited or, even absent (in cases where students were self-isolating or attended their classes from their home countries). The quotes below demonstrate in what ways the online writing retreat fostered an environment of writing productivity:

When I was writing on my own, I could be drifted easily... I looked up my phone, checked on social media, went to check the fridge...etc., but when I'm working with others in the retreats, I can't explain it, everybody is working so I'm working as well... I am way more productive (Student 15, 2020).

I set specific goals before the 45 minute session, like writing a plan for my literature review... I told myself that during that time I would just focus on that goal... We were all muted. I was very productive and was able to achieve my goals (Student 6, 2020)!

From the above quotes, it was evident that well-defined tasks, timed sessions and 'being watched' by peers and facilitators encouraged students to achieve their goals. What proved to be very beneficial to them was discussing their goals in an informal setting during the breaks, such as whether they needed to revise their goal, if the goal was overambitious, or how many tasks they could complete within the given time. The creation of a space that reproduced typical working conditions was what increased productivity and gave a clear structure to the day.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on auto-ethnographic fieldnotes and qualitative feedback, and responding to concepts of community of practice, social support, productivity, and isolation/alienation, we have explored virtual writing retreats as a way to: 1) build a community, 2) create a virtual library, 3) combat isolation, and last but not least 4) maintain productivity, in a context of crisis.

Our study extended the notion of writing retreats in two ways. Firstly, as discussed, previous studies of writing retreats addressed researchers: doctoral candidates and academic faculty, but not Master's students. However, it is important to note that Master's students also need to fulfil writing demands and complete their dissertation following the completion of compulsory coursework. In terms of practice, educators in higher education might consider this model to construct a writing community, which develops academic well-being (Stevenson, 2020).

Also, previous studies of retreats were conducted based on physical settings. However, in times of pandemics, face-to-face interaction is no longer possible. This study offers insights into the possibility and contribution of virtual writing retreats, and responds to specific challenges that arise from the context of a pandemic. Regardless, we hope that the model and practice of virtual writing retreats could be considered by educators. Compared to physical retreats, virtual writing retreats are relatively flexible in terms of time and space and offer a space for community building and academic productivity, especially for distance learning.

Challenges and limitations

Although virtual writing retreats offered students opportunity for socialisation, productivity, and community-building, this experience cannot be treated as a panacea to the various challenges that the pandemic exposed to them. In fact, a twice-a-week retreat could not compete with teaching and community-building in a physical space, as the nature of casual interactions and university experience differs when students move from the offline to online

space. The difficulty also lies in the facilitator if they have not established a relationship and rapport with participants; in our case, this relationship was pre-existing, but was further strengthened during the retreats given the temporal and social aspects of the retreat. We assume that such a method might only be suitable to self-motivated and high-performing students and/or students that aim to pursue an academic career in the future (i.e. students that are planning to conduct a doctoral thesis). This study does not suggest that online writing retreats fit all MSc students: it might not be appropriate for those less motivated or academically oriented. Therefore, the challenge for facilitators in the digital space of the platform is to engage and include those students who are not self-driven, less motivated, or silent. While these are initial assumptions, more research needs to be done to assess the effectiveness of online writing retreats in students' performance in assignments and dissertations. In addition to these challenges is Zoom fatigue which has become a widely recognised condition (Hall, 2020). Based on our own experience, it is not always easy to be the facilitator of an online writing retreat during the COVID-19 pandemic. Facilitators have to deal with their own anxiety and uncertainty for the future and it can be challenging to cater for every student's needs (as they may arise during a break, for example), but it is a rewarding experience for both parties. It should be noted that the popularity of online writing retreats can be attributed to the very specific temporal and contextual dimensions (unexpected lockdown and measures for social isolation), while in the post-pandemic times the retreats can work in a hybrid mode, which may entail a different learning experience. With the hybrid mode of teaching being more prominent in higher education environments, the role of online writing retreats and the limitations they entail should be given more scholarly attention to foster inclusion, community building, participation, productivity, and well-being.

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