Developing academic wellbeing through writing retreats

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Abstract

Writing experiences have a crucial role in the wellbeing of academics and PhD researchers and this paper seeks to extend a body of work on writing retreats, by exploring them from a wellbeing perspective. Drawing from literature on wellbeing and the practical experience of developing and delivering writing retreats, it highlights wellbeing outcomes that arise as people write together and engage in social and physical activities away from the university. A sense of wellbeing is developed through the combination of social, physical and sharing activities, which create feelings of confidence, safety and belonging, and a sense of being calm, focused and clear-headed. These states contribute to the writing task, but more importantly can support a general sense of being well. The conclusions draw attention to the importance of non-writing aspects of writing retreats and their role in enhancing peoples' broader sense of wellbeing. The challenge going forward is how to translate these subjective, personal and relational wellbeing benefits back in to university life. It is difficult to envision how writing retreats might have comprehensive wellbeing impacts unless they are integrated into wider strategic initiatives which start to tackle some of the wider causes of ill-being in HE.

Keywords: Writing Retreat, Academics, PhD students, Wellbeing, Ill-being.

Introduction

In academic life our engagement, approach and feelings about writing are intertwined with our broader sense of wellbeing. Writing is an emotional endeavour which is connected to our sense of self, achievement and status within the profession. Our writing is usually influenced by a mixture of our own and our employers aspirations, and university funded writing retreats are increasingly popular as a way of developing writing and increasing productivity. This paper aims to contribute to the writing retreat literature by reflecting upon writing retreats from a wellbeing perspective. Initially it considers context and those factors which lead to ill-being (such as anxiety and stress). It then reviews literature on academic retreats and on wellbeing as a way of exploring the retreat experience through a wellbeing lens. The discussion section shares the experience of developing and running academic writing retreats with a focus on wellbeing. This paper adds to the literature on academic ill- being and reframes writing retreats in terms of their potential contribution to personal wellbeing.

There is a wealth of literature about higher education (HE) in the context of neo-liberalism and its implications for academics (including Ball, 2012; Burrows, 2012; Gill, 2010; Elizabeth and Grant, 2013; Larsson, 2009: Mahoney and Weiner, 2019; Sparkes, 2007 and Shore, 2008). Increased marketization of education, has led to the adoption of managerial approaches, intensified auditing of academic work and increased the use of metrics as a way of increasing competitive practices within and between universities (Mahony and Weiner, 2019). In the UK context HE expansion has been accompanied by fiscal restraint, restructuring, redundancies and reductions in job security due to an increase in short term and temporary contracts (Sparkes, 2007). This has been accompanied by "heightened levels of institutional control and surveillance, backed up by external inspection agencies" (Mahony and Weiner, 2019: 569). Measured outputs include citations metrics, research assessments, performance indicators, teaching quality assessments, workload models, quality assurance measures and institutional, school and departmental audits (Ball, 2012; Burrows, 2012; Mahony and Weiner, 2019).

The Wellcome Trust (2020) outline the implications of this context on the experiences of researchers, identifying aggressive work cultures, intense pressure to publish and widespread reports of "stress, anxiety, mental health problems, strain on personal relationships, and a sense of isolation and loneliness at work" (2020: 3). These stresses and anxieties are exacerbated for those with wider academic roles, amplified by the complexity and "strategic dissonance" (MacLeod, Steckley and Murray, 2012: 653) associated with academic life. In the context of regularly changing university priorities, job insecurity, high workloads, and diverse, often conflicting priorities it is unsurprising that many face challenges not just in their academic writing but in terms of their wellbeing more generally (Elizabeth and Grant, 2013; Lincoln, 2011; Petersen, 2011). Writing productivity is associated with recognition, career stability and progression, but the intensification of the 'publish and perish' culture presents significant tensions within the context of the multiple roles and accountabilities associated with academic life.

Wellbeing in the workplace is associated with feeling confident, satisfied, safe, supported, recognised and appreciated, and of having a sense of belonging and of purpose (New Economics Foundation (NEF), 2018). In the light of the contextual factors identified above it is unsurprising that there is a degree of ill-being in HE. Burrows (2012) highlights academics' role in the co-construction of statistics and the changing organizational life of universities. Collusion in the monetisation and marketization of learning, teaching and research, impacts academic identity and leads to a sense of deep seated discomfort for many (Ball, 2012; Burrows, 2012; Sparkes, 2007). It creates "perturbed self-reflexivity" characterised by "contradictory and vying emotions, such as anxiety, doubt, guilt, shame, envy, pride and pleasure" (Elizabeth and Grant, 2013: 133). Discomfort combines with insecurity, leading to exhaustion, stress, anxiety, shame and a sense of being out-of-place (Gill, 2010).

Literature Review

Approaches to understanding Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a complex concept associated with "optimal psychological functioning and experience" (Ryan and Deci, 2001: 142) and with health, happiness and

satisfaction. The term has been used by the World Health Organisation since 1948 in its definition of health which is “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2019). White (2017) distinguishes between comprehensive, subjective, personal and relational wellbeing. Comprehensive conceptualisations situate wellbeing within its broader context and draw attention to “the erosion of the social and relational that has occurred with the development of late capitalist, globalised modernity” (White, 2017:122). They draw from Sen’s Capability Approach (1992, 1999, 2009) which encompasses notions of agency, freedom, self-respect and social integration (Sen, 1992), emphasising “what people are *actually able to do and be*” (Brunner and Watson, 2015:3 - Italics in original) rather than the resources that they have.

Subjective wellbeing involves our own cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction, the sense of fulfilment in various domains of life (work, family, social life) and affective evaluations of positive and negative feelings and moods (Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith, 1999). Two aspects of wellbeing are commonly identified. The *hedonic*, feeling good aspect, is associated with pleasure and happiness. The *eudaimonic*, doing things that are worthwhile aspect, is linked with deeply held values and a more holistic sense of satisfaction with life (Datu and King, 2018; Ryan and Deci, 2001). Identification of these two aspects enables a distinction to be made between happiness and wellbeing, and recognition that not all things that make us happy contribute to our wellbeing. The eudemonic aspect includes activities that are challenging and require effort but contribute to wellbeing by facilitating personal growth and development (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Both conceptions are useful to the discussion of wellbeing and writing retreats which combine hedonic states of being relaxed and getting away from day-to day problems and eudaimonic states of personal growth and fulfilment through challenging and effortful work.

Personal wellbeing approaches place the onus on individuals to develop “a positive and proactive approach to take more responsibility for their own health or state of mind” (White, 2017: 126). A practical example of this approach is set out in *Five Ways to Wellbeing* - a set of evidence-based public mental health messages aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of the population. This approach was developed by the New Economics Foundation in 2008 and encourages people to connect with other people, be active, take notice, keep learning and give (Aked, Marks, Cordon and Thompson, 2008). This approach is concerned with “how we feel in ourselves … how we experience life – quality of life, good physical and mental health, and being part of our communities” (NEF, 2018) and sidesteps wider contextual considerations, and discussions about the need for governmental action or societal change. The *connect* aspect of *Five Ways to Wellbeing* also touches upon notions of relational wellbeing drawing attention to fundamental importance of the quality of relationships “the common life, the shared enterprise of living in community” (White, 2017: 128).

Academic writing and wellbeing

There is a body of research that explores the experiences and emotional challenges faced by PhD students as they engage in academic writing (Aitchison and Guerin, 2014; Castelló McAlpine, and Pyhältö, 2017; Lonka, Ketonen, Vekkaila, Cerrato, and

Pyhältö, 2019; Papen and Thériault, 2018; Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka, 2011). These studies illustrate how procrastination and perfectionism can trigger negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration, and are linked to feelings of stress and exhaustion. The emphasis on PhD students in the literature perhaps arises because the negative emotions associated with writing are particularly acute in the first stages of our academic writing careers, as we learn the conventions in our field and forge our writing identity. However the emotional challenges associated with writing, are ongoing and are exacerbated by the practicalities of academic life and the competing tensions between teaching, administrative and research roles (Kent, Berry, Budds, Skipper and Williams, 2017; Murray and Newton, 2009; MacLeod, et al., 2012; Murray, Thow, Moore and Murphy, 2008). The immediacy of the teaching and administrative elements mean these aspects often take up much of the working day. In this context writing is an activity which often happens alone, out-of-hours and out of the office. While a successful publication might lead to a sense of wellbeing, fulfilment and positive emotions, the writing process itself can be isolated, fraught with worry and largely unsupported.

The literature on subjective wellbeing identifies strong correlations with social activities and networks that provide a sense of community and support (Diener and Seligman, 2002). This is reflected by formal initiatives within some universities to create groups and activities to engender cooperation and discussion to support research and academic writing. However Olszewska, and Lock (2016) contend "building a community of practice, where sharing and trust become the guiding principles, is truly challenging because the individualistic nature of writing is so tightly bound to issues of individual performance, promotion, and success"(2016: 135). Often the focus of such groups and activities is geared towards research assessment and output rather than the emotional aspects of writing, and potential for joy and pleasure in the process of becoming an academic writer (Dwyer, Lewis, McDonald and Burns, 2012). This perhaps explains the growth of initiatives which occur more informally between groups of colleagues and friends who chose to write together or to support one another in their writing (Kent et al., 2017).

Writing retreats and academic wellbeing

A retreat enables a short term withdrawal from everyday life. Many academics engage in a process of retreating on their own, sometimes into a study, a hotel or guest house, or even a shed. Retreating provides a way to disconnect from regular commitments with the specific purpose of thinking and writing. Literature on academic writing retreats focusses on a particular way of retreating in a group around a programme that is designed to enable people to write on their own in a group setting (Benvenuti, 2017; Grant, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Kent et al., 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016; Moore, 2003; Moore, Murphy and Murray; 2010; Murray 2015; Murray and Newton, 2009; Papen, and Thériault, 2018; Southwood, 2017; Swaggerty et al., 2011). Retreating together enables support, discussion and shared reflection offering an immersive experience**,** "affording conducive environments for academic engagement with writing" (Southwood, 2017: 17). Different approaches are apparent in terms of structure, approach, facilitation style, opportunities to write alone or together, and the importance of ancillary and social activities to promote creative thinking, reflection and support. However common themes are identified around the idea of a programme enabling a group of people to focus on writing away

from mundane tasks, providing for co-located, peer-based writing opportunities. Many make reference to the structure and group writing practices advocated by Murray and Newton, 2009; Moore et al., 2010 and Murray, 2015. For example Kent et al., (2017) identify that their approach departed from Murray and Newton (2009) as they engaged in "a continual process of self-reflection" (2017: 1198) in order to foster collaborative community around their writing practice. Southwood, (2017) discusses a 'hybrid' approach which was based on the structure discussed in Murray (2015) and involved objective setting before the retreat, a choice between individual and communal writing spaces, more flexibility in writing times and the decision to offer a buffet style lunch so people did not have to break their flow.

Contextual challenges to academic writing are commonly mentioned in the retreat literature and include metrics, marketization and the multifaceted aspects of academic life. The retreat is proffered as an opportunity for respite from the demands of day-to-day university life. Most commonly case studies are introduced and are based on one or several writing retreats. Generally the writing task is the main focus and aspects which are conducive to increasing publication output are identified including "protected time and space; community of practice; development of academic writing competence; intra-personal benefits and organisational investment" (Kornhaber et al., 2016: 1210). During the retreat, writing is supported by a process of disconnecting from the mundane and engaging in a programme of writing alone but with regular social interaction and encouragement from others.

Whilst not explicitly framed to consider wellbeing, many aspects of these writing retreat experiences resonate strongly with ideas in the wellbeing literature. Grant (2006), Kent et al., (2017), Jackson, (2009), Moore, (2003), Moore et al., (2010), Papen and Thériault (2018), Southwood (2017) and Swaggerty et al., (2011) discuss wider psychosocial benefits of writing retreats which include: developing and supporting collegiality and collaboration; creating a sense of support and safety; generating positive emotions or states of mind and developing a sense of self. Many of these aspects are developed during the times between writing and when people are engaged in social activities. Jackson (2009) Moore (2003) and Southwood (2017) discuss the importance of healthy and relaxing activities such as yoga and walking. Social eating is commonly mentioned (including Benvenuti, 2017; Jackson, 2009; Southwood, 2017; and Swaggerty et al., 2011) and the value of pleasant physical environments are identified by Grant (2006), Kent et al. (2017), Moore (2003), Murray and Newton (2009), and Southwood (2017). These papers do not explicitly discuss the wellbeing literature but notions of personal, subjective and relational wellbeing are apparent. These writing retreats encourage the development of positive thoughts, experiences and emotions, supportive relationships and create a feeling of being part of an academic community. Thus they develop both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing by helping people to develop positive feelings, a sense achievement, and a sense of being a writer.

Method and process

The approach taken to this research draws from research by Flyvbjerg (2001) and Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram (2012) about "phronesis" or "practical wisdom" (2012:1), the idea about developing "knowledge … out of intimate familiarity with practice in contextualized settings" (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012: 2). It encompasses

reflective practice (Schön, 1991) with opportunities to engage reflexively in the practical application of ideas encountered in journal articles and research, and with the learning that arises from the experience of running retreats. Practice based research provides opportunities to reflect upon experiences, ideas and feelings that arise informally in conversation or through personal observations (Warwick and Board, 2013).

The first stage of the research process occurred prior to the development of writing retreats, starting from a series of informal conversations with academics and PhD students from a broad range of disciplines about their writing experiences. Anxieties around academic writing were commonly identified. This sparked interest and further investigation through a review of writing retreat and wellbeing literature. The second phase involved planning and designing writing retreats with a focus on wellbeing. This was informed by face-to-face and email conversations with academics and researchers from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds about their writing and writing retreat experiences. These conversations enabled the exploration of peoples' experiences of writing; the challenges they faced when writing; the nature of support they received or felt they would like to receive and their experiences of writing retreats. Those who had attended retreats were asked about any aspects they had enjoyed or disliked. Many people identified the importance of non-writing activities including social aspects and interactions during meals, walks or when they were relaxing in the evening. These informal social interactions supported a sense of community, creating opportunities to share ideas, experiences and personal challenges in writing and publishing. They also enabled discussion of wider concerns associated with academic life. The balance between working and relaxing activities, comfort and attractiveness of surroundings were identified as an important part of the pleasure that most associated with the retreat experience and contributed to a broader sense of wellbeing. People also identified aspects of their previous retreat experiences which they did not enjoy, or which created negative feelings. They expressed concerns about overly rigid programmes that did not fit well with their own writing rhythms and practices, an over-emphasis on word count, narrow ideas of writing productivity and uncomfortable surroundings.

At the end of this phase two pilot retreats were set up to explore writing and wellbeing retreats in practice; one with PhD students and the other with academics. Prior to each retreat participants were sent an e-mail asking them to summarise the paper/chapter they would be working on and to identify objectives for the retreat. They were also asked to reflect more broadly on their writing practices, and identify any barriers or issues they faced when writing generally and any blocks associated with their specific retreat task. This information was used to inform the design of each retreat programme and range of activities offered.

Post retreat feedback was collected on participants' feelings about their experience generally and their views about structure, support and social activities. This feedback was collected in conversation and by email, and was combined with personal observations of what worked and what required further thought. Participation in several non-residential retreats during this period helped to refine ideas about structure and further consider aspects that induced or inhibited social activity. This research and experience informed the design of a further nine writing retreats in 2019 which are outlined below. The phronesis or practical wisdom gained

from running these retreats is discussed more broadly within a wellbeing framing and intends to progress thinking about how we might develop both writing and wellbeing through a retreat experience.

The discussion in this paper is framed around the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (Aked et al., 2008) The *Five Ways* were introduced earlier in this paper and are associated with ideas about personal and relational wellbeing. They inform approaches adopted by employers including Universities, the NHS (National Health Service), Universities and local authorities and underpin advice on best practice (NEF, 2012, 2018). They are relevant as a way of framing discussion in this paper as two of the three universities which funded staff to attend the retreats had wellbeing strategies which aligned closely with this approach.

Writing and Wellbeing Retreat Experiences

The retreats were delivered in a coastal setting and were offered to a mixture of PhD students, early career academics and established academics. They were attended by a diverse cohort, which encompassed seven broad disciplines. Most participants were funded by their University, and the majority of this funding was broadly aligned with REF objectives. 1/5 were self-funded, and worked on academic papers or their PhDs at their own expense and in their free time. On eight retreats participants worked on papers or projects individually and on one they wrote and worked together.

All participants were asked to set objectives before the retreat and to identify their writing rhythms and practices, and any barriers they faced when writing. This was used to develop a programme of activities including writing periods, focussed discussion, walking, social meals and socialising. The programme was adapted to reflect the different rhythms and objectives of each group, with the intention to create optimum mental and physical states not just for the writing task but for a sense of wellbeing more generally. Timings, activities and protocols about internet use and the level of support from the facilitator were discussed and agreed with each group at the start of the retreat and reviewed as the retreat progressed. There was no standard programme but we generally wrote for about 5-6 hours each day and on most retreats wrote in 60-90 minute blocks. Start and finish times varied for each group, fruitful discussions were allowed to over-run, walks and meal times were sometimes brought forward or delayed. During the retreats feedback was obtained informally through conversation, observation and after through e-mail correspondence. I wrote a research diary at the end of each day to capture observations, ideas and experiences as they emerged. This daily reflection was used to develop phronesis (Flyvbjerg et al.,2012) and the experience and learning arising from each retreat informed and developed my emerging practice.

Retreat participants commonly identified the main challenge to their academic writing arising from too many competing priorities. In the context of busy teaching, tutoring and administration schedules it was difficult to find a time when they could focus on their writing. PhD students talked about the challenges of combining their research with teaching and other work responsibilities. It was apparent that academic writing had personal as well as professional significance – their attitudes while writing on retreat went beyond developing their writerly self and were associated with a more

widely construed sense of self. People commonly talked about the contradictory emotions that they experienced when writing, the fluctuations between pleasure associated with sense of achievement, and both anxiety and frustration when they found it difficult to express their ideas. In all cases writing was identified as an activity that they chose to do, but many felt that they needed more time, space or support to be able to write effectively and with less anxiety.

When asked what they found valuable in the retreat experience, people commonly mentioned the pleasure associated with focussed and quiet time for writing, being able to discuss their writing and the writing process with others, developing a sense of shared purpose being in a pleasant environment, having meals prepared for them, informal chats in the breaks and walking. They stressed the importance of being away from mundane responsibilities, of feeling looked after and of being in a pleasant, comfortable space. Getting a good night's sleep was also regularly identified as an aspect that made them feel good, refreshed, and focused.

All participants felt that they had made progress in their writing. However this often did not translate into easily quantifiable words-added approach. Many were at the final stages of a book, paper or PhD thesis and so the retreat enabled them to edit and improve their written work rather than add words. They attributed their progress to a variety of factors including having the space and time to write, disconnecting from their phones and social media, and retreating from the responsibilities associated with daily life. They commented positively about the semi-structured approach to the retreat. All participated in the formal writing sessions and daytime breaks and most spent much of the day around a table in the shared space. However people liked the sense that they had the freedom to withdraw to write on their own, to work in the garden and to take breaks at other times as required. They valued the support and guidance from the facilitator and colleagues, and the mixture of formal discussion and more informal conversations that occurred during the evening walk, meals and as they relaxed at the end of the day.

The writing retreats did not preclude people encountering difficulties in their writing. In fact most participants experienced at least one writing session where they were not very productive and felt frustrated. However the atmosphere of the retreat enabled people to discuss and share individual frustrations and the process of sharing normalised some commonly experienced problems. Overall, participating in a writing retreat enabled participants to achieve emotional states that were "relaxed", "calm and content" and "happy". This was attributed to the balance between time spent writing and social activities and sleeping well. It was also attributed to the retreat environment, the ambience of the retreat house, the comfort and variety of writing areas and the wider coastal surroundings. People felt satisfied because they had made progress with their writing but more generally they reported feeling "well", "great", "refreshed" and "re-energised".

Developing wellbeing at writing retreats

The results are discussed below around *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (Aked et al., 2008) and the focus is on connecting with other people, being active, taking notice of ones surroundings, learning and giving. This framing helps to foreground the wellbeing aspects of writing retreats broadly around themes rather than producing a timetable

or template for a wellbeing focussed retreat. *Five Ways to Wellbeing* aligns strongly with notions of personal, subjective and relational wellbeing which are prevalent in the UK HE context. Working with the framing and language of this initiative was intended to connect this study to wider discussions about wellbeing (NEF 2012; 2018).

Connect

Academic writing retreats can help to develop relational wellbeing in that they bring people together, enabling them to connect and interact around common interests and similar challenges. The importance of the writing community is discussed in the retreat literature with participants benefiting from co-presence and interaction (Benvenuti, 2017; Murray and Newton, 2009; Kent et al, 2017; Southwood, 2017). Awareness of the relational aspects of wellbeing meant that when designing each retreat attention was given to developing varied opportunities for social interaction and connection. Some social interactions were focussed around the writing task and formal writing sessions, but it was important to complement these with opportunities for relaxed conversation about other things. The sociability that emerged during breaks often arose as people moved between the house and garden, and performed simple tasks like making tea for one another. They also occurred during meals together or during walks on the beach in the evening and where characterised by informal banter, humorous exchanges and laughter.

In conversations prior to developing retreats and during the two pilot retreats many people expressed a dislike for formal socialisation activities. This informed the decision to take a casual approach to social interactions. People were introduced as they arrived and our initial group conversation was often held in the garden whilst drinking tea. In the breaks people were encouraged to move away from the writing space, doors were opened to the garden, the kettle turned on. All of these things created a flow - helping people break with the task, step into a different environment and start to converse with one another. The mixture of focused and relaxed conversation created hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing by developing amity, feelings of belonging and of being supported in the writing task. Participants were positive about the relaxed atmosphere within each group and the sense of community that quickly arose around a common interest in writing, shared experiences of HE, combined with more relaxed social interaction. Many conversations were not centred on the writing task and feedback from retreat participants highlighted the importance of these non-writing interactions.

Be Active

A wellbeing approach draws attention to the importance of balancing physical, social and intellectual activity. Yoga is mentioned in the retreat literature by Moore (2003) as an antidote to “the physical discomforts of writing” (2003:339) and by Southwood (2017) in terms of its contemplative aspects which are seen to complement writing. More commonly papers on writing retreats identify walking as a complementary activity to the main writing task (including Benvenuti, 2017 and Southwood, 2017) but the links between walking and general wellbeing are not explicitly considered. In the wider literature much has been written about walking and wellbeing (including Doughty, 2013; Gatrell, 2013; Green,2009; Olafsdottir, 2013; Stevenson and Farrell,

2018). Walking has therapeutic and restorative qualities (Doughty, 2013; Gatrell, 2013) is linked to a meditative consciousness, (Green, 2009) and enables people to escape excessive workloads and responsibilities - the "'ills' of the everyday" (Olafsdottir, 2013: 219). The rhythm and physical exertion of walking creates "a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned" (Solnit, 2002:5), and a sense of perspective (Stevenson and Farrell, 2018).

Group walks provided a way of developing a sense of wellbeing by balancing the intellectual activity associated with writing with physical and social activity. They normally occurred at the end of each writing day and creating an informal social and thinking space. The length and destination of the walk varied by group, but generally took place on or next to a long sandy beach. Some participants chose to engage in additional walking or running activities alone at the start of the day or at lunch time and two groups chose to walk to the pub. On three retreats participants engaged in breathing exercises which are commonly practiced in yoga as a way of developing focus prior to writing, and yoga stretches to loosen shoulder and back tension at the end of the day, and on two retreats people swam in the sea. Participants reported that the combination of intellectual, physical and social activity "were perfect for reflection and relaxation", enabling them to "mentally focus", and enjoy themselves and their writing practice. Social walking in a beautiful setting developed hedonic wellbeing associated with feeling relaxed, contented, calm and well and eudaimonic wellbeing associated with being feeling clear headed and being able to focus on the writing task.

Take notice

At the writing retreat people focussed on one task in an unfamiliar setting. Stepping away from day-to-day responsibilities provided time not just to engage with writing but to notice their surroundings, people in their group and the food that they ate. Aspects of noticing are apparent in the retreat literature and many residential writing retreats are located in rural environments which are perceived to be beautiful or tranquil (Benvenuti, 2017; Grant, 2006; Kent et al., 2017; Murray and Newton, 2009; Southwood, 2017). Natural, calm and peaceful environments are associated with concentration and contemplation, "a stimulant for deeper thought and engagement" (Southwood, 2017: 24) and are related to creativity, thinking and positive emotions. Benvenuti, (2017) identifies the importance of "beautiful large gardens perfect for writing, thinking, walking or discussions" (2017: 98). Outside the retreat literature the idea that connecting with nature promotes enhanced wellbeing and positive mental health is well-established and is supported by a body of research (including Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, and Pullin, 2010; Capaldi, Passmore, Nisbet, Zelenski, and Dopko, 2015; Doughty, 2013; MacKerron and Mourato, 2013).

The connection between the physical environment of the retreat and peoples' sense of wellbeing was clear in the feedback from participants of the retreats. People had positive feelings about being close to the beach, being able to smell the sea and being in the fresh air. They engaged with these surroundings passively - noticing them as a setting to their writing experience and more actively as they walked along the "picturesque coast", "the sandy beaches and the promenade". Participants also highlighted the importance of their immediate surroundings being tranquil, aesthetically pleasing and comfortable and of being able to choose and move

between writing spaces. They commented on “comfortable chairs and tables”, “adequate heating and ventilation”, “natural light” “the garden” and “comfortable beds”. Minimising the physical discomforts associated with prolonged periods of writing is mentioned by (Moore 2003) but not discussed in much of the retreat literature. However the findings of this study illustrate the importance of both the wider environment and micro environment within the retreat setting. These helped people to focus on the writing task, but also provided opportunities to relax, to be comfortable and to feel good.

Another aspect of noticing, relates to social interactions within the group and the sociality associated with eating in a group and these aspects are recognised in the writing retreat literature (including Benvenuti, 2017; Jackson, 2009; MacLeod et al., 2012; Murray and Newton, 2009; Swaggerty et al., 2011). In designing writing retreats within a wellbeing framing attention was given to social interaction at mealtimes and in providing healthy food, which was locally sourced and often home grown. Mealtimes were agreed and eating and writing activities were not combined. For many this contrasted with their daily habits, which often involved a sandwich hastily eaten at the desk. People ate together and meals were often eaten in the garden surrounded by vegetables and fruit which were used in the meals. Eating well and taking a break to eat was an important aspect of feeling good. People noticed what they ate and feedback refereed to the importance of “delicious and often locally-sourced food” and “healthy home-cooked meals” and the pleasure of eating food in the company of others. The informal conversations at mealtimes supported collegiality and interaction and provided insights and ideas that supported the writing process. Eating together was both emotionally and physically nourishing and was associated with feelings of being healthy, happy and well.

Keep Learning

At a writing retreat people learn through the process of writing, discussion and interaction with the facilitator and through informal conversations with other participants. The retreat literature commonly discusses writing communities and the role of interaction in the learning process (including Murray and Newton, 2009; Moore, et al., 2010). This interactive learning occurs within a retreat “sanctuary”, where participants feel protected, supported and “safe to share work” (Moore, 2003: 335). Safety is commonly discussed (Benvenuti, 2017; Moore, 2003; Southwood, 2017); as is trust (Jackson, 2009; Moore, 2003). In the retreat setting people feel freer to express struggles and vulnerability around their academic writing (Southwood, 2017). Beyond this learning about writing, retreating can be an “important reminder” about the benefits of “paying attention to physical health and relaxation in the context of a schedule of hard work” (Moore 2003: 339).

The learning experienced during the writing retreats went beyond the writing task and encompassed a broader sense of wellbeing which was developed through learning (or remembering) to look after oneself and to relax, about the positive feelings associated with interacting with others and about how much we can do when we give ourselves time and focus on one task. Participants said that they would be taking some retreat practices back into their daily lives. This included social walking, the use of breathing exercises in conjunction with writing, unplugging from social media more often, maintaining a supportive collegiality with other

participants, and trying to take breaks away from their desks during their working day.

Give

In the writing retreats literature there is discussion about sharing and support around the writing task but not around sharing other tasks. So for example Kent et al, (2017) are self-catering in a shared cottage, and one assumes this would involve sharing food preparation and washing up tasks but this is not discussed. Swaggerty et al., (2011) include their retreat programme in the appendix and it can be seen that participants prepare food to share. While these informal sharing aspects are not considered explicitly they provide space to develop relationships and make an important contribution to building a sense of community within the group.

The experience of running writing retreats highlighted the extent to which people engaged in sharing activities. Some of these occurred around the writing task and included experience sharing, the sharing of ideas and reviewing work of other participants. Outside of the writing task retreat participants volunteered to help with laying the table, stacking the dishwasher, picking a few vegetables and helping to serve food. Some brought wine, chocolate, fruit and biscuits to share with others. These sharing behaviours created feelings of fellowship, worth and belonging, and played a significant part in developing trust, collaboration and a sense of community. Conversations in the space of shared tasks were informal, humorous and created a different type of camaraderie which contributed to personal, subjective and relational wellbeing during the retreat. After the retreats many participants reported that they sustained closer and more supportive relationships with one another. This aspect deserves more attention as the inclusion of sharing activities appears to be important for the group dynamic, collegiality and sense of wellbeing within the group.

Conclusion

Retreats can enhance subjective, relational and personal wellbeing by developing writing communities, boosting confidence and creating a sense of satisfaction. This paper draws together discussions about academic writing retreats and wellbeing and offers some ideas about how wellbeing might be enhanced during a writing retreat. From a wellbeing perspective the interest in writing retreats goes beyond creating space to write. Awareness is drawn to instilling healthy writing practice and in developing and supporting practices and techniques that develop a sense of wellbeing more generally.

Retreating from everyday pressures can remind people how important it is to talk to other people about their writing and to share work related concerns. The retreat can also be used to develop and reinforce ideas about the benefits of a more balanced approach to writing, the positive effects of a walk with others, of healthy food and of noticing and enjoying ones surroundings. These are things that most participants knew already but the retreat provided space and a supportive atmosphere which helped people get things into perspective, and to set an intention to do things slightly differently when they returned to their day-to-day lives. Some participants continue to practice approaches developed at the retreat by timetabling writing into their weekly tasks and through more regular discussions about their work with colleagues.

The limitation of using *Five Ways to Wellbeing* as a framing is that it does not enable consideration of the prevalent challenges in academic life that create a sense of ill-being. High workloads, competing work priorities, short-term teaching focused contracts, metrics, pressures around the REF, long school/faculty meetings and increasing administrative workloads were commonly discussed at the retreats, but participants felt that they were not in a position to change the wider practices and processes which framed their experience of academic life. Thus while these writing retreats provided enjoyable time and space to write, to reflect, connect, eat well, walk and relax, and a welcome respite to the day to day experience of academic life they did not resolve larger issues. The challenge going forward is how to translate the wellbeing benefits that arise on a writing retreat back in to everyday life. It is difficult to see how these small scale interventions can impact more broadly unless they are integrated into wider strategic initiatives and start to tackle some of the wider causes of ill-being in HE.

It is time to move beyond the idea of writing retreats as a way to re-energise or rejuvenating writing and towards conceptualisation which considers their potential in developing wider feelings of fulfilment, satisfaction and wellbeing. Consideration of writing retreats within a wellbeing framing draws attention to the significance of non-writing aspects, the importance of conversation with others, the sense of satisfaction arising from sharing and supporting one another, the value of providing opportunities to engage in physical and social activities around the writing task and the retreat environment. It is hoped that by foregrounding wellbeing aspects that they might be more formally considered and integrated into the design of writing retreats.

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