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Increasing Research Productivity and Professional Development in Psychology With a Writing Retreat

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Abstract

Writing is a core feature of the training requirements and career demands of psychology faculty members and graduate students. Within academic psychology, specifically, writing is vital for the generation of scientific knowledge through manuscripts and grant applications. Although resources exist regarding how to improve one's writing skills, few models have been described regarding how to promote a culture of writing productivity that realizes tangible deliverables, such as manuscripts and grant applications. In this article, we discuss the rationale, model, and initial outcome data of a writing retreat developed and implemented to increase research productivity among psychology faculty and trainees. We also review best practices for conducting writing retreats and identify key areas for future SoTL on advancing writing.

Keywords

writing retreat; psychology; training; SoTL

Consider the factors that contribute to a successful career in academic and professional psychology. Within the realm of academic psychology, there are at least four main metrics of success: (1) manuscripts both published in high-impact journals and that collectively demonstrate a cohesive, goal-directed, and incremental research program; (2) grant applications, especially to federal agencies (e.g., National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, U.S. Department of Defense); (3) mentorship of graduate students to generate the next cadre of scientists; and (4) instruction of undergraduate and graduate level courses. Within the realm of professional psychology, Kaslow (2004) identified two foundational competencies—ethics, as well as individual and cultural diversity—and several core competencies that operate under the umbrella of a scientifically minded practice (e.g., psychological assessment, intervention, consultation and interprofessional collaboration, supervision, and professional development). Across all divisions of academic psychology, as well as professional psychology (and these are not mutually exclusive categories), the motivation and ability to write—efficiently, clearly, and routinely—is arguably the root of all of these competencies. However, beyond the anecdotal, relatively little is known about how to foster an environment of writing productivity. Determining ways to enhance writing

productivity has the potential to enhance knowledge, bolster academic achievement, and generate the very science needed to advance the science of psychology.

Indeed, writing is among the scientist's most powerful tools for knowledge generation and dissemination, and this is true across the rank spectrum (Stewart, Roberts, & Roy, 2007). Engaging trainees in writing early in their career trajectory is important (Petrova & Coughlin, 2012), because activities heavily reliant on efficient, accurate, and coherent writing (e.g., publications) are a core expectation of psychologists and other academics (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). Undeniably, the nature, quality, and quantity of publications and other writing-related activities (e.g., grant applications) are in many cases a determining factor in tenure and promotion decisions. Thus, it is imperative to impress on psychology graduate students and junior faculty, in particular, the importance of writing and to identify ways to increase writing productivity.

One way to achieve scientific progress is through writing retreats (cf. writing colonies, writing workshops). For the purposes of this article, writing retreat is defined as a prescribed period of time during which one geographically separates oneself from a typical or routine work environment for the distinct purpose of writing (as opposed to work-related activities more broadly) with other likeminded individuals with the same purpose. On this front, several articles have also documented the ingredients and utility of writing retreats. For example, Rosser, Rugg, and Ross (2001) describe writing retreats as a "necessary and responsible way to respond to the demands of research" (p. 13) and offer 10 components of a successful retreat, among them being: be goal-oriented, create tasks prior to the retreat, select an environment favorable to writing, ensure opportunities for mentoring of junior investigators, safeguard principal investigators' writing time, and ensure appropriate technology is available. Chick and colleagues (2014) provide a comprehensive account of the curriculum and program assessment of their writing retreat model, which they termed the "Writer's Collaborative." This retreat program is noted for several strengths, among them being a systematic evaluation of participants' writing confidence, preferences, and time-management techniques—all of which serve as useful pre- and postretreat outcome data. Indeed, participants in the Writer's Collaborative reported a 37% decrease in worries regarding the initiation of writing, a 12% decrease in feeling intimidated by colleagues about having their writing evaluated, and a 38% increase in appreciation of small writing groups. Perhaps most importantly, participants reported that, as a result of the program, the amount of structured time that participants created *beyond* the writing retreat increased by 28%. Despite these strengths, it is worth highlighting that this retreat—and the majority of which we are aware—are limited to faculty as participants.

Writing retreats may be especially useful for trainees, because the retreat not only provides the time and opportunity to write but it also facilitates and solidifies the engagement of its participants in the academic process (MacLeod, Steckley, & Murray, 2012), creates a "culture of publication" (Garside et al., 2015), and offers structured time for mentorship (Cable, Boyer, Colbert, & Boyer, 2013). It is important that writing retreats have demonstrated usefulness in improving participants' motivation to write, affording opportunities for targeted writing instruction, and enhancing output (Garside et al., 2015; Moore, 2003; Murray & Newton, 2009; Paltridge, 2016).

Purpose

Drawing from a corpus of multidisciplinary scientific literature (e.g., clinical, social, educational, and industrial and organization [I/O] psychology; medicine; and business), the purpose of this article is to describe the rationale, model, and preliminary outcome data of a writing retreat developed and implemented to increase research productivity among clinical psychology faculty and trainees. We additionally review best practices for conducting writing retreats and identify key areas for future SoTL on advancing writing. In this article, we focus, in part, on research productivity in clinical psychology, because that is the framework through which we operate. However, we do not intend for this discussion to be limited in practical scope to clinical psychology faculty and trainees. We find educational and scientific utility of the writing retreat approach described herein across disciplines.

Resources for Planning Writing and Generating Good Writing

Although it is beyond the scope of the present article to instruct on how to become a better writer, we wish to refer the reader to several gold standard resources for planning writing and generating good writing: *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (Silvia, 2007), *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* (Pinker, 2014), *Stylish Academic Writing* (Sword, 2012), *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (Sword, 2017), *The Portable Mentor Expert Guide to a Successful Career in Psychology* (Prinstein, 2013), and *Flow and the Principle of Relevance: Bringing our Dynamic Speaking Knowledge to Writing* (Rossen-Knill, 2011).

On the Specificity of Writing Retreats

Why might a writing retreat yield incremental production of scientific knowledge compared with other structured efforts to write (e.g., designating four hours of “writing time” each Friday)? For one, although it is acknowledged that the actual projects worked on during a writing retreat are often one’s own, writing retreats are inherently a group activity. Given that the group environment has certain expectations—namely, to write—it is likely that group accountability and social comparison processes are motivational. Moreover, the social structure of writing retreats (e.g., the evening activities in which academic discourse and relaxing events are encouraged) likely serves to reduce stress and facilitate social connection. Humans have an innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which has been shown also to extend to work environments (Berman, West, & Richter, Jr., 2002). It is likely that when colleagues feel more connected to one another, they have more successful work output. Similarly, to take clinical psychology as one example, writing retreats that integrate scholars from distinct lines of research within clinical psychology likely serve to facilitate across-field collaborations (e.g., researchers who study suicidal behavior broadly as opposed to specific, related disorders such as anorexia nervosa), and consequently, transformative approaches to the understanding of mental health conditions can be achieved.

Multidisciplinary research has established the utility of work retreats more broadly, although it is acknowledged that the distinction between work retreats for socialization/team-bonding

versus work productivity purposes is often blurred. For socialization/team-bonding purposes, short-term work retreats have been shown to promote friendships, strengthen bonds between workers, and diminish burnout (Berman et al., 2002; Birx, Lasala, & Wagstaff, 2011); build teamwork and leadership skills (Stoller, Rose, Lee, Dolgan, & Hoogwerf, 2004); decrease stress (Rao, Keitel, Berman, & Yager, 2000); and strengthen support systems (Klein, Marcuse, Jackson, Watkins, & Hudgins, 2000). Particularly relevant to trainees and faculty within clinical psychology, a recent pilot study has also supported the use of 1-day retreats for mental health providers in boosting morale and reducing staff burnout, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Salyers et al., 2011).

Although writing retreat has elements of socialization, as will be described later, the primary function is to create protected time and space to write. This may especially true for clinical psychology trainees who, as noted, have competing professional demands (e.g., a caseload of psychotherapy clients, clinical supervision, and academic classes) or for trainees in other subfields of psychology for whom teaching and other responsibilities may necessitate protected writing time. Indeed, protected time to write is crucial. Not surprisingly, extended periods of time away from conventional work settings, such as sabbaticals (which can range from one month to one or more years), are similarly beneficial for mitigating employee burnout (Maslach, 2003). Burnout can significantly decrease productivity and morale, as well as increase turnover rates of valuable employees (Carr & Tang, 2005). Sabbaticals can contribute to significant personal and professional benefits (Benshoff & Spruill, 2002; Carr & Tang, 2005). Evidence for the utility of sabbaticals has been reported across occupations, including military officers (Thie, Harrell, & Thibault, 2003), clergyman (Ferguson, Andercheck, Tom, Martinez, & Stroope, 2015), and clinicians (Brazeau & Van Tyle, 2006). In academia, specifically, sabbaticals allow faculty members to focus on research productivity (Brazeau & Van Tyle, 2006).

Thus, it follows that efforts to leverage the successes of work retreats and sabbaticals for the purposes of training and creating a culture of writing among psychology faculty and trainees have the potential to substantially contribute to research productivity and career trajectories. On this front, several esteemed organizations host writing retreats for the purposes of generating, among other metrics, peer-reviewed publications. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation hosts a coveted writing retreat in Northern Italy, termed the Bellagio Residency Program. Its mission is to offer “academics, artists, thought leaders, policymakers, and practitioners a serene setting conducive to focused, goal-oriented work, and the unparalleled opportunity to establish new connections with fellow residents from a wide array of backgrounds, disciplines, and geographies...[to support] the generation of important new knowledge” (Rockefeller Foundation, 2016).

Our Model

Building on historical and contemporary approaches, such as that of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Residency, in 2015, we instituted an inaugural research-intensive, lab-wide writing retreat with two primary purposes: (1) to promote intralab research collaborations, and (2) to produce a large quantity of high-quality scientific manuscripts for submission to recognized peer-reviewed journals.

We emphasize four crucial points in this brief snippet of the Foundation's Bellagio Residency Program mission: (1) serenity, (2) goal-oriented work, (3) intra- and interprofessional connectedness, and (4) knowledge generation. The latter three were discussed earlier with regard to core competencies in the training and careers of academic and professional psychologists. The former—a serene environment—is, we argue, a crucial mechanism to achieve the latter. Academic residencies like this, however, are almost exclusively limited to advanced scholars: the Rockefeller Foundation indicates that “[s]uccessful applicants will demonstrate *decades of significant professional contributions* to their field or show evidence of being on a strong upward trajectory for those earlier in their careers” (emphasis added; Rockefeller Foundation, 2016). As described earlier, it is important to engender this scientific entrepreneurial spirit early in one's career, as writing is a paramount skill at all stages (Petrova & Coughlin, 2012)—indeed, this focus on graduate trainees is at the very core of our own model and sets the present writing retreat model apart from other models described in the literature. In what follows, we describe core features of the model, particularly planning, location, duration, and structure considerations. We emphasize that each lab or research group is unique and that the writing retreat may require tailoring to the unique cultural milieu of each lab or research group.

Planning

To plan for the writing retreat, participants create an action plan in the days, weeks, and months leading up to the retreat. Specific goals are identified, and this takes various forms. For example, some participants establish a daily target word count, or specific section(s) of a manuscript, book, grant application, or other academic writing assignments to be completed. Participants are encouraged to obtain materials necessary to facilitate the writing objectives, such as relevant journal articles and books, prior to the retreat to maximize the amount of time spent writing. As graduate students, the nature of writing assignments may include those that facilitate completion of, for example, a dissertation prospectus. In this regard, some activities performed during writing retreat serve a dual purpose: fulfilling successful completion of programmatic requirements, as well as laying the bedrock for the future publications that may arise from a dissertation. The emphasis is to create discrete, measurable, and flexible goals that correspond to the overarching goal of the retreat: writing. Participants are implored to not allow the writing retreat to become a distractor or an excuse to pause writing in the interim between when it is scheduled and when it occurs; the thought that “I'll just do it at the retreat” only serves to stymie progress. In addition to planning for the actual writing that will take place, it is important to consider other logistics, such as transportation, food, and nighttime activities (e.g., board games).

Location

Like the Rockefeller Foundation retreat described earlier, it is important, if possible, for the retreat to occur in a serene environment with minimal external distractions. Indeed, two core tenets of a successful writing retreat are to “select an environment conducive to writing” and “ensure the writers' comfort” (Rosser et al., 2001). Our writing retreat has occurred at a cost-responsible location approximately 90 miles west of Florida State University. Of course, serenity is in some ways subjective and can take various forms: at a house overlooking the ocean, in a cabin in the woods, in a quiet, windowless room, and so forth

While writing retreats that occur offsite are advantageous to reduce distractions and promote exclusive focus on the goals of the writing retreat (Rosser et al., 2001), we recognize that offsite locations such as hotels, cabins, or lake or beach houses are not always logistically feasible (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). In this regard, alternative environments could include, as appropriate, a faculty member's house or a community center.

Duration

Historically, our retreat has occurred across four nights. This time may seem short, especially compared to the month-long duration of the Bellagio Residency; however, as will be demonstrated below, the goals of the retreat can be reliably met and in many cases exceeded in this timeframe. The duration of the retreat is contingent upon several variables, such as participant availability and budgetary considerations. Identifying an optimal duration is an empirical question that, to our knowledge, has yet to be examined.

Structure

The structure of our retreat includes intensive writing throughout the day, with evenings reserved for scholarly discourse, which then funnels back into intensive writing the following day. This cycle is intended to cultivate high-quality, collaborative research. We do not adhere to a rigid start time, though many participants commence writing at or around 8:00 a.m. Space permitting, attendees write in areas for which few distractions exist (including, e.g., other attendees). What is “rigid” is the stop time, for example, 4:00 PM. This firm stop time allows for structure throughout the day, ensuring that everyone is on a similar schedule and that unreasonable noise and distractions do not occur while participants are still writing. At the predetermined stop time, any lingering thoughts and/or incomplete sentences, paragraphs, or sections serve as a springboard for the next day. After the daily writing period, we come together as a group to discuss what was achieved during the day, roadblocks, and action plans for moving forward. This group discussion is led by the retreat's facilitator, as described below. This group activity also functions as a support system for those who are experiencing difficulties, such as “writer's block.” To wit, participants are often reminded of an axiom attributed to William Faulkner: “Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it's the only way you can do anything really good.” Indeed, the goal is to write—no matter what.

Of course, writing and scholarly discourse are the priorities of writing retreats. However, we would be remiss to not discuss the importance of engaging in enjoyable group activities after the daily writing stop-time as a way to relax and foster an environment of cohesion, collaboration, and perseverance. Examples of recreational group activities for the late afternoon and nighttime include board games, charades, karaoke, swimming, biking, kayaking, and a relaxed group dinner—all of which depend on the retreat location, finances, and participant preferences.

Leadership

The success of the writing retreat would likely be tempered without a predetermined leader to facilitate retreat guidelines and promote the culture of writing. For our retreats, the facilitator has been a Professor of Psychology, who also serves as the research lab director

for the majority of the graduate student attendees and has an established track record of scholarly productivity. The interactions with this facilitator occurred during group discussions following the day of writing; that is, this facilitator did not monitor individuals' progress throughout the day. Indeed, this facilitator, too, was writing.

Preliminary Outcome Data

Our writing retreat was piloted in Summer 2015 and was successful, yielding numerous scientific articles submitted to leading psychology and psychiatry journals. Overall, among seven graduate student participants, 11 scientific manuscripts were directly attributable to the time spent writing during the retreat. For example, one article that was fully written and submitted during the 2015 retreat was published in *Clinical Psychology Review* (Stanley, Hom, & Joiner, 2016), which has among the highest impact factor of journals in the field of psychology.¹ The other manuscripts were published in top-tier journals such as *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine* (Hom et al., 2016), *Assessment* (Rogers et al., 2016), and *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes* (Joiner & Stanley, 2016). Beyond the immediately measurable successes of publications that stemmed from this writing retreat, these publications and the attendant ideas generated in writing them and discussing them with the other retreat attendees served as leverage points for at least two grant applications—one funded directly to two of the doctoral-level students in attendance through the American Psychological Foundation (APF; PIs: Stanley & Hom) and one that was submitted to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA; PI: Joiner). Given these successes, we endeavored to replicate the retreat in a subsequent year and to expand its scope by including another research laboratory from the clinical psychology program at Florida State University.

Thus, in Summer 2016, we held our second annual writing retreat, which was similar to the pilot in structure, location, scope, and scientific and training mission. One notable change was that we more systematically examined outcome data across four domains: (1) manuscripts, (2) grants, (3) research project idea development, (4) interlab collaborations, and (5) other academic writing activities (e.g., dissertation prospectus, essays for application to clinical internship). Overall, across the 14 trainees and two faculty members in attendance, 24 scientific manuscripts were written, in whole or in part, during this second retreat. One grant idea was developed by a faculty member through the nighttime discourse, and one separate grant proposal was written by a student. A total of four new research project ideas involving future data collection were generated, of which two involved interlab collaborations. Moreover, two students were able to near completion on their dissertation prospectus; two students were able to complete essays for clinical internship applications; one student wrote an institutional review board (IRB) application for a study that was previously conceptualized; one student wrote a section of a book; three students were able to make substantial progress on their master's thesis prospectus; and one faculty member readied a book for submission to the publisher.

¹This article is a systematic review. The actual systematic review and organization of articles was completed in the planning stages leading up to the retreat.

A major leverage point for this retreat was the initiation of a student-run, student-only follow-up writing retreat to occur monthly at a student's house on a rotating basis. In the months following the writing retreat, about one follow-up meeting occurred per month for a total duration of approximately 3 months. These meetings occurred only with graduate students present. Productivity data were not tracked. That only three known follow-up meetings occurred may be because a clear leader was not established. Indeed, the structured writing retreat described above is directed by the Principal Investigator of the laboratory for which the graduate student attendees work. The lack of this facilitator's presence—or even a surrogate facilitator—likely accounted for the diminished frequency of the student-only follow-up meetings. In this regard, booster sessions may be needed that are more formalized and that involve a director (e.g., lab Principal Investigator). Regular (e.g., annual) writing retreats may serve to maintain this synergy.

The outcome data collection is a notable strength. Of note, participants in the writing retreat were not aware at the outset that outcome data would be collected. We decided to collect outcome data following the retreat, and thus we are confident that the productivity reflects organic processes rather than a desire to “look good” at the outcome assessment. Moreover, data were provided via self-report and were anonymous. Despite these strengths, we wish to highlight that a limitation of the present study is that outcome data were not comprehensively assessed. Namely, we did not systematically collect nuanced outcome data regarding the *degree to which* a completed manuscript was attributable to the writing retreat. It could be that for some manuscripts, only a section (e.g., Participants and Procedures) was written and for other manuscripts it may have been the full document. It would be useful to track how many sections of a manuscript were written during a retreat or, more flexibly for nonscientific articles written, how many words were written. Our data also do not speak to the preparatory work that was completed prior to the retreat. For example, were outlines created? Were data analyses conducted ahead of time? Were articles to reference within the manuscript gathered ahead of time? Moving forward, we endeavor to leverage the abovementioned writing retreat model and conduct a thorough program evaluation, inclusive of detailed pre- and posttest data, consistent with that done by Chick and colleagues (2014). We also endeavor to prospectively examine productivity at points in time that do not coincide with the structured writing retreat as a pseudocontrol group. In addition to the collection of quantitative data, we believe that rigorously collected and analyzed qualitative data may augment the utility of a writing retreat program evaluation. Nevertheless, it is clear—at least anecdotally—that the writing retreats yielded a productivity spike over and above the *status quo*.

Considerations

One may suggest that the writing generated during writing retreat would likely have been written eventually, even if writing retreat never occurred. We do not disagree. However, we and others suggest that such writing would have occurred at a slower speed and would not have been privy to the benefits of discourse with the other writing retreat attendees (Rosser et al., 2001). Moreover, beyond the production of tangible writing products, an additional emphasis of a writing retreat is creating a *culture of writing*. In that regard, writing retreat is a crucial conduit to both short- and long-term research productivity.

One may also suggest that cost is a barrier for the widespread adoption of writing retreat across training institutions. Here, too, we do not disagree. We view the investment, however, as an investment not only in the training and career advancements of the student and faculty attendees, but also an investment in science. There are multiple examples of likeminded events that occur daily on university campuses, such as invited speakers and colloquia, all of which incur costs and are time-intensive but nevertheless serve to enhance the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Moving forward, it will be important to identify grant mechanisms—either internal (e.g., from a university) or external (e.g., through foundations)—that may serve to sponsor the important intellectual progress made possible by writing retreats.

Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, it is our hope—and it has been our experience—that writing retreats such as these will stimulate and advance rigorous scientific research and thereby also have a meaningful impact on the training and career trajectories of the graduate student trainees and supervising faculty members in attendance.

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