



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN GENDER AND EDUCATION

Women Writing Socially in Academia

Dispatches from Writing Rooms

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Coaching Interventions in Writing Retreats: A Creativity Boost

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INTRODUCTION

The structured writing retreats I run, called Study Hubs, bring together coaching and writing in a virtual environment. Most people who attend are doctoral students, but master's students, established academics, and the occasional creative writer also attend. Most attendees are women, and it would be interesting for research to further explore why this is the case. We meet approximately once a month for a structured, all-day session (9 am to 3:30 pm), divided into 25-minute working sprints with 10-minute breaks and a lunch hour. Writers have told me that they look forward to these meetings as a time to focus and move their writing along. Most writers attend each month and new members are warmly welcomed. It is perhaps the warmth of the group that creates this light and fun writing haven. Meeting online is effective as writers can join from far and wide and dip in and out as their schedule permits—people often need to attend an

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additional meeting or take their dog for a walk at one point in the day. The common plight of moving forward on our writing journeys knows no borders, and it is fascinating to hear about the similarities and differences in writers' writing and life experiences across the world.

Coaching seems to be implicitly happening, perhaps unbeknownst to writers in many physical retreats, in those pep talks in the corridor or discussions over dinner. As a Chartered Coaching Psychologist, I am keen to bring coaching into structured writing retreats explicitly. Coaches create clarity so people can think for themselves and make better decisions through structured, purposeful "learning conversations" (Clutterbuck, 2023, p. 60). I have adapted my skills and knowledge to the writing retreat environment in a practical way, to give people "permission" and space to be creative with their ideas, to foster motivation and confidence in their academic writing, and to create psychological safety so that they can air any concerns or fears, enabling them to move forward in their work.

Each writer has a 20-minute one-to-one coaching session with me during the day (or in the week of the Study Hub) and also participates in group coaching at the beginning of the day and after lunch. The group coaching entails leading the writers through creative exercises designed to elicit insights and "aha" moments. Although most of these exercises are initially reflected on alone, it feels that there is an emancipatory shift in the group as a whole when writers share their insights. One of these shifts is that writers realize they are not alone on their writing journeys, which, for me, is what makes this social writing. Writers encourage each other and commiserate when their writing or current circumstances are difficult. Friendships are built up over time and some writers meet between Study Hubs to write together informally.

In academia, I believe our playful creativity can become stifled. I find people often lose the joy in their academic work: their work becomes task oriented rather than creative. These exercises reconnect people to their research and writing with levity and joy, helping them remember what they offer in their own work. Writers have told me that they find the exercises deeply reflective and reflexive, with the result that their writing becomes more vibrant. These exercises allow writers to tap into creative pathways and allow new perspectives on their work to surface. One writer said, "They move you out of 'head down' mode into 'head up' mode."

In this chapter, I share and expand on a selection of these playful exercises which I have developed in the hope that these will give writers

permission, and a way forward, to think creatively about their work. I also hope that these exercises will spark ideas for retreat facilitators to use in their sessions. I have written the following exercises—the ideas cycle, cue cards, and supportive networks—in an interactive style, imitating the way I facilitate group coaching at Study Hubs. This includes inviting the writer to sketch diagrams, fill in tables, and reflect on key questions. I often share my insights about my own process to demonstrate that is safe and liberating to share how we do things, and I encourage other facilitators of structured writing retreats and social writing groups to do the same.

THE IDEAS CYCLE

We start by thinking playfully about how ideas work. The aim of this exercise is to give you, as a writer, some control over your process rather than feeling at the mercy of it. In Fig. 7.1, we can see my sketch of the ideas cycle. Yours may be different to this—but this represents a starting point so you can jump in and think about your own cycle, changing it up, skipping sections, and circling back on yourself as you see fit. Owning your process is freeing, as once you understand it, you can actively choose to change it.

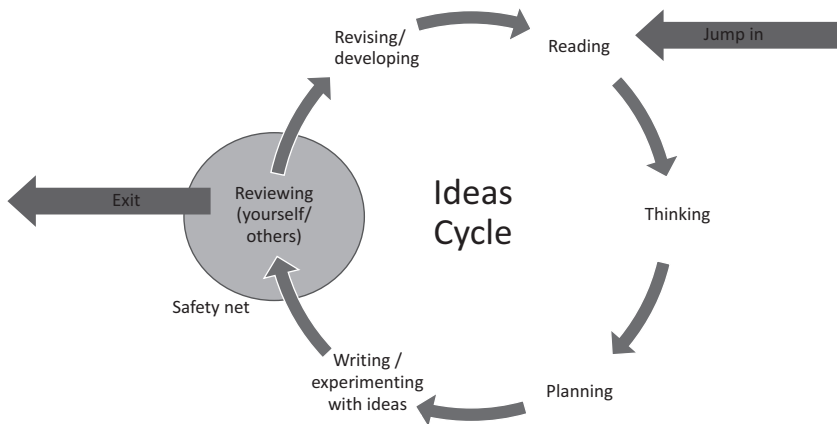


Fig. 7.1 The ideas cycle

What to Do

Refer to Fig. 7.1 and circle where you are right now, as a snapshot in time, on the diagram. Remember you might be at various stages at the same time on the same piece of work, or you might be attending to more than one piece of work and be at different stages with them.

Now draw your own version of the ideas cycle. It's useful to give each position on the cycle a name, even if the label is not fully accurate, as it helps you define where you are and what you want to do next, which will free you up to take action. Consider how it is different to my version above. Circle where you are now in your own diagram. Is this where you want to be? Draw an arrow from where you are to where you want to be.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you dwelling on a section of the cycle?
- Do you need to spend more time there?
- Do you need to extricate yourself from that part and fly across to a different part?
- What would happen if you moved positions today?
- What could you work on now to enable you to move?

If you don't know where to start in your work, pick a place on the cycle and allow yourself to dwell there for a week or so. Make yourself stay there, even if this feels difficult, so you can start making inroads and putting down some roots on this project.

If you are feeling stuck in your work, it might be useful to allow yourself to go to a different part of the cycle. Most academic writing is iterative—you will come back to each part eventually. Therefore, it does not matter what order you do it in—it all needs doing in the end!

My Thoughts on the Ideas Cycle

As academic writers, we are always in an ideas cycle. For me, it entails reading, followed by thinking and planning. Thinking jumps out at me when I read or listen to different articles, books, podcasts, and videos. Planning is the taming of these ideas so they are in a manageable form for another human being to understand—in fact, even for me to understand. Sometimes, I dispense with planning altogether and go straight into writing, experimenting with what I want to say.

In the review stage of the cycle, not only do *we* review our work, but inevitably, in academia, each writer has many other readers: the supervisor on an academic programme and the examiner at the end of it, or a colleague, a journal reviewer, and a proofreader. Whatever feedback I get, I spend some time considering whether I agree with it and how to develop my work. This is the revising/developing part of the cycle. In order to revise and develop the work, I might read further, plan more, write something, and so on—in other words, move around the cycle again.

We could find ourselves endlessly on this cycle which can result in us feeling bogged down. When we begin to wonder how to get out of this cycle, I suggest we are at the stage when we need to jump off! And it is a jump! This jumping off could mean handing in a thesis, putting a line under a chapter, or resubmitting an article. It takes courage to say to the gatekeepers, such as a supervisor or reviewers, that you have done all the work you are going to do on this piece and it is time for you to turn your attention to something else.

This exercise encourages writers to think conceptually about how they work. Writers who engaged with this exercise on my Study Hubs gained clarity and ownership about their creative process, realizing that all the messy components of reading, thinking, writing, reading more, rethinking, and combining sections of writing are all part of getting the work done. Retreat facilitators could consider asking their writers to map out their creative process and thus help them own their process. The next exercise focuses on taking a pragmatic approach to academic reading.

CUE CARDS

All writers need to read! When you are reading a book or a paper, do you ever feel unfocused? I know when it takes me more than an hour to read a paper, I have lost focus, and my mind has wandered. Sometimes it is useful to have a set of questions to answer about your reading material to tether you down. I use the cue card to give me focus.

What to Do

Next time you read a book or a paper, read the questions in Fig. 7.2 to alert you what to look out for. You can choose to answer the questions in various formats. As well as printing out the cue card and filling it in by hand, you could answer the questions as annotations or notes on your

Cue card

Paper/book citation:

How did this paper/book deepen your understanding of your field?

Did something really strike you about this paper/book?

Which aspects of this article are most relevant for you?

Is it relevant because it helps your argument for why you are doing your study? Either as something to rail against or as something in the right direction?

If it is a similar study, how did they diverge from what you are going to do and what is the significance of that for your work, e.g., they covered this, but I will cover that....?

Is it a landmark study in your opinion? Explain why.

Is the author a key player in your field? Or someone people have overlooked and you are giving more prominence too?

Is there an angle on this topic/study they have missed that you don't want to miss?

Fig. 7.2 Cue card

electronic articles. Alternatively, you could make an electronic version of the cue card, delete the questions after answering them and voilà—you have a ready-made paragraph about each paper or book. Make sure to cite the paper or book at the top of the cue card.

I invite you to adapt the cue card for your own use. Consider if you can make the questions more relevant for your work and if there are any you can dispense with. You may prefer a less structured format, where you simply ask yourself (if and) why the study is important, what the main points are and how it fits in with your work.

My Thoughts on the Cue Card Exercise

I use the cue card exercise in different ways. I print out copies of the cue card and staple them to the front of articles or slot blank versions into books at a useful chapter or page. I also write the answers on index cards and use these to physically build up my argument, rearranging the cards several times. I then type these up to form an outline of my chapter.

Writers could consider whether the cue card is a useful tool and how they might adapt this to their own writing and retreat facilitators can adapt it for their writers. This exercise helped my writers gain clarity on what they got out of each reading, retain key points, and choose what they could usefully read next. It helped them construct arguments in a more direct way and prevented them from feeling lost in a multitude of readings.

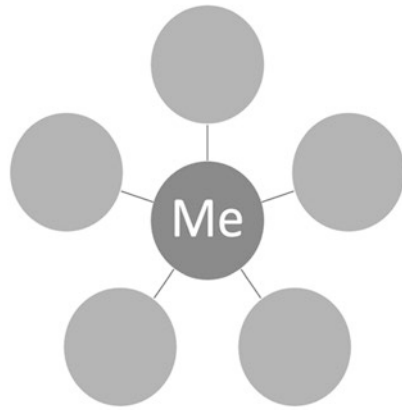
SUPPORTIVE NETWORKS

Our final exercise for this chapter takes us in a relational direction. Academic writing can be intense and you need to be fearless in drawing on your support network. As retreat facilitators, we can help people consider who they can draw on for support. I like to think of the people supporting me as “Team Natalie.” Fill in your own name in Fig. 7.3. How does it feel to have “Team [your name]”?

What to Do

In your role as a writer, think about who are the people on your team. Who make up your supportive network, the people who do or could help you get your academic writing done? Without thinking too much about it, jot down five people in your supportive network in the circles in Fig. 7.3.

Fig. 7.3 Supportive networks part 1



Who are the important people in your life academically, professionally, and personally? Write the names of the friends, family, work acquaintances, and university personnel who might have some bearing on helping you get your academic writing done. It could be a babysitter who you can call on to look after young children, if you have them, or perhaps your partner. You might write down the librarian or academic support team at university.

Write down five people or groups who are in Team _____

Are the people you have noted down clear on how they can best support you? Have you met and had conversations with them explicitly about this? There are some people you will pay to support you, such as a babysitter or a writing coach; some that are free by dint of you being at an institution, such as the services of an academic writing centre; and others that are reciprocal—maybe you and a peer can proofread each other's work? Ultimately, people enjoy helping each other; it's important to ask for help rather than assuming people can't or don't want to.

We are going to look at your supportive network in more detail because there might be people you have forgotten about who can help you. For example, you might have some friends who you think have no interest in your academic writing and actually they do—they would enjoy discussing it with you. Or it might be there are people who would look after your child, if you have one, who you had not considered, such as a friend. The same people may fulfil more than one function. Think as broadly as you can to include, for example, family, friends, peers, community members,

academic staff, coaches, and social media (I have found that the academic Twitter community are highly supportive).

Have a look at the supporting function column in Table 7.1. As you read the list, write down the name of someone who fulfils that function, or could fulfil that function in your life in the name column in the table. Consider how these people have helped you in the past and how they can help you now and in the future. Write the answers in the final two columns of Table 7.1.

Looking at your completed table, answer the following questions:

- Does anything surprise you when you look at the extent of your support network?
- Are there any gaps? If so, what could you do to fill those gaps?
- Do you rely on only one or two people for support? Does this matter? You might be quite happy with this state of affairs, or you might feel like you would prefer to have a broader base.
- Do you wish to expand your support network in any way? You could plug into an existing group or start up an interest group, for your topic or method, on social media or in person. Maybe you can cultivate some new relationships in your cohort or at conferences?
- Are there untapped resources in your supportive network?
- Can you add different elements to existing relationships? Maybe you haven't given some people the opportunity to fulfil a certain role for you and if they only knew what you needed, they would happily do it!
- Have you forgotten about some people who could potentially help you?
- Do you need to have a key conversation with someone, so that they are clear about how they can help you or how you can help each other?
- If this exercise has made you realize how extensive your support network is, have you expressed gratitude to these people and considered how you can help them?

My Thoughts on the Supportive Networks Exercise

When filling in the first part of the supportive networks exercise, one writer could only think of four people. After completing the second part of the exercise (Fig. 7.4), they ended up with ten people. This itself made the writer feel more supported and less anxious. Taking a proactive approach to cultivating a supportive network is time well-spent. Academic

Table 7.1 Supportive networks part 2

<i>Supporting function</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>How have they helped you in the past?</i>	<i>How can they help you now and in the future?</i>
On whom can you always rely when you are in some sort of turmoil? Who buoys you up when you are down?			
To whom do you enjoy chatting when you have the need to talk about your work, or maybe something completely different to give you a refreshing break?			
With whom can you discuss interesting concepts?			
Who makes you feel competent and valued?			
Who gives you constructive feedback? i.e., Who are those critical friends who you know give you honest feedback with the kindest of intentions?			
Who is always a valuable source of information?			
There might be an administrator in your group who always seems to know about pockets of funding, for example.			
Who will challenge you to take stock of your personal and professional goals?			
On whom can you depend in a crisis?			
Whom do you feel close to – perhaps a friend or a partner who stops you feeling isolated?			
With whom can you share bad news, for example, when a colleague says something that hurts?			
With whom can you share good news and your wins without feeling awkward and that you are blowing your own trumpet?			
Who or what introduces you to new ideas and new interests? It might be a social media group, a newsletter, or even a periodical.			
Who introduces you to new people or who is happy to introduce to their contacts to help you move forward on a project/ambition?			
Whom do you feel comfortable asking for help from?			
Who is or could be your mentor? Do you want to make this a formal relationship (are they happy to do this?) or would you draw on their support informally?			

writing can be draining and retreat facilitators can help writers work out how they can make it as comfortable as possible for themselves, which in turn will help the writers get their work done whilst extending and deepening their relationships.

CONCLUSION

I invite retreat facilitators to reflect on what engaging with these exercises, as a writer, has brought forth in you and how you may adapt these for your writers. Writers at my retreats find these sorts of exercises motivating and thought-provoking. Such exercises provide an uplifting and empowering way of engaging with academic work and to date I have produced over 150. The one-to-one coaching conversations I have with writers help inform the creation of these exercises, which I will continue to develop for use at my retreats. Study Hubs (online writing retreats with coaching) are a popular form of structured writing retreat and I have many more planned. Furthermore, I think this model of social writing, with the use of one-to-one coaching and group coaching, is particularly effective and I encourage other researchers to explore this phenomenon.

REFERENCE

Clutterbuck, D. 2023. *Coaching and Mentoring: A Journey Through the Models, Theories, Frameworks and Narratives of David Clutterbuck*. Oxford: Routledge.