Writing in Social Spaces: A social processes approach to academic writing
Rowena Murray
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Review by Mary Malcolm

At the heart of *Writing in Social Spaces* is the author’s commitment to the idea that the academic task of writing can usefully be practiced as a social rather than an individual activity. For the individual, relinquishing the isolation of the prevalent academic model of writing - one that is individual, hidden, even secretive - has the potential to improve both the quality of an academic’s writing and its consistent and productive practice. And through successful engagement in writing, tensions in contemporary academic identity – between the competing demands of the various activities required of the individual academic, and within an institutional focus on research outputs that fails to identify and attribute value to writing as central to that productivity – can be resolved.

To achieve this, Murray recommends engaging academics at various career stages in the task of supported and orchestrated engagement with the task of writing, if possible alongside the more formal development of rhetorical skills that is a feature of US higher education. Writing retreats and writing groups should be peer-led, and with leadership committed both to the
idea of social writing and to the principles and prescriptions that distinguish it. Conducted carefully, these occasions shift the focus from exploring and listing the external barriers to progress, towards cultivating writing as a practice constructive of academic identity. The tensions of academic life are well represented. And the challenges these pose to the academic writer are recognisable, including the immediacy of email as a task, and the social demands of teaching and of collaboration within teaching. Against these, writing can fare badly as a priority activity. In this context, the author describes, and provides templates for, a social processes approach to developing and sustaining academic writing practice – one in which writing is prioritised as the subject of reflection and exploration, and privileged through ‘containment’ – the setting aside of intellectual, physical and motivational space.

Much of the authority for Murray’s argument derives from the testimony of those who have experienced this approach, and although potential leaders of social writing are the text’s primary targets, there is much within it that may be of value to individual writers struggling with the challenge of maintaining writing in their practice and career. It is honest in its evidence base, not only about the external obstacles to sustained writing, but also about the personal behaviours that can militate against our own success, as we postpone writing in favour of tasks we construct as more urgent than they actually are, become reluctant to manage time in a way that doesn’t seek huge and improbable blocks of time but takes responsibility for finding some, and adopt the habit of writing till the bitter end of immediate motivation and knowledge, making it all the more difficult to start afresh next time. Although there are references to a range of writing purposes, and to research students and experienced researchers among the members of the groups Murray has experienced and led, most of the guidance provided, and the substantial testimony of social writing participants, focuses on the experience of academics struggling to initiate and sustain their engagement with research and scholarship through a practice that is at the same time expressive, reflective and generative of their identity as academics.

Whether unblocking the barriers to writing will make quite the difference to research development that is suggested is a different matter. It is, for example, not clear how social writing events discriminate in the guidance they offer between the quality of writing and that of its evidence base. There is no treatment of related issues such as the equal determination and regularity necessary to sustain academic reading practice at a level capable of generating the well-founded hypotheses and valuable research questions on which research writing is based. But these are not the claimed remit of this book. As a reminder of all the reasons we find, in our contexts and ourselves, not to write, and an encouragement to engage consistently in pragmatically chunked writing, social or otherwise, it’s worth a read.