

Adopting Structured Mini Writing Retreats as a Tool for Undergraduate Researchers

Authors : Clare Cunningham

Abstract : Whilst there is a strong global research base on the benefits of structured writing retreats and similar provisions, such as Shut Up and Write events, for academic staff and postgraduate researchers, very little has been published about the worth of such events for undergraduate students. This is despite the fact that, internationally, undergraduate student researchers experience similar pressures, distractions and feelings towards writing as those who are at more senior levels within the academy. This paper reports on a mixed-methods study with cohorts of third-year undergraduate students over the course of four academic years. This involved a range of research instruments adopted over the four years of the study. They include the administration of four questionnaires across three academic years, a collection of ethnographic recordings in the second year, and the collation of reflective journal entries and evaluations from all four years. The final two years of data collection took place during the period of Covid-19 restrictions when writing retreats moved to the virtual space which adds an additional dimension of interest to the analysis. The analysis involved the collation of quantitative questionnaire data to observe patterns in expressions of attitudes towards writing. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and used to corroborate and support the quantitative data when appropriate. The resulting data confirmed that one of the biggest challenges for undergraduate students mirrors those reported in the findings of studies focused on more experienced researchers. This is not surprising, especially given the number of undergraduate students who now work alongside their studies, as well as the increasing number who have caring responsibilities, but it has, as yet, been under-reported. The data showed that the groups of writing retreat participants all had very positive experiences, with accountability, a sense of community and procrastination avoidance some of the key aspects. The analysis revealed the sometimes transformative power of these events for a number of these students in terms of changing the way they viewed writing and themselves as writers. The data presented in this talk will support the proposal that retreats should much more widely be offered to undergraduate students across the world.

Keywords : academic writing, students, undergraduates, writing retreat

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