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Chapter

Perspective Chapter: Writing Retreat - A Trajectory towards Academic Language Enhancement

Bulelwa Makena

Abstract

Structured research writing retreats are noted for their characteristic to enhance academic writing among postgraduates as novices in the field of research. Nevertheless, as these researchers are expected to display creativity in paper writing, there are still challenges to transcribe and paraphrase own thoughts instead of transferring experiences by other scholars. It is for this reason that this chapter felt compelled to outline its aim at investigating whether writing retreats have any significant value as trajectories to redefine and enhance academic language for the so-called 'emerging researchers'. Additionally, as researchers are loaded with other assigned duties at their workstations, this causes a limitation, yet with an effect of declining confidence in writing abilities. Findings for this investigation confirmed that a huge challenge for this cohort of students was limited space and time to work into finality the expected throughput, as compared with seasoned researchers who are already acquainted of creating own writing spaces. It is for this reason that this chapter suggests and recommends that events such as writing retreats have power to shape postgraduate students towards modified academic writing, thereby leading to enhanced academic language.

Keywords: researchers, writing retreat, language enhancement, academic writing, paraphrasing

1. Introduction and background

Writing retreats for academia have been noted of the significance they bring towards researchers in manuscript writing, as such, this has now become a prevalent yet widespread event aiming at capacitating authors embarking on academic writing [1]. As academic staff have now resorted to using writing retreats as a weapon to lifting up research output coupled with improved scholarly writing and augmented academic productivity, there is still a gap because little is considered that postgraduate students could be assisted by these events to enhance writing self-efficacy [2]. This manuscript already believes that if this cohort of students could be supported through such academic events, there would surely be a trajectory towards academic language enhancement as this has been identified as a lacking factor in

most submissions during dissertation and thesis writing [3]. For students at this level of study to be having a deficit in academic writing and language enhancement, there really seems to be a need for academic writing retreats to be remedial devices towards this handicap.

Consequently, Honours' and Masters' students undergo processes to write their dissertations as a prerequisite towards completion of the programme enrolled for. During this entire period, they solely depend on allocated supervisors for professional guidance in order for progress to be eminent, yet without any supplementary support [4]. It is worth to note that the very same supervisors have plenty modules to offer in different levels and across varying programmes. On the other side, the very cohort of Honours' and Masters' students are mostly workers employed in diverse sectors. This limitation for both these recipients to research writing, supervisors and supervisees really raises some alarm bells if there are limited alternative strategies put in place to curb the situation [5]. It is for this reason that this chapter explores writing retreats as a trajectory for improved academic language enhancement for students expected to re-design 'dissertation writing' as one of the prerequisites towards graduate attributes. The subsequent section is where literature is unpacked in relation to the benefits of structured academic writing retreats to sustain postgraduate students' academic writing logic and language enhancement.

2. Literature review

2.1 Empirical literature

2.1.1 Writing retreat as a supporting aid for postgraduate students

Compiling written text and paraphrasing for an audience of academics is no mean task as this group of people critically interrogate whatever text they come across, with a critical eye and own justifications besides those outlined by the author/s of the manuscript. Further than that, academic writing is classically characterised by technical aspects, effective writing logistics and academic language [6]. Through academic writing aspects, not only limited to the listed ones, a scholar also needs to be conversant enough when undertaking whatever form of scholarly writing, either a manuscript or dissertation or thesis [7]. As authors experience some individual hindrances and diverse challenging factors when engaging on academic writing, writing retreats with their pedagogies have since been noted to be remedial necessities [8]. For enhanced academic writing and language skills, there seems to be a dire need for consistent organisation of academic writing retreats to empower and benefit the supervised and supervisors. Engaging in this practice has a likely wood to empower university students towards enhanced academic language indulgences.

In line with enhanced academic language, it is alleged that some models on Academic Literacies (AL) are recommended for use as they have a feature to arouse development of students' writing yet addressing language as a barrier to excelled academic writing [9]. As students at tertiary institutions of higher learning engage in platforms such as AL's collaborations and academic writing retreats, confidence is boosted, as indicated by respective teachers when reverting to students for feedback [10]. This corresponds with one of the supervisors reported in literature that after students were referred for capacitation at the Academic Writing Centres (AWC's),

as they were expected to re-submit previously submitted texts, improvement was recognised in academic language enhancement more so because of paraphrasing the given texts. It is for this reason that research suggests and recommends consistent and ongoing research writing retreats as significant benefactors to all recipients involved in research-related writing activities. Embarking on this type of activity is not only seen as remedial for university students but cuts across as a community-based academic pedagogical activity for either undergraduate, postgraduate, novices and seasoned scholars in the field of research. It is therefore essential that all scholars in academia be timeously provided with sustenance for sharpened research and authorship abilities [2].

2.1.2 A prospective solution of bringing together a community for related research fields

Through academic writing retreats, students with relating research fields collaboratively engage to work as a team, thus breaking isolation challenges [11, 12]. A great deal of students is faced with frustrations of locking themselves in their little corners when expected to write their dissertations, yet research writing is an exercise that requires collaborative teamwork. This helps to brainstorm and share ideas with scholars within the same field of study. This is the platform that allows a quiet space without disruptions from either home or workplace surroundings [13].

Accordingly, these are spaces with exquisite approaches that open door for discussion forums to further reconnoitre socio-professional prospects not only limited to individual proficiency fields. As the notion of isolation is cut off and broken into thin lines in between diverse students from varying programmes enrolled for, there is exposure to share academic writing objectives, common challenges and fruitful experiences [14]. As collaborations and exchanging own thoughts about one's work constantly take place within students as peers, within supervisees and their supervisors, within mentors and mentees, the ultimate goal is strengthened cohesion between dissertation/thesis writers.

Henceforth, as writing retreats seem to have become a potential solution, throughput rate for students graduating has been improved as compared with previous instances when such events were not organised for the cohort of postgraduate students [15]. In line with this statement, allocated supervisors also resonate that students who attended writing retreats perform better in academic language enhancement. Be that as it may, the question remains on whether taking students to only one writing retreat throughout the entire academic year is sufficient or not. This chapter raises such a concern on noting that although writing retreats are organised just once yearly, there are still reported cases of students who resort to dropping out when held up in challenges of being unable to write into completion their dissertation as the system only allows a specified number of academic years for students to be registered for a particular programme [16].

Research therefore articulates and recognises production of academic writing. This is made evident by students who attended academic writing retreat as they accord prospects of improved academic language enhancement, time management, self-discipline and improved personal schedule on intended time frames for attaining their expected writing objectives [7, 17, 18]. Another overwhelming report is one research finding that was reported. Writing retreat imperatives indicated huge number of hours spent specifically on writing, yet considering logistics of reduced isolation, continued student support and attainment of realistic personal targets [19, 20].

2.2 Theoretical literature

Underpinning this investigation is the Conceptual Map of the relationships between retreat outcomes and key themes [21]. This analysis is where research writing attributes are presented, thereby supporting writing retreat approaches as they enhance publication throughput percentages [22, 23]. In his conceptual map [21] distinguishes five key elements necessary for organised and professional publication output.

As identified in the figure below, the stated five elements envisage (**Figure 1**):

- **Organisational investment** which depicts availability and willingness of experienced mentors, allocation of resources and follow-up support
- **Community of practise** which entails collegial support, social interaction, shared vision and mentorship

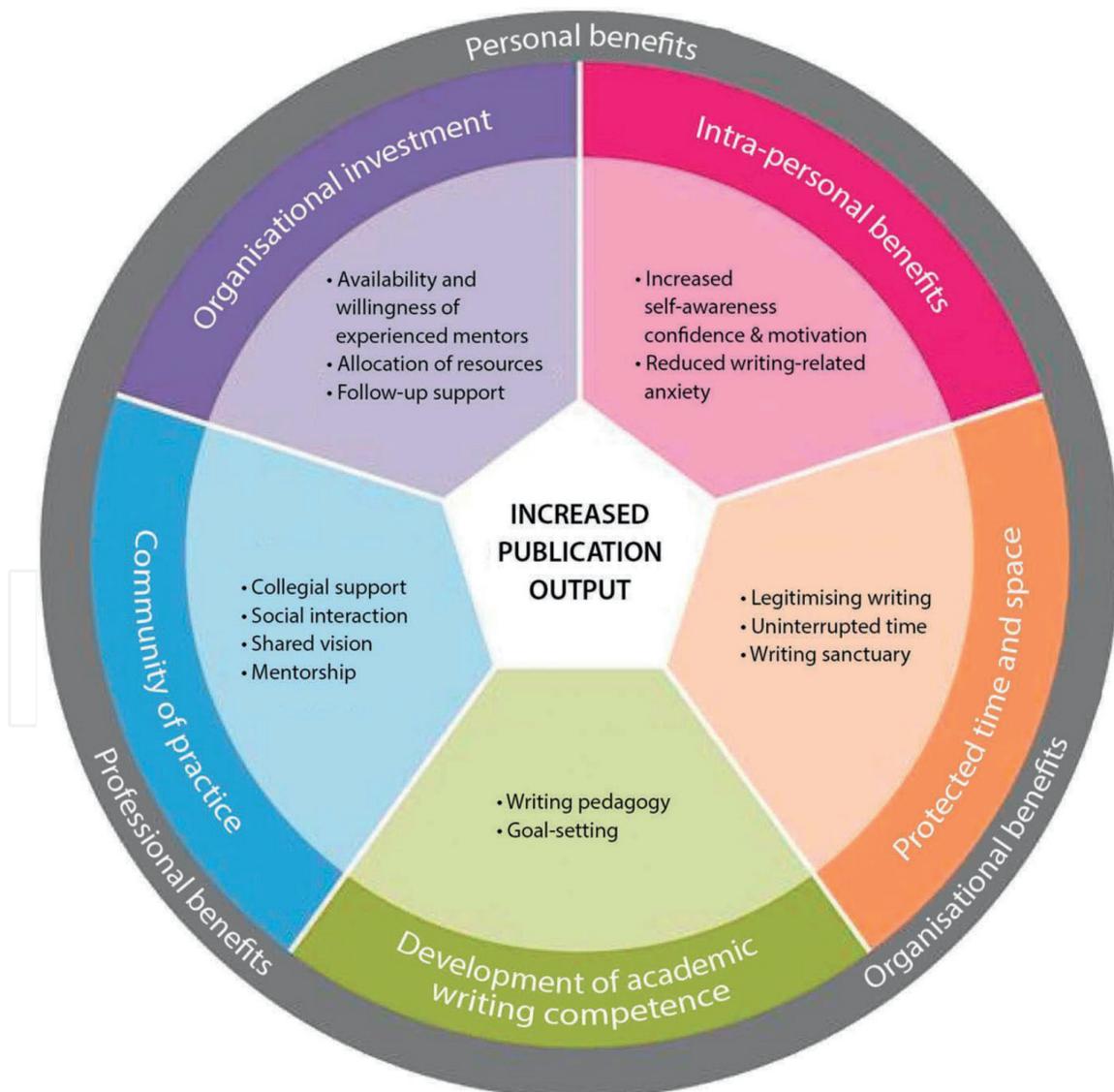


Figure 1.
Conceptual map of the relationships between retreat outcomes and key themes [21].

- **Development of academic writing competence** portraying writing pedagogies coupled with goal setting
- **Protected time and space** depicting legitimised writing, uninterrupted time and writing sanctuary
- **Intra-personal benefits** necessitating increased self-awareness, confidence and motivation as well as reduced writing-related anxiety

For a grounded approach to academic writing retreats, these five elements are considered as core towards attaining the intended publication throughput, together with improvement in academic language used during dissertation and thesis writing by Honours' and Masters' students [24]. Be that as it may, as graduate students are novice in the field of authorship, they still experience paraphrasing encounters when expected to write academic texts [25]. This therefore implies that consistent writing retreats have to be organised as a remedy to tackle and overcome such existing challenges. Success for the arranged academic writing retreats solely depends on protecting both time and space concurrently for writing, assigning numerous days consecutively and also intensifying continual writing periods [26]. When these basics are highly considered during periods scheduled for academic writing retreat, authors would have obtained assuring prospects for effective and efficient scientific production [27]. Consequently, to ease the pain and frustration of isolation during dissertation writing, there is an urgent need for postgraduate students to be taken through all the five stages as proposed [28].

3. Methods and materials

Methods and materials in research writing logistics are those techniques or specific procedures which are used by researchers to help at classifying, choosing and processing data about a subject that is being studied. Therefore, this is the section where this chapter has displayed all methods and methodologies of research used when this investigation was conducted [29].

3.1 Research approach

For the purpose of this investigation, qualitative approach was seen as the most prominent research method with its aid when there were engagements between the author and study participants [30]. As collaborations were further extended due to the nature of debates, there became an emergent understanding in relation to university postgraduate student' experiences in their real-life situations when expected to undertake academic journey of dissertation writing despite scarcity of intervention strategies such as academic writing retreats.

3.2 Methodological design

Embedded in this qualitative investigation is a case study design. A case study is renowned with its characteristic of generating in-depth yet considerate understanding of compound concerns entangling humans in their real-life situations [31]. It is for this purpose that there emerged some interest to explore how postgraduate students

are recipients to dissertation and thesis writing could be capacitated at accomplishing academic language enhancement through academic writing retreat trajectory. For postgraduate students to experience such challenges is worth a great concern as their publications are revealed out there for the entire scholars around the world to perceive and aspire.

3.3 Population and sampling

Population for this investigation entails all students enrolled for Honours' and Masters' Programme in one selected university, an institution of higher learning in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Therefore, the sample specifically for this study entailed four purposefully nominated participants of which two were registered Honours and the other two were registered for the Masters' programme [32]. Research resonates that identifying participants in a purposeful manner is when a researcher selects those with experience in relation to the investigated field of study, relevant, as well as accessible. Participants willingly agreed to take part in this investigation after clarities were made that both their identities and responses were to be kept anonymous and that at any given point in time when they felt threatened, they had access or withdrawal rights [33]. For this investigated institution to offer only a single academic writing retreat once yearly for postgraduate students, it was proved imperious that the selected participants proved to be the relevant sample to supply findings of this inquiry with the projected outcomes, as envisaged by the inquiry itself.

3.4 Research instruments

As advocated by the nature of this inquiry being a qualitative one, semi-structured interviews were administered as data collection tools, as yet this type of tool allowed for robust engagements between the interviewer and the interviewed as essential and critical themes were distinguished [34]. Contained in the interview schedule were open-ended questions which allowed participants a huge ground to respond as far as one would have anticipated. Items asked were centred on viewpoints by postgraduate students with regard to solely depending on allocated supervisors for professional guidance in dissertation and thesis writing, taking into note that capacitation activities such as academic research writing retreats were more than the word scarce. Time factor proved to be a major limitation as both the researcher and participants were workers serving in different sectors. This led to the investigation not finished at the anticipated period as some of the appointments secured would abort due to diverse logistics factors. Interviews commenced during September month and could only be consolidated mid-November and that was when the researcher was able to collate on analysing all collected data.

3.5 Data collection procedures

On each of the arranged meetings between the interviewer and interviewees, all participants' responses were recorded to ensure that no single response was left uncaptured and unnoticed. When participants could no longer respond and reflect on any new sources of information, and after the researcher had exhausted at posing some follow-up questions which were primarily not contained in the original interview schedule, there was a feeling that interviews had then reached a point of saturation. It was during this period that analysis of data began. This was done by playing and re-playing all recordings, repeatedly done for the purposes of ensuring

that all information was well captured and perceived. During this process, there emerged some similarities, relationships and connections. Research allows that such sub-categories of responses be classified together as a single category, thereby leading to formation of themes discussed subsequently as findings of the study [35].

4. Research results

As data were analysed and then classified as categories, two themes emerged as findings to this inquiry. With regard to academic writing retreat as a trajectory towards academic language enhancement, it was divulged as a major finding that when postgraduate students embark on writing retreat as academic events, there is (i) increased throughput publication rate. It also emerged as the second finding that attending academic writing retreats have been proven to have a track record of (ii) re-imagined scholarly attitudes.

4.1 Increased throughput publication rate

On engagements in relation to benefits brought about by academic writing retreat attendance,

Participant A debated:

In my previous studies while enrolled for my undergraduate studies, I nearly dropped out as the mini-research project was a real hell to undertake. I would lock myself in a room trying to figure out what is expected of me as comments from my supervisor made me feel like an utter fool.

This debate is harmonised by Participant D who shared own experiences:

As I arrived at the venue on day one where the writing retreat was to be conducted, I was so nervous with the fear of the unknown. I anticipated this event to be like postgraduate presentations which normally make me to panic. Little did I know that we have been summoned to such an eye-opening event! It was the first event of its kind to be attended by our group. We were overwhelmed yet so privileged to have obtained a feel of other supervisors, with workshops in-between.

Concurrently, Participant B acknowledged:

After day one of the academic writing retreat, I wanted no supervise to delay me by conducting workshops! I just wanted to focus on and on at writing my dissertation. To my surprise, I felt like doomed to learn how imperative and essential was each presentation! When a workshop on research writing logistics was shared, I felt like starting all over again as the work I thought was legit, was full of technical errors! It was as if we would stay in that quiet space for the entire week.

4.2 Re-imagined scholarly attitudes

As findings discovered that scholarly attitudes had begun to be re-imagined,

Participant C when interviewed in this aspect responded:

I think that stereotype attitude towards research writing is beginning to shift away a little bit. As I collaborate with other students researching on a similar field of my study,

I no longer feel that sense of isolation. The atmosphere in the writing retreat made me to recognise that the journey is not solely between myself and my supervisor, but among a group of scholars with similar and differing academic fields.

Participant A is of the same opinion by declaring:

At times I really could not understand why my supervisor would require me to effect corrections repeatedly. After attending that academic writing retreat, it then dawned to me why paraphrasing is so necessary. I now no longer copy and paste someone else's text as is. I have since began to paraphrase whatever text I come across with. This practice has helped me a lot to improve in academic writing and my language has improved so immensely. Funny though, it is only at this stage that I realise why most learners obtain less marks in activities where expected to summarise given texts. Most normally shorten the given text instead of using own words to compile own story! Specifically, I then began to applaud my supervisor, because as a language specialist, reluctancy to paraphrase normally worried her, but not anymore!

5. Discussion

In consideration of the finding on increased throughput publication rate, findings of this inquiry revealed prospects of improvement in graduate attributes [17]. This was eminent as the department with enrolled postgraduate students graduated a double digit, this being the first accomplishment of its kind ever since students got enrolled for this programme. The glaring and wonderful experience of the outcomes of the academic writing retreat is that the greatest percentage of the postgraduate students who attended the event were able to work out their projects into finality. Postgraduate students had now developed a zeal towards this academic practice which had been previously regarded as tormenting and strenuous. Students were reported to have started to display some sense of ownership to an extent they would require consistent contact without even securing appointments with their supervisors [36]. This cluster of students was seen time and again collaborating and engaging as a group in a quiet space. This really displayed dedication and prioritisation of their Honours' and Masters' projects. Little have supervisors known that in the very specific year, a miracle was bound to happen! The department offering these postgraduate programmes made a huge mark by escalated number of graduands particularly for that academic year. This has served as a wake-up call for the enrolled first-year students in the programme. They would be heard commenting: How we wish such events could be organised at least thrice yearly. Indeed such propositions are correct with an objective to drain off pipe-line students who normally stay stagnant in the system due to experiencing challenges to write-up their research projects into completion.

It also emerged from gathered data that as scholarly attitudes had begun to be re-imagined, there were reported improvements in postgraduate students' academic writing pedagogies, with enhanced academic language. For novices in the field of research, to engage in the context of writing they are not familiar with has proved to be a real challenge and frustration [37]. As postgraduate students are faced with a huge task to produce dissertations, academic writing retreats have been discovered to assist a lot as change agents in scholarly attitudes. The level of academic writing coupled with enhanced language was discovered to have improved after postgraduate students were taken away to a 3-day event: academic writing retreat

[38]. Postgraduate students relayed that their supervisors commented on improved academic language when comparing submissions done after attending the workshops infused within writing retreat sessions. These students echoed out loud that they no longer felt in isolation as was the case before. They now freely practiced the strategy to consult whosoever supervisor not limited to the one allocated to. Further than that, collaborating and engaging with other students from the same field of study had proved to distress, thereby driving away that feeling of isolation. Students also reported that their scope on enhanced academic language seems to improve as they fully embark on paraphrasing whatever text they come across, thereby infusing own thoughts for the voice of the researcher to be heard.

6. Conclusion

Findings analysed and discussed in this chapter are noted to be in line with the theory underpinning this inquiry as the five core elements envisage organisational investment with accessibility and of seasoned mentors to support and professionally guide postgraduate students. This being in line with development of academic writing competence where writing pedagogies and goal setting are portrayed, thus re-building increased self-awareness, confidence and motivated research modalities. It is therefore needed to conclude and recommend that despite postgraduate students feeling isolated, academic writing retreats have been proven by this inquiry to be an exquisite strategy to iron out anxiety, improve throughput rate in research writing, with enhanced academic language, and ultimately working towards reduction of pipe-line students who stagnant the system.

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In conclusion, participants are highly applauded, through their robust engagements, this chapter has managed to table out findings coupled with recommendations thereof.

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Author details

Bulelwa Makena
Walter Sisiulu University, South Africa

*Address all correspondence to: bmakena@wsu.ac.za

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