Structured academic writing retreats in healthcare professional practice

Bell, Mary; Murray, Rowena

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STRUCTURED ACADEMIC WRITING RETREATS IN HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Summary

The critical importance of writing skills in communicating issues, such as the evidence needed for resources and change as well as the implementation of new practices and processes based on evidence-based outcomes, are now core skills for every healthcare professional including nurses in clinical practice. Within a very busy and challenging work environment, while maintaining a work-life balance, writing to fulfil these professional requirements can become challenging and even impossible. This article describes an educational intervention which adopted the Structured Writing Retreat (SWR) model developed by Murray and Newton in 2009 into a healthcare practice setting. The aim of this intervention was to promote self-efficacy in academic writing in a supportive environment. Three tools are described which outline how to set this intervention up within a healthcare setting. The outcomes and participants' evaluations clearly affirmed the benefits of this model to enable healthcare professionals working in any clinical environment to support their professional development and career advancement.

Introduction

Structured academic writing retreats can help with writing practices (1-3). Specifically, this type of retreat can provide a space to allow busy professionals time to write. Providing an environment to enable people to just write can stimulate the imagination (4), increase motivation (5) and be an enjoyable experience when writing with others (1). The structured writing retreat (SWR) model (3) was developed to enable participants to cultivate ideas by providing free writing periods (6), to foster writing in progress via structured interventions (7) and to offer a ‘typing pool’ environment to write with others (1). In essence, this structured format aims to promote self-efficacy in academic writing in a supportive environment.
What is the Problem

Healthcare and advanced professional practice continues to change within the wider healthcare context. Writing is both a key academic skill as well as a key competency for all healthcare professionals. For nurses in particular, an academic writing identity would not have been historically perceived as the most important component of their professional practice or identity. However, the critical importance of writing skills in communicating issues, such as the evidence needed for resources and change as well as the implementation of new practices and processes based on evidence-based outcomes, are now core skills for every healthcare professional including nurses in clinical practice (8-10). Postgraduate courses to progress their careers require nurses to write and subsequently disseminate knowledge by contributing to the professional literature via scholarly research publications (10). However, within a very busy and challenging work environment, while maintaining a work-life balance, writing to fulfil these professional requirements can become challenging and even impossible. Indeed, a writing retreat might even seem a luxury within this milieu.

Nurses face many challenges to academic writing. Problems such as insufficient time (11, 12), maintaining a work/life balance (13) and the nurse’s confidence in his/her own ability to write are but a few (14). There are also pre-conceived ideas about the task of writing and how and when to write. For example, writing in isolation is considered by some as the only way to write, while others perceive that writing groups are only for weak students or indeed people with writing problems (15). Within a specialist healthcare setting, an education innovation using a SWR model was implemented to enable nurses to have space to fulfil their academic writing requirements.
Aim

This toolbox describes how we created and ran a SWR for nurses in clinical practice and discusses the challenges, benefits and outcomes of this innovation within a busy healthcare environment.

Ethical considerations

In line with the ethical guidelines of the organisation, participants’ rights to privacy, confidentiality, dignity and fairness were ensured throughout the writing retreat. Consent to publish the participants’ evaluations was also given.

Conducting writing retreats (What I did)

Four days of SWRs were introduced during the spring of 2019 at Our Lady’s Hospice & Care Services (OLH&CS) in Dublin, Ireland. OLH&CS is a hospice and healthcare organisation, providing specialist care for people with a range of needs from rehabilitation to specialist palliative care to end-of-life care. It was essential that the leadership within the organisation was supportive of this innovation to enable the participants to engage with it (Box 1). Having identified a suitable room on the campus of OLH&CS that fulfilled the criteria for running this programme, the facilitator then negotiated with the key caretaker for access. This quiet room provided a peaceful sanctuary on the campus and was laid out with two tables, seating and access to sockets for laptops to accommodate nine participants, including the facilitator. As these retreats are focussed on writing, no network coverage connection was required. The costs accrued were primarily the time commitment by participants which was agreed with the nursing leadership within the organisation and the minimal costs for food and beverages provided.
Participants were nurses working in the service who wished to participate. In preparation, the facilitator met and spoke with each of the potential participants and sent a follow-up email outlining how the retreat would facilitate their academic writing needs, the requirements for the day and the schedule. Participants were also encouraged to complete their preparations beforehand to enable them to focus and to write productively on the day of the retreat. The retreats adhered to the time schedule presented in Box 2.
The facilitator introduced and managed the schedule for the day and outlined the overall ethos of the retreat. The facilitator and first author has been a nurse academic for over 20 years having supported many nurse clinicians over that time with their writing challenges and adopted the SWR to promote good learning behaviours about writing for herself and her colleagues while the second author is an internationally recognised expert and author on academic writing and on creating and running writing retreats. The essence of this model was to impose a time structure on the participants’ writing practices for the day, within an environment of non-surveillance while creating an atmosphere of trust. This particular time schedule has been shown to help to promote healthy writing behaviours within this model hence this time table is adopted by many throughout the world. To start, participants wrote out their specific goals of writing for the day and then discussed these goals with another person in the group. The first writing session then began at 9.30am. The facilitator ensured that the room remained quiet and at the right temperature. During each writing session, the facilitator observed the participants for problems and checked in with them at the break times. The facilitator and the participants left the room for refreshments, comfort breaks, exercise and to discuss the challenges of their writing projects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>09.00-09.30</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.30-11.00</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.00-11.30</td>
<td>COFFEE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.30-12.30</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.30-13.30</td>
<td>Walk and Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.30-15.00</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.00-15.30</td>
<td>COFFEE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.30-16.30</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the end of each day, participants were asked to complete an 8-item evaluation tool. This tool incorporated demographics, questions about their writing output (such as what writing projects the participants were working on, the number of new and edited words completed as well as a short reflection of their experiences of the day (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Evaluation of Writing Retreat Tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What is your staff grade or profession?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Did the retreat meet your expectations? Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What type of writing project were you working on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How many words did you write today? New words: Edited words:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What do you think was good about the retreat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>What do you think could be improved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Would you recommend the retreat to a colleague?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Reflection of this experience overall.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants**

Over four days, eight nurses across different grades attended the writing retreats, working on a variety of different writing projects, and produced an average of 500 new words or 650 edited words each day on projects ranging from an audit report, a thesis chapter, an application to commence post graduate studies and journal articles. Despite an admission of apprehension by some initially, every participant confirmed that the retreat met their expectations, and that they would recommend it to others.
Outcomes and Participants’ Evaluations

Four key elements combined to deliver a successful experience as well as productive writing outcomes for the participants.

The first essential element was the structure of the day, incorporating time management and goal setting. The former helped these participants to “think logically, clearly and plan the day in blocks”, while the latter allowed an opportunity to plan and prepare in advance ensuring that the time spent writing was productive.

A second key element was that the retreat focussed on writing only. Preparing beforehand and setting specific goals at the start of the day enabled participants to clear away unnecessary thoughts and to allow more focussed thinking to emerge. In addition, the short reflective sessions before and after the writing sessions helped them to see if they were still on the right track for their writing project and gave them an opportunity to share ideas and feed back into the next writing session. The participants felt that this singular focus guaranteed that their writing tasks would be completed at the end of the retreat. This is a very important feature for the busy health professional who has limited time to complete assignments or academic papers for professional development purposes and career advancement.

The guaranteed peaceful room away from busy, demanding work and family lives which allowed the participants to concentrate, think clearly and, most importantly, to write uninterrupted was the third element. All the participants were very positive about the supportive and encouraging atmosphere, which was captured by one in this comment: the “facilitator and colleagues were respectful and affirmed writing done in a safe, empowering environment and so the retreats were appropriate for the novice to the expert writer”. This environment also generated a collegial atmosphere that enabled them to get to know other colleagues from different specialities.
The fourth element was the role of the facilitator. Through her expertise in academic writing, the facilitator ensured that the other three key elements were adhered to, that the day ran smoothly and was available to, “offer support, guidance and feedback individually in developing the relevant” writing activity within a peaceful, safe, non-judgemental environment.

Benefits of the programme for healthcare professionals

It was clear from the participants’ evaluations that this SWR model had many benefits, including confidence building, self-efficacy as healthcare professionals, the fostering of important professional relationships outside of the clinical environment as well as a sense of achievement and success by completing writing tasks.

Challenges

As with any innovation, there are challenges. Scheduling the retreat days to accommodate nurses’ work/family/university schedules was the primary and consistent challenge requiring flexibility. Setting different days each week and notifying retreat participants of the schedule two months in advance, to allow for different staff members to attend, addressed this challenge.

Recommendations

The success of this innovation within the nursing cohort in OLH&CS has identified the need to support other healthcare professionals throughout the organisation to participate. Given the recent impact of the pandemic on group meetings, conducting SWRs on online platforms is being adopted, using the same key elements for success as presented in Box 3.
BOX 3. Key Elements for Success

- Preparation
- Suitable environment
- Goal setting for specific time slots
- Time management
- Writing with other people
- Breaks and exercise activity enable social interaction and further support
- Fostering professional relationships within an organisation
- Experienced facilitator as leader and who knows how to address issues that may arise during writing

Conclusions

The SWR model is a simple yet effective innovation that has the potential to enable healthcare professionals working in any clinical environment to support their professional development and career advancement. Both novice and experienced academic writers are likely to benefit from having peace and quiet for writing. While there are constraints to implementing and maintaining this innovation, the potential benefits for healthcare professionals are evident. For success, this innovation within a healthcare environment needs to be consistently driven by an individual who has the determination and motivation to see it through.

REFERENCES