The C.L.E. Writing Retreat 2012: 'Lifting the Mask of the Impostor'
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This year’s residential Writing Retreat, the fourth in consecutive years, took place between the 11-13th of April at The Priory in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. The Writing Retreat process began in 2009 when the first retreat was held at Streatley, Oxfordshire. This retreat and that held at Highgate Hall in Northants in 2010 were organised by the University’s Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to produce two internally published books charting different departmental perspectives on the significant curriculum changes introduced during that time. The 2011 and 2012 writing retreats had a different purpose: to produce individually authored articles for externally published academic journals. So the overall aim of these events was for each participant, including David and myself, to finish an academic paper, the first draft of which had been submitted to the CLE for editorial review as part of the application process several months earlier. The objective was for all authors to submit their papers electronically at the end of the three days. This objective formed part of the Centre for Learning Excellence’s strategy to support the University’s ethos of scholarship by encouraging academic writing for publication. Writing Retreats are the final event of a process that includes our Writing for Publication seminars and the establishment of the Journal of Pedagogic Development. Having gained experience of writing and publishing in this process, Writing Retreats allow delegates the opportunity to dedicate time and concentration to a specific piece of writing with the support of their colleagues. By taking the delegate away from his or her more customary work patterns and rhythms of the working week, the Writing...
Retreat provided space to focus and for the words to flow. Although the three days were busy with activities, workshops and tasks, the focus was very much on completing the paper in question, or getting as close to completion as possible.

In attendance at this year’s event were ten delegates from the University, all from different departments. This wasn’t regarded as a problem. One delegate noted this: ‘if we are all from one discipline there would be differences of opinion of content or subject, but that hasn’t got in the way at all...’. We also had an invited Guest Editor, Professor Hilary Constable. We invited Hilary to the retreat because we believe that is important for the authors to have the experience and perspective from an external authority in research scholarship focussed on their work.

Six of the ten participants had never been on a writing retreat before. Naturally, there was an air of anxiety when we first assembled. Not only was there concern about writing at the perceived standard and finishing; there were the other delegates. Would everyone ‘get on’?

The first activity was led by Dr Mark Atlay to provide context for the event. In groups, delegates discussed the purpose of universities, their role as academics in fulfilling it and the part writing for publishing played in that role. With the context established expectations were shared, not only of ours of the delegates, but the delegates’ expectations of David and me representing the CLE. Our expectations were:

- To develop an ethos of scholarship;
- To share understanding of pedagogy;
- To take delegates out of their silos.

By the latter, we meant supporting delegates to take off their ‘hats’ as tutors and departmental colleagues, so that they could become open to the thoughts and experiences of others with positive results for their writing. The delegates’ expectations were represented by mind maps. Examples of the words and phrases recorded were

- Motivation;
- Confidence;
- Inspiration and clarity;
- Pressure and intensity;
- Time and headspace;
- Concentration;
- Focus;
- Support;
- Mood and atmosphere.

A result of these activities was that members of a group got to know each. The atmosphere of anxiety disappeared. There was definite feeling in the conference room that delegates were now able to open themselves to their colleagues and were ready for the activities of the retreat. They even were amenable to regrouping into combinations structured before the retreat when everyone’s draft article was circulated for review. In this way, before we’d arrived at the event, everybody had had a chance to read at least two other drafts of papers, which they would then be able to comment on at the Writing Retreat itself, as part of this structured activity.

We felt that a ‘community of practice’ had been established by time lunch was served on the first day. This was appreciated. One delegate, echoing the written feedback of others, said: ‘I think the big strength for me is being part of a community of enquirers...’ The rest of the time at The Priory was spent in activities that both reinforced the ethos of supportive community and allowed time for individual writing. At times reinforcing ethos and making time for writing combined through an activity. For example, we knew that focus is important when writing an article. We showed delegates how to put their articles into the open web resource Wordle. This is a programme that counts up the words used most often and displays them as a pattern with the most frequently used words...
big and bold. So delegates uploaded their draft articles into the programme. If their key words are not among the big, bold words in the patterns, some redrafting was required! Every delegate was given time with Hilary to be given individual feedback on her/his draft. Another activity involved Hilary leading a session on abstracts and introductions. Delegates found these activities very useful as their feedback on their initial expectations for the retreat indicated.

Feedback was given in relation to the expectations expressed at the start of the retreat. In many cases, words or phrases were simply ticked. We put expectations and feedback into tables to help us evaluate the feedback. Group 3’s feedback was informative and gave us the title for this report:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure a paper, process of writing,</td>
<td>Liked sessions on introductions/endings and the abstract.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develop writing/academic skills</td>
<td>Enjoyed the Wordles and tweets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and headspace to write</td>
<td>[Tick]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage coherence of originality</td>
<td>Writing retreat gave crisp focus, which was transparent to the reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning practice</td>
<td>Lifts the mask of the impostor! [A comment we liked so much that we have adapted it for the title of this article.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher/researcher scholar</td>
<td>Hilary did this last year but not this year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and recapping standards of publication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>types</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To finish paper</td>
<td>Not quite but good progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase of confidence, freedom to think</td>
<td>Surprisingly so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To learn from others, community of enquirers</td>
<td>[Tick]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for collaboration</td>
<td>Request to continue to review future work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate new thinking</td>
<td>Not enough time but coming!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to turn dissertation thesis into papers</td>
<td>One person got two papers where thought there was only one. Freedom to think. Treating her data with respect but telling the story, not just reporting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Group 3’s feedback**

We are in no doubt that the retreat was successful. An ethos of scholarship had been developed, although in the end only one delegate submitted his paper at the end of the retreat. Interestingly this did not appear to be an issue. As one delegate put it:

So for me, perhaps the progress has not been exactly as I had planned but even so I have done something because my paper really looks better because the abstract I have rewritten, the introduction I have rewritten and... but I still haven’t gone through everything as yet. So originally I wanted to submit at the end I don’t think I should rush. I can do a proper job when I get home and hopefully bring it to that point.

As, at the time of writing four papers have been submitted with another three about to go, it appears that not submitting on the last day of the retreat was indeed not an issue. Within six months of the end of the 2011 retreat, all but one delegate had submitted to their publications of choice. It looks like a
similar result will be achieved by the 2012 delegates.

Understanding of pedagogy was more difficult to assess as the term was not specifically used in the feedback. Naturally enough, this was focused on writing and personal development. However, as the articles themselves were focused on pedagogy it can be assumed that understanding had been developed through the process of delegates drafting, writing and talking about their research. But there was no doubt about the retreat’s success in bringing delegates out of their silos. One delegate commented:

In terms of academically, the thing that’s really mattered the most is the thing about the silos. I’m co-writing a paper with [...] and we’ve been together, because we started off, met up a year ago and we started doing things together but separately, but we discovered that for this paper to be successful we had to be together. And we work well together and that’s really helped because one thought has led to another, which has crystallized the focus of our paper, along with all the wonderful [support?] we have got, which has been very, very similar because we were in two different feedback sessions, and we managed to amalgamate that so we kind of broadened the horizon if you like. Because we’re not in silos by ourselves but embraced the feedback, so thank you everyone!

Of course there were some negatives. For example several delegates commented that there was not enough time spent with Hilary and that there should have been more writing time on the first day. We were asked to make sure that the retreat had a higher profile so that authors weren’t rushing to meet a deadline that they’d missed at first call. We were also asked to organise a follow-up session to keep the momentum going. This we did four weeks after the event with six of the ten delegates attending. It has to be said, though, there were many more positive than negative comments. Particularly gratifying was the appreciation delegates felt for David and me writing alongside the delegates and taking part in the various activities. One delegate said: ‘...it’s not just the structure and I’ve found the structure helpful, but it’s about the collaborative nature...it’s because the tutors are also engaged in the same activity, which means there’s a respect between all of us which has been absent in some in-service teaching’. Delegates also like the fact that no PowerPoint was used!