Writing Retreats and Writing Groups
Significant Stages of Doctoral Writing Support

JENNY MATTSSON, THE UNIT FOR ACADEMIC LANGUAGE (ASK), UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Overview

- ASK's work with writing retreats and our current development of **support for writing groups**.

- A look at a survey on writing groups supported by ASK.

- Summing up and going forward.

The Unit for Academic Language (ASK), University of Gothenburg

- A university-wide unit offering writing and language development support in Swedish and English for staff and students at the University of Gothenburg.

- For staff we offer e.g.

  – Writing Retreats

  – Writing Groups

ASK's Work with Writing Retreats

- One-day structured writing retreats for doctoral students and researchers offered since autumn term 2017.

- Main idea: to give participants a full day of structured, focused, individual writing.

- Strict schedule, setting goals, following rules (no phone, no emails, no reading), etc.

Photo: Johan Wingborg

From Writing Retreats to Writing Groups

- After attending an ASK writing retreat, participants **spontaneously** formed writing groups.

- Mattsson et al. 2020 illustrates the **positive influence** that the groups have on doctoral student writing as well as the **difficulties** of forming and (especially) sustaining a writing group.

- The study motivated ASK to start offering writing group **support** to all university staff, doctoral students included.

ASK's work with Writing Groups

- Started supporting writing groups autumn term 2019.

- Set-up: 3 meetings with an ASK writing advisor: (1) planning, (2) writing, (3) follow-up.

- So far, 5 groups (4 with doctoral students and 1 with researchers).

- All groups focus on writing together (no feedback on texts).

Photo: Johan Wingborg

Follow-up on the writing groups: survey

- 3 groups so far

- 8 individuals (6 doctoral students and 2 researchers)

- Questions in survey:

  - Practicalities

  - Individual overall experiences

  - Individual writing experiences

  - The WG in connection to department

  - Support from ASK

➢ Writing practice and Productivity
➢ Stress and Well-being
➢ The WG and the Pandemic
➢ Social dynamics - challenges

Writing practice and Productivity

*It really does help to have the **company of others** and to keep to a **strict routine**. It makes writing a more **automatic process** and has also **alleviated the pressure** around writing.* (D1/1)

*I've become **aware of my own writing**. How much **time** I need, what **obstacles** appear and how I move on from them. I have a greater acceptance of my writing **process** now.* (D2/1)

*I normally get **writer´s block**, but the WG and its setup has helped me on all occasions to write.* (D2/3)

- Strict routine/automatic process
- Positive group dynamics
- Less pressure
- Awareness of writing process

Stress and well-being

*The WG has definitely **improved my well-being**. Both in what I have **accomplished with my writing**, and in how I now **plan for writing.*** (D1/2)

*The WG keeps you going, but most importantly it **fosters long term good writing habits**. Writing **regularly** makes writing a **demystified and non-pressure** activity.* (D2/2)

*My **expectations for my writing become realistic** in the WG.* (D1/3)

*I **feel less stress** and I've realized something important: **being a doctoral student is WRITING** a thesis.* (D2/1)

- Planned writing time
- Realistic expectations
- Positive group dynamics
- Writing demystified
- Getting writing done (early)

The writing group and the pandemic

*Our WG has really **helped me enormously during the pandemic**, not least **socially**. It's been important to meet others and be a part of a **context**.* (D1/3)

*The WG is **the most important part of my work life** right now. It's actually **the only structure I have as a doctoral student**. It's also **the only social contact** I have with colleagues.* (D2/3)

*This is **the only coffee machine moment** we have right now.* (D1/2)

- Social/colleguial context
- Structure of work time

Social dynamics - challenges

*We're **getting too relaxed with the rules and schedule**. It's good to follow the rules more strictly, I think.* (D2/3)

*With our third **group member disappearing,** the dynamics of the WG changed and we're not as good at keeping to the rules anymore. We really need more people in the group or it **risks falling apart.*** (R1/2)

*When **the discipline is lost, the whole concept falls apart**.* (D2/2)

WGs risk breaking down if:
- Structure is not followed
- Rules are not followed
- Group members leave

Summing up

➢ Writing practice and Productivity

➢ Stress and Well-being

➢ The WG and the Pandemic

➢ Social dynamics - challenges

- WGs is an important stage of doctoral writing support, closely connected to that of writing retreats.

- In order to sustain the work in WGs, they need more support.

Going forward:

✓ <u>Support from ASK</u>: WGs need **more hands-on support** early on as well as more ongoing **support to sustain** the group.

✓ <u>Support from the university/academia at large</u>: WGs need to become a **more systematically integrated** part of **a university's structure** and **a more visible stage** of doctoral student writing.

Productivity   Well-being

Photo: Johan Wingborg

Thank you!

jenny.mattsson@gu.se

References

Aitchison, C. & C. Guerin (eds). (2014) *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond*. London/New York: Routledge.

Kamler, B. & Thomson, P. (2006) *Helping Doctoral Students Write. Pedagogies for Supervision*. London: Routledge.

Mattsson, J., Brandin, E.-K., & Hult, A.-K. (2020). Get a Room! How Writing Groups Aid the Development of Junior Academics' Writing Practice and Writer Identity. *Journal of Academic Writing* 10 (1), 59-74. https://doi.org/10.18552/joaw.v10i1.602

Moore, S. (2003) 'Writers' Retreats for Academics: Exploring and Increasing the Motivation to Write'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 27 (30), 333-342.

Murray, R. (2014) 'Doctoral Students Create New Spaces to Write'. in *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond* ed. by Aitchison, C. and Guerin. London/New York: Routledge, 94-109.

Murray, R. (2015) *Writing in Social Spaces*. London/New York: Routledge.

Murray, R. & Newton, M. (2009) 'Writing Retreat as Structured in Intervention: Margin or Mainstream?' *Higher Education Research and Development* 28 (5), 541-553.

Sword, H. (2017) *Air & Light & Time & Space. How Successful Academics Write*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.