Writing retreats as a milestone in the development of PhD students' sense of self as academic writers

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Introduction

> […] I felt like a more legitimate writer, like writing with other people around me in an academic setting rather than just on my own […]. (Daniel, PhD student)

In the quotation above, Daniel, a doctoral student in Politics explains how taking part in a non-residential writing retreat organised by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Lancaster University changed the way he perceived himself as an academic writer. Writing retreats are structured events during which a group of people write in the same room and share their aims, progress and difficulties over several days (Aitchison and Guerin 2014; Murray 2015). In this paper we report on the findings of a qualitative study into the use of writing retreats for PhD students. The main aim of this study was to explore how writing retreats can support PhD students' writing. To understand how taking part in a retreat can help PhD students write, we explored with them their wider biographies as writers and their prior experiences of writing in different academic and non-academic contexts. Our second aim was to contribute to the search for appropriate structures and pedagogies to support writing at PhD level.

In the UK, as elsewhere, doctoral students are a diverse group, having different cultural and academic backgrounds and experiences (Guerin et al. 2013). PhD students are likely to have experienced writing in different ways at different stages in their student and working lives (Ivanič 1998). There are significant pressures on PhD students to write: their work is

primarily assessed through the texts they produce (Aitchison 2009). In the current policy and funding climate, where public funding for higher education is increasingly limited, universities depend on income from tuition fees and face pressures to attract high numbers of doctoral students and to ensure that they produce timely and high quality theses (Aitchison and Guerin 2014). In this context, universities are incentivised to search for new and successful ways to support PhD student writing (Aitchison 2009). The writing retreats we report on in this paper were such an initiative.

The next section of this paper serves to locate our study in the context of what is already known about how writing retreats can support academic writing. We then introduce the key theoretical concepts that inform our study: the autobiographical self (Ivanič 1998, 32) and *rapport à l'écrit* (henceforth relationship with literacy, Besse 1995). The next section presents our methods and introduces the research participants. In what follows we discuss the experiences and biographies of two students: Daniel and Michelle. Based on these two and other examples from the data, we suggest that writing retreats are important events for PhD students allowing them to make progress with their writing, to enjoy writing and to feel like 'legitimate' writers, not students. In our conclusion, we briefly discuss the implications of our study for pedagogies to support PhD students' writing.

Writing retreats and writing groups

Studies into the role of writing retreats for academics have shown that taking part in such events increases the participants' productivity (Grant 2006). Writing retreats can also increase academics' pleasure and motivation to write, and help them to cope with pressures to publish (MacLeod, Steckley and Murray 2012). Writing retreats break the social isolation that can be part of academic work and they can change the sense of people's selves as writers (Grant

2006; Murray and Newton 2009). Furthermore, writing retreats allow academics to incorporate 'new rituals, habits, skills or strategies for tackling' academic writing (Grant 2006, 488). Retreats can generate positive feelings about writing and reduce feelings of under-achievement (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009, 235).

Few studies have inquired into the role of writing retreats offered to PhD students specifically. One such study found that the students valued the retreats for the time to write they offer, for the pleasure of sharing a room with other writers and for the opportunity to talk about writing practices and experiences (Paltridge 2016). Research on writing groups for early career researchers, including PhD students, shows that - similar to writing retreats - these groups provide time for participants to come together to write (Maher et al. 2013). Other groups operate on the principle that the participants do their writing on their own, but meet in regular intervals to discuss each other's work (Dwyer et. al 2012; Guerin et al. 2013). Chihota and Thesen (2014, 131) explain how such groups allow postgraduate students to feel more confident with the social practices associated with academia. Writing groups are also valued for the sense of 'community' they produce (Aitchison and Lee 2006), for understanding a particular academic culture (Guerin et al. 2013) and for enhancing participants' confidence (Ferguson 2009) and sense of selves as writers (Cuthbert and Spark 2008). An important difference between these writing groups and the writing retreats that we discuss in this paper is that our retreats did not include the participants sharing their written work or the facilitator offering any specific skills training or advice.

In the USA, writing groups for postgraduate students are referred to as Dissertation or Writing Boot Camps (Eckstein et al. 2017). While these camps have become increasingly popular, they have not been widely researched (Busl, Donnelly, and Capdevielle 2015).There

are two main models of boot camps: the 'Just Write' model where student are given dedicated space and time to write without distraction and the 'Writing Process' model which includes training sessions on academic writing, mentoring, and peer feedback (Lee and Golde 2013). According to Busl, Donnelly, and Capdevielle (2015) '[t]he theory behind [the "Writing Process" camps] is that attendees have not fully mastered the skills and behaviors necessary to complete a dissertation or other long writing project.' Thus the camp idea seems to presume that students have important skills deficits to overcome. As will become clearer in the following sections, the retreats we report on here did not share this perspective. We did not focus on the students'skills deficits and the retreats' primary aim was to create conditions allowing the students to write, as in the Just write model.

The relationship with literacy and autobiographical self

Our study is informed by an understanding of writing, including academic writing, as social and cultural practice. The academic literacies model developed by Lea and Street (1998) postulates that writing is about more than skills and how-to patterns for students to learn (Ivanič 1998; Lillis 2001). Writing in academia is a complex social and cultural practice, shaped by institutional relations and power structures (Lea and Street 1998). Power is particularly relevant for understanding PhD students' writing because nearly all the writing they do is 'high stakes' and heavily critiqued (e.g. by supervisors and examiners) (Cotterall 2011, 413).

Becoming an academic writer requires not only subject knowledge and an understanding of discipline-specific genres and expectations. Doctoral students have to develop a scholarly identity (Aitchison 2009). In other words, they have to see themselves as somebody who has something to contribute to an already established academic community and discourse. In

order to understand how PhD students can develop an understanding of themselves as academic writers, we draw on two theoretical concepts: relationship with literacy (*rapport à l'écrit*) (Besse 1995) and the autobiographical self (Ivanič 1998). Both concepts emphasise the importance of looking at the personal history with regards to literacy.

The French scholar Jean-Marie Besse (1995) explored the process by which people appropriate literacy (*appropriation de l'écrit*), based on research conducted with adult literacy learners. Following Besse, literacy is never 'acquired' once and for all, but is appropriated throughout a lifetime in different spheres of one's life and depending on society's changing literacy demands. Besse (1995, 88) calls the outcome of this dynamic process an individual's 'relationship with literacy'. This idea can be applied to everybody, beyond the group Besse worked with.

According to Besse, a person's relationship with literacy has three dimensions: affective, social, and cognitive. The affective dimension includes attitudes, values and emotions with regards to literacy. For PhD students, this could be a lack of confidence or recollections of failure during earlier studies. The social dimension locates literacy in the person's social context and interactions with others. This would for instance be PhD students' relationship with their supervisor or with peers. The cognitive dimension comprises a person's knowledge of the writing system, their strategies for reading and writing, their attention span, memorisation and conceptualisation abilities (Besse 1995, 87-88). For PhD students, the cognitive dimension relates to, for example, knowledge of the rules for academic writing in their field of study. The affective, social, and cognitive dimensions are dynamically interconnected. Interestingly, Besse's three dimensions mirror the three factors that Ahern and Manathunga (2004) have found to cause blocks to writing for PhD students.

Besse's model suggests that writers, including PhD students, bring more to their writing than skills or knowledge. Writing is also related to identity. Roz Ivanič (1998, 24) has coined the term 'autobiographical self' to describe 'the identity which people bring with them to any act of writing, shaped as it is by their prior social and discoursal history.' Ivanič (1998, 32) explains that the autobiographical self is formed by the different 'social groups' people identify with. For example, this could mean that PhD students' autobiographical self can be shaped by the extent to which they feel part, or not, of an academic community. Ivanič's (1998) work inspired us to inquire into students' prior experiences of writing and how these shape what they think of themselves as writers as a factor that can explain how writing retreats support doctoral students.

Both concepts, relationship with literacy and the autobiographical self, acknowledge the fact that people do not only bring to new literacy demands (e.g. writing a PhD thesis) their literacy skills but their previous experiences, emotions, cultural backgrounds, etc. Ivanič (1998) mentions but does not explicitly discuss emotions in the context of the 'autobiographical self'. Conversely, Besse (1995) addresses both affective and cognitive issues in his framework. In this paper we look at the students' relationship with literacy, covering Besse's three dimensions. We ask how attending a writing retreat affects the students' relationship with literacy and, related to this, how the experience of the retreat impacts their autobiographical self. We inquire into these two aspects because our data analysis revealed them to be factors explaining how writing retreats can support PhD students' writing, the article's main goal.

Methodology

The data for this study covers four writing retreats offered as part of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences research training programme for doctoral students at Lancaster University. The retreats were facilitated by Uta. Virginie took part in two of these retreats while she was still a PhD student. Prior to each retreat an email was sent by Uta to all PhD students in the Faculty inviting them to take part in these events. Interested students had to send a short text explaining why they wanted to take part. Priority was given to students who were working on draft chapters or who were close to finishing their thesis. A maximum of 12 PhD students took part in each retreat.

The four writing retreats followed the same structure; they spanned over two and a half days, and included writing sessions of either 60 or 90 minutes long interrupted by half hour coffee and one hour lunch breaks. The retreats were non-residential and started with a daily sharing of aims and ended in a discussion of progress. Two retreats were held at off-campus locations, the two others on campus.

Between June 2015 and January 2016, with approval from the University's research ethics committee, we interviewed 19 PhD students (12 women and 7 men; 10 native speakers of English and 9 non-native speakers). Of the students who had taken part in the retreats not all were able or willing to participate in the study. Several had finished their studies and moved away or were unavailable at the time of data collection. The 19 participants studied in different departments: Contemporary Arts (n=3), Educational Research (n=1), English (n=2), Law (n=1), Linguistics (n=6), Politics, Philosophy and Religion (n=3), and Sociology (n=3). The majority of the participants were in their 3rd year of their doctoral course. We use pseudonyms to refer to the research participants.

Our interviews drew on what Ivanič (1998) calls 'life-history' techniques to research the students' past and current experiences of writing. The interviews lasted between 35 and 70 minutes and covered topics such as writing at school and University, experiences of writing a PhD, the place of writing in other aspects of their lives and their participation in the writing retreat.

Fourteen of the interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus, the five others on Skype. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using the software NVivo. We also collected post-retreat evaluations (n=26), written pre-retreat (n=4) and post-retreat (n=1) reflections. These data were also uploaded to NVivo. We conducted a content analysis (Gibbs 2008) using a taxonomy of 54 themes (codes) based on our literature review, the aims of our study, the interviews, and new elements that emerged during the coding process. For example, the code 'Writing Retreat/Effects' included what the PhD students said about effects of their participation in a retreat. Another example is 'Writing a PhD/Social Aspect' that includes information related to peer support or social isolation.

Since we are interested in the PhD students' relationship with literacy and how this relates to doctoral writing, our analysis is grounded in the biographical narratives students shared in the interviews. In this paper, due to lack of space we only present two such narratives. Although an important aspect, looking at the data set we found that language was not a decisive element shaping the students' experience of the retreat. We chose Daniel and Michelle, both native-speakers of English, because their stories reveal factors shaping PhD writing that were relevant for all the participants in our study, native and non-native speakers. Michelle exemplifies the situation of mature and part-time students, whose relationship with literacy is

shaped by their prior experiences of writing in professional roles. Daniel's story, on the other hand, illustrates the experiences of another key group of PhD students at our University: younger, enrolled full-time, and whose relationship with literacy is more strongly shaped by their student experiences.

In the following we first present Daniel and Michelle's experiences. We then bring in the voices of other participants to examine in more detail the students' relationship with literacy and how this bears on their experiences of writing during the retreat.

Daniel: 'I felt like a more legitimate writer'

When he attended the writing retreat, Daniel was in his third year of a full-time PhD in Politics. He had come to doctoral study straight through from undergraduate and Masters studies, with just a year-long gap before embarking on the PhD.

When asked about his writing history, Daniel immediately said that he never found writing difficult. He remembered preparing for his A-levels (the highest secondary school leaving examinations in the UK) and writing coursework at University, where compared to others, he always wrote 'quite a lot' and it was 'never a struggle'. But Daniel also recalled a specific situation when his English Literature A-level teacher had commented on a piece of Daniel's writing which he then reworked in light of that teacher's comments. After reading the revised text, his teacher told him that he could keep making small alterations, but that these would just be about him 'nit picking' his own work. That Daniel remembered and shared this experience shows the enduring influence it had on him. It illustrates, he explained, his 'perfectionist' approach to writing, which remained with him throughout his studies, including the PhD.

At university, Daniel gradually began to be less interested in the essays he had to write. This was partly because as an undergraduate and Masters student his essay topics were set by the tutors and he had to write about topics that did not inspire him. Daniel's growing disaffection with academic writing was concomitant with him stopping all non-academic writing. He used to keep a diary, which was, he said, 'like fiction'. He wrote down ideas for novels he wanted to write. But coming to university was the 'brake' for that and writing, he explained, just stopped being 'pleasurable'.

When he started his PhD, the research was 'enjoyable', while the writing was not. He feared that his academic writing wasn't 'good enough and would be picked apart'. His concern was not so much with his style but with the content. This was particularly difficult in the early stages of the PhD process when Daniel, as he explained, did not have a clear idea of what he had to say and what his contribution would be. This concern was so strong that it stopped him from writing. We can see here the change in his relationship with writing compared to his experiences in school. Things improved slightly when he had his own data to write about, but his worry about how his 'writing will be perceived' continued into the later stages of his PhD. Because of this fear, he tended to write in short and intensive bursts, but only after having spent a lot of time preparing for what he had to write, procrastinating and hindering himself from getting started. When he finally started, the writing process itself was so unpleasant that 'at the end I hated it just from the experience'. The feedback Daniel got from his supervisor was generally positive. But Daniel was always surprised that his supervisor liked his work.

The email inviting students to apply for the retreat explained that it would be writing without distractions and without access to the internet. This appealed to Daniel. His experience of the

retreat was positive: '[…] it made me feel more kind of empowered or encouraged to write, taking that feeling away and I suppose the task is to try and replicate that feeling of, that my writing can be legitimate.' Daniel had prepared some material for the retreat but on the second day he worked on parts that he had not prepared. He was surprised by the amount of work he was able to do (3500 words) 'without being prepared as much as I wanted'.

Michelle: 'it was a definite lifeline for me'

At the time of the writing retreat, Michelle was in her third year of a part-time PhD in Educational Research. To do the PhD, Michelle had taken a break from her career in Higher Education (HE) management and leadership and she was working part-time as a consultant. When asked how she perceived herself as a writer, she responded that she 'actually quite enjoy[s] writing'. She liked the 'process of finding the right word' that captures what she tries to express. When she looked at something she had written previously, she felt 'quite comfortable with it'. Sometimes she was 'surprised that little old me has produced that stuff'. We can see here the positive emotions related to her writing.

Talking about writing in school and at university, Michelle remembered essays she had to write in secondary school and also weekly creative writing exercises. Her A Level English teacher taught her how to 'deconstruct language' and understand the importance of every element in a sentence. A sense of confidence and enjoyment of writing is identifiable in Michelle's narrative; she talks about how she got a 'buzz' out of finding the right type of writing or language for the right purpose. She describes herself as a 'pragmatic' writer, driven by deadlines and a 'sense of urgency'. Her Masters was part-time and by distance, while having two pre-school children and her grandmother to look after.

Michelle's habit of working to deadlines was later reinforced by the demands of her professional roles. Most of her nearly 20 years as a manager in HE, she explained, 'involved a lot of writing', including having to master different genres, such as newsletters, management reports and governance minutes.

Talking about her PhD and her reasons for attending the writing retreats, there is a noticeable rupture in Michelle's narrative. The PhD, she remembered, was 'a shock to the system'. In her first year on the programme, she experienced a period of 'swimming around in this soup of completely alien language'. Her sense of herself as somebody who can read and write was threatened by the unfamiliar social sciences language she had to engage with requiring her to use a dictionary when reading journal articles. Although she was able to overcome the challenges of this first period, at the time of the retreat being advertised, Michelle had reached a moment where she felt 'stupid', 'falling behind' with her confidence having taken 'a real beating'. Before the retreat she even thought of dropping out or changing programme. Michelle experienced writer's block and explained that: '[w]ith the PhD stuff, […] I certainly can get very hung up on the idea that I'm not ready, I've got to read more, I've got to think more […].' Also, in the months prior to the retreat, she felt isolated and 'hijacked by life', as her husband had been ill and she was doing childcare for her grandchild.

The retreat had been 'a lifeline' for Michelle, even allowing her to 'leapfrog'. Whereas before the retreat she had felt to be six months behind in what her schedule should be, after the two and a half days she had made enough progress to give her a sense of having caught up with where she ought to be.

How attending a writing retreat affected the PhD students' relationship with literacy and their autobiographical self

Both Daniel and Michelle's narratives reveal that despite having had many positive experiences with writing in their prior education, these two PhD students experienced the doctorate as a significant challenge to their relationship with literacy. But for Daniel and Michelle, as well as for the other 17 students in our study, the retreat was a positive experience. To examine the factors explaining this, in the following we draw on the wider data set to look into the students' relationship with literacy, their autobiographical selves and how they experienced the retreat.

The cognitive dimension

Our data reveal three cognitive aspects the students talked about: 1) technical writing skills (e.g. grammar, syntax, and vocabulary); 2) time management, organisation and writing strategies; and 3) knowledge of the discipline(s) (e.g. discourse and writing style).

Technical writing skills were not prominent in the respondents' account of their writing. However, aspects such as vocabulary were mentioned by some of the non-native speakers. For example, Harun described writing in English to be 'a bit challenging'. But he also explained that what made finding the right word challenging was not just that he had to do this in English, but that he had to learn the discourse of a new discipline. Harun had been trained as an architect, but studied for a PhD in Sociology.

Time management and writing strategies were mentioned by several students. The retreat triggered a change in their practices. At the retreat, Michelle and Daniel discovered that they did not have to prepare as much as they normally did, leading, as explained, to delay and

procrastination. The retreat's 'imposed' timetable was commented upon positively in many of the interviews and evaluations. Writing in blocks of 60 to 90 minutes had not been common amongst the participants. Kanchana commented that being required to do this at the retreat helped her 'self-discipline'. The writing slots helped Michelle realise that 'whatever time I can find myself I can do something'. Others learned how to value breaks and, as Daniel mentioned, to avoid writing for many hours without interruption. Writing in structured blocks throughout a day was a new experience for Ava. When we interviewed her several months after she took part, her continued adoption of this structure in her local university library had helped her to overcome her usual reluctance to get on with writing, prioritising other aspects of her work. Others, such as Ann and Leah, learned how to separate writing from researching. At the retreat the internet was banned, so they could not interrupt their writing to search for missing references.

The third aspect, complexity of knowledge to be dealt with, was experienced by several students as a block to their writing (see also Ahern and Manathunga 2004). The tension between carrying on with readings and sitting down to write illustrates an aspect of academic writing that was challenging for the students in our study, including Daniel and Michelle. Writing at this level is a 'knowledge-creating' not a 'knowledge-recording process' (Ferguson 2009, 294). The challenge this carries with it was well captured in Gail's comments on comparing writing for her PhD to writing that she used to do as a film journalist. She explained how writing a film review would quickly result in a 'very attractive piece', but with the PhD, 'you're handling so much more complex material, it's almost like your writing can't cope with the level of the material you are trying to pull together'. Gail seemed to have accepted that because of this complexity, writing the PhD wasn't as

enjoyable as other writing she used to do. She learned to cope with being 'nervous' as simply being part of the process.

The affective dimension

Thesis writing is 'emotional work' (Aitchison et al. 2012, 438). Emotions were strongly present in all our students' accounts of their writing, prior to and while working on their PhD. While many of the participants enjoyed writing in school and in their undergraduate days, when talking about their PhDs, they shared a range of emotions, some very positive, yet others showing the frustration and lack of pleasure that could be part of thesis writing. 'hating it all', as Daniel had told us.

Polina described vividly her changing emotions relating to her writing. While writing, she usually felt that what she produced was a 'disaster'. After submitting the text to her supervisors, she did not dare opening the file until the day before the meeting because of the 'fear', she said, of what they would say. But she was 'happy' when she received good feedback. Leah, echoing Polina's sense of the PhD being a time of changing emotions about writing, explained that 'writing a PhD, it's like very up and down, isn't it?' 'It's like a very emotional thing', she added. These examples echo the feelings of 'self-doubt' and anxiety vis-à-vis academic writing shared by other graduate students and early career academics (Cameron et al., 2009, 273).

Turning now to the writing retreats, the students' comments illustrate that taking part was an opportunity for positive emotions to be experienced. 'I'm glad, the retreat was a good time for me', Daniel explained. Comments in the (anonymous) end of retreat evaluations confirmed that the event allowed positive emotions about writing to surface. For one student,

the retreat had been ‘a real bonus, an enjoyable and productive event’. Another student was ‘pleased and delighted’ with the outcome, 5000 words of a paper and some work on a questionnaire.

Productivity was crucial for the students’ positive evaluation of the retreat. At the end of the two and a half days everybody shared how many words they had written. We can say that the retreat produced positive emotions because it allowed the participants to overcome the tension between creativity and criticism (Cameron et al. 2009) that could easily block their writing. Daniel’s fear of his writing being taken apart, resulting in him using all possible distractions to delay sitting down at his computer to write, illustrates this tension. At the retreat, seeing that he could overcome his fear of criticism produced positive feelings. Florencia commented on how she ‘felt focussed, motivated’ and ‘got a nice feeling of achievement because the thesis sections keep falling into place and settling little by little and gently’. She had worked on different sections of her thesis during the retreat. The 2000 words she wrote were less than what other retreat participants had produced, but meant ‘the world to her’ because prior to the retreat she had struggled to do any writing. Florencia’s words illustrate the sense of achievement that taking part in the retreat produced.

Amongst the few less positive experiences that the students reported is Mariana’s comment on the first retreat she attended and how she was ‘frustrated’ and ‘stressed’ when after the first day she was getting less done than she had planned. Her aim had been to write her literature review chapter. In the interview, remembering this, she acknowledged that part of the issue had been her lack of preparation for the retreat. Several other students too found that lack of preparation for the retreat limited how much and how well they could write in the 2 1/2 days and this induced fatigue rather than pleasure.

Overall though for the students the writing at the retreat was a positive experience. Ann remembered how during the retreat, she 'really enjoyed the writing', adding that she tried not to think too much about what she was writing, but just focussed on 'getting ideas down'. These findings illustrate an important point about academic writing. In times of heightened pressure on students (and their supervisors) to achieve timely submission, produce published articles and get prepared for the academic world, writing—including thesis writing—can focus too much on the product to be achieved neglecting the value of the process itself and the pleasure to be experienced from writing (Dwyer et al. 2012).

The social dimension

The social dimension of literacy—the idea that reading and writing are always situated in a social context and generally involve interactions with others—is crucial to Besse's model, but also to the academic literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998). Social relations affected the doctoral students' experience of writing and of the retreats in various ways.

We asked all our participants about people in their lives that they thought had influenced their writing, acting as 'guiding lights' (Padmore 1994, 143). Daniel and Michelle both mentioned an A level teacher. For Leah it was her GCSE English teacher who had a significant impact on her interest in writing. For others, including Aurélie, Adam and Gemma, family members had shaped their relationship with literacy. The impact other people had on the students' writing and their perceptions of themselves as writers also indirectly affected their decision to attend the retreat and their experience of it.

Our data illustrate the salience of what Brandt and Clinton call sponsors of literacy: 'underwriters of acts of reading or writing—those agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable or induce literacy and gain advantage by it in some way' (Brandt and Clinton 2002, 349). In the example above we can see the 'accumulated layers of sponsoring influences' in the lives of people that can include, for example, the social network, people at work, school and other institutions, who all, at different times in the students' life, influenced how they thought about themselves and their writing (ibid.).

The students' memories of the retreats reveal the importance of the social environment to writing. All the interviews and most of the evaluations commented on the 'communal feel' of the retreat, as Michelle put it. During the retreat Daniel felt a 'positive social pressure' to write. Adam's comments illustrate what others have also shared with us:

> [e]veryone that I know here is a PhD student but we're all our own little island. But when you go to a retreat, you meet these people and you have that as a common ground […]. [A]ll of these people are working on a project and they know what it's like to have that kind of, the sort of loneliness of writing […].

For Gemma writing at the retreat was more enjoyable because of the 'peer support' that she did not have when working at home. We can see here how the social and the emotional in Besse's concept interconnect: sharing the experience of writing with others produces positive emotions (see also Grant 2006, Paltridge 2016). While the companionship the retreat offered was undoubtedly positive for those who attended, it is important to bear in mind that the students had selected to be at the retreat. In the four retreats, there was only one student who struggled with the shared space and who at the second day asked to move to another room. It is likely that other students, seeing the invitation to apply, sensed that the kind of pressure

emerging from a shared writing space would not have worked for them and therefore never applied.

Despite these obvious limitations of the retreat model, it is important to see that those who attended found the structure to be a model they could adopt. Following their participation in one of the retreats, Ava created her own writing group, while Mariana organised regular writing days in her Department.

The autobiographical self

In this final section, we extend our analysis beyond Besse's relationship with literacy to the role of the students' autobiographical self (Ivanič 1998) in helping us understand how taking part in a writing retreat affected the students' sense of self as writers. As explained earlier, the autobiographical self represents the identity that people bring along to any writing they do.

Ivanič (1998, 28) explains that in any given context, how a person, in our case a PhD student, thinks of themselves a writer can only develop in the space between their autobiographical self and any subject positions that are socially and institutionally supported and available to them. PhD students, however, occupy a peripheral position in academia. They are placed both as student and as researcher. Daniel seemed to be very aware that in his writing, he had to take on a position of expert, and yet he strongly depended on his supervisor's judgement on that writing. When we asked Leah how she thinks about herself as writer, she said she saw herself as a student, not a writer. It seems that at this stage in her journey towards the PhD, Leah did not yet experience the academic writer's position as one she could occupy.

Prior to starting the PhD, several of the students operated in contexts where established positions as writers had been available to them through their professional roles. For example Michelle had a successful career in HE and, within that role, an established position as writer. Starting the PhD, this changed and her sense of self as writer was challenged by the experience of being new to a discourse and genre. But overcoming this challenge was not just a matter of acquiring new writing skills. We agree with Grant (2006, 490) that the way to become a 'good writer' is 'about being different in relation to your earlier self, about overcoming or moving past older anxieties, rigidities, etc., that hampered writing in some way.' Ava explained how as an artist, her relationship with writing for academic purposes is unstable, with moments of feeling she has something to contribute while at other times being clear that her main way of expressing herself is through her art and that she has little to offer to academic theory.

But for Ava and others the retreat was an event that affected their autobiographical self. The retreat positioned all participants as academic writers, not as students. While PhD students' identities as writers are, as Hall and Burn (2009) suggest, more aspirational than real, for the time of the retreat being a 'real' academic writer was possible. The fact that the writing retreats were not framed as a support group or training session in academic writing (and thus different from the Writing process type of dissertation boot camps, see Busl, Donnelly and Capdevielle 2015) is relevant here. They were advertised simply as spaces for writing, not implying a 'deficit discourse' (Lea and Street 1998) which would highlight what PhD students were lacking in order to be 'real' academics (Dwyer et al. 2012). This appears to be part of why taking part in a retreat affected the students' autobiographical self.

It is reasonable to assume that the facilitator's presence contributed to the retreat being experienced by the participating students as a context where a position as writer (not only student) was available to them. That Uta, a senior academic, wrote too and shared her experiences was often commented upon in the evaluation. This also suggests that writing retreats offer a space where PhD students can feel part of an academic community (Maher 2014). In so doing, despite their necessarily temporary nature, writing retreats establish themselves in the students' ongoing experiences of writing as events where the position of 'legitimate' (Daniel's term) academics was available and could be experienced (Chihota and Thesen 2014).

Discussion

In this paper, we examined the role of writing retreats as a part of PhD students' ongoing relationship with literacy (and more specifically writing) and their developing autobiographical self. Based on our interviews and the retreat evaluations, we found that writing retreats have the potential to be important moments in the student's developing identity as academic writers. According to Ivanič (1998, 29), a writer's autobiographical self is constantly evolving and changing, 'from one act of writing to the next'. The retreat was such an act to which PhD students brought their autobiographical selves which emerged to be changed in one way or another.

This overall positive effect on the students' relationship with literacy was primarily due to the students' experiences of writing at the retreat. All our 19 respondents commented on the number of words they produced and their ability to overcome a blank screen or to keep on writing even when feeling tired. The retreat evaluations did, however, reveal some limitations of the approach. For some, the time table posed problems. Kanchana did not produce much in

the morning sessions. Adam, by contrast, felt that in the afternoons, the quality of his writing deteriorated and that he mostly felt his 'fingers making the movements of writing'. Lack of preparation, as mentioned earlier, could also limit what the students got from the retreat. Once the students had accepted their place, Uta sent them instructions, including advice on preparation. But this one off communication may not be sufficient to help students prepare for the retreat.

Despite these limitations, our study has shown that the students' ability to write at the retreats established these as events contributing positively to 'the challenging process of developing a sense of self as an academic writer' (Cameron et al. 2009, 269). Using Besse's (1995) framework allowed us to place the experience of taking part in the retreat in the context of the students' wider literacy biographies, Identifying key moments and people who shaped the student's relationships with literacy, helped explain both their wider experiences as doctoral students and their reactions the retreats. For all our participants, the effects of taking part in a retreat were most pronounced at the level of their emotions, which affected their autobiographical self by feeding into a more confident sense of self as writers. We can conclude from this that writing retreats are effective not so much in terms of the cognitive dimension of writing but can best be explained by looking at the positive emotions they generate and their impact on the students' identities as writers. The retreats produced hard (numbers of words written) and 'soft outcomes' (Morss and Murray 2001)—social and emotional effects.

To explain what made this possible, it is important to understand that the writing retreats offered a safe and comfortable space for the students to feel part of an academic community. The writing itself at the retreat, experienced bodily and emotionally through the increasing

word count on the laptops and the sense of writing for many hours without distraction 'empowered' the students, as Daniel explained, or, as others said, was simply pleasurable. Inquiring into the students' long-term relationship with literacy, as we did in our interviews, allowed us to understand the effect the retreats had as an event that fed into and sedimented a more or less developed sense of self as 'legitimate' academic writer. While the positive social pressure that make writing groups and writing retreats work has been confirmed by other studies (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Dwyer et al. 2012; Lee and Boud 2003), these investigations have not discussed the wider relevance of the 'social' and the autobiographical for understanding PhD students' writing and their experience of a writing retreat.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we suggest that writing retreats can make positive contributions to pedagogies of support for writing at doctoral level. One of their limitations, however, is that they are isolated events and in that, limited in their impact on students' writing and their identities as academic writers. Many participants in our study mentioned that writing retreats should be available on a regular basis throughout doctoral studies. As retreats took place only once or twice a year and offered a limited number of places, only three of the 19 students we interviewed were able to took part in more than one retreat. All the 19 students we interviewed had tried to carry on using the structure of the retreats. But this was not always easy. This suggests that more regular writing retreats could be beneficial.

Writing retreats focus on creativity rather than criticism. They provide an antidote to writing classes and skills training or other types of support offered to PhD students where the emphasis is on critique. This, it is reasonable to assume, is both a strength and a weakness. The fact that texts are not shared and that there is no feedback from a senior academic is

likely to be a bonus for some, while deterring others. The expected time commitment is making it more difficult for part-time and/or distance students to attend these retreats. Conversely though, those from this group who have attended have found the retreats to be beneficial. They not only provide dedicated time, they also help counter a feeling of isolation that is particularly difficult for the part-time students who struggle to feel part of an academic community.

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