Building a community of writers in a university: An ethnographic study

Thesis

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BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS IN A UNIVERSITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Doctorate in Education

13 February 2020
Abstract

This study investigates the role of a writing community in the development of academic lecturers’ writing practices in a new UK university, where teaching is prioritised and research is less prominent. In recent years this university has identified an improved position in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) as an institutional priority. The competing priorities encapsulated in this apparent shift in balance between teaching and research provided the backdrop for considering the challenges of building a writing culture in this context and investigating the role a writing group might play in such an endeavour.

An ethnographic case-study approach was used to build a rich picture of the writing group and its activities over an extended period of time, drawing extensively on participants’ own words. The findings are presented as a series of stories, and they reveal the changes in writing practices that occurred as a result of participants’ involvement in a writing group. From a socio-cultural perspective, it is argued that the space within which the writing group occurred was socially constructed. To this end, theories of identity and space help to unravel the complex factors that affect the development of academics’ writing practices.

The findings suggest that the writing group helped to establish writing as a priority for participants. It also changed the ways in which they thought about writing and about themselves as writers. The ethnographic approach revealed a detailed picture of its communal and dialogic nature. The space was shown to be instrumental in helping to define the nature and purpose of writing for the individual participants and the group as a whole. However, the findings also demonstrate that these changes proved difficult to sustain beyond the boundaries of the writing group, and that the reasons for this need to be set in the wider context of the institutional challenges facing new universities in the UK. The study concludes that the writing group provided a space where writing was legitimate and valued, and that its potential might be fully realised in an institutional context that articulates a clearly defined place for writing within its academic community.
Acknowledgements

During the past four years, I have learned that a Doctorate in Education, though it bears only my name as its author, is a collaborative project. This study tells the story of a writing group and I am eternally grateful to its members for creating that story together and allowing me to tell it here. It was a privilege and a joy to share my doctorate journey with a group of people who wanted to write and treasured the space that we created to make it happen.

Everyone needs a colleague, mentor and friend who maintains an unfailing optimism that you are up to the task. To that end, I am indebted to Tansy Jessop, who has prayed, encouraged, suggested readings, helped me grapple with ideas, read drafts and made my writing better.

Grateful thanks also go to my two supervisors, Professor Judith Lathlean and Dr Liz Chamberlain, who have encouraged and challenged me in equal measure, always believing that the end result would be worthwhile.

And finally, Andy, Emily and Anna – I suspect that writing this study has, at times, been as challenging for you as it has been for me. Hopefully, it has been worth it in the end. Thank you for not complaining and for always cheering me on. I couldn’t have done it without you.
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### Acronyms

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAQDAS</td>
<td>Computer-aided Qualitative Analysis Software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIQ</td>
<td>Critical Incident Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEF</td>
<td>Knowledge Exchange Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Planning Sheet (where PS is followed by a number, the number denotes the writing group to which the planning sheet relates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORDO</td>
<td>Open Research Data Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REF</td>
<td>Research Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEF</td>
<td>Teaching Excellence Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Transcript</td>
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<tr>
<td>TK</td>
<td>Task (where TK is followed by a number, the number denotes the writing group in which the task occurred)</td>
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<tr>
<td>WG</td>
<td>Writing group</td>
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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study has emerged from a lifelong personal and professional interest in writing as a powerful tool for developing and expressing thought and the potential to communicate ideas that can capture the imagination and transform both writer and reader. In the context of higher education, Bean (2011) has argued that academic writing is both a process and an outcome of critical thinking, highlighting its vital role in the construction and communication of knowledge. However, whilst there has been considerable focus on investigating the writing practices of students in higher education, the writing practices of academics have received less attention (Tusting et al., 2019). My study therefore focuses specifically on the practice of writing for publication in the professional lives of academics in a ‘new’ UK university. (In this study the terms ‘new’, ‘post-92’, ‘modern’ and ‘teaching-intensive’ are used interchangeably as they are almost equally characteristic of the institution where the study was undertaken.) In its investigation of a community of writers, the concern of this research is to explore how the potential for writing might be unlocked in a university where the main priority for academics is teaching, but where there is simultaneously growing pressure to write for publication to satisfy an increasingly metrics-driven sector (Murray and Newton, 2009).

This chapter outlines the political and institutional contexts in the UK, where the study was situated. It argues that both are important in helping to understand the complex nature of the academic role. Changes in the structure of higher education, driven by a marketised, audit-driven culture, have resulted in competition between institutions, with ‘serious consequences for teaching and research’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009:309). The chapter also explores the particular significance of these changes for a new university, such as the one where this research took place.

1.2 The wider context

In recent years, the UK higher education landscape has seen an emphasis on ‘performativity and an evidence-based approach to policy-making’ (Harris, 2005). The impact of a highly marketised approach to policy-making has increased competition,
with some suggesting a subsequent threat to the professional autonomy of academics as individuals and universities as organisations (Beck, 1999). These characteristics reflect a neo-liberal agenda (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009), with its focus on strengthening the economy in an increasingly globalised market-place. It is argued that this is largely achieved through ‘technologies of institutional control and accountability’ (Beck, 1999:227). In the context of higher education, one implication has been the emergence of a range of metrics to serve as a measure of individual universities’ performance and to enable comparison between institutions.

One such performance measure is the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which in 2014 replaced the Research Assessment Exercise as a means for judging the quality of research in higher education. A key metric relates to the numbers of research-active academics who have published in highly-rated journals and therefore acts as a powerful driver to both increase research outputs and attract funding (Morss and Murray, 2001). The arrival of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016, followed by the subject-level TEF pilots in 2019 and the first iteration of the Knowledge Exchange Framework in 2020, has further emphasised clear links between performance and funding in the university sector. Widely promoted by their advocates as helping universities to achieve excellence, opponents view both as examples of neo-liberalism permeating the higher education agenda (Beck, 1999). This is reflected in the extensive auditing and benchmarking processes of a ‘new-managerialism’, and has arguably resulted in ‘new forms of bureaucratisation and the destabilisation of academic identity’ (Watermeyer and Olssen, 2016:202).

Discomfort with the impact of neoliberal values on the higher education sector has centred on the fact they are in opposition to the liberal education values that have traditionally underpinned the role of the university in public life (Harland et al., 2010). From this perspective, the very purpose of higher education is open to question (Collini, 2012). There is an inherent tension between a neo-liberal view of the university as central to the economic needs of society and the liberal perspective of the academic as ‘critic and conscience of society’ (Harland et al., 2010:93). In practice, this tension can result in difficult choices about the types of research and publications that are valued in the context of the wider institution’s need to attract funding (Harland et al., 2010). It
may also influence the extent to which collaboration occurs both within and across institutions in a climate of institutional and individual competitiveness (Beck, 1999). The tethering of funding to research output and impact also threatens to separate the core and interrelated roles of teaching and research for academic staff (Archer, 2008a). Furthermore, the increasingly common workload models that seek to distinguish between and allocate hours to teaching, research and administration represent a policy-led institutional discourse that reinforces the divisions between them, both in managerial practices and the ways in which academics relate their own narratives of practice (Malcolm and Zukas, 2009).

Some have argued that neo-liberalism has challenged the autonomy of academics (Clegg, 2008), reflected in a pressure to ‘construct academic identities in line with corporate identity’ (Harris, 2005:426). Against this backdrop, however, universities largely continue with their core roles of ‘providing quality teaching...and maintaining academic standing and rigour through research’ (White et al., 2014:57). This raises the question of what kinds of academic identities are possible within the contemporary higher education landscape, and to what extent institutional contexts contribute to the shaping the identities of the academics who work within them.

1.3 Institutional context

Against the backdrop of the wider political context, this study is situated in a ‘new’ university in the south of England. In general, ‘new’ universities tend to have evolved from a history of applied, professional and vocational learning (White et al., 2014) and most were polytechnics and institutes of higher education that became universities in or after 1992 (Findlow, 2012; Murray et al., 2011). The institution in this study is characteristic of the archetypal ‘new’ university. Its high teaching loads (18 hours per week for academics) class it as a ‘teaching-intensive’ university, where teaching is prioritised and the research environment is less prominent (Tomas and Jessop, 2018). This contrasts with a ‘research-intensive university’ where academics’ careers develop largely through research and publications and where ‘primacy for research over all other activities (leadership, teaching, administration) is deeply embedded’ (Fung et al., 2017:13). There are more nuanced positions than these broad categories allow, but they
serve to introduce an institutional context for this study, where teaching is prioritised over research.

However, the institution in this study also maintains an assumption that writing for publication continues to form part of the academic role, a position recently enshrined in a new ‘teaching and scholarship’ career pathway, which was introduced into the institution in 2018 after a lengthy period of consultation between management and union representatives. What is less clear is what form this writing and research could take in this career pathway, since it remains the case that the teaching culture is visibly more dominant than the research culture. This study, through its exploration of the activities of a writing community, considers one possible way of developing a culture of writing amongst academics for whom teaching takes priority.

Some specific characteristics of the university where this research was situated made an investigation into the academic writing practices of lecturers an important area for research. Firstly, academics in teaching-intensive universities are often second-career academics (White et al., 2014; Findlow, 2012). It has been argued that academics’ identities are, to a significant extent, shaped and represented through their participation in everyday academic writing practices (Tusting et al., 2019). If this is the case, the potential gap between second-career academics’ professional and academic literacies (French, 2019) needs to be acknowledged. This in turn has implications for any expectation that writing for publication can be unproblematically absorbed into the academic role. Secondly, the high teaching loads both send a clear signal about where lecturers’ priorities should lie and, in practical terms, make the time available for research extremely limited. Simultaneously, however, while outsiders might speculate that teaching-intensive universities would not be that concerned about research outputs and impacts, in reality research metrics drive research pressures in not dissimilar ways to research-intensive universities.

As a result, in the university where this study was based, academic writing has been at the front and centre of a drive to embed research-informed teaching. This was resourced through the appointment of a Professor of Research Informed Teaching and two post-doctoral researchers. It was progressed through the academic development initiatives of the Learning and Teaching Institute. Accordingly, this university’s
operational plan prioritised developing academics’ writing identities and building strong publication records. The university’s stated intention, to which the writing group that is the focus of this study was one response, was to ‘support pedagogic research through mentoring colleagues to publish in peer-reviewed journals’ (Learning and Teaching Institute Operational Plan, 2017).

1.4 The study: scope, aims and research questions

The growing institutional importance of research and writing for publication provided an ideal starting point for a study that would investigate how to develop the writing practices of academic staff. One possible response to academics’ rather ambivalent views of their research and writing identities might be to create ‘principled and valued space[s]’ (Archer, 2008a:268) where creativity, debate and dialogue enable critical exploration of ideas, alternative ways of thinking and new forms of practice (Harris, 2005). The structured writing retreat model (Murray and Newton, 2009) has the potential to offer one such space, and this study focuses on a writing group for lecturers that was initially founded on the principles of this approach.

In the university where this study is situated, the Head of Academic Development initiated the writing group near the start of the 2017-18 academic year as a response to an institutional priority to increase the publication output of academics. I worked at the university as a Senior Lecturer in Learning and Teaching and the group simultaneously offered a research site for this study and an opportunity to join the group as a participant. I was aware that, in common with other new universities, academics at my institution often did not identify writing for publication as a significant part of their academic role (Gale, 2011). Their experience was that teaching assumed priority and the potential connections between teaching, research and writing remained under-developed (MacFarlane and Hughes, 2009).

In an increasingly marketised and metrics-driven higher education landscape, the writing group provided a space where academics could write. This study takes a sociocultural perspective on learning, in which both context and social relationships shape what occurs. Its aim was to explore the social relations and activities that occurred within the group and what these suggested about the ways in which a modern university might
develop a writing culture amongst its academics. This aim underpinned the main research question:

*What is the role of a writing community in the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices?*

Two sub-questions sought to establish the importance of the relationship between the community and its individual participants on the development of these practices.

1. *How do the writing practices of group members change over time?*
2. *What factors might account for these changes?*

The research questions were explored using an ethnographic case study approach, in which the use of participant observation enables the researcher to become fully immersed in the research field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Consistent with the idea that learning is a social process, often built through communities (Wenger, 1998), this approach enabled the collection of a wide range of data, allowing the role of the community in both the collective and individual practices of its members to be explored in depth.

My own role in the university where the study took place was that of Senior Lecturer in Learning and Teaching. Thus, this study’s exploration of the place of research and writing within the role of the lecturer does, to some extent, also explore my own role and identity as a Senior Lecturer, with the requirement to engage in scholarship reflected in my job description. Having begun my career as a primary school teacher, my first experience of lecturing was in the context of higher education in a further education setting. As such, my journey into academia mirrors that of many of my colleagues; until I took up a university post, there was no requirement for me to be research active. Although I had written for publication in the past, it had been on my own terms and in my own time. Tasked with building the research and writing capacities of the students on the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, I found myself looking back to my roots in primary education to find ways of reigniting my own writing practice. I wanted to write meaningful texts that others would want to read and to convince my students of the value of such a practice. To do this, I recognised the importance of finding opportunities to be actively engaged in research
and writing myself and I became a member of the writing group that forms that basis of this study.

Chapter Two explores key theories of identity and the ways in which they might be applied to the concept of academic identity. Taking the perspective that identities are not fixed, but shaped by the social contexts in which they are formed (Taylor, 2008), the first part of the chapter demonstrates how this understanding can help to explore the extent to which academics might have the agency to shape their own identities and practices. The chapter then focuses more on the extent to which academics see writing as a significant part of their academic identities. It reviews studies that have investigated ways of developing academic lecturers’ writing practices, demonstrating that there is a preoccupation with success and productivity and justifying the alternative focus on the process of writing that underpins this research. The link between academic identity and the potential role of the writing group is then explored within the context of the concept of space, which provides a theoretical framework for better understanding the role of the writing community in developing the writing practices of academics. The chapter next discusses the concept of the ‘successful’ academic writer, comparing two contrasting positions that underpin the ways in which academics’ writing is viewed and developed in higher education contexts.

Chapter Three explains the methodological approach taken to this research. Establishing the study firmly within an interpretive paradigm, the case is made for an ethnographic case study as a means of building a rich picture of the writing group that tells the stories of individual participants, as well as the story of the group as a whole. The data collection and analysis methods are shown to be consistent with the ontological and epistemological positions outlined at the start of the chapter. These methods support a full exploration of the activities, interactions and experiences of the participants and enable the ways in which the community itself played a role in shaping their writing practices to be surfaced and analysed.

Chapter Four presents the study’s findings in the form of four stories. The first is the story of the writing community and the remaining three are the individual stories of writing group participants, chosen because each participant was one of the most regular attendees at the writing group meetings and because each represents a writer at a
different stage of their academic career. These stories are presented through the artefacts and narratives of the research participants, demonstrating the rich potential of narratives in capturing participants’ perspectives of their writing group experience.

Chapter Five draws together the significant threads that have been identified in the research narratives. This discussion explores some of the key themes that help to articulate the ways in which the study of the writing group has helped to address the research questions at the heart of this study. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which the writing group supported the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices, and that this development in turn led to a more coherent sense of academic identity. However, it also acknowledges the extent to which unclear institutional expectations about writing made these changes hard to sustain in the long-term.

In Chapter Six, the key findings of the research are summarised, and some potential limitations are identified. Ultimately, it is argued that the writing group did indeed offer a space for academics to develop their writing practices. This study therefore proposes the principles that underpin the development of a writing culture amongst academics in similar institutions. In addition, given the challenges identified in sustaining these practices requires a shift in the institutional culture, this chapter also recommends areas for future research that might contribute to the institutional shift in culture that is identified as a vital factor in the long-term transformation of lecturers’ writing practices.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Both the wider and institutional contexts provide a vital backdrop to this study. This literature review begins by demonstrating the complex interplay between the institution and the individual in the shaping of academic identities. Since these identities are worked out both in relation to others and the activities that the individual carries out, an academic’s writing practices can be seen as one inextricably entwined strand of their wider academic identity. It is therefore significant that an extensive review revealed that the body of literature that explores academic identities in new universities is relatively small, and that studies on academic writing identities draw largely on data from doctoral students. Given the particular characteristics of the institution where this study was situated, which were identified in Chapter One, these gaps in the existing literature provide a basis on which this study builds in its attempt to better understand how academics’ writing practices might be supported and developed in a teaching-intensive university.

This exploration of identity leads to an understanding of the ways in which academic identities are ‘formed and performed’ (White, 2012:42) in the context of higher education. It underpins the focus of this study, which asks the question of whether a particular activity (a writing community) in a specific university might develop both the practices and the identities of its members, whilst simultaneously taking the first tentative steps in building an alternative culture in which research and writing might be embedded in the wider institution. Thus, the second strand of the literature review considers the empirical evidence for writing groups as a means for developing the writing practices of academics.

Whilst the writing group is identified as a ‘community of writers’, my study moves beyond a traditional understanding of the concept of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This concept assumes that members acquire the skills and knowledge required to participate in a particular professional community through their ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in its activities. As such, it draws on the idea of enculturation, with
participants becoming members of a community of practice through adopting its language, norms, beliefs and behaviour (Wenger, 1998). However, Wenger does not take account of how ongoing participation may cause positions to shift and change. Rather than assimilating and adopting what already exists, it is at least as likely that active participation might challenge and reshape it (Vågan, 2011). For this reason, whilst my study acknowledges a definition of ‘community’ as a group of people coming together with a shared purpose, it focuses more explicitly on the concepts of identity and space, to explore the ways in which these contributed to the shaping of the practices of a particular community of writers.

2.2 Understanding identity

A close examination of different theoretical perspectives on identity suggests that they can be distinguished in two key ways:

1. The extent to which identities are single, fixed entities
2. The degree of agency attributed to individuals

A structural perspective views identity as something ‘taken on’ through shared and uncontested practices (Taylor, 2008), suggesting that the individual plays a largely passive role in relation to the society or institution of which they are a part. A post-structural view acknowledges the possibility of multiple identities, but continues to see structural factors as a dominant force in shaping these identities (Archer, 2008b). A third perspective tends towards the view that identity development is a learning trajectory, which ‘incorporates the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present’ (Wenger, 1998:74). The use of the term ‘trajectory’ does not imply a linear and undisrupted process, but an ongoing project in which identity construction, reconstruction and disruption may occur (Leibowitz et al., 2014).

The idea of identity trajectories allows for a more fluid interpretation of the complex interrelationship between the individual and the institutional. It suggests that identities are ‘continuously “under construction” in contexts that are characterised by indeterminacy, partiality and complexity’ (Taylor, 2008:29). White et al. (2014) distinguish between the ‘substantial’ and ‘situational’ self. The substantial self is founded on an individual’s core beliefs, grounded in experience, whilst the situational
self is ‘developed through interaction with others and can be re-framed when circumstances alter’ (White et al., 2014:60). Similarly, Lopes et al. (2014) suggested that there is an interplay between the individual’s view of themselves and what they want to become and the constraints and opportunities that their context presents. Thus, there are potentially multiple ways of constructing academic identities, which can be influenced by the ever-changing relationship between individual values and beliefs and institutional culture and positioning (Barnett, 2000).

Since identities are constructed and are not fixed (Taylor, 2008), they are developed in the context of the social lives of individuals and are fluid, rather than static entities, which are worked out in relation to others. For Giddens (1991:5), this meant that individuals must sustain ‘coherent yet continuously revised biographical narratives’, which require them to exercise a series of choices. These choices occur in the context of individuals’ social lives and are thus taken in relation to the systems and structures in which they occur (Castells, 2011). Both in wider terms, and more specifically in relation to notions of academic identities in higher education, an important question thus relates to the nature of the complex interplay between these contributing influences.

How an individual sees themselves cannot be separated from the ways in which they are known by others (Castells, 2011). In the context of higher education, Taylor (2008) links this idea to Castells’ distinction between the individual and their role. Identity is seen as a ‘source of meaning and experience’ (Castells, 2011:6) for individuals, whilst ‘roles give rise to context-specific opportunities to express, and even develop, personal identity’ (Taylor, 2008:29). However, since the nature of a role tends to be defined in the first instance by an organisation, there is potential for a tension to arise between the two.

2.3 Academic identities

Chapter One explored the influence of wider political and institutional contexts on perceptions of the academic role in contemporary higher education. Taking account of the theoretical perspectives on identity, any attempt to develop academics’ writing practices needs to be situated in a wider understanding of the ways this particular activity is currently worked out in academics’ lived experiences. Therefore, in this section, attention turns to the concept of academic identities. The broad concept is
explained, before a more focused discussion of the perceived impact of the neo-liberalist, managerialist agenda on academic identities, with reference to post-1992 institutions in particular. Finally, this section of the literature review draws conclusions about the relevance of the concept of academic identities to the work of writing and research, which is the focus of this study.

Boyer (1990) identified four broad dimensions of scholarship that comprise the role of the academic in higher education. The first of these is discovery, defined as the ‘disciplined, investigative efforts’ that flow from a ‘commitment to knowledge for its own sake’ (Boyer, 1990:17). Secondly, integration broadens the notion of discovery to work that crosses disciplines and that interprets and applies knowledge in the context of wider patterns and ideas. Integration enables the scholarship of discovery to go beyond the confines of the researcher, their discipline and their institution to respond to ‘new intellectual questions and to pressing human problems’ (Boyer, 1990:19). The scholarship of application relates to the dynamic relationship between the discovery and application of knowledge, in which new findings grow out of scholarly work, are applied in the broader contexts of policy and practice and in turn give rise to new possibilities for discovery. Finally, Boyer argued for a scholarship of teaching, noting the false assumption that it is a ‘routine function, tacked on, something almost anyone can do’ (Boyer, 1990:23). Rather, it is a complex task, which moves beyond the transmission of knowledge to finding ways in which students can be engaged in pushing its boundaries in new directions. Ultimately, argued Boyer, ‘inspired teaching keeps the flame of scholarship alive’ (1990:24).

Broadly speaking, the scholarship dimensions that Boyer (1990) proposed continue to define the role of the university lecturer (White et al., 2014), although debates about their relative importance may differ according to the particular character of the university in which they occur. In addition, whilst Boyer’s (1990) model is useful, there is a danger that in its application each dimension will be viewed as a separate entity because ‘it is tougher to operationalize aggregated than disaggregated elements’ (Boshier, 2009:5). In contrast, a socio-cultural perspective on academic identities contends that each of these dimensions is worked out in the context of the activities academics perform and the social contexts in which they perform them (Kreber, 2010).
Henkel (2000) argued that academic identity is a dynamic process that represents a complex relationship between the individual and the institutional and disciplinary communities in which they participate. This means that a focus on any one aspect of the academic role, such as this study’s investigation of writing practices, must begin with a clear understanding of the context in which the activity occurs. Therefore, the next section draws on empirical literature to explore the ways in which academic identities are worked out in the post-1992 university context, relating this to the particular context in which this study is set.

2.3.1 Academic identities in the post-1992 universities

To identify relevant empirical literature for this section, the subject terms ‘academic identity’ and ‘higher education’ were used in a search of four databases, on the basis that they offered comprehensive access to relevant peer-reviewed educational journals: Academic Research Complete; British Education Index; Education Research Complete; Education Resources Information Centre. Having identified 238 studies, the search was narrowed in several ways. Firstly, a third criterion was added to search the terms ‘neo-liberal*’ OR ‘managerial*’ in any database field. This search reduced the number of potentially relevant studies to 41. Next, the third search criterion was replaced with each of the following in turn: ‘teaching intensive’; ‘teaching-led’; ‘research-teaching nexus’; ‘new universit*’. The aim was to narrow the search to focus tightly on literature that explored academic identities in similar institutional settings to the one where this study is based; a UK, post-1992, teaching-intensive university that is home to many applied disciplines. These additional search terms identified a further 14 potential studies for consideration.

The choice of search criteria reflected the idea that ‘the nature of the institution...appears to be reflected in the experience of those who work within it’ (White et al., 2014:58). This is not to suggest that some of the characteristics and challenges presented here are absent in other contexts, but simply to acknowledge that they may take on a particular character in a particular context. Therefore, studies that focused on research-intensive universities (for example, Flecknoe et al., 2017; Jawitz, 2009), or those that drew respondents from a range of university-types (such as Archer’s (2008a) study of ‘younger’ academics from a range of universities across the UK), were
excluded from this review. Studies of universities outside the UK were also excluded. After these exclusion criteria had been applied, eight studies were identified for review, reflecting the lack of existing research in this area (Gale, 2011). The eight studies that met the criteria and were selected for review are summarised in Table 1.

2.3.1.1 Characteristics of the context

In setting the context for their research these eight studies collectively paint an image of a higher education sector in considerable flux (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009). They also suggest that this leads to significant tensions because academic roles are constantly being redefined. As such, the studies draw out many of the characteristics of the institutional context that were identified in Chapter One of this study, which might be summarized as the effects of a marketized sector on the loss of professional autonomy, and the increasing fragmentation of the academic role (Gale, 2011). Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher (2009) argued that these effects can be especially profound for academics in the newer universities who, facing increasing pressure to produce
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of university (as defined by authors)</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-1992</td>
<td>Eight academics: 1 professor; 1 reader; 5 principal lecturers; 1 senior lecturer</td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1992</td>
<td>4 academic staff in a school of education</td>
<td>Self-study; case study; action research</td>
<td>White et al., 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching-oriented; post-1992</td>
<td>17 ‘new academics’ (5 years or less in the profession)</td>
<td>Interviews relating to critical incidents</td>
<td>Gale, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-1992, but an investigation of a ‘newly academic’ discipline</td>
<td>Nursing lecturers</td>
<td>Ethnographic data from interdisciplinary pedagogic dialogue; discussion and reflective commentaries</td>
<td>Findlow, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post 1992 or ‘new’</td>
<td>20 teacher educators across two universities</td>
<td>Embedded case study</td>
<td>Murray, Czerniawski &amp; Barber, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newer higher education institutions</td>
<td>28 lecturers (14 teacher-educators; 14 nurse educators)</td>
<td>Social identity inventory; biographical narratives</td>
<td>Lopes et al., 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1992</td>
<td>50 new lecturers, studying for a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Professional Practice</td>
<td>Collaborative reflections on identity mapping</td>
<td>King et al., 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘New’ university</td>
<td>16 academic in Events management (11 senior lecturers, three principal lecturers, two readers)</td>
<td>Narrative inquiry</td>
<td>Dashper &amp; Fletcher, 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 Summary of empirical studies on academic identity*
credible research, can experience ‘cultural tensions between priorities of teaching and learning on the one hand and the production of high-level research outputs on the other’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009:309).

Given these characteristics, several authors argued that a great deal of widely cited research on academic identities lacks relevance for academics in newer universities. For example, Gale (2011) noted a common assumption that higher education is a homogenous sector, its characteristics largely deemed to be those of the research-orientated universities (see, for example Barnett, 2000). Similarly, White et al. (2014) commented that, for example, Archer’s (2008) work on younger academics (one of the studies excluded from this review) has a strong focus on the challenges associated with transitioning from researcher to established academic.

The focus on newer universities in the eight studies reviewed below reflects similar concerns to those of my study in their attention to the lived experience of academics in these contexts. Whilst each of the studies takes a more general perspective on the notion of academic identities, the analysis that follows below focuses on their findings in relation to the place and influence of writing and research, since this is the particular interest of my own research.

In each of the studies, the number of participants was relatively small, ranging from 4 to 50. In this sense, as well as in their use of broadly interpretive and qualitative methodologies, they are similar in nature to the methodology and approach of my study. There is an emphasis on the lived experience of participants, which makes it possible to ‘examine the discourse at the heart of social practice among academics operating in contemporary higher education’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009:310).

2.3.1.2 The individual and the institutional

An overarching theme that recurs in each of the studies is summed up as follows:

‘There is nothing automatic or evolutionary about the practical academic process of researching and publishing. There is very little evidence of either subject or pedagogical research being critical to these early-career academics’ (Gale, 2011:222)
Gale's (2011) research in a post-1992 university drew on data gathered from more than fifty critical incidents contributed by 17 early-career academics (those with less than five years' experience). Through a grounded theory approach, Gale identified the key factors that influenced the development of these academics' identities. It became apparent that, whilst they were aware of the expectation to research, write and network, these activities did not form a significant element of their day-to-day activity. Gale's research concluded that these academics found their focus largely on teaching, with engagement with the wider academic community limited as a result. This means that 'for these staff, who do not often come from a research background, there is no foundation being laid for the inclusion of any future research role' (Gale, 2011:223).

Lopes et al. (2014) reported similar findings in their comparison of teacher and nurse educators. They carried out a thematic analysis of the biographical narratives of both nurse and teacher educators, in which one of the categories encompassed these academics' perspectives on research. Again, they identified themselves first and foremost as practitioners and teachers. One dominant view of research was that it was a requirement almost entirely related to the need to achieve a Master's/PhD qualification. In the same vein, one academic in Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher's (2009:312) study was firm in the belief that ‘teaching is one of the most important things in the job and everything else takes second place to that’.

A deeper analysis of the studies helped to illuminate some of the reasons why academics in newer universities did not see research and writing as integral to their role. The first of these was that the culture of the institutions often mitigated against it. For example, Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher’s (2009) in-depth interviews with eight academics revealed a perception that only particular types of writing were seen as valuable activities, and these were tethered to the need for publications to enhance the reputation of both individual and institution. For one senior academic this limited the time for him and his colleagues to 'have these research discussions...have some debate amongst ourselves...have some ideas’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009:310).

Lopes et al. (2014) identified another institutional constraint. The nurse and teacher educators’ narratives revealed that, whilst they were aware of an expectation that research was part of their academic role, they encountered significant difficulty in
carrying out this work whilst maintaining their teaching and administration activities. Although there are differences in the manifestation of institutional constraints, the common factor in both studies is that the institutional culture serves as a significant barrier to academics in these newer universities developing research and writing as part of their academic identities.

Another potential barrier can result from the ways in which more applied disciplines can be viewed both by those who teach them and by the wider institutions in which they are taught. This has implications for the academic identities of those who come to academia from a professional background. For example, two studies (Lopes et al., 2014; Findlow, 2012) noted that nurse educators may try to maintain two separate identities (the professional and the academic), but also to ‘resist an academic identity which is seen as centred on research’ (Lopes et al., 2014:169). Findlow (2012) suggested that, given the contested nature of vocational subjects in an academic environment, nurse educators tended to hold to their professional identities as the basis for respect and recognition in the academic community. Consequently, however, this excluded them from some aspects of academic business, which in turn led them to feel separate from their ‘more academic’ peers. Murray et al. (2011) reported similar findings from a thematic analysis of interview data from teacher educators in two ‘new’ universities, where respondents retained their identities as teachers, whilst resisting the identity of a university academic. A further study of lecturers in Events Management, which they define as a new and largely vocational subject, (Dashper and Fletcher, 2019:2) noted that:

‘assuming an academic identity may be particularly challenging and uncomfortable as they strive for legitimacy and space within the academic environment that prioritises disciplinary knowledge and research-related achievement”.

Lopes et al. (2014) also explored the potential for the research-teaching nexus to enrich both teaching and research. Their data led them to conclude that whilst both the nurse and teacher educators in their study saw the potential value of research to inform their teaching, the institutional constraints they encountered prevented them from exploiting this potential. Gale (2011:219) similarly concluded that there was a significant
disconnect between ‘the everyday teaching experience of most of these [early-career] academics and the critical influence of any form of research’.

Whatever the reason for the disconnect between teaching and research, there are some clear implications for writing and research in the newer universities where such a disconnect exists. Firstly, if as Gale (2011:222) suggests, writing and research are neither ‘automatic [nor] evolutionary’ in the newer universities, then it is reasonable to assume that even more experienced academics will not instinctively see this kind of activity as central to the development of their academic identities. One effect of this will be limited research output, with all the accompanying difficulties this raises in a sector where both funding and institutional reputation are directly linked to a university’s research credentials.

However, the studies reviewed here reveal other potential implications. Quoted above, the principal lecturer in Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher’s (2009) study hints at a wider purpose for research and writing that relates to the development of new ideas and the importance of debate and discussion. White et al. (2014) connected three studies, which drew on different qualitative methods (self-study; case study; action research) to investigate the development of academic identities amongst lecturers in a School of Education. One of their conclusions was that the activity of writing was in itself a valuable part of the process of developing an academic identity. These implications are relevant to my study, because they suggest some potentially significant benefits of writing and research that might only be recognised if they are not solely tethered to outputs.

2.3.1.3 The question of agency

One omission from each of the eight studies above is any significant discussion of the concept of agency in relation to the development of identity; in fact, using the search and find function to search the term ‘agency’ in the relevant documents revealed no use of the specific term in any of the studies. Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher (2009) perhaps came closest to assigning a degree of agency to the individual. Their study set out to ‘examine the discourse at the heart of social practice among academics operating in contemporary higher education’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009:310). From
their interview data they identified an overall theme of resignation, both literal and figurative, amongst academics of varying degrees of experience. They categorised this resignation in four ways. In synergy with the other studies reviewed above, two of these categories represented a lack of agency on the part of academics; they termed one category ‘entrapment’, in which academics perceived that their careers were closed down by the institutional context in which they found themselves. A second category positioned academics as victims (either knowingly or unknowingly) of the ways in which institutional values and structures influenced their role. A third category of resignation was characterised as resistance and transgression (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009). Here, the restraints of the institution are responded to by a ‘growing resistance to compliance in the habitus and field of this academic’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009:314). In each of these categories, the perceived limits on the academic’s ability to exercise sufficient agency in response to their institutional context, led to a degree of resignation.

However, in a fourth category, described as ‘taking flight’ after the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1986), one of Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher’s (2009) respondents described developing the freedom to develop networks that were ‘defined through more porous boundaries than through concrete institutional ones’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009:315). Whilst the same academic acknowledged there was still a certain level of restriction that prevented total freedom, the idea of individual agency was present in the narrative.

Although not explicit, some of the findings of King et al.’s (2014) study also hint at some degree of agency. These researchers used a visual method to engage new lecturers in a reflective process about their academic identities. Participants were asked to conceptualise their understanding of their academic identity as an island map and to produce an accompanying written reflection. Participants were co-researchers at each stage, including in the final part of the project where findings were reviewed collectively, and which produced four distinct ways in which participants viewed their academic identities. Two of these are of particular interest in relation to a discussion of agency.

In their description of the ‘fragmented self’, King et al. (2014:264) described the ‘disjuncture between expectation and lived reality’. Here, the degree of agency is limited
by a sense that each of the different roles of the academic is separate, that there are competing demands and that these are largely influenced by the institutional context. In contrast, the ‘interlinked’ self was represented by an island map in which multiple commitments were connected together by railways and bridges, allowing for boundaries to be crossed in ways that helped to develop a coherent identity.

This suggests that despite the relatively negative picture presented in the reviewed studies a more hopeful perspective might be possible. Returning to the theoretical literature on identity in general, and academic identities in particular, confirms this to be the case. One view is that the idea of a loss of academic agency and control is, in part an attempt to preserve a ‘golden age’ of academic freedom (Taylor, 2008). However, Taylor also argued that such an attempt reflects a flawed assumption that one unified and fixed notion of academic identity once existed and is now lost. Furthermore, it positions academics as passive rather than as individuals with considerable agency. This is not to suggest that institutional contexts play no part, but rather to acknowledge the dual role of individual and context in the development of identity (Castells, 2011). In this way, academics themselves can play an active role in the ongoing constructions of identity that reflect both the complexities and possibilities of the academic role (Clegg, 2008).

Striking a balance between institutional structures and individual agency enables a more optimistic view of the experience of academics, in which they can continue to learn and adapt over time and across roles (McAlpine et al., 2014). In this way, rather than focusing on ‘the disempowering elements of neo-liberal modes of governance’ (Harris, 2005:428), it becomes possible to find new ways of working and different ways of being.

Whilst the main focus until now has been on the structures of entire institutions, higher education might also be seen as a ‘community of communities’ (Brown and Duguid, 2000:53). This means that academics’ interaction with the smaller communities within the larger community of the university as a whole (such as the writing group that is the focus of this study) can enable them to explore alternative ways of working. These in turn might simultaneously develop their own individual writing practices and identities, whilst also offering an alternative culture for generating writing and research in the wider institution.
Therefore, exploring notions of identity in isolation from the social contexts in which they are formed is unhelpful. Similarly problematic, however, is making the assumption that individuals are passively at the mercy of the structures they inhabit, since it does not account for the agency that individuals have in relation to their identities (Archer, 2000). For this reason, the theory of ‘identity trajectories’ (Inouye and McAlpine, 2019) underpins this study’s understanding of the ways in which the writing group contributed to the making and remaking of participants’ academic identities. Through this theoretical lens it was possible to explore the ways in which the individual, the writing group and the institutional context worked together to shape both writing practices and identities. Given that identities are ‘forged, rehearsed and remade in local sites of practice’ (Lee and Boud, 2003:188), it is important to try to understand any attempt to develop the writing practices of academics in the context of these sites of practice.

2.4 Developing academics’ writing practices

Therefore, the next section of this literature review focuses on the types of interventions commonly used to support the development of academics’ writing. In their systematic review of writing interventions, McGrail et al. (2006) adopted three inclusion criteria for the studies they reviewed:

‘(i) the article reported the implementation of a specific structured intervention with the aim of increasing publication rates; (ii) the target group were academics or professionals involved in academic work; and (iii) the article provided data that assessed the effectiveness of the intervention’ (McGrail et al., 2006, p21).

McGrail et al. (2006) concluded that there were three broad types of intervention, which they categorised as writing courses, the use of writing coaches and writing support groups (and ‘writing retreats’ are included in this category). Having categorised the literature in this way, McGrail et al. were able to define a range of intervention types, from informal groups to more structured programmes and, in one case (Murray, 2001), a credit-bearing course. In each of the studies reviewed, participants reported on the effectiveness of the writing intervention after the event. The priority was the effect on publication rates, but in each of the studies there were other perceived benefits of the interventions, which McGrail et al. categorised as:
1. The effect on writing knowledge and skills (for example, improved grammar; applying effective writing techniques)
2. Psychosocial benefits (increased momentum for writing; a non-threatening environment; peer support)
3. Positive effects on other academic activity (writing partnerships and collaborations; positive influence on other academic colleagues; support for other forms of writing, such as grant applications, conference abstracts and conference papers)

To evaluate the perceived effectiveness of each of the intervention types encountered in the study, McGrail et al. (2006) applied a statistical analysis that enabled them to calculate the comparative effects on the publication rates of participants. Whilst they acknowledged that a more standardised approach would be useful for future studies, McGrail et al. (2006) concluded from their analysis that three types of intervention model had potential benefits for publication rates:

1. Writing support groups: peers meet together regularly for a combination of writing-related activities, which might include writing time, peer feedback, encouragement and discussion.
2. Writing courses: expert-led courses offering information about writing and publication; commonly, participants develop a manuscript as part of the course.
3. Provision of a writing coach/professional mentor: one-to-one support designed to offer support and encouragement to staff who seek help at any stage during the writing process.

Of these, McGrail et al. (2006) suggested that writing support groups ‘were superior...in attaining higher publication rates than writing courses’ and also that ‘mainly didactic writing courses offered in a short-term format were the least beneficial in terms of an immediate return of published papers’ (McGrail et al., 2006:33). In addition, coaching/mentoring interventions ‘were beneficial’ (McGrail et al., 2006:34). Finally, five potential benefits of a successful intervention were identified. To varying degrees, each intervention type was suggested to result in increased publication output, improved writing quality, greater writing knowledge and skills, increased support and motivation and positive impact on other academic activity.
McGrail et al. (2016) therefore offered some promising evidence that the implementation of a writing group may have positive effects on the publication rates of academics, and that there may be additional benefits. However, the priority for establishing the effectiveness of each intervention type rested with the statistical analysis of the resulting number of publications. There are several problems with this measure. Firstly, the studies themselves did not all apply the same measurement definitions of publication rates; some included only publications in peer-reviewed journals, whilst others applied less stringent criteria and included non-refereed publications in their measurement. Secondly, establishing a clear link between the intervention and subsequent publication rates is not straightforward. For example, Grant (2006) noted that not all participants in an intervention are able to directly attribute their published outputs solely to the intervention itself.

Thirdly, McGrail et al.’s (2006) focus on productivity marginalised any meaningful analysis of other potential benefits. In addition, the use of studies that relied almost exclusively on participants’ retrospective evaluations meant that their lived experiences of the intervention did not play a role in the evaluation of their effectiveness. For this reason, this literature review returns to the studies identified by McGrail et al. (2006) to see whether they had anything to offer in terms of their analysis of benefits beyond productivity.

However, not all the studies were revisited. The model for supporting writing to be adopted in the institution where my own study was based was that of a writing group, and thus this became the key focus of this review. Therefore, only two kinds of studies were revisited:

a) Studies that explicitly focused on a writing group

b) Studies where the intervention shared some characteristics with such a group (regular meetings; time for writing alongside each other; opportunities for peer feedback, encouragement and discussion)

Studies of interventions that were either one-off workshops or that used one-to-one mentoring and support as the main approach were excluded. In addition, one article was identified as a journal editorial, rather than an empirical study (Stern, 1998) and was also excluded. Finally, where a study focused solely on doctoral students, rather than
academics, it was excluded. As a result, three of the studies from McGrail et al.’s (2006) review were revisited (Pololi et al., 2004; Grzybowski et al., 2003; Morss and Murray, 2001).

McGrail et al.’s review included studies up to and including a publication date of 2004. Therefore, the next stage was to identify further studies meeting the criteria for my own study. Thus, the terms ‘writing group’ and ‘writing retreat’ were combined with other search terms that narrowed the focus to higher education contexts and academics’ writing. In addition, the search extended the date parameters to include studies published after 2004. The search identified one article that met the criteria, but that had not been included in McGrail et al.’s original study (Murray, 2002), along with fifteen more recently published articles. Three of these (Gibbs, 2016; Martínez et al., 2011; Hemmings and Kay, 2010) explored a range of strategies that could be employed by academics to become more productive writers, rather than a single intervention. Another (Kornhaber et al., 2016) provided an integrative review of existing literature on writing retreats. These four studies have been used to add context to the remaining literature, which focused on single interventions. The studies of single interventions were added to the studies already identified by McGrail et al. (2006), to produce a final set of fifteen studies for review, categorised as shown in Table 2.

It was clear from an initial overview of the studies that, even where productivity measures took priority, qualitative data were often gathered that indicated other potential benefits. The extent to which these data contributed to the final evaluation of the intervention varied. Thus, both in revisiting the studies included in McGrail et al.’s (2006) review and in analysing the additional studies, the review that follows below pays particular attention to the qualitative data.

Three questions guided the review of the articles:

1. How does the study define the purpose of academic writing?
2. What institutional barriers to academic writing are identified in the study?
3. What were the identified benefits of the writing intervention?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention type</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing group</td>
<td>10 academic staff; range of disciplines; 5 with PhD, 4 with master’s</td>
<td>Comparing published output with pre-programme goals; writer’s discussion; monitoring forms; written questionnaire; focus group discussion</td>
<td>Morss &amp; Murray (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic writing group</td>
<td>HE lecturers who have moved from FE to HE</td>
<td>Interactive reflective diary.</td>
<td>Murray, R. (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing group</td>
<td>14 physician academics (22 including occasional participants)</td>
<td>Comparison of pre and post-group publication records; written survey</td>
<td>Grzybowski et al. (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing group</td>
<td>18 assistant professors; medical faculty</td>
<td>Post-session written responses to open-ended questionnaires; self-reporting of publication records; post-intervention interviews</td>
<td>Pololi et al. (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing retreat</td>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>Open-ended questionnaires</td>
<td>Grant, B.M. (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty development workshop and peer writing group</td>
<td>Faculty academic staff</td>
<td>Post-workshop evaluations; a one-year follow-up questionnaire; manuscript tracking; analysis of curriculum vitae</td>
<td>Steinert, Y., McLeod, P., Liben, S., &amp; Snell, L. (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention type</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Authors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing retreat</td>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>McLeod, I., Steckley, L. &amp; Murray, R. (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing groups</td>
<td>Early career academics</td>
<td>Authors' personal reflections</td>
<td>Dwyer, A., Lewis, B., McDonald, F. &amp; Burns, M. (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing support programme</td>
<td>Teacher educators</td>
<td>Focus groups; semi-structured interviews; written evaluations; feedback emails</td>
<td>Roberts, A. &amp; Weston, K. (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing centre</td>
<td>Young academics</td>
<td>Interviews with seven academics</td>
<td>Archer, A. &amp; Parker, S. (2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2 Summary of empirical studies on writing interventions*
The first two questions helped to situate the studies within their institutional contexts. Both these aspects are reflected in the data collection, analysis and discussion for my own study (see Chapters Four and Five). The third question was used to identify the benefits of the interventions not just in terms of productivity, but also the other ways in which they supported the development of academics’ writing practices.

**2.4.1 The purposes of writing**

In general terms, a key finding of the literature review was that a there is a body of literature that reports on interventions to increase *productivity* (see, for example, Torrance et al., 1993; McGrail et al., 2006) and a further group of studies that consider how to support the *process* of academic writing (see, for example, Moore, 2003; Nairn et al., 2015). It was also apparent that research that investigates strategies for increasing productivity, and also that evaluates the efficacy of interventions is more common than research that explores the process of writing and its impact beyond productivity. Thus, the literature on developing academics’ writing reflects some of the tensions of context identified in Chapter One; the pressure to produce is set against the freedom of the academic to develop research and writing interests and practices that go beyond metrics-driven outputs.

For example, for Martínez et al. (2011), the issue at stake was a pressure to produce, so that promoting strategies to increase volume was their main aim. Their rationale was that a successful publishing record is the ‘benchmark against which high-stakes decisions about salary, promotion, and tenure are measured at research universities’ (Martínez et al., 2011:692). As a result, they based their research on the most ‘prolific’ authors in a particular field (school psychology), aiming to identify the strategies and attributes that underpinned their productivity. Through a questionnaire and subsequent semi-structured interviews with a small sample of ‘highly productive scholars’ (p714), they produced a set of recommendations for those who ‘desire to be more prolific in their scholarly contributions’ (p714), which can be summarized as: persistence and hard work, collaboration, effective time-management, protecting writing time, systematic approach, honing research skills, inviting peer review, knowing your audience and mentoring.
The language of the article, with its focus on ‘productivity’, has echoes of the performance culture, which it has already been argued pervades the higher education system in the UK and elsewhere. In their focus on research output, Martínez et al. (2011) presented strategies designed to increase output, and the subsequent potential to raise the profile of both the academic and their institution. Hemmings and Kay (2010) took a similar perspective in their quantitative analysis of the publication records of both academics with limited numbers of publications and ‘those with impressive publication rates’ (Hemmings and Kay, 2010:189). Offering some guidance for managers who wish to encourage ‘greater research and publication’ (p185), they concluded that there was a need for appropriate incentives, time and space for research activities to be undertaken and opportunities for the development of confidence and writing skills.

This focus on increasing productivity is prevalent. Cable et al. (2013) described an off-campus writing retreat, in which junior faculty were paired with senior colleagues, as a ‘high-yield’ strategy. For example, the mentoring provided by the senior faculty members is viewed almost entirely in terms of its productivity benefits; it ‘decreases turnaround time for drafts and accelerates manuscript production’ (Cable et al., 2013:302). Similarly, a five-year follow-up study on participants in a medical faculty writing intervention (Steinert et al., 2008) focused on a review of participants’ curriculum vitae to calculate the number of publications achieved since the intervention.

The need for academics to be productive stemmed from three core purposes for writing that were articulated in the studies: contribution to knowledge, individual recognition and career advancement and institutional reputation. Making a contribution to the field (Pololi et al., 2004) and extending disciplinary knowledge (Grzybowski et al., 2003) were both seen as important functions for writing and a means of ‘honouring the commitment to scholarly work’ (Grzybowski et al., 2003:195).

This emphasis on the product rather than the process of the intervention limits the analysis of other potential benefits. For example, Grzybowski et al. (2003), despite claiming that productivity is an additional rather than a central benefit, do not make any meaningful reference to other potential benefits in their data analysis and discussions. The thematic analysis of qualitative data is presented in table form without comment,
whilst the main body of the text focuses on a detailed analysis of participants’
publication rates.

Whilst it is not suggested here that the strategies outlined by these authors have no
merit, they lack any significant analysis of academics’ actual experience of the writing
initiative *during* their participation in it. Given that this literature review has established
that lecturers’ academic writing practices are strongly liked to their notions of academic
identity (Gale, 2011), the ways in which they experience the process of writing are
important in any study investigates the development of their writing practices. This link
between product and process has echoes of Adams St Pierre and Richardson’s (2017)
work on the role of writing in qualitative research:

*‘The writing process and product are deeply entwined; both are privileged. The
product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production and the
method of knowing’* (Adams St Pierre and Richardson, 2017:820)

From this perspective, the need to better understand the writing *process* is evident. This
hints at the importance of studies that gather data *during* rather than *after* an
intervention, interrogating it to try to discover how the group’s activities and
interactions contribute to the benefits identified. Even where studies focus more
extensively on the writing process, there is a tendency to rely on retrospective accounts,
such as post-intervention interviews and feedback questionnaires. One exception is
Murray’s (2002) study, which drew on email correspondence during the course of an
intervention. This is a potentially valuable strategy, but in this case only allows the
reader insight into the lived experience of one participant. Another exception was Nairn
et al.’s (2015) collaborative auto-ethnography, which offers a powerful account of the
complex challenges encountered by one writing group and thus confirms the potential
of data generated during the initiative itself.

Set against this narrative, there is another, less common, but perhaps no less significant
purpose for writing that emerges in some of the studies. Grant’s (2006) study of writing
retreats for female academics included pleasure alongside productivity as a hoped-for
outcome of the intervention. Dwyer et al. (2012:133) described pleasure in Foucauldian
terms as a ‘discourse’, a body of knowledge that ‘reshapes academic writing discourses
– and practices’. This poses the possibility that the activity of writing can be
reconstructed as something that brings pleasure, rather than in its current, largely performative nature.

2.4.2 Barriers to writing

The studies highlighted a parallel with the literature on identity in revealing both individual and institutional barriers to writing. Increasing institutional demands over and above teaching and research commitments (such as attracting research funding, serving on editorial boards and consultancy work) are frequently cited as activities that erode the time available for research and writing (see, for example, Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Morss and Murray (2001) noted that particular difficulties might be encountered in a university where there is an emergent research culture. A lack of experience amongst academic staff might be further hampered by a lack of resources and, at times tensions between research and teaching staff about where priorities should lie. Indeed, time to write for publication can be seen more as a luxury than a necessary part of the academic role (Pololi et al., 2004). Dickson-Swift et al (2009) also highlighted that the demand for increased publications has not been matched by universities’ investment in strategies for supporting academics’ writing development and productivity. One of the ways in which support was lacking was in the intentional development of writing skills. Grzybowski et al. (2003) claimed simply that writing skills were not taught. Others suggested that, though skills were taught to some degree, interventions often focused on a single aspect rather than taking account of ‘the complex combined strategies required for productive academic writing’ (Morss and Murray, 2001:36).

In addition, the continual interplay between institutional and individual barriers to writing is evident in many of the studies reviewed. For example, Murray’s (2002) study tracked the progress of one writing group participant through the analysis of a series of email exchanges. The writing group was the second stage in a two-part intervention (the first stage was a credit-bearing academic writing module) and encouraged participants to reflect on the process of writing over the course of their attendance at the group. In one email, the participant writes:

‘There are many obstacles to the writing process. These include priorities of work and home life, inappropriate conditions for writing and the inability to get started.’ (Murray, 2002:231)
A similar theme of competing demands is also evident in Grant’s (2006) study. One reason for the bi-annual, week-long writing retreats was the opportunity to set aside other aspects of the academic role for a period of time. However, a second reason is that the retreats ‘fly in the face of a “quick-fix” culture that pervades institutional views of academic and professional development’ (Grant, 2006:485).

MacLeod et al. (2012) addressed the challenge of competing demands in a study that followed up academics who had attended a writing retreat. Their use of containment theory as a way of helping to conceptualise the problem and consider solutions is unique in the studies reviewed here. In basic terms, the theory contends that organisations have a primary task that they must perform to maintain their existence. When this task is poorly defined, there is the potential for confusion and conflict within the organisation. In contrast, ‘anti-task’ is defined as ‘any practice that is unconsciously used as a defence against task-related anxiety’ (Macleod et al., 2012:643). As a result, the primary task is less likely to be achieved. The problem in higher education is that multiple tasks may compete for priority at any given time, so that overall effectiveness is reduced. Structures and processes that help to manage task-related anxiety and its associated practices are defined as ‘containment’ and offer a potential solution to the challenge of competing demands. Using containment as a theoretical framework for exploring the potential benefits of a writing retreat enabled MacLeod et al. (2012) to investigate whether interventions of this kind had the potential to address the challenge of competing demands. They concluded that the structure of a writing retreat had the potential to act as a powerful containment force, clarifying the primary task of writing and managing task-related anxiety.

Institutional barriers to writing were compounded by individual factors. For example, reasons for not writing included difficulty focusing on a topic (Grzybowski et al., 2003), along with struggles to find time and motivation to write (Morss and Murray, 2001). Another significant barrier was the tendency for writing to be a solitary activity (Grant, 2006; Dwyer et al., 2012), with working on writing alone cited as having the potential to exacerbate negative emotions and also resulting in a lack of a supportive structure to help manage competing priorities (Grzybowski et al., 2003). However providing a social dimension to a writing intervention did not guarantee success; some participants may
be sensitive and resistant to feedback (Pololi et al., 2004). Emotions also emerge as a key factor, with low self-confidence, anxiety and fear of criticism and rejection all cited as reasons for not writing (Pololi et al., 2004; Grzybowski et al., 2003; Morss and Murray, 2001).

2.4.3 Beyond productivity: the benefits of writing groups

The ways in which participants approached the task of writing emerged as a positive result of the interventions examined in the studies. More significantly, these changes in approach seemed, to an extent, to mitigate struggles with time and motivation. In their study of ten academic staff, from a range of disciplines and with a range of writing experience, Morss and Murray (2001) used written questionnaires and a focus group discussion to explore the ways in which participants saw changes in their approach to writing. Their results suggested that the focus on regular writing offered by the writing group encouraged participants to set achievable writing goals and equipped them with writing strategies that they used outside the group. In their responses to an open-ended questionnaire, the majority of participants in Grant’s (2006) study of writing retreats for female academics similarly highlighted changes to their writing rituals and strategies. In addition, Pololi et al. (2004) noted that there were benefits to writing behaviours beyond the group; participants were better able to optimise their writing time and began to see the value of scheduling time to write so that it became an integral part of their working week. In one case, a participant noted that he was now ‘altering my workday to be more in line with my values’ (Pololi et al., 2004:66). In their reflective account of an on-campus, departmental writing retreat, Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) noted a similar effect; the progress made on a writing project during the retreat made continued work on the project outside the retreat more manageable. MacLeod et al. (2012) suggested that the structure of a writing retreat, which offered a means of protecting space for writing, acted as a form of ‘organisational containment’ that extended beyond the retreat. Those participants who appeared to internalise the structured approach were more able to apply it to their writing activity in other spaces.

Several benefits of a writing group can be identified as contributing to the development of participants’ writing skills. For example, in one intervention (Grzybowski et al., 2003), participants received a resource pack, which included some guidance on particular
aspects of the writing process and regular peer feedback on work in progress was a central feature of writing group meetings. Participants commented on the contribution of peer feedback to the development of their writing skills, an approach that Pololi et al. (2004) and Steinert et al. (2008) also identified as having a positive impact. Some aspects of the writing process also seemed to be demystified through participation in the group, such as better understanding of journal criteria (Morss and Murray, 2001) and greater confidence in structuring a paper (Pololi et al., 2004).

A further benefit related to the nature of the writing group or writing retreat as both collegial and collaborative (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Both Grzybowski et al. (2003) and Morss and Murray (2001) noted the value of shared approaches to problem-solving that occurred in the group context. This included opportunities to give and receive feedback across disciplines (Macleod et al., 2012). In addition, Moore (2003) reported a sense of solidarity that emerged as participants recognised that others in the group shared similar experiences and struggles with their writing. A further benefit was the opportunity to share ideas across disciplines (Morss and Murray, 2001); another study noted that participants came to view one another as ‘rich resources for their writing’, seeing peer feedback as developmental (Roberts and Weston, 2014; Pololi et al., 2004:67). For Grant, this aspect made her writing retreats ‘transgressive’; the participants in the two retreats in her study came from several different institutions, ‘cutting across a national ethos of competition between universities’ (Grant, 2006:485).

Finally, the perception that the writing group can be a non-threatening environment, characterised by safety and trust (Grzybowski et al., 2003), appears to result in a positive impact on emotions about writing. Participants in several interventions noted increased confidence (Pololi et al., 2004; Morss and Murray, 2001) and a greater willingness to depersonalise feedback (Pololi et al., 2004). In more than one study, participants reported increased pleasure in writing (Grant, 2006; Pololi et al., 2004). Dwyer et al. (2012) moved beyond simply describing a feeling of increased pleasure to noting that the ways in which participants came to inhabit the activities of the writing group led to them enacting ‘discourses of pleasure’. Macleod et al. (2012:645) suggested that the writing retreat environment provides a form of ‘emotional containment’. The analysis of interviews with 27 participants suggested that their experience of a writing retreat had
offered them the space to ‘think about or manage unthinkable or unmanageable feelings’ (Macleod et al., 2012:646). Important factors that contributed to this emotional containment included the choice of venue, the absence of distractions and the social dimension of writing amongst colleagues. What is apparent from these studies is that the social context of the writing group offers something more than simply a space to be productive.

However, one problem often acknowledged by the authors themselves (Moore, 2003; Grant, 2006) is the difficulty of attributing success entirely to the benefits of the intervention. Furthermore, in some studies (for example, Roberts and Weston, 2014) the retreat/writing group element is one part of a multi-layered intervention so that it is difficult to isolate the specific benefits of this particular element. Moore (2003) notes the need for longer term evaluations of initiatives to support writing development, since these may help to better understand the ways in which the changes recorded after a single intervention might be sustained over a longer period.

2.4.4 The persistent challenges

Despite the potentially powerful benefits of the writing group or writing retreat as an intervention to develop academics’ writing practices, the studies reviewed here do recognise some ongoing challenges. For example, whilst a formal writing intervention can make the task of writing feel more legitimate (Moore, 2003), this was not a universal finding of the studies. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) noted that participation in the retreat induced feelings of guilt, exacerbated by the reaction of colleagues in other departments who suggested that attendance at the retreat must mean they had little else of importance to do. Given MacLeod et al.’s (2012) assertion that the primary task(s) of an organisation should be clearly defined, this lack of a shared understanding of the value of writing time is likely to inhibit the development of a writing culture.

In addition, a noticeable feature of several of the studies is that, whatever the nature of the intervention, the competing priorities of academics remain an ongoing challenge in making time for writing. The final email in a series of exchanges between a lecturer and writing group facilitator in Murray’s (2002) study recorded a lack of writing activity in recent weeks and the administrative demands that continued to take priority. Grant (2006) suggested that participants who attended more than one writing retreat and who
transferred their learning from these retreats to their everyday working lives were more likely to continue regular writing. Murray and Newton’s (2009) findings suggested a similar correlation between repeated attendance and sustained changes to participants’ writing practices. However, they also noted significant ongoing difficulties in maintaining changed practices in the context of the competing daily demands of an academic role. This same tension is reflected in a different way in the collaborative auto-ethnography that records one writing group’s ‘mutiny’ (Nairn et al., 2015). Here, the tension amongst group members between a focus on productivity and a slower, reflective approach to writing, hints at the pressure of the demand to produce beginning to dictate the nature of a writing group’s activities. This suggests that the picture remains complex; writing groups and retreats have the potential to bring about changes in lecturers’ writing practices, but the persistent interplay between institutional and individual factors can remain a powerful barrier to lasting change.

2.4.5 Academic identities and writing

None of the reviewed studies explicitly addressed the concept of writing identities; they were more preoccupied with the ways in which academics can be supported to *produce* writing. Careful reading, however, reveals a consistent echo of the literature on academic identities (see Section 2.3). This suggests that, aside from the question of productivity, academic writing plays a significant role in the development of academic identities. The extent to which a writing intervention draws out this aspect is thus of particular interest to my study.

For example, Roberts and Weston’s (2014) research was prompted by their new posts in a School of Education in a post-1992 university. Their colleagues commented on their office location, which was known as the ‘clever room’:

‘Further probing revealed a view that lecturers divided into those whose focus was research and writing – ‘the clever ones’ – and ‘the others’ who did not write and who were characterised by a more student-centred, teaching focus’ (Roberts and Weston, 2014:698).

One of the motivations for Roberts and Weston’s (2014) study was to consider the way in which developing academics’ writing might impact on their teacher-educator colleagues’ perceptions of themselves as academics. This was confirmed in their initial
scoping study. One theme that they identified in their analysis of eight interviews was the distinction made by participants between *being* an academic writer rather than *doing* academic writing. Roberts and Weston (2014) noted that one of the implications of this is the theoretical concept of writing as a ‘situated practice’ that impacts on conceptions of identity (Lea and Stierer, 2009) and can play a role in its reconstruction (Savin-Baden, 2008; Clark and Ivanič, 1997).

The idea of writing as situated practice is also evident in Macleod et al.’s (2012) concept of ‘epistemological containment’, which they identified as a theme in their interview data. This referred to participants’ increased sense of the relationship of writing and publication to their overall academic role and purpose. Participation in the retreats played a role in developing participants’ sense of self and the role of writing as a primary activity, rather than an underdeveloped aspect of their academic identity. Similarly, Grant (2006:490) noted shifts in identity amongst the participants of her writing retreats, describing these as being ‘different in relation to your earlier self’.

### 2.5 Creating spaces

The idea that identities are constructed within social contexts through a complex interplay of individual and institutional factors can be further explored through a theme that is evident throughout the theoretical and empirical literature on both academic identities and writing interventions: the theme of space. Debates about how the nature of space can be understood in many ways mirror the ways in which identities are shaped, since both explore the dual role of the individual and wider influences. Soja’s (1980) understanding of the socio-spatial dialectic offers a theoretical lens through which to explore this idea. He argued that, whilst spaces are undeniably material in their construction, the social relations that occur within them ultimately shape them. Thus, whilst spaces may initially be designed and constructed in particular ways and for particular purposes, they can be reconstructed and repurposed by those who interact within them. In this way, since space is ‘an evolving product of human action’ (Soja, 1980:210), spaces and places can also be sites in which cultural and social identities are constructed (Allen et al., 1998). Massey (2001) proposed that such work is ongoing; the construction of a space is never completed and closed. This understanding of the socially constructed nature of space suggests that the study of any particular space should occur
in the context of the other spaces with which it co-exists (Soja, 1980). For this reason, the writing group in this study is considered not in isolation from the wider university in which it existed, but in the context of it.

The shared focus on social construction in the literature on both identity and space suggests that any space within a university (such as the writing group in this study) may be a site that shapes the identities and practices of the individual, the group and the wider institution. This provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the role of a writing group in developing the practices and identities of its participants and its impact on the wider institution. It allows the interplay between individual and institutional factors to be considered in the shaping of a space and the impact on the activities that occur within it. Some of the studies that were reviewed in Section 2.4 characterised the spaces occupied by their writing interventions in a range of ways and these studies are revisited in this section, where some parallels are drawn with some theoretical perspectives on space. Table 3 summarises the ways in which each of the others characterised the space occupied by each writing intervention. It excludes the studies that did not explore this theme.

A recurring theme in each of the studies, even where the nature of the space was not characterised in any particular way, was that the physical space in which the intervention occurred remained significant. Whether on or away from the university campus, the sense that the physical environment was separate from participants’ daily workspaces was commonly noted as an important benefit (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Grant, 2006) alongside the repeated assertion of the value of having ‘time and space’ to write (Cable et al., 2013; Macleod et al., 2012; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Grant, 2006; Moore, 2003).

However, it is the more abstract ways in which the nature of the space is represented that begin to build a picture of the relationship between the individual and the institution and of the role of the writing intervention in shaping the identities of its participants. McLeod et al.’s (2012:650) description of the writing group as a ‘protected space’ is linked to their use of the concept of containment; the group is a space within which the primary task of writing can be defined and carried out. However, the choice of the word ‘protected’ suggests that writing beyond the group is a marginalised task,
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Intervention type</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Characterisation of the space</th>
<th>Authors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing retreat</td>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>• Dedicated space</td>
<td>Grant, B.M. (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Structured’ writing</td>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>• imaginative space&lt;br&gt;• structured space&lt;br&gt;• space between multiple communities</td>
<td>Murray, R. &amp; Newton, M. (2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Onsite writing retreat</td>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>• headspace&lt;br&gt;• separate space</td>
<td>Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., Kippon, S., Talbot, L., Verrinder, G. &amp; Ward, B. (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing retreat</td>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>• private space&lt;br&gt;• uninterrupted space&lt;br&gt;• legitimate space</td>
<td>Moore, S. (2003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing retreat</td>
<td>Academic staff</td>
<td>• protected space</td>
<td>McLeod, I., Steckley, L. &amp; Murray, R. (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing groups</td>
<td>Early career academics</td>
<td>• discursive space&lt;br&gt;• peer-negotiated space&lt;br&gt;• flexible space&lt;br&gt;• de-briefing space&lt;br&gt;• supportive space</td>
<td>Dwyer, A., Lewis, B., McDonald, F. &amp; Burns, M. (2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing retreat</td>
<td>Medical faculty members</td>
<td>• intensified space</td>
<td>Cable, C. T., Boyer, D., Colbert, C. Y. &amp; Boyer, E. W. (2013)</td>
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<td>Intervention type</td>
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<td>Writing support programme</td>
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<td>• emotional space</td>
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<td>Writing centre</td>
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<td>• liminal space</td>
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*Table 3 Characterisation of writing spaces*
threatened by the necessity of other activities. This resonates with Grant’s (2006:494) use of the term ‘dedicated space and time’, which also suggests that a writing group necessarily creates space for an activity that would not otherwise occur. It is a recurring argument that the need for these protected spaces arises as a direct response the competing institutional demands on academics’ time (see, for example, Macleod et al., 2012; Murray and Newton, 2009).

In studies where the main focus is on an increase in publication rates (Cable et al., 2013; Steinert et al., 2008; Grzybowski et al., 2003) little is said about the nature of the space beyond its capacity to offer time for writing to occur. However, other studies explore two further aspects. The first of these is the ways in which the activities of the group shape the writing process. The studies suggest that, whilst the provision of a protected space is important, a shared space with access to like-minded colleagues creates dialogue (Archer and Parker, 2016) and offers valuable support (Dwyer et al., 2012). However, one characteristic that is not universally agreed is the need for the space to be structured or flexible. Murray and Newton’s (2009) structured retreat approach contrasts with Dwyer et al.’s (2012) flexible, peer-negotiated space, yet both claim significant benefits for participants. In both these spaces and in those described in other studies, dialogue is a key feature, and contributes to the development of approaches to writing and to particular writing practices and skills. What these studies do not explore in any significant depth is the nature of the dialogues that occur in writing spaces; my study’s focus on the social interactions of the writing group participants aims to add to the understanding of this aspect of the group’s activities.

The second aspect that the studies consider is the nature of the relationship between the writing space and other spaces in the university. For example, Archer and Parker’s (2016) study focused on a university-based Writing Centre that supported the transition of, in most cases, post-doctoral students to a full academic role. The Centre’s activities shared several of the characteristics of writing groups and retreats (providing time and space for writing, opportunities to write alongside others, and peer feedback on writing). One of the concepts introduced by Archer and Parker (2016) was that the site of a writing intervention may act as a ‘liminal’ space where transformations of identity and practice can occur. Although Archer and Parker’s (2016) focus was mainly on post-
doctrinal students, other studies suggest that a writing intervention can occupy a similar space of transition and transformation for participants moving from, for example, further education lecturer to higher education academic (Murray, 2002), or from teacher to teacher-educator (Roberts and Weston, 2014). Other studies (see, for example, Macleod et al., 2012; Grant, 2006) recognise transformations in participants’ views of themselves as writers, even when they began an intervention already with a sense that writing was a part of their academic role. Thus, for the participants in these studies, the writing space was also a space in which they both experienced and reflected on the shifts in their academic identities that occurred as they transitioned between roles. Roberts and Weston (2014:713) went as far as to suggest a writing group could offer participants a ‘space to grapple with a conflicted sense of self and find resolution’.

However, even where a writing space existed away from the other spaces that these academics inhabited, it remained inextricably linked to them. In this sense, writing spaces were simultaneously separate from and overlapping with the other spaces that participants inhabited. As a result, any shifts in academic identities and writing practices that occurred were ultimately worked out in the context of the wider institution. For this reason, the descriptions of the writing space as ‘in-between’ (Archer and Parker, 2016:52) and as a space ‘between multiple communities’ (Murray and Newton, 2009:550) are of particular interest. The idea links with the work of Savin-Baden (2008) who referred to the existence of ‘boundary spaces’ in universities, characterised as:

‘in-between spaces between cultures and politics, between people and institutions and between diverse forms of knowledges’ (Savin-Baden, 2008:115).

In her use of the idea of ‘in-between’ spaces, Savin-Baden’s (2008) work has echoes of Bhabha’s (1990) concept of ‘third space’. Bhabha terms third spaces as ‘interstitial’. They are small spaces between one space and another, in which activities occur that can shape the adjacent spaces in new ways.

In a similar way, Murray and Newton (2009) argued that the structured writing retreat in their study was a space that existed between the other communities in which academics were required to operate. Their approach drew specifically on the idea of communities of practice and the associated concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). From this perspective, a structured retreat was a writing initiative that
could ‘move writers from a position of peripherality into a community of writers’ (Murray and Newton, 2009:542).

The concepts of ‘boundary spaces’ and ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ suggest that a writing space can be a site of both writing and identity work. By creating a space in which writing is a legitimate activity, a writing retreat or a writing group can become a space in which lecturers might negotiate this aspect of their academic identity in relation to other aspects. In this kind of ‘learning space’, argued Savin-Baden (2008:8) the ‘values of being are more central than the values of doing’. It is this that has the potential to shift the value of a writing intervention beyond simply developing writing practices and better understanding the writing process. Archer and Parker (2016:43) suggest that a key element in this process of transformation rests with the opportunities that such interventions can provide for participants to develop ‘critical ways of being’ through the discussion and argument that can provide the backdrop for writing. An example of this was Murray and Newton’s (2009) study, which took place in a Faculty of Education, where lecturers grappled with a dual identity of researcher/writer and teacher/teacher educator. The need to create a coherent academic identity from these dual beginnings is one that is mirrored in many post-1992 contexts where lecturers often come to an academic role from another professional context.

The idea of a writing space as ‘in-between’ suggests that it can occupy a gap between the institutional understanding of the value and practices of academics’ writing, and the ways in which the individuals themselves perceive the same. In this way, a writing group might be a place in which this relationship comes to be better understood and articulated. If so, then it may both develop the practices and identities of its participants and begin to redefine the ways in which these are conceptualised in the wider institutional context. It may also be the kind of ‘principled space’ that Archer (2008a) had in mind as a response to some of the potentially negative impacts of a marketised university sector.

In addition, it is argued that writing spaces can positively affect the writing practices of the academics who engage with them. For example, it is argued that there is potential for the shape of a writing intervention to be process-oriented (Archer and Parker, 2016), providing a space for learning about ‘how writing is actually produced’ (Murray,
Spaces can be created in which activities can be flexible and self-determined (Dwyer et al., 2012). For example, Archer and Parker (2016:49) described participants’ ‘commitment...to a space not a particular agenda’. In addition, the commitment to writing among others rather than in isolation results in a peer-negotiated space (Dwyer et al., 2012) where collaborative approaches to learning the process of writing become more common. The literature suggests that these kinds of spaces become increasingly dialogic (Archer and Parker, 2016) and discursive (Dwyer et al., 2012), enabling participants to ‘suspend daily life in order to engage with ideas, prompt new ways of seeing and provide opportunities for reflection’ (Archer and Parker, 2016:44).

Beyond the impact on individual academic identities, other authors argue for a wider institutional role for writing spaces. For example, Archer and Parker (2016) identified the ways in which the discursive nature of their Writing Centre enabled accepted knowledge and subject positions to be questioned and challenged. As a result, these particular spaces had the potential to ‘function as agents of change, contributing towards changing the dominant attitudes towards language and culture by shifting authority’ (Archer and Parker, 2016:50). Dwyer et al. (2012) proposed a similar function for their writing group, suggesting that the opportunities to think, talk and write resulted in possibilities for challenging the dominant culture.

The ways in which these spaces function to develop writing practices, bring about shifts in identity and respond to the challenges of the institutional culture are consistent with those who have taken the more nuanced approach to the challenges of neo-liberal managerialism referred to above. For example, Archer (2008) suggested that, whilst academics continue to encounter opportunities for extensive interaction with others, including their academic peers, public intellectuals and students there may still be space to resist some of the potential negative impacts of the neo-liberal agenda. This in turn ‘can open up new ways of thinking, and [allow] us insights into other worlds and ways of being’ (Harris, 2005:429).

However, Savin-Baden (2008) sounds a note of caution in her distinction between space creation in which spaces are created for particular kinds of activities, and space production where those who inhabit the space are able to create and shape it in ways that enable them to develop their practices and their identities. This reflects the
theoretical approach to the concept of space that is adopted in my study, which holds that spaces become places when they are given meaning through the interactions, processes and practices that occur within them (Massey, 2005). A crucial factor, according to Savin-Baden (2008) is that such space production must be seen as valid by the institutional management, demonstrated through the ways in which they allow such spaces to remain uninterrupted and unpatrolled. In the light of widespread concerns about ‘technologies of institutional control and accountability’ (Beck, 1999:227), such spaces (including the writing space that is the focus of my study) will need to be explored within the context of the wider institution as well as through the eyes of individual participants.

2.6 Defining the ‘successful’ writer

One final question that arises from studies reviewed above is the definition of the ‘successful’ writer. Like the concept of identity, this is not something that is foregrounded in the studies, but it lies beneath the surface and is captured in some of the assumptions made about the nature and purpose of writing. It is another area in which the tension between producing writing and becoming a writer is evident and is therefore worthy of further exploration. Two widely cited authors (Sword, 2016, 2017; Boice, 1990, 1997) offer opposing definitions of success and these are discussed below in the light of the analysis of writing interventions that has been presented above.

In a culture where research outputs are a significant factor in sustaining an academic career, the idea that academics must ‘publish or perish’ is prevalent (Gibbs, 2016; McGrail et al., 2006) and the notion of a successful writer is often defined in terms of publication rates. In many ways, the exhortation to ‘write every day’ (Boice, 1990) as the only path to productivity still resonates with academics, but this may be more because it induces guilt in those who do not meet the mark, than because of any empirical evidence in its favour (Sword, 2016; Macleod et al., 2012).

Boice’s (1990; 1997) guidance on writing for academics has held sway for many years and continues to permeate recent literature. He defined successful writing almost entirely in terms of productivity and was clear that the most productive writers adhere to strict regimes in which they write every day. This is contrasted with ‘binge writers’,
who write less regularly and in extended bursts. In one study of 16 academics in the United States, Boice (1997), a psychologist, used a range of quantitative measures to calculate the differences in rates of production, levels of depression, and quantity of creative ideas. He also observed these writers for signs of what he described as hypomania. In terms of writing behaviours, Boice categorised these signs as:

‘(a) fast, rushed rates of writing without pausing for periods of 15 minutes or more; (b) fatigue reflected in error rates of more than three per minute over 5 consecutive minutes; (c) working at writing, during more than two thirds of the session, in hurried fashion and without obvious reliance on outlines, notes, or prior prose; (d) spontaneous comments indicating euphoria’ (Boice, 1997:442).

He concluded that binge writers, when compared with a matched sample who wrote daily, produced lower quantities of writing and received fewer editorial acceptances. In addition, they exhibited signs of depression and were less likely to generate creative ideas. Other authors have taken up a similar theme, suggesting that ‘binge writers spend more time feeling guilty and anxious about not writing than schedule followers spend writing’ (Silvia, 2007:14). Neither Boice nor Silvia were persuaded by the suggestion that lack of time is a barrier to writing:

‘It’s reassuring to believe that circumstances are against you and that you would write a lot if only your schedule had a few more big chunks of time to devote to writing.’ (Silvia, 2007:12)

In summary, these authors proposed a single, straightforward solution that regular writing is the only recipe for productivity, and that it is this productivity that characterises a successful writer.

In contrast, Sword (2016; 2017) conducted an extensive study that drew its data from in-depth interviews conducted with one hundred ‘exemplary academics’ (Sword, 2017:1) from a range of disciplines and of many different nationalities. Whilst these included academics who were highly distinguished in their field and whose publication rates were ‘prolific’, other definitions of exemplary included those from under-represented groups (cultural, ethnic and gender minorities) who had carved out their own academic niches, writers who had come to academia through non-conventional routes, writers for whom English was not a first language and writers who had challenged disciplinary conventions in their writing and others. To supplement the interviews with these academics, Sword
also collected anonymous questionnaire data from participants in her writing workshops, who varied from faculty members to PhD students and post-doctoral researchers. Their insights were used to supplement the findings of the interviews. Her purpose was to discover the writing habits and approaches that appeared to make them successful.

One of Sword’s (2016) key findings, which challenged Boice’s study, was that seven out of eight of the writers she interviewed did not write every day, so that ‘daily writing turns out not to be a reliable marker or a clear predictor of overall academic success’ (Sword, 2016:316). In addition, Sword (2016) argued that Boice’s research has been exaggerated through confirmation bias and identified several limitations of his studies. She noted that Boice’s work rested on a deficit model of productivity, which is aimed at changing negative behaviours. Secondly, Boice’s ‘one-size’ model ignores a range of potential influencing factors, such as culture, academic rank, gender and subject discipline. Finally, Sword suggested that the kind of highly structured approach proposed by Boice needs to be maintained post-intervention, and all the evidence indicated that this was not the case. Thus, Sword concluded:

‘The bottom line is that Boice’s austere methods do not reflect – and in some cases are antithetical to – the real-life practices of productive academics...The secret to their academic success lies not in any specific element of their daily routine but in a complex cluster of attributes and attitudes.’ (Sword, 2016:320)

Coding of the data from both the interviews and the questionnaires led Sword to adopt the acronym ‘BASE’ to define the attributes and attitudes that might build the foundations for successful writing:

Behavioural habits: how successful writers ‘carve out time and space for their writing in a striking variety of ways’ (Sword, 2017:4). Character traits include determination persistence.

Artisanal habits: the craft of writing, developed over time through learning and developing skills. Character traits include creativity, patience and practice.

Social habits: collegiality and collaboration form an important part of the successful writer’s approach. Colleagues, friends and family, reviewers and
editors play a role in offering support and feedback. Characteristics include collegiality, generosity and an openness to both praise and criticism.


Rejecting Boice’s and others’ more prescriptive advice, Sword argued that these habits (termed the Writing BASE: see Appendix 6) offered a ‘flexible heuristic for visualizing the complexities of the writing habit and developing strategies for lasting change’ (Sword, 2017:5).

The contrast between Boice and Sword both in their definitions of ‘success’ and their findings about the habits of ‘successful’ writers positions the academic writer in two different ways. Boice (1990) seemed to conclude that the academic who is deemed ‘unsuccessful’ is entirely to blame for their fate, and that the adoption of a new routine offers a straightforward solution to the problem. Positioning the writer in this way casts any writing intervention as an activity that is required to bring about remediation (Dwyer et al., 2012). This is inconsistent with the perspective of this study, which holds that whilst the individual has agency, the institutional structures within which they work combine with past and present individual experiences to create a complex web of factors that do not lend themselves easily to a simplistic remedy. Instead, Sword suggested that productivity and success can be defined by ‘not just publication rates and professional kudos, but other, less measurable, academic accomplishments, such as craftsmanship, collegiality, pride, and even joy’ (Sword, 2017:x).

2.7 Conclusion
The development of academic lecturers’ writing practices is a complex task. In this study, the context of the ‘new’ university provides both opportunities and potential barriers to building a writing culture. These include the demands of a metrics-driven culture and the diversity of experience amongst academic staff, which work together to produce a particular understanding of the academic role and the place of writing within it. The literature review has demonstrated that writing identities are developed in the wider
context of an individual’s academic identity, which in turn is shaped by both institutional and personal factors.

However, whilst considerable attention has been paid to the theme of changing academic identities in the contemporary university context, the particular implications for academics in ‘new’ universities have received less attention in the literature. As a result, there is still a need to explore the ways in which teaching-focused academics, often from ‘non-traditional’ academic backgrounds might find their writing voice and develop their writing identities in the context of their wider academic role.

The literature review has demonstrated that the tension between producing written outputs and developing an identity as a writer is evident in the work of writers who have researched a range of writing interventions. In the ‘new’ university where this research is situated, this situation is likely to be exacerbated by several factors. These include under-developed research cultures, high teaching loads and the diverse backgrounds of lecturing staff. In such a context, where academics do not see themselves first and foremost as researchers and writers, interventions designed purely to incentivise higher productivity are unlikely to gain traction. At the same time, a deficit approach that focusses largely on skills development (such as workshop programmes) does little to develop academics’ writing identities. Given the link between the institutional culture and individual activity in developing identities, it is likely that any intervention will need at its heart a challenge to established cultures and space for academics to explore new ways of working and the consequent shifts in identity that these may precipitate. A review of empirical evidence has suggested that a writing group might provide a powerful space in which these kinds of changes to practice and shifts in identity might occur. This study investigates the extent to which this is the reality of participants’ experience in one such group.
Chapter 3. Methodology, research design and methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a rationale for the methodology, research design, data collection and data analysis methods selected for this study. It demonstrates how these are consistent with an interpretivist paradigm and, in turn, why this paradigm is congruent with the nature of the research questions. The main research question addressed by this study is:

*What is the role of a writing community in the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices?*

The writing group that is the focus of this study was established by the university’s Head of Academic Development near the start of the 2017-18 academic year as a response to an institutional priority to increase the publication output of academics. The study aims to build a rich and detailed picture of one such community, a writing group established to support the academic writing practices of lecturers in a post-1992 university. In doing so, it also explores the two related sub-questions:

1. *How do the writing practices of group members change over time?*
2. *What factors might account for these changes?*

The writing group met for the first time in November 2017 and 5 lecturers were present in addition to Ruth, the Head of Academic Development and Professor of Research-informed Teaching, who had convened the group. On the first occasion we began with lunch and then continued with a three-hour writing period. At the end of the session several participants requested that future meetings occupied a full day so that we settled into a pattern of beginning and 10am and ending at 4pm. Each session was led by Ruth, who prepared a creative task for the start of each session and facilitated the various peer-review conversations that came to be a core activity of the group.

3.2 Research aim

The overarching aim of this study is to investigate the activities of a writing group in a specific context to explore the ways in which it supported the development of
academics’ writing practices. As demonstrated in the literature review, the existing literature has a significant focus on the impact of academic writing initiatives in terms of productivity and tends to focus on an increase in the volume of published work as the primary goal of an intervention. In contrast, my study focuses on an academic writing group as a means through which to explore instead the process of writing over an extended period. The study tells the story of the writing group, describing the significance of its activities, relationships and interactions in the lives of its participants.

3.3 Methodology

Specific perspectives on the nature of reality (ontology) and epistemology or ‘what counts as knowledge’ (Creswell, 2013:20) have informed the design of this study. The study’s authenticity is assured by the fact that every aspect of the research design is consistent with the philosophical and theoretical perspectives on which it is founded (Twining et al., 2017). Its underpinning assumptions reflect an interpretivist paradigm and lend themselves to a qualitative methodology. Therefore, this section sets out the characteristic features of an interpretivist perspective, justifying their use in the context of this study.

In contrast to a positivist paradigm, in which reality is considered to be objective and can be understood through experimentation and observation (Cohen et al., 2007), an interpretivist paradigm sees reality as subjective (Cohen et al., 2007). From this perspective, it is important to explore the meanings, purposes and interpretations people give to their own actions and interactions with others (Smith, 2008). In addition, it is acknowledged that the individual has the ability to think and reflect, allowing them agency and thus the capacity to construct new meanings and develop identities (Radnor, 2002).

As a result, social realities are constructed and interpreted, rather than objectively understood (Denscombe, 2002) and are ‘dependent on the inter-subjectivity between people’ (Burgess et al., 2006:54). It is probable, then, that multiple realities will exist amongst research participants, and these are best represented by the participants themselves. There is also the potential, through interaction and shared activity, for what is shared to be interpreted differently by different members (Radnor, 2002). This study’s
objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of the writing group’s practices by better understanding the significance of the interactions and activities that occurred within it (Ewertsson et al., 2017:2).

Consistent with an interpretivist paradigm, this study therefore adopts a sociocultural perspective on the investigation of the writing group. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning also draws on this perspective. They argued that, through the process of interaction with others, participants become members of professional learning communities in which further learning occurs; ‘learning is the process of becoming’ (Vågan, 2011:44). In his study of communities of practice, Wenger (1998) worked from the assumption that legitimate peripheral participation becomes full participation as the existing practices and norms of a community are assimilated and adopted.

Taking all of this into account, it was vital that the research design for this study allowed for the investigation of the realities of both the writing group community and the individuals within it, so that the development of ideas, knowledge and identity could be traced over time. Thus, both personal narratives and interaction between participants were important sources of data, gathered through field notes, audio recordings from the writing group meetings, email correspondence and unstructured interviews. The process of ‘interpretation, reflection and reinterpretation leading to understanding’ (Radnor 2002) needed to be iterative (Miles et al., 2014), with early data collection and analysis informing subsequent stages of the research. The research design enabled me to work interactively with the data, asking questions of it which then shaped the ongoing process of the research, so that the ‘unfolding of a holistic picture’ (Radnor, 2002:37) was possible. This iterative approach was important to the study, because its purpose was to examine the development of identities and changes in writing practices through the experience of being a member of the writing group.

3.4 Research approach

In the early stages of the study, I considered using an action research approach. This was because the writing group was an intervention designed to address a perceived professional development need of lecturers in my institution, with a strategic objective
to increase research and publication rates ahead of the 2020 REF submission. Therefore, participatory action research was a potentially suitable approach, since it has been defined as a ‘social process of collaborative learning’ (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005:563) which aims to bring about a change in shared practices. In addition, the research questions reflect the longitudinal nature of action research, which studies change over time. However, this longitudinal dimension is also suited to other qualitative approaches, and the focus of my research on people and processes rather than the specific intervention, leant itself more readily to a case study approach.

3.4.1 Ethnographic case study

Studying a writing group over an extended period is consistent with the description of a case study as ‘an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project…in a “real-life” context’ (Simons, 2009:21). Appleton (2002) suggested that a case study can be used when little is known about an issue; it lends itself to research questions that are exploratory, or that seek explanations (Yin, 2009). Since this study investigated the ways in which a writing group brought about changes in the practices of its participants, exploratory questions have shaped the process of data collection, interpretation and analysis.

However, Stake (1995) noted that the use of a case study is not in itself a methodological choice and this raised the question of the particular approach to be taken. Therefore, having made the decision to pursue a case study, a further consideration was that this particular study is characterised by my own engagement in the field with the aim of understanding the writing group ‘in its socio-cultural context’ (Ewertsson et al., 2017:2). For this reason, an ethnographic case study was chosen as a suitable approach because it would allow for the kind of in-depth study of the writing group that the research questions would require. Ethnographic studies demand that the researcher is immersed in and committed to the field of study, paying ‘disciplined, close attention to what people actually do, how they do it and what the consequences are’ (Atkinson, 2015:24). The research design therefore reflected these characteristics, adopting a range of methods that enabled me to build a detailed knowledge and understanding of the social context and therefore to better understand the meaning and purpose of the interactions and practices that occurred. Whilst I remained focused on
the research questions throughout, I also aimed to maintain a degree of flexibility about how these questions might be answered, enabling me to ‘suspend [my] taken for granted categories and presuppositions in order to explore them in a local setting’ (Atkinson, 2015:35).

3.5 Research design

3.5.1 Defining the case

Whilst a case is best defined by deciding what constitutes its boundaries from the outset (Yin, 2009), in the context of this study, these boundaries shifted over time (Simons, 2009). This is consistent with an ethnographic approach, in which bounded entities are not consistent with the nature of ‘the field’. Atkinson (2015) contended that ‘the field’ in an ethnographic study is ultimately created through the interaction and collaboration of the researcher and participants. Initially, this study was to be an exploration of a particular writing group, meeting monthly on six occasions with a consistent membership. In practice, the unit of analysis became the activities of a writing group, with a fluid membership, over the course of a full academic year, meeting on nine occasions in total during the research period.

Ahead of the first meeting, contact was made with ten lecturers known to the Head of Academic Development and who had previously expressed to her an interest in developing their writing. Informal discussions with these lecturers had suggested that lack of both time and confidence were significant difficulties and establishing a writing group seemed a worthwhile experiment in trying to help address them. Over time it became clear that one of the very problems that created the initial need for the group – lack of time for writing – led to irregular group attendance. There were occasions on which one or more participants felt that other demands on their time prevented them from joining the group that day. At the same time, group members shared their writing activities more widely with their colleagues, which led to the addition of new members on various occasions. This fluidity of membership thus became an interesting characteristic of the writing group, worthy of consideration in the context of the study.

Central to the study was the observation of the meetings themselves, since this ‘active observation’ is a distinctive feature of an ethnographic approach (Gobo and Marciniak,
Other activity included the social activities beyond the formal writing periods and various email correspondences and informal conversations between meetings. Since these all contributed to the wider picture of the writing group and featured regularly in field notes, they are viewed as within the boundaries of the case. This decision relates the definition of ‘case’ in this study to the main research question (Yin, 2009). In acknowledging that the role of the community in developing lecturers’ writing practices might extend beyond the confines of the group meetings, it enables these wider activities to be considered in the analysis.

In addition, within the group, there were five regular attendees (including me). When the process of data analysis began, it became clear that a better understanding of each of their individual experiences within the group might make a significant contribution to addressing the research questions. In this sense, each of these five participants became a ‘unit of analysis’ in their own right. Ultimately, three of these members became the subject of a story and these are presented in Chapter Four.

3.5.2 Data collection methods

Atkinson (2015) argued that it is possible to draw on various disciplinary traditions that in combination offer a useful framework in the development of an understanding of the aspect of social life being studied. Therefore, ethnographic research does not rely on one single method of data collection or analysis, so that in this study several methods are applied both to the gathering and analysis of data to achieve the overall aim of making sense of the individual and collective actions of the writing group members and understanding their impact.

Furthermore, a case study context such as this is ‘unique and dynamic’, so that the investigation itself unfolds through the ‘interaction of events, human relationships and other factors’ (Cohen et al., 2011:289). Thus, this study involved a parallel process of data collection and analysis, with the research design ensuring that I could work interactively with the data, asking questions of it, which then shaped the ongoing process of research. Because the study was largely inductive, the exact course that it took was, to an extent, determined by the process of analysis that occurred at each stage (Creswell, 2013). The aim throughout was to build a data set that enabled me to
ask how and why questions about the phenomenon (the writing group) and the environment in which it occurred, which is a distinctive characteristic of a case study (Yin, 2009).

Each of the data collection tools is described below, with a rationale for their choice in the context of this study. The final data set includes both researcher-generated data and data generated by the participants themselves. This is consistent with the ethnographic nature of the study in which multiple sources contribute to an in-depth understanding of the case. Thus, the artefacts that participants produced and the activities and interactions that occurred were all important in building the rich and detailed picture of the writing group. This was not without its challenges. A significant volume of data was generated and a high level of reflexivity was required throughout to ensure that the multiple perspectives of the participants were preserved in the presentation of the data and in the subsequent analysis. Figure 1 sets out the research process and gives an overview of the different data sources.

Figure 1 Overview of the research process
3.5.2.1 Participant observation

A distinguishing feature of ethnographic research is its use of participant observation, through which the researcher builds a relationship with research participants by direct involvement in their environment and activities (Gobo and Marciniak, 2016). Consistent with an interpretive paradigm, participant observation acknowledges that social contexts are constructed by social actors, and that the researcher is one such social actor. Rejecting the positivist position that it is possible to be detached from the context under study, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:15) suggested that ‘researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them’. Thus, rather than trying to eliminate the effects of the researcher from the study, the ethnographer instead tries to understand and interpret these.

Since this study investigated the activities of a writing group, and thus the social actors who create and sustain these activities, I was ‘inevitably and inextricably implicated’ in what I was studying (Atkinson, 2015:26). I was an active member of the group, working on my own writing projects, whilst simultaneously researching its activities. Whilst participants had consented to the research, it was important to consider my position within the group throughout the research period. Reflexivity, which Gobo and Marciniak (2016:105) identified as ‘the self-aware analysis of the dynamics between the researcher and participants’, ensured that my own position in relation to the participants was accounted for throughout the project. In my case, I acted as a complete participant of the writing group, fully involved with the group members and their activities, with a view to describing and interpreting ‘the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs and language’ (Creswell, 2013:90) that I observed and participated in over time.

Recording the activities of the writing group necessitated several different approaches to recording and representation. My professional notebook combined field notes recording the actions of participants and my reflective diary (Goodall, 2000), since the dual process of observation and reflection quickly became a natural process during the
sessions. As Atkinson noted (2015:40), these written representations – field notes and reflections – were in themselves ‘preliminary reconstructions of the social world’, which were then subject to a further process of selection and interpretation in the final analysis.

The general pattern of the writing group meetings was to start with a creative task and planning sheet, which we then discussed together. After lunch came another short period of conversation about what we had achieved in the morning and what we aimed to achieve in the afternoon, and then each day ended with a progress update and overall reflections on the day. Each of these conversations was recorded and transcribed as soon as possible after each writing group occurred. These verbal exchanges are described as the ‘organising focus of everyday experience’ (Goodall, 2000:98) and, as such, made a significant contribution to helping to understand the ways in which the culture of the group was constructed and the individual and shared meanings assigned to its activities.

### 3.5.2.2 Artefacts created by participants

A range of artefacts, both written and visual, also formed part of the dataset. Some were produced during the writing group meetings themselves, and others were produced outside. For example, there are emails that were exchanged between writing groups. Although these were produced outside the group meetings, they related to them and are therefore included in the data. A further distinction is that some artefacts are the result of creative tasks at the start of a session, where poetry and drawing featured regularly, whilst others were more instrumental documents, such as planning sheets (see Appendix 7). Each artefact was added to the tapestry of field notes, reflections and interview data to construct the comprehensive narratives, both of individual participants and of the group.

In some ways, the use of images as a source of data seems counter-intuitive in research focused on writing. However, the value of visual methods as an ‘alternative to the hegemony of a word-and-number based academy’ (Prosser and Loxley, 2008:4) was harnessed through drawing tasks at the start of some writing sessions. These were largely at the instigation of the group facilitator, and the results provided valuable data
for this study. These activities offered participants an alternative form of expression as a route into thinking about writing in general and their own writing in particular. Drawings have the potential to reveal thoughts and emotions that might not otherwise surface (Stiles, 2004). Despite their potential value, the images created were not ‘unmediated renderings’; their construction reflected aspects of ‘culture, personal biography, positionality, politics, aesthetics, and so on’ (Prosser and Loxley, 2008:18). Thus, they needed to be discussed with the participants so that there was a shared interpretation, rather than one that I imposed on the images (Stiles, 2004). These conversations happened during the group sessions, where the creative tasks were shared and discussed collectively, and they formed part of the transcribed data from the sessions.

3.5.2.3 Critical incident questionnaires

On two occasions during the research period, participants were asked to complete a series of reflective questions adapted from Brookfield’s (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) to reflect on their experience of the writing group (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire was designed to capture significant moments of the writing group experience, drawing out both emotional responses and particular actions and activities that had seemed important to individual participants.

3.5.2.4 Interviews

After the writing group had been meeting for one academic year (and at the point at which the research period ended), I conducted extended interviews with the three members of the group who had been the most consistent in their attendance and whose stories are recorded in Chapter 4. In advance, I sent each participant a copy of their personal stories for review. The interviews were then designed to serve two purposes. They were an opportunity for participants to comment on the interpretations I had made in the stories and then to reflect more generally on their participation in the group. The aim was to reach a deeper understanding of the participants’ experience (Simons, 2009:46) and to make sense of the activities and interactions of the writing group and its members from multiple perspectives.

The interviews were broadly based around the main research question in order to explore the influence of the writing group on participants’ academic writing practices.
However, although a basic schedule provided a loose interview framework (see Appendix 8), each individual interview was treated as, ‘a social encounter in which information is actively formed and shaped’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016:69). In this context, the role of the interviewer is that of the active listener and the locus of control shifts to the interviewee. The open-ended nature of the questions resulted in the kinds of extended responses that suggested this shift had indeed occurred.

In the analysis of the data I remained aware that interviews are not ‘transparent representations’ and that ‘language is never a neutral medium of interpretation’ (Atkinson, 2015:93). This is important in relation to this study, because the experience of the writing group was shared by both interviewer and interviewee. Drawing on Holstein and Gubrium’s assertion (2016:69) that an interview is a process of narrative production, an ‘active, interactional process’, the resulting text is not neutral and needs to be analysed accordingly and in the wider context of other sources of data. Thus, in the analysis, I continued to use high levels of reflexivity in response to the interview data. Overall, the aim was to make further sense of the unfolding narratives in ways that illuminated the interpretation and understanding of the overall story of the writing group and its participants.

3.5.3 The practitioner researcher

As a practitioner researcher, two specific issues were potentially problematic in relation to the ethnographic approach that was used. However, access to the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) was straightforward, since the members of the writing group were part of the academic community to which I belonged. Secondly, in terms of power hierarchy (Parker-Jenkins, 2018), I held no position of authority, real or perceived, over the participants. That said, it was still important to consider my own position and its subjectivity, and to acknowledge this throughout the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Parker-Jenkins, 2018; Aull-Davies, 2008). For example, I was aware that far from being in a position of power, I was in fact newer to the position of ‘academic’ than other group members, with less experience of research and publication than the majority. Furthermore, the facilitator of the writing group was my line manager and the task of increasing pedagogic publishing within the university fell firmly within
her remit. These dynamics required a high degree of reflexivity in my approach to the role of participant observer and the subsequent analysis of data.

Recognising my position with the research setting in this way allowed me to take account of my ‘situational self’ (Simons, 2009:83). What I was less clear about at the outset was the impact of the ‘substantial self’, that part of me that is ‘difficult to change, rooted as it is in the unconscious past and the relationships which helped to shape it’ (Simons, 2009:83). Peshkin (1988) argued that simply acknowledging subjectivity in research does not go far enough; instead it is important to intentionally seek out subjectivity in every part of a project, so that the particular personal qualities, values and practices brought to the process are surfaced and examined, and then both acknowledged and interpreted when the study is written.

To address this issue, I used my field notes to document my feelings, exploring aspects of the ‘substantial self’ that became evident at every stage of the research (Simons, 2009). In doing so, I acknowledged a career-long interest in the power of writing as a tool for self-expression and for developing complex thinking. I acknowledged too that I like writing; it does not always come easily, but I enjoy the process of crafting and the satisfaction of a sentence well written. I brought to my study of the writing group a belief that writing is a pleasurable experience and I found it surprising that others in the group viewed it as more problematic. I realised very quickly that I would need to find empathy with something that did not resonate with my own experience, in the hope of making sense of it. As the study progressed, my field notes recorded other reactions and reflections that revealed some of the feelings and values that I brought to the research. Where these are consciously woven into the analysis, they can, to an extent, give the study a valuable distinctiveness (Peshkin, 1988).

This distinctiveness results from the ways in which the relationship between researcher and participants is expressed through the social interactions that occur in the research setting. These interactions, argued Aull-Davies (2008:5), mean that ‘ethnographers help to construct the observations that become their data’. Peshkin (1988) argued that remaining alert to researcher subjectivity allows these observations to be more consciously interrogated. My own responses to specific activities and interactions were noted, but also tested against the responses of others. My active participation in the
writing group enabled a deeper connection with its participants that in turn allowed me to better interrogate and understand their experiences.

### 3.6 Ethical issues

In addition to reflecting on my role as a participant in the writing group, further ethical issues were taken into consideration in the design of this research. My line manager, Ruth, who was also head of the Academic Development team in the university’s Learning and Teaching Institute, facilitated the writing group. This added a further layer of complexity to the analysis and interpretation of the data. It was important for the study’s findings to be authentic, rather than in response to any desire for a particular outcome on Ruth’s part. The iterative approach to the data analysis and interpretation helped minimise this potential difficulty. Regular discussions of my emerging findings within the normal course of writing group sessions ensured that interpretations were transparent and open to challenge from all participants. Ruth contributed to these discussions, but her voice was one of several, enabling multiple perspectives to be preserved.

In addition, since part of the Institute’s strategic plan included a target related to increasing the research outputs of academics, it was important to ensure that the academics who were invited to be part of the group did not feel under any pressure in this respect. Therefore, the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 2) made it clear that (non)engagement with the research would not affect how their performance and willingness to publish were assessed in any of the university’s formal appraisal procedures. It was also made clear that participation was voluntary; whilst the group was quite clearly an opportunity for professional development, there was no requirement to attend. Although there were occasions on which group participants shared stories of work that had been published, the main focus of shared activities remained on the process of writing rather than the publication count.

Practical ethical conventions, as set out by the British Educational Research Association (2018), were also adhered to. Prior to the commencement of the research, permission was gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at The Open University (Ref: HREC/2689/Saunders). The data management plan that accompanied the ethics
application stated that, beyond the research period, relevant data would be stored in
the Open University’s own research data repository, Open Research Data Online (ORDO)
and retained for a period of ten years. All participants, whether they joined the group at
the start or at a later stage, received a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 2) and
signed a Consent Form (Appendix 3). Included in the information sheet and the consent
form was clear information about the use and storage of data, along with details of the
participants’ right of withdrawal at any stage in the process.

A final consideration was the right of the group to be aware of the research findings.
Since the data collection process was iterative, interpretation and analysis occurred both
during and after the ten-month period of the research project. In the writing groups, I
shared some of the ‘interpretive asides’ (Simons, 2009:117) from my field notes, along
with the ‘sensitizing concepts’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:163) that began to
shape the process of analysis. This resulted in an open and transparent approach to the
research findings, allowing participants to corroborate or question the findings and
interpretations I was working with in the early stages of analysis. The individual
interviews that took place at the end of the research offered a further opportunity to
explore more concrete findings with the three individuals whose stories were presented
in Chapter Four. Thus, the data from these interviews are embedded in the research
findings, providing a valuable means by which participants have been able to validate
them.

Each of these aspects had implications for participants’ rights to anonymity. Whilst
acknowledging the importance of this principle, the fieldwork in this study occurred in
the context of what became a close-knit community, where findings and emerging
themes from the data regularly formed a part of the discussions that occurred. In
addition, the group’s existence and membership became more widely known as
participants discussed their activities with colleagues. These characteristics are among
those acknowledged as reasons why those both within and beyond the research context
may be able to identify individual participants (BERA, 2018). Nevertheless, pseudonyms
have been used throughout to preserve the highest levels of anonymity possible given
the context and ethnographic nature of the research.
3.7 Analysing the data

Consistent with an ethnographic case study, the data generated from each of the nine meetings of the writing group were extensive and varied. The process of analysis and interpretation needed to reflect this; to produce the ‘thick description’ characteristic of an ethnography requires an analytical approach that enables various forms of data to be synthesised, whilst maintaining awareness of the need for reflexivity throughout (Denzin, 1997). This is consistent with Atkinson’s (2015) assertion that social contexts are complex and multi-faceted, requiring a detailed analysis that draws on a range of appropriate approaches that can illuminate the data. Returning to Hammersley’s (2007:4) description of ethnography as a way of ‘understanding what people say and do in particular contexts’, the process of analysis described below tried to maintain the importance of social interaction in developing this understanding. The analytical approaches that were used were chosen to enable the building of the richest possible picture of the writing group.

3.7.1 Organising the data

From the start of the study, the data collected were stored and organised in NVivo, a software package that supports the organisation, storage, coding and retrieval of qualitative data. I created an overall data file, within which I created a separate data set for each of the nine writing groups that took place during the period of data collection. Each writing group generated a significant amount of data of different kinds. One key source was the recordings of conversations that occurred during each group. Some of these were in response to specific tasks, whilst others were informal conversations at the beginning and end of sessions. The transcriptions of these, along with other data from the session, were included in the relevant writing group folder. For ease of reference, Table 5 gives an overview of each writing group and the related data.

Organising the data this way enabled me to take each writing group in turn during the first, familiarisation stage of data analysis and to quickly locate relevant data at any stage in the process. The use of NVivo also ensured all the different forms of data could
be assembled together and organised in different ways; it was possible to organise by type, by writing group, or by individual participant. Thus, the data could be viewed from more than one perspective in order to consider what light these perspectives shed on the whole picture. It also enabled me to keep an open mind about how best to approach the presentation of my findings and analysis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing group (WG) Session</th>
<th>WG1</th>
<th>WG2</th>
<th>WG3</th>
<th>WG4</th>
<th>WG5</th>
<th>WG6</th>
<th>WG7</th>
<th>WG8</th>
<th>WG9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Nov 2017</td>
<td>Jan 2018</td>
<td>Feb 2018</td>
<td>March 2018</td>
<td>April 2018</td>
<td>April 2018</td>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>June 2018</td>
<td>June 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Sheet</td>
<td>PS1</td>
<td>PS2</td>
<td>PS3</td>
<td>PS4</td>
<td>PS5</td>
<td>PS6</td>
<td>PS7</td>
<td>PS8</td>
<td>PS9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative/starter task(s)</td>
<td>Writer’s BASE (see Appendix 6) (TK1)</td>
<td>Academic identity verbs (TK2) Academic identity image (TK2.1)</td>
<td>Auto-biographical poem (TK3)</td>
<td>Artefact task (TK4)</td>
<td>Postcard task (TK5)</td>
<td>Two trumpets: Music &amp; image task (TK6)</td>
<td>Biographical poem (TK7)</td>
<td>CV Task (TK8)</td>
<td>Revisiting the Writer’s BASE (TK9) Peer review of my writing (TK9.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts</td>
<td>WG1 T1</td>
<td>WG1 T2</td>
<td>WG3 T1</td>
<td>WG4 T1</td>
<td>WG6 T1</td>
<td>WG7 T1</td>
<td>WG8 T1</td>
<td>WG9 T1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WG1 T2</td>
<td>WG2 T1</td>
<td>WG3 T1</td>
<td>WG4 T2</td>
<td>WG6 T2</td>
<td>WG7 T2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WG2 T2</td>
<td>WG2 T2</td>
<td>WG3 T2</td>
<td>WG4 T3</td>
<td>WG6 T3</td>
<td>WG7 T2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>FN1</td>
<td>FN2</td>
<td>FN3</td>
<td>FN4</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>FN6</td>
<td>FN7</td>
<td>FN8</td>
<td>FN9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective diary</td>
<td>RD1</td>
<td>RD2</td>
<td>RD3</td>
<td>RD4</td>
<td>RD5 (by Ruth, in my absence)</td>
<td>RD6</td>
<td>RD7</td>
<td>RD8</td>
<td>RD9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Related emails | EM1.1 Joel  
EM1.2 David  
EM1.3 Ruth  
EM1.4 Daniel  
EM2.1 Ezra  
EM2.2 Joel  
EM2.3 Joel  
EM3.1 Joel  
EM3.2 Joel  
EM3.3 David  
EM3.4 David  
EM3.5 David  
EM3.6 David  
None  
None  
None  
None  
None | None  
None  
None  
None  
None |
|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Critical incident questionnaires (CIQs) | EM1.1 Joel  
EM1.2 David  
EM1.3 Ruth  
EM1.4 Daniel  
EM2.1 Ezra  
EM2.2 Joel  
EM2.3 Joel  
EM3.1 Joel  
EM3.2 Joel  
EM3.3 David  
EM3.4 David  
EM3.5 David  
EM3.6 David  
None  
None  
None  
None  
None | CIQ1.1 Joel  
CIQ1.2 Naomi  
CIQ1.3 David  
CIQ1.4 Ruth  
CIQ1.5 Philip  
CIQ2.1 Joel  
CIQ2.2 Naomi  
CIQ2.3 David  
CIQ2.4 Ruth | None  
None  
None  
None  
None |
| Final Interviews | IN1 Micah  
IN2 David  
IN3 Ruth  
None  
None  
None  
None  
None | None  
None  
None  
None  
None  
None  
None |

*Table 4 Summary of data collected from writing groups*
However, whilst NVivo undoubtedly simplifies the organisation and retrieval of data, on occasions during the analysis process it was more useful to print data and physically arrange it in particular ways, stepping back to see the overall picture. This was helpful in the context of an ethnographic case study, where the boundaries shifted and the story unfolded gradually over time. The analysis process is not static; Simons (2009:140) used the term ‘dancing with the data’ to describe the ongoing activity of making observations and connections and developing themes. Whilst such activity is theoretically possible with software such as NVivo, the physical act of working with the data in concrete forms made the process feel more experimental and open-ended as I worked to make sense of the story.

Another potential drawback of using computer-aided qualitative analysis software (CAQDAS) became increasingly significant because of its particular relevance to an ethnographic approach. In the allocation of data to codes and categories, which is a core feature of such software, there is a danger of fragmentation, in which data become de-contextualized and then re-contextualised as categories are defined by the researcher (Atkinson, 2015). This study’s research questions did potentially lend themselves to identifying and interpreting themes, but in the early stages of data familiarisation, it became clear that simply coding segments would be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, there were many instances of extended participant narratives, which played a central role in the construction of both individual and group identities (Riessman, 2008). Secondly, the complex interplay between individual and social context (Giddens, 1991) made it important to preserve these contexts in the process of analysis. Whilst it was possible to attempt such a process in NVivo, it ultimately proved more helpful to work with the texts on paper than on screen, so the process of analysis proceeded largely in this way. In the end, NVivo was used to build on my initial familiarisation with the data, identifying potential aspects for further exploration, and to store data sets for ease of access. At the point at which individual narratives and interactions between participants became the central focus of the analysis, I worked almost exclusively with the printed extracts.
3.7.2 Familiarisation with the data

For each writing group, the first stage of analysis was an initial familiarisation with the data. The field notes already included some ‘interpretive asides’ (Simons, 2009:19), which noted things that seemed interesting or potentially significant at the time. Moving into a more formal process of analysis, a close reading was undertaken of the audio transcriptions, field notes and other artefacts that had been imported into NVivo, allowing for the addition of more detailed analytic memos. In these memos, I consciously posed questions, tried to challenge initial assumptions about why certain events occurred, and tolerated a level of uncertainty about what I believed was significant (Charmaz, 2017). These memos were also the first step in making the story (Goodall, 2000) from the exchanges, artefacts and practices I had gathered, infusing these with my own reflections, to build a ‘persuasive expression of interpreted cultural performances’ (Goodall, 2000:83). This process of familiarisation was the beginning of an overarching narrative of the writing group, which is presented in its final form in Chapter Four. It was also the first stage in asking exploratory questions of the data, and of trying to identify some ‘sensitizing concepts’ that would help to make sense of what was going on, even if the why was not yet apparent (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:162).

3.7.3 Thematic analysis

Familiarisation with the data is the first stage in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of thematic analysis. The second stage is the generation of initial codes and my initial intention was to proceed through the subsequent stages, coding extracts of text according to the developing themes. Thus, beginning with the first writing group, I worked through the data set for a second time. Each data source was considered in turn, and NVivo was used to apply the initial codes. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method includes searching for themes and reviewing themes as stages three and four in a sequential process. Working with the data from the first two writing groups, both phases ran alongside one another. On completion of the initial coding phase, some early observations about themes were made and noted (see Table 6, which demonstrates this process with the codes from Writing group 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Possible themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic identity</td>
<td>Academic identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity between sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>The power of emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of others</td>
<td>Barriers to writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing priorities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and workload pressures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafting writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just getting on with it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of regular writing</td>
<td>Reflecting on process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>In the space: writing is produced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing writing</td>
<td>In the space: we think differently about writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community of practice</td>
<td>The power of community: co-construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of social</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert in the midst</td>
<td>The power of community: making the tacit explicit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5 Possible themes based on the coding of Writing group 1 data*

After the data from the second writing group had been similarly coded, with some new codes generated, the themes were reviewed and refined. In some cases, codes were renamed, because new data sources led to the conclusion that an alternative name better encapsulated the data that were collected together under its heading. For example, the code ‘Reflecting on process’ was renamed to ‘Articulating process’ as I added additional data from the second writing group. As the data from both groups were considered, it was clear that the verbalising of the writing process was an important factor in relation to the research questions, since it hinted at a means of building a shared experience and understanding.

As a result, the related theme was adjusted again to ‘The writing process’, a more overarching theme that drew together the associated codes. This systematic process of reviewing and refining codes and themes, key factors, themes and patterns and the relationships between them could have been continued at every stage of the analysis. However, during the coding of the data from these first two writing groups, I recognised that the process, whilst potentially useful in identifying overarching themes, was
stripping the data of its context (Mishler, 1979). This was inconsistent with what I had previously established was a dialectical relationship between the participants and the context (Giddens, 1991). Any analytical approach needed to listen to the participants’ words, to examine the interactions between them and to take account of the structural systems in which their writing activities occurred (Radnor, 2002:20). Repeatedly, in the transcripts of the writing groups and at times in the other data, I came across extended individual narratives. It also became apparent that the group was building something of its own identity in the rituals and routines it developed. At times, I noted jointly constructed narratives between participants that leant themselves to analysis as a whole rather than in coded segments.

It was apparent that each meeting of the writing group was providing fertile ground for participants’ storytelling. They told stories about themselves and their writing and these stories were drawn both from their experiences during the writing group sessions and also at other times; there were narratives about past, present and future. This was not surprising, since the choice of an ethnographic approach to the case study reflected an understanding that social life is formed through the interaction of its participants. Thus, to fully understand the ways in which the writing group affected the academic lecturers’ writing practices, it was important to do justice to the complexity of the social context. The process of analysis needed to reflect the importance of these aspects and for this reason I moved away from a strict adherence to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to the coding of data to one which would better suit the nature and purpose of an ethnographic case study.

3.7.4 Narrative methods

I turned instead to narrative methods, which ‘keep the story “intact” by theorising from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases’ (Riessman, 2008:53). The definition of ‘narrative’ is not straightforward; its increasingly common use in qualitative research has led some to suggest that the term has become ‘so broad as to rob it of its descriptive, let alone explanatory power’ (Andrews et al., 2013:5). It was therefore important to make some decisions about what would be defined as narrative in this particular study. Riessman (2005:1) argued that an important characteristic of a narrative is that it has ‘sequence and consequence’. The way that the
content of the narrative is ordered is significant; events are sequenced and connected in particular ways for a particular audience. However, this remains a broad definition, and it is still possible to operationalise the term in several different ways. A narrative might be a discrete section of discourse (such as a monologue within the context of a conversation), or an extended response to an interview question. It might equally be a single extended story. In the data for this study, individual narratives were located in writing group session transcripts (where they often occurred as monologues within broader conversations amongst group participants), critical incident questionnaire responses, email correspondence and participant interviews.

I therefore approached this phase of the analysis by revisiting the data in NVivo to identify potential narratives for further investigation. I located extended individual narratives or interactions and re-read the initial notes that I had made on these in the data familiarisation phase. I then copied and pasted these narratives into a Word document for further annotation. This process of revisiting the data resulted in a collection of narratives that were regarded as significant in relation to the research questions. They offered insight into the participants’ views of themselves as writers, the role of the writing group in developing their practices and the factors that might account for the changes that occurred. In the first instance, the narratives were simply listed in chronological order, with an initial ‘code’ assigned to identify the focus of the narrative. These are presented in Table 7.

I then began to work with these narratives in paper form, re-reading them and grouping them into narratives with a similar focus. This resulted in the identification of some over-arching themes and enabled the narratives to be grouped accordingly. The initial themes and their related narratives are presented in Figure 2.

However, consistent with an ethnographic approach, it was important not to lose sight of the other available data. Whilst the narratives were rich sources in their own right and perhaps most closely represented the authentic words of the participants, they were supplemented by a range of other data, which was vital in building the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) that is a distinguishing feature of ethnography. The next stage of analysis was therefore to work with the other data. I linked other data extracts to the transcript data that I had already coded. This added weight to some of themes
that had been identified, building a more detailed picture than the transcripts alone provided. It also led to some consolidation of the original themes, which were further refined as I began to write up my findings (see Chapter Four and Appendix 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing group (WG) and Transcript (T)</th>
<th>Initial code</th>
<th>Writing group (WG) and Transcript (T)</th>
<th>Initial code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WG1 T1</td>
<td>Institutional context and impact on writing The rules of the game</td>
<td>WG4 T2</td>
<td>High level discussion of ideas The PhD and the general writing process Making the tacit explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG1 T2</td>
<td>The institutional climate – social and emotional impact</td>
<td>WG4 T3</td>
<td>Redefining productivity Developing the writing culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG1 T3</td>
<td>The early benefits of the group Discipline and accountability</td>
<td>WG6 T1</td>
<td>Writing metaphors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG1 T4</td>
<td>Group solidarity leads to confidence</td>
<td>WG6 T2</td>
<td>Institution, individual, writing group Changes in thinking about writing Recognising achievements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG2 T1</td>
<td>Changes in approach Sharing impact on pedagogy</td>
<td>WG6 T3</td>
<td>The writing process PhD therapy The tacit explicit What is productivity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG2 T2</td>
<td>Making the tacit explicit Academic identity</td>
<td>WG7 T1</td>
<td>What counts as writing The need for protected space Rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG3 T1</td>
<td>Contrast between process and product Changes in thinking about writing</td>
<td>WG7 T2</td>
<td>Sharing writing and building community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG3 T2</td>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>WG8 T2</td>
<td>Discussing writing leads to discussing pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WG3 T3</td>
<td>Discussing the writing process Peer support/subversion/PhD therapy Challenging the status quo Making the tacit explicit Peer feedback and support</td>
<td>WG9 T1</td>
<td>Co-construction of ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6 Initial coding of narrative*
Figure 2 Initial narrative themes
Once this stage of the analysis was complete, I was left with some transcripts and other data that had struck me as relevant to the research questions, but which did not neatly fit into the themes already identified. Closer analysis revealed that there were three clear strands apparent in these data. The first was a significant amount of data from the first two or three writing group sessions that related to participants’ prior experience of writing and the barriers to writing that they experienced in their academic roles. This material set the scene for the writing group and was grouped under the heading of ‘In the beginning’ (see Section 4.2.1). Secondly, there were data that I had loosely grouped under the heading of ‘space’. I worked through these data extracts to identify the different ways in which space had been characterised by the participants. Amongst other terms, explored in more detail in Section 4.2.2, ‘protected space’ was used on more than one occasion by participants, and several of the other words used were synonyms for this. It was also apparent that the nature of the space was an important factor in the changes in practice that occurred through the Writing group. For this reason, Section 4.2.2 establishes the important of the ‘protected space’ before subsequent sections explore what happened in this space. Finally, there was evidence in the data that participants found themselves writing more as a result of being part of the group. Whilst this study deliberately focuses on the process rather than the product of writing, the fact that increased productivity was evident was important to acknowledge and this is explored in Section 4.2.2.5.

3.8 Telling the stories

Having worked with the data to identify some significant themes, I wanted to retain the sense of narrative in presenting my findings. For this reason, I made the decision to present Chapter Four as a series of stories, constructed both from the analysed narratives and the other data. The first of these is the story of the group as a community, fluid in membership and developing in character as the writing group progressed. Next are the individual stories of three participants. These three were chosen firstly because they had been amongst the most regular in their attendance at writing group sessions and secondly because they represented different levels of experience in terms of time in academia and number of publications.
3.8.1 Constructing the group’s story

To construct the group’s story, I returned to the themes I had identified in the data and used the research questions to shape my decisions about how to present the narrative. The aim was to tell the story of how the writing group contributed to the development of lecturers’ writing practices and the factors that contributed to this development. By retaining the jointly constructed narratives in their entirety, supplementing these with additional data sources where relevant, it was possible to better understand the extent to which the community of writers was significant. In Chapter Four, the story of the writing group as a whole is thematically told, but very much through the words of the participants themselves, so that the significance of the group emerges through the ways in which they experienced it.

3.8.2 Constructing the individual stories

To construct the individual stories of each of the three selected participants, I began by returning to NVivo, revisiting the transcripts from the writing group sessions and identifying any occasions on which a participant had delivered an extended narrative during the natural course of the conversations that had occurred. At this early stage I made annotations that noted the context (at what point in the session the narrative had occurred) and preserved the contributions of others to the conversation. This ensured that the narratives were not stripped of any context that might help to interpret them appropriately. Each of these narratives was copied and pasted into a Word document in the order in which they appeared in the writing group transcripts.

To these narratives, I added any other artefacts created by the participant, and any that they had collaboratively produced. These included session planning sheets, data from the activities that were used at the start of each session (poetry, drawings, and reflective writing), extended responses from critical incident questionnaires and email correspondence between sessions. These data were pieced together in a loosely chronological order. In each case, the process produced a series of individual, but connected narratives that told the overall story of the participant’s experience of the writing group over the course of the study. Finally, I added the transcription of each individual’s narrative interview to complete the picture.
Piecing the relevant data together in this way resulted in a ‘complete’ story for each of the three participants, albeit one that I had reconstructed from the available sources of data. Next, each individual’s story was annotated with initial thoughts and questions, much like the analytic memos created in the earlier process of familiarisation with the data. Throughout this process, consideration was given to the research questions that underpin this study. I used them to prompt questions about the stories. What did the story reveal about how the participant saw themselves as a writer? What was their experience of the writing group and how did this change or develop their writing practices? What were the successes and frustrations of the writing group experience for them? I worked through the data several times, marking material that seemed to relate to one or more of the three research questions, and other content that, whilst not directly related to a research question, seemed significant for some other reason. I continued to add possible thoughts and interpretations to my initial annotations, testing out different perspectives and explanations. In the light of these reflections and interpretations, the stories were redrafted several times. Before they were included in the study in their final form, participants were invited to read their story and it formed the starting point of their post-group interview. They commented on what they had read and offered their own reflections, so that the final stories reflect each participant’s perspective as closely as possible.

Thus, the individual stories in Chapter Four are the accounts of each participants’ participation in the writing group, constructed in a form that aims to capture and interpret each of their unique experiences, drawing out the themes that were identified in their particular story. However, it also allows for comparisons between themes across different participants’ stories where these are relevant. In Chapter Five, I suggest ways in which the narratives might be analysed and interpreted, drawing out the ways in which the experiences of the three participants were shared, and the ways in which they contrasted with one another.

3.8.3 Implications of a narrative approach

There are several methodological implications of this narrative approach. The first is that the language of a narrative cannot simply be assumed to be a transparent and unproblematic representation of meaning (Riessman, 2008). Thus my analysis of
participants’ narratives aimed to address questions about the context in which they were generated, including their intended purpose and audience (Riessman, 2016). Secondly, in drawing together all the sources of data from each of the participants, I have constructed a particular story of both the individual participants and of the writing group as a whole. In this way, each of the stories in Chapter Four constitutes a new narrative, with its sequence of events connected for the purposes and audiences of this study. This is Goodall’s (2000:96) approach of ‘making the story’ from the data, and the stories I have constructed aim to answer the research questions for each of the participants, demonstrating how the writing group impacted upon their writing practices. The final interviews with each of these participants served two purposes – they brought their individual stories to an end (at least in relation to this particular experience on their writing journeys), and also enabled me to share my findings with them and ask them to reflect on my interpretation of their story.

Developing the stories over a period of time also made it important to take an iterative analytical approach, allowing ideas to be developed, worked with and refined at every stage, with a ‘constant interplay between data and ideas throughout the research process’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:159). This interplay is the work of the researcher, who needs to be conscious that ‘data do not speak for themselves’ (Simons, 2009;118). Themes and explanations do not simply emerge from the data; the researcher makes active choices in developing patterns and ideas, and these need to be explained and justified in the subsequent interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The cumulative approach used in this study ensured a comprehensive analysis of the data that simultaneously built understanding and highlighted potential explanations (Simons, 2009). In Chapter Four, each narrative is presented through the transcribed words of the writing group participants, supplemented by additional data sources, and connected with my commentary on the events presented. In this sense, the work of interpretation begins in that chapter, since the verbal extracts selected and the ways in which they are connected demonstrate the ways in which I have considered the narratives contribute to the research questions that were posed at the start of this study.
3.9 Conclusion

Ultimately, the writing group in this study was analysed first and foremost as a community that came together to write. The research questions are deliberately exploratory in nature. Furthermore, they do not relate directly to the ‘success’ or otherwise of the group and nor do they set out to measure a change in the productivity levels of its participants. In this sense the writing group was not an intervention to be studied for its effectiveness, but a phenomenon to be explored. It was explored for its potential insights into the ways in which academics in one particular context might develop their writing practices in this kind of community.

It was this perspective that resulted in the choice of an ethnographic case study approach, which underpins the research design outlined in this chapter. Key aspects of the design, consistent with the interpretivist research paradigm that was adopted, enabled me to build a rich and detailed picture of the writing group and thus to fully explore the research questions. Firstly, it acknowledged the potential significance of the social context, recognising that writing in community would mean that the activities, relationships and interactions that occurred within the group would be central to understanding the ways in which participants’ practices developed. Secondly, its longitudinal nature enabled the study of writing practices to occur over an extended period of time and in situ rather than retrospectively.

In addition, since the data produced both in and beyond the writing group sessions were so varied, the approach to analysis and interpretation ensured that its richness was captured, analysed and interpreted in ways that enabled me to piece together the story of the group from the perspectives of its participants. The use of narrative analysis was a key tool in this process, since it allowed the value of the extended interactions between participants to be maintained and analysed in context and enabled other data to be interwoven throughout. Whilst the final constructed form of these narratives is infused with my own interpretations, the actual words of participants have been preserved throughout, and the many artefacts that formed part of the data are set in context.

Adopting the role of a participant researcher required high levels of reflexivity throughout the research process. Whilst it enabled me to be fully immersed in the
writing group, participating in its activities and interactions, at the same time, I maintained the role of researcher. As a result, there were moments where others were writing and I was making field notes, or recording interpretive asides in my reflective diary. Ultimately, however, these field notes and reflective diary entries provided an important opportunity for ensuring the rigour and authenticity of the study. My ongoing analysis and interpretation of the data became part of the social interaction in the group. Emerging ideas, questions, themes and interpretations were shared with members of the group throughout the research period. This allowed them to be discussed and refined and for participants’ multiple perspectives to become a central part of the final interpretation. This culminated in the interviews with three participants at the end of the research period, in which they reflected and commented on their narratives, on the ways in which I had represented the nature and purpose of the writing group and their final reflections on the development of their writing practices.

In these ways, the ethnographic case study approach and research design remained consistent with the ontological and epistemological perspectives set out at the start of this chapter. This ensured that the study was able to achieve its intention of building a picture of the ways in which the writing group contributed to the development of academics’ writing practices. The stories which follow in Chapter Four paint this picture in some detail, before their implications are discussed in Chapter Five.
Chapter 4. Findings and analysis: four stories

4.1 Introduction

This study’s main research question aims to investigate the role that the writing group played in the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices, whilst the sub-questions explore how and why these writing practices changed. In this chapter, findings that relate to these questions are presented in the form of four stories. The first is the story of the group as a whole and is followed by the individual stories of three participants.

In Chapter 3, the process of narrative analysis that identified the core themes for the group’s story was explained. For ease of reference, Figure 3 demonstrates how this thematic analysis of narratives (See Appendix 5) was drawn together to shape the group story:

For the individual stories, the decision was made to use Ruth and David, since they were the most regular attendees of the writing group. Given her responsibility for increasing the publication output of academics, it could be argued that Ruth’s role in the writing group differed significantly from that of the other participants and that her story was of less relevance to the research questions as a result. However, as Ruth’s story will demonstrate, the pressures and challenges that Ruth experienced in relation to her writing resonated with those of her colleagues, making the inclusion of her story of central importance to understanding the writing group as a whole.
For the third story, Micah was chosen. Although Joel attended one more session than Micah, on one occasion he was marking dissertations, rather than working on writing projects and on another, he was only present for part of the session. Furthermore, the three selected participants had different levels of experience both in terms of their time as an academic and number of publications. Naturally, the group narrative also draws on the interactions of all the participants. To some extent the individual stories, largely told in the words of the particular participants, also contain other voices in the sense that their narratives are set in the social context of which they were a part. Table 8 shows the contribution of each participant to the final stories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Groups attended</th>
<th>Contribution to narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Learning and Teaching Institute</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Individual narrative Micah’s narrative Group narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Course Leader</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Individual narrative Group narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Learning and Teaching Institute</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Group narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>Yacht Design</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Individual narrative Group narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micah</td>
<td>Football Studies</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Individual narrative Group narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Learning and Teaching Institute</td>
<td>Learning Support Officer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Group narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Course Leader</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>Maritime Engineering</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Learning and Teaching Institute</td>
<td>Learning Technologist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Graduate Intern</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7 Summary of participants*
Drawing on the analytical approaches outlined in Chapter Three, each of these stories has been woven together from the varied data sources collected during the research. Consistent with this study’s position that there are multiple, socially constructed realities, it is acknowledged that each of these stories has been intentionally constructed in the way that it appears here, drawing on my interpretation of the data as a representation of the participants’ experience. Whilst returning to each participant, sharing their personal story and the group story with them, has enabled a degree of validation, the final sequencing of the stories remains infused with my own perspective.

The starting point for each of the stories explores how the participants saw themselves as both academics and writers at the beginning of the process. As the narratives unfold, reference is made to each of the research questions, demonstrating the extent to which the narratives contribute to the ways in which these questions might be answered. In this way, the chapter combines findings and analysis in a way that is consistent with dialogic/performance analysis (Riessman, 2008). This approach takes account not just of the words spoken, but expands to consider other factors, such as social and cultural context and audience, each of which influences the ways in which a narrative might be interpreted. Riessman (2008:137) noted that this ‘nested form’ of writing may be regarded as unconventional in the way that it produces what Bakhtin (1981) referred to as a plurivocal text. To maintain something of a more conventional approach, I have opted to move from findings and analysis in this chapter, to discussion in the next.

To achieve, this I adapted the definitions of findings, analysis and interpretation proposed by Wolcott (1994):

- Description is used to ask the question ‘what is going on’? and is reflected in the choices made about the sequencing of the narratives and the direct quotations from participants that are used to give life to their individual perspectives.
- Analysis involves identifying key concepts/themes and interrogating their relationship to one another and to the research question. In this chapter, this level of analysis is achieved through the use of performance/dialogic analysis, which is embedded within the narratives. In this way, participants’ experiences are interrogated through an analysis of the ways in which they describe and perform their identities in the context of the writing group.
The discussion in Chapter Five explores the way in which the findings and analysis can be understood in relation to the research questions and in terms of relevant literature, thus interpreting the findings and analysis through a theoretical lens.

4.2 The group’s story

The story of the group aims to draw out the range of ways in which the interactions between its members contributed to the development of individual writing practices, as well as shedding some light on the extent to which the group became a community and the culture of writing that developed as a result. Section 4.2.1 sets the scene, before the story is told thematically through a series of extended narratives that were co-created between participants and recorded in the session transcripts. For each theme one or two representative narratives are presented, integrated with other data to build a richer picture.

4.2.1 In the beginning

Six participants attended the first writing group, including me (see Table 5). The session began with each of us completing the Writing BASE (Sword, 2017; see Chapter Two and Appendix 6). The BASE asks participants to reflect on their existing behavioural, artisanal, social and emotional habits in relation to writing. On completion, we discussed our responses in two small groups. These conversations revealed something of the participants’ starting points in relation to their current writing activities:

Philip: Well, I’ve just finished [my PhD] and
David: Yes, did you find it a very solitary experience?
Philip: Yes, because I was doing it as I was working, so everything was done either in the evenings or at weekends, so I just didn’t have time. I found I was scraping to get time. It was in the margins of work, changing jobs.
David: Yes, and I think this is something I’ve been trying to explain to my supervisors when they start nagging me; it’s like, I haven’t done anything for three months because I’m already at the limit…

Philip: Do you feel stressed about it?
David: Um, yes, I do feel stressed
Philip: Do you? D’you know, I think I was in – there was, almost like a permanent stress…So it was easy for me just to ignore it, but then the more I did, the more I actually
got into it, and you get the enthusiasm back and then something else calls you away...
(WG1 T1)

This narrative is drawn from the transcript of the first writing group and the first task. Thus, the interaction serves several purposes, since the two participants had not met before. The exchange is marked by the sharing of personal narrative, which situates each participant. Each of them recounts a potted history of their journey so far: in Philip’s case his PhD is complete, in David’s it is ongoing. However, they quickly establish there is enough in common to sustain the conversation: the solitary experience of the PhD journey and the institutional barriers to writing that both of them encounter. The initial relationship that is established early on in the interaction seems to be enough to make them comfortable to disclose. In fact, the interaction ended, rather than began, with them asking each other their names. The personal narratives came first, perhaps in an early sign that in the group, writing would take priority.

In their discussion, whilst Joel, Daniel and Ruth noted a degree of enjoyment in writing, they nevertheless concurred that lack of time was a barrier to writing common to all members of the group:

Joel: I really enjoy the writing; I just have very little time, sadly
Ruth: Yes
Joel: And I guess, because I’ve got very little time, and because a lot of my colleagues are not interested in research etc, I end up doing pretty much everything alone...
...
Ruth: So, you’re a lone wolf writer, yes? What about you, [Daniel]?
...
Daniel: ...we do talk about our research, socially. So, I’m lucky to share an office with two active researchers...both of whom publish books and journals a lot, so they help me with my early writing and I...
Ruth: So that environment creates quite a strong social
Daniel: Yes, definitely, but...it is still only occasional; our priority in term-time is teaching, but any chance we get, we do talk about research. I wish we could talk about it more.
(WG1 T2)

When limited interest amongst other colleagues is added to lack of time, the result is both that less writing occurs, but also that it becomes a solitary activity. It may be the case that for Joel, the focus on teaching amongst his colleagues both contributes to a lack of interest in writing and research and a subtle but persistent pressure on those who do want to write to prioritise teaching instead.
Despite these barriers, it is also apparent from these exchanges that the participants both want to write and, when they are able to, gain some enjoyment from doing so. However, the extent to which writing and research was integral to their identity as academics was limited.

The second writing group began with two activities in which participants were asked first to write down the verbs they associated with their role as an academic, and then to collaborate to produce an image that represented for them the term ‘academic’. The verbs were collected together and clustered around 6 themes generated through the data analysis (Table 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Organisational</th>
<th>Writing and research</th>
<th>Headspace</th>
<th>Containing</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example verbs</td>
<td>design</td>
<td>meet</td>
<td>write papers</td>
<td>reflect</td>
<td>cope</td>
<td>fume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prepare</td>
<td>problem-solve</td>
<td>edit other people’s work</td>
<td>listen</td>
<td>deal</td>
<td>worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>plan</td>
<td>email</td>
<td>research (very little)</td>
<td>learn</td>
<td>fire-fight</td>
<td>stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>monitor</td>
<td>lead</td>
<td>blog</td>
<td>enquire</td>
<td>herd</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mark</td>
<td>administrate</td>
<td>observe</td>
<td>babysit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>facilitate</td>
<td>organise</td>
<td>explore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>teach</td>
<td>re-organise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8 Participants’ verbs associated with the role of the academic*

The specific verbs ‘writing’ and ‘research’ featured rarely in the subsequent discussions, consistent with the relatively small number of verbs represented in this theme:

*Joel:* ...I’ve got teach, which we do quite a lot of, and then they probably go together but fire-fighting and running fast to stand still, it is just there’s so many things going on...that at the end of the day you feel that you haven’t actually made any progress, you’ve done
all that work just to be in the same place...I’ve got read, learn and when I really manage to find time, write. But certainly...to me, the write is at the very bottom, it’s very difficult to find the time for it.

**Naomi:** That’s really interesting...I didn’t even put write on my list, but that doesn’t seem to even come in, but bottom on my list was actually teach, but I share, hear what you’re saying and I can relate to a lot of it. (WG2 T1)

Drawing on these verbs and working collaboratively, participants produced a series of images (Figure 4) that represented the role of the academic for them. The narrative below captures something of the feeling of relentlessness that the different metaphors seemed to represent and which was captured in my reflective diary for the session.

**Figure 4 TK1: Academic identity**
**David:** How do you draw a black hole?

**Ruth:** Ok, a black hole

**Joel:** No, I would have a tiny firefighter, with a tiny water pistol and a huge fire in front of them...

...

**Ruth:** I would have juggler...with different sized balls, and lots of them dropped. [Laughter]

**Naomi:** Yes, see I’d have, I see plates spinning, you know, the old circus act, you’re running before the plates smash on the ground...

...

**Ezra:** I think I’ll go with the fire one, the fire-fighter, because you’ve got like loads of flames coming to you, and you’re trying to push...so I’m coping, dealing and coping, so loads is coming and you’re coping with it...

You’ve got lots of people juggling the same balls at the same time haven’t you, and some of them are being dropped and picked up by other people and it’s like, it’s a bit more like a pinball machine isn’t it?

**Ruth:** Oh, pinball wizard [laughter]

...

**Naomi:** But it’s also a kind of vision that I have in the sense that if you were swimming along the river and then you reach the waterfall, and you know that sort of whirlpool that you get at the bottom and you’ve really got to kind of swim hard before you can get out of it to find a smooth road out. It’s kind of like a whirlpool going round.

**Ruth:** A vortex? It kind of goes with the black hole. [Laughter]

...

**David:** The nice thing about black holes though is that they take you somewhere, don’t they?

**Ruth:** To the big nowhere!

**David:** No, it might be to another part of the universe, another dimension

**Joel:** Another university? [Laughter]

**David:** You’re kind of like in a time loop aren’t you, like Doctor Who? They stick prisoners in time loops don’t they, so you can’t get out...

**Ruth:** Ok, so shall we have the juggler

**David:** Being sucked into the time loop

**Ruth:** With a plate spinning

---

**My Reflective Diary WG2**

David’s words, ‘The nice thing about black holes though is that they take you somewhere, don’t they?’ introduce a potentially more positive note, but it’s swallowed up in the negativity. There’s a hint of the alternative space; something different is imagined here. But then David shifts back with the others to a more negative position, and the interaction builds momentum as all participants contribute to the final images.
Joel: Yes, that’s a good idea, we should have all the little drawings being sucked into the vortex
Naomi: Spinning
David: You need a stick
Naomi: Yeh, go for it, go on
David: Yes, there’s the stick and the plate [He’s drawing, we’re watching]
Naomi: And there’s hundreds of plates
Ruth: And then they smash
Naomi: There’s more, yes, and there’s more plates [she’s drawing now], there’s one over here going, and there’s one over here going, one here [laughter] They’re all going all everywhere, one right over here
Ruth: Ok, then you want a juggler, don’t you, and you want a fire, why don’t you do the fire and the firefighter [several people drawing now]
David: That’s never going to put a fire out! [Laughter]
Joel: That’s the whole idea!

In this exchange, the group gradually comes together, the momentum of the conversation builds, and there is a strong sense of shared experience and understanding about the nature of the academic role. Very early in the group’s existence there was a sense that building a community of writers needed to become more than a way of channelling negative emotions; it was undoubtedly the beginning of the story, but somehow needed to avoid becoming the driving force behind the group.

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My Reflective Diary (WG2)
Solidarity feels important – this early on, we have forged a supportive community, presumably through some shared prior experiences and present challenges and tensions. I’m conscious there’s a danger of a siege mentality that means we never get beyond the frustrations of the present to an imagination of what might be – and even a new reality. It will be interesting to see how this progresses as we move on with the groups.
4.2.2 The ‘protected space’

My reflections on the first writing group meeting recorded an immediate sense that the group provided an environment that was conducive to writing. Furthermore, in an email responding to a request for participants to reflect on their experience of the first session, Ruth referred to the group as ‘bounded space, which feels good, but almost too brief an encounter, leaving you wanting to linger for longer over your writing’ (EM1.3; Ruth). Joel noted his experience of the group as a place of ‘discipline and focus [that] I don’t get in the chaos of everyday working’ (EM1.1; Joel). Thus, right from the start there was a sense that something about the way the space operated gave structure and purpose to the writing that took place.

The idea of the writing group as a ‘space’ persisted. In David’s words:

‘The group kind of functions as an isolation tank and is a calm space, which is quite addictive.’ (EM3.6; David)

Protecting this space proved difficult at times; other demands and the attitudes of others lingered as potential threats that might derail the group:

Ruth: Anything stopping you [from writing], David?

David: Time, distraction, pressures of work. I mean, no time really, more than anything else, and not enough writing groups!

Ruth: ...I said to my husband this morning, [he] said to me, ‘What are you doing today?’ I said, ‘I’m in a writing group.’ He said, ‘Not another one’...And I thought to myself, actually, in terms of our contracts, we should have one once a week, you know, we should be writing one day a week, you know [he] shouldn’t be fussed that I’m having another writing day.

David: I think the thing is that it blocks it out, it’s there, you know...and I think it’s really important. For me, it gives real discipline...this carves out a calm, quiet space

...

Ruth: Yes, it does, and it prioritises it above everything else.

(WG7 T1)
However, the writing group appeared to offer a ‘protected space’ in which it was possible to set aside other demands and make time to write. This is reflected in Figure 5, which records the different ways in which participants variously described the nature of the environment:

protected; alternative; isolation tank; bounded; legitimate; separate; calm; intentional

*Figure 5 Participants’ ways of describing the writing group space*

In Micah’s final interview, he spoke at some length about the way that the space had functioned for him:

‘It was an environment that you could come into and there are like-minded people who are doing the same kind of thing... time-wise it was that the day was reserved for doing something. Space in terms of culture... creating a culture where from time to time you come together and you can focus on your research. So, in that sense, space and habit for me, they are linked. Also, space in a way that gives you a kind of pressure, but in a positive way. It allows you to focus on something important.’ (IN1)

Further exploration of the data revealed the ways in which the group’s members interacted with one another and with the ‘space’ that had been created and it revealed the role this played in the development of their writing practices. These are the themes that are explored in the remaining sections of the group’s story, and which also recur in the individual narratives.

4.2.2.1 Thinking differently about writing

The analysis of the data revealed three significant ways in which our thinking about and approaches to writing changed. Firstly, quite soon after the writing group was formed, participants began to share the ways in which they were beginning to more consciously prioritise writing and develop ways of working that integrated it into their academic role. At the start of Writing Group 2, Joel noted a change in his thinking and his reflections on how he might try to adapt his practice:

‘I’m thinking, it’s so much more efficient to go out of the office, go somewhere and just work there, so yeh, I’m looking at my timetable and thinking, there’s a three-hour gap here, I might book myself a study room in the library and just go with my laptop and do some writing there’ (WG2 T1; Joel)
This was an early example that demonstrated a more intentional approach to writing, and one that drew on some elements of the writing group in Joel’s intention to create a space for writing. A similar change in approach was also evident in Micah’s interview at the end of the research period:

‘I think perhaps, when I am planning my writing days, then I try to be more organised and structured. For example, in the writing groups, at the beginning of the day, we had to make a plan…which I think really made sense…I’m not saying I’m doing the same when I am working alone, but I am at least trying to have some goals for the day’ (IN1)

An early change in David’s thinking showed that he was beginning to see the task of writing in a broader sense:

‘What is highlighted more than anything is the need to make time for reading…the sessions have changed this, and I am reading to prepare for writing more.’ (EM1.2)

However, for some, the writing group remained their primary opportunity to write, as they continued to find their time for writing outside the group diminished by the competing priorities of other aspects of their role. In this case the writing group played a significant role in maintaining some writing momentum, and attendance at the group was the priority:

‘Yes, I mean I’m here against all odds today, but I thought, I’ve got to get here, even if it’s just a couple of hours just to get myself somewhere, yes, against all odds’ (Naomi, WG6 T2)

Whilst both of these extracts recount different approaches to keeping writing going, both highlight an intentional approach, suggesting that writing has taken on a degree of importance that it hadn’t previously assumed in these participants’ academic lives. This was also reflected in the planning sheets:

‘[Writing is] much more of a priority. I do the writing first, which is getting me into hot soup with other things like the curriculum framework.’ (Ruth, PS4)

‘I’ve been more intentional about setting aside specific parts of my week for writing.’ (Me, PS4)

This more intentional approach also seemed to heighten consciousness about the writing process:

Naomi: ... I am transitioning from the last writing group... I used to be a meticulous writer - every sentence was perfect and then I would move on to the next and the next to...get it all right, so I have... started to be more creative and stop being so [fussy] about
it. But I’m in a transition so there’s a conflict with it; I kind of feel that it’s better to be the…second state, but it’s kind of letting go of the first bit, so I’m doing a bit of both at the moment and I kind of think that this stage will pass, just keep doing it…and I will find my natural place; knowing that there is another way I’m trying to go the other way. Yes, that’s what I think I am.

Me: I would say I’m transitioning…I’m really surprised how hard I find it kind of carve out of space because I’ve not been in this more relentless academic role…at a point when I’ve also been expected to write…I’m finding it hard to carve out the time that I thought I would have…to do it. So, slightly depressing really that this group has made me realise I need to do more than I’m doing. So, on a day like today I loved it…I recapture the, oh I remember why I like writing because there’s enough time to do it. (WG6 T2)

In this exchange each of us is voicing some reflections about ourselves as writers, each drawing on the idea of transition. The implication is that participation in the writing group has begun to surface not only new writing practices but also some of the tensions and conflicts that a heightened awareness of the writing process has brought to the surface.

The second change was that what counted as writing became more than simply producing words on the page. Different parts of the process became normal activities within the group. This occurred early in the group’s existence; whilst my field notes from Writing Group 2 record David working on writing his PhD, at the same Joel is editing a completed draft and Ezra is working with his data. The planning sheets that were completed at the start of each session captured the variety of tasks that constituted writing for each of us. Each of these things is an integral part of the writing process and seen as legitimate activity for a writing group. For example, Table 10 summarises the planning sheets for Writing Group 7:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Part 1 - morning</th>
<th>Part 2 - afternoon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Work on the literature section of the IJAD article</td>
<td>Carry on with the lit. section. Do some reading on thematic analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Finish GI paragraph, send to Esther for references</td>
<td>Paul’s paper – and email him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Re-read data for PJR paper.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micah</td>
<td>Listening to one interview and working within the coding frame.</td>
<td>Working within the coding frame and on the presentation at the conference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Review article for Studies in HE PhD commentary</td>
<td>PhD commentary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 PS7 Summary of participants’ planning

The third change was the way in which the group came to define the notion of ‘productivity’. At the end of each session, we would discuss our achievements, and highlight any challenges we had encountered during our writing that day. The following became a fairly typical kind of exchange:

**David**: ...Well achievements, I think I have a kind of sense of how theoretically how to frame the commentary...[Although], I’ve been reading all these papers about rhizomatic research and writing, and it seems that they all kind of present these ideas in fairly conventional ways...So, no disappointments but a massive challenge really. So in a way today’s been very productive because I came in here not knowing what I was going to do or what I wanted to do and actually just opening that space has resulted in a kind of a massive shift forward.

**Ruth**: That’s good

**David**: So, full of achievements

**Micah**: ...So I have listened to those two interviews...but I think the most important achievement was that I could be focused the whole time, so compared to like a normal day in the office this was much more efficient so that’s the most kind of rewarding thing...

**Me**: I've had a really productive day so that’s good...I've read those articles in that ethnography magazine and...my initial slight disappointment was that actually, having read all this really creative stuff about writing the new ethnography in that book that [Ruth] lent me, the articles are really conventional. (WG4 T3)

It is interesting to note the different ways in which ‘productivity’ is framed in this interaction. In referring to his activity in this session as ‘opening that space’, David
defines ‘productive’ as a shift in thinking, rather than words on the page. The writing process has become more broadly defined for him. My own reflection suggests that even my ‘slight disappointment’ during the course of my reading counted as productive. Both these examples suggest that the link between thinking and writing is heightened and that the space for this thinking to occur is proving valuable in moving writing forward.

4.2.2.2 Making the tacit explicit

There were some clear advantages to the fact that the writing group’s members varied in their experiences of writing and publication. One of these advantages was that the less experienced members of the group had access to the knowledge and practices of their more experienced peers. This is exemplified by the narrative below, when Ruth describes her approach to writing during a discussion of the Writing Base (see Appendix 6) activity in the first writing group session:

> I tell you what I've learnt is that I never send a journal an article that I haven't had loads of feedback on and if you look at my folder for this article you'll see how many drafts, um, I'll tell you how many drafts there are, of this one...I used to try out my journal articles on reviewers and editors. I no longer do that; I try out my journal article on friends, so I've got here, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9 versions, Esther's fed back comments...I normally get my husband to feedback but I'm giving him a bit of a break at the moment...So, I get someone I trust to look at it first and then uh, I change it again and again...before I send it off. (Ruth, WG1 T3)

Here Ruth describes what might first appear a rather mundane part of the writing process, but my field notes record the attentiveness of the less experienced writers in the group. Although the interaction here was not vocalised, it was nevertheless evident; my field notes record that it felt like a ‘masterclass’. It seems that one perhaps unexpected advantage of having an expert immediately to hand in the informal setting of the writing group was the opportunity to get an insight into the kinds of processes that tend not to feature in guidebooks and writing courses, but which are actually a fundamental part of the process of getting published. In this narrative, the value of multiple drafts and of inviting others to read them is expressed as the work of an experienced writer.
A second example occurred in Writing Group 2, when three members of the group (including me) were discussing what they had achieved since the last meeting. One participant, Ezra, described the process of carrying out major revisions on an article. In this instance, there was less of a sense of an ‘expert in the midst’. Instead, it was a peer discussion between two colleagues with similar experience (Ezra and David), discussing their experiences in the company of a more novice academic writer (me). An analysis of this narrative identified two elements of the writing process that were explored in the conversation. Firstly, in articulating the process in what is almost a monologue, with occasional interjections from David and me, Ezra clarifies for himself a developing sense of audience during the process of revision. This discussion began early in the conversation and was returned to later as Ezra and David recognised a shared experience of the process. I have therefore reconstructed the narrative below to capture it as a more coherent whole:

**Ezra:** ...in fact, everything changed, the tone, what we’re trying to put across is still there...but I see that [now] it’s very sharp...and it’s a lot clearer in the second version.

**Me:** Brilliant, how do you think that happened then? I’m really interested in how you get to that point.

**Ezra:** ...One thing I found...that really happened to me by writing, the first time, it was actually writing for myself...So I know what I’m trying to say and I’m saying it to myself and when other people try to deconstruct it, digest it, it’s kind of you rambling around...

**David:** It’s interesting what you say about the first time you write, it’s you learning...Yes, because you make assumptions, don’t you, that people understand what you’re talking about...

**Ezra:** ...the first writing you find out that you’re actually writing it for yourself, not for other people to really understand...It works if you take time, re-read and then, uh, reconstruct it, try and think about other people. The audience is very important. (WG2 T2)

Secondly, both the emotions and the practicalities of the peer review process are exposed in the conversation between David and Ezra:

**Ezra:** Some, some reviewers can be so nasty, they don’t care, some people obviously. It gives me the option to kind of now look at every sentence and then try to make sense of it myself. Some people, they don’t care, we’ve got about three reviewers and then they’re like, one of the comments of the reviewer is perhaps not making sense at all, maybe she’s just saying it for something to say, or she’s actually writing the report for herself to read...
or something, you know what I mean, so she’s trying to make my corrections, but she’s perhaps not read the paper properly, or he

David: I mean you don’t know, I had the paper that’s just been published the first two reviews came back and they’re, the, the journal said, look, like one of them’s like brilliant and really, really should publish, the other one is so completely opposite we’re going to go for a third reviewer, so it went out to a third one with glowing reports, a couple of typos, so it was quite good, so it meant that I didn’t really have to address the really critical feedback because the person obviously didn’t get it, but I did try to, but the way I deal with it is when you get that feedback, read it, go away, be angry, sad, depressed or whatever and then forget about it for a week, and then go back to it and be kind of methodical and turn it into a task list. (WG2 T2)

For the novice writer listening to this exchange, the strength of emotion was obvious; the peer review process can feel brutal, even if it is not intended to do so. For Ezra and David, it seemed that it was important to express this, and recognise that it was a shared experience, but there is also resolution here in the form of a practical response that moves beyond the emotion to something more productive.

One other way in which the process of writing was articulated was through some of the creative tasks that began each session (See Appendix 4). For example, Sam’s response to the postcard task (TK5; Figure 6) enabled him to express his understanding of the key features of a successful piece of writing, even though the last sentence acknowledges that these sometimes seem beyond his grasp.

Each of these narratives suggests that one role of the writing community was the many opportunities that it provided for participants to articulate key aspects of the writing process both for themselves and others. Bringing together both new and more experienced academic writers provided a space to acknowledge that the writing process is complex and emotionally draining, but ultimately potentially satisfying.
4.2.2.3 Co-constructing ideas and understanding

Although the silent periods of writing were the most significant in terms of the time allocated to them during the writing group sessions, there were also numerous examples of group members trying out and constructing ideas together. As part of the sessions, we often discussed both the content of our writing and the process of writing it. Careful examination of the transcripts, supported by the accompanying field notes, revealed a significant number of narratives where the interactions between group members involved us in explaining complex ideas to one another.

The following is an example of an occasion on which I shared an aspect of my writing that I had been grappling with during the session. The ensuing conversation played around with the idea, co-constructing a perspective on the concept that I was able to take forward in my subsequent writing:

Me: I was critiquing Wenger, which is obviously quite brave, because...communities of practice is a big thing isn’t it, but I’ve said, using somebody else’s work to help me to be fair, um, ‘However, Wenger does not take account of how ongoing participation may cause positions to shift and change. Rather than assimilating and adopting what already exists, it is at least as likely that active participation might challenge and reshape it’

Ruth: That’s nice, ja

Me: I quite like it

David: I think that’s brave!

Ruth: Legitimate peripheral shaping

Me: Yeh, because basically what he says is that as you become part of a community you just assimilate

Ruth: Just absorb it

Me: And absorb it and I’m suggesting that as we work together and become writers together we might actually challenge

Ruth: and change, ja

Me: and change

David: it’s more becoming than being

Ruth: Yeh

Me: [To Ruth] Bit like a paper you’ve just written

David: The, I think the problem with Wenger is that communities of practice require a transmission of knowledge
Ruth: Yes
Me: Of values and knowledge, yes

(WG2 TR2)

The turning point of this conversation comes when Ruth interprets the challenge to Lave and Wenger’s work as ‘legitimate peripheral shaping’. Adopting this variation on the original concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) shifts David from his initial comment that a such a challenge to established writers was ‘brave’ to one where he too begins to shape the concept in a new way. Listening to Ruth and I develop the challenge to Lave and Wenger leads him to offer his own critique, which expresses the central problem we are grappling with in relation to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation. The dialogue brings all three participants to a shared understanding, using shared language to express it, and the concept that I had tried to explore in my writing was further clarified through this discussion.

A similar pattern is evident in an exchange about the development of another participant’s writing. On this occasion, Sam was in the early stages of a paper on using personal response technologies in the classroom. Part way through Writing Group 8, he shared one hypothesis that he wanted to explore, that ‘students will prefer free text responses to multiple choice…as it gives more opportunity to express their own opinions’ (WG8 T2).

Joel: I was going to say do you actually want them to do free text, because it opens the door to responses that might not necessarily be what you want

Sam: Yes, we’ve, we’ve, that’s the...

Joel: Because when we did the talk with [two other colleagues at the university’s Learning and Teaching Conference], Adam did one of his things online and he said, ‘Oh I put rude word filter’ and the first thing everybody did was try and find a word that wasn’t covered by the filter!

Me: Yes, that might have been an error on his part. He should probably have just let them get on with it.

Joel: But it opens the door, too, you know, little jokes and comments etc, which may steer away from what you really want them to answer.

Ruth: But at the same time, there’s more agency and autonomy and ownership. It’s less passive and I think that the literature on this is more about, the profanity’s one thing, but the other thing is how passive do students want to be, how engaged…and how able are they to articulate their opinions even anonymously compared to…
Me: ...and to what extent are we as teachers enabling them to do that and giving them...

Ruth: ...pressing them and challenging them

Sam: Ok...yes, that is something I could go into.

(WG8 T2)

During this interaction, the practical objection to using free text responses is gently challenged by other group members, and what develops is a conversation about pedagogy. As a result, Sam’s own thinking about the original hypothesis is both clarified and extended, which helps to develop his ideas for his writing. For Joel, this was the second occasion on which he had reflected on pedagogy as a direct result of his involvement in the writing group. In an earlier email he described his intention to apply the writing group approach in his own teaching. He had a two-hour session each week with his third-year dissertation students, and made a change to the format of this session:

‘Based on my very positive experience of the writing group, I am now looking at using those two hours to set up a mini writing retreat, where they can get on with their dissertation’ (EM1.4)

The way in which a discussion about writing can lead to a more in-depth exchange about complex ideas is also evident in a discussion that occurred in Writing Group 4. On this occasion, David was outlining his writing challenge for the day, which was to construct a commentary that provided a narrative thread to the articles he had written for his PhD by publication. Ruth had lent him a thesis that David described as:

‘kind of rhizomatic, sort of rhizomes and things, and then you mentioned that as a way into connecting those things...but actually, what intrigued me is that, although he’s adopted, theoretically adopted it, it’s not very rhizomatic’ (WG4 T2).

Here David is framing the problem with his own PhD in the light of his reading of another thesis. What ensued was a discussion between Ruth and David about the concept of rhizomes. Part way through the conversation, both pause to involve the rest of the group in the interaction:

Ruth: ...does everyone know what rhizomes are here, biologically. Come on [David], define them for us.

David: If you like, mushrooms are classic...
Me: [Laughs] Clear as mud now, eh?

David: Rhizomes. They’re connected underneath

Ruth: Connected

David: So, any part is connected to any other part and then they kind of emerge, these sort of, these little plateaus if you like, emerge and then they kind of go, but…it contrasts to the idea of trees, for example.

Ruth: The tap root, yes

David: The more conventional idea of knowledge branching out and it’s kind of fixed. It’s in there and that’s it, and this is like disciplinary knowledge. Each of the trees is disciplinary knowledge

Me: I first came across it in relation to E-Learning actually....

Ruth: Yah

Me: ...and the way that we learn with the internet and how we do that now, rather than a more linear path

Ruth: Yah, yah, so it’s, I mean it’s the, the tap root compared to, you know it’s about the roots of your knowledge isn’t it? I know you’re going to branches but I think it’s the what you don’t see is actually loads of links and connections and I think you’re right, I think I’ve heard it first in the context of network learning, connectivism, um and E-learning (WG4 T2)

In this exchange, the group moves from an abstract concept, through a metaphorical representation to a concrete application in relation to e-learning pedagogy. David’s own explanation of the concept becomes clearer as the interaction unfolds, so that he is able to compare and contrast a rhizomatic view of knowledge with one where knowledge is bound by disciplinary structures. Almost in a reflection of the concept itself, the interaction is not entirely linear, but the concept is unpacked collectively, and a degree of shared understanding is reached.

These kinds of interactions became commonplace and the contribution they made to the writing process is particularly apparent in an exchange that occurred in Writing group 9. On this occasion, we had moved from brief in-session discussions about our writing in progress to a more formal critique of an extract from a draft paper. I had submitted a section of an article for group members to read before the session, posing a question about it that I wanted to discuss when we met. The article was a comparison of two writing interventions that our department had implemented, one of which was the writing group, with the other a series of writing workshops. This had presented me with
some challenges about the relationship between the proposed paper and my ongoing work on my thesis:

**Me:** So, for me, it’s about how do I best use the data that I’ve got…and what kind of angle do I take on this article that works as an article in its own right but doesn’t go too deeply into my EdD study data [before my EdD is completed and submitted]. (WG9 T1)

The subsequent discussion involved three kinds of contribution. The first, which came from David, came from his shared experience with relating to the issue at stake:

**David:** I’ve been struggling a bit, it’s a bit like the blogging article…we’ve got all this data…I’m thinking, what am I going to do with all this and how do we make sense of it all? And actually, the way I am looking at it is saying, well a lot of the stuff we did was kind of contextual, it informed the research rather than necessarily being the research (WG9 T1)

In confronting a similar issue with his own writing project, David was able to propose a potential solution for my paper. We discussed focusing tightly on one or two particular ideas and exploring their implications for the reader.

Ruth’s contribution to the conversation positioned her partly as co-writer (the paper was jointly authored) but also as expert. She highlighted the ‘thinner’ dataset about the writing workshops and suggested that we ‘swing the methodology differently in this paper…maybe isolate one dataset [from each intervention]’ (Ruth, WG9 T1) and then used these to compare the workshops and the group. Later on, her advice was related to the specific section I had drafted and sent in advance of the session:

**Ruth:** …and in the methods section you said, do I need something in the beginning? Yes, you do, there’s no ethics…You mustn’t put that in at the beginning, but I think you should. What I found was you were diving straight into the analysis – a sort of reflexive analysis or reflection or whatever – and I think you need to say, ‘We used three methods’…these were…and then do…your unpacking (WG9 T1)

Ruth was a reviewer and an associate editor of an academic journal, and this experience was evident in the clear and direct advice that she offered here.
Micah’s contributions drew on his own sociological disciplinary perspective:

**Micah:** You could just have a kind of methodological point of view that you use to describe your methodology in the context of the university developing this kind of writing, the social practice side I just found the identity part really interesting...I think it’s a fascinating thing and it’s changing and evolving...and it’s something as a reader I would be interested in. (WG9 T1)

This disciplinary perspective helped to identify social practice as a key issue for clarification in the paper. Esther questioned whether it was my intention to focus on the group or the individual, noting that the paper currently seemed to switch between the two. It surfaced a confusion in the paper that I was then able to articulate for myself:

**Me:** In the context of this, I think I’m looking at the [Pause] the way the group affects individuals’ thinking about their own writing...but that’s where I’m coming unstuck...am I looking at the group as a whole or am I looking at the individuals within the group? Well actually, it’s probably both. (WG9 T1)

Further discussion around the concept of writing as social practice involved several members of the group and clarified it as an area for further clarification, and a focus for me in the writing group that day.

What is evident from this exchange is the different kinds of contributions that were made and the ways in which they interacted with one another to construct a clearer sense of direction for the paper, which could be pursued more confidently as a result.

The opportunity to work through ideas in a collaborative way was highlighted by David as one of the most significant functions of the group. In his final interview, he reflected on the reading of his individual narrative as follows:

_Clearly, I was working through ideas and the writing group was a space to do that...This was a space where I felt I could have conversations about but stuff that I don’t normally talk about with colleagues...Reading [my narrative] made me realise that yes, that was quite important, that potential space where you actually can go and have academic conversations and talk to people about ideas...because discussion and debate is one of the ways that you test and work through those ideas that are kind of bubbling up from the unconscious._ (David, IN2)
4.2.2.4 Building a community

Ultimately, over the academic year, the writing group became a community. This is demonstrated in several different ways in the data. Firstly, peer support became a feature of the group’s interactions right from the start. In this exchange, at the end of Writing Group 1, both Ruth and David had submitted revised journal articles for review:

David: Yeh, I’ve done the same, I’ve submitted it with my revision as well
Ruth: Oh well done
Me: Two submissions!
David: Do you think, I mean, I’ve had two very good reviews from reviewers and then one who didn’t like it. And I addressed half of his concerns but then a couple of the other points I just sort of politely said you’re talking rubbish. [Laughter] Is that acceptable do you think?
Joel: If it’s politely worded!
Daniel: You’ve got the balance of power anyway, if two enjoyed it.
David: Well I get the feeling, you know, when you get these, you go, you know the editor can always reject it and say oh no you do have to do it, but I get the feeling that as long as you generally deal with the comments, you don’t, you’re not, there’s not a law that says you have to
Ruth: Yeh because sometimes they’re, they’re also human, they’re wrong.
(WG1 T4)

In this interaction, David sets out his approach to responding to reviewers. At the end of his first contribution, he directly asks for affirmation from the group, an early indication that he is willing to trust them with this particular problem. He continues his theme, this time tailing off a little as if he needs further reassurance that he has taken the right approach. A sense of himself as a writer emerges here in his ownership of the writing in response to reviewer’s comments, but it is tentative. Validation of his approach, and thus his ownership of the writing, is provided by Ruth’s more experienced voice. For David, the sense of solidarity that he gained from being part of the group was an important factor for him:

‘It feels like I am among friends, people who share my goals and who can help me keep on track. I guess it’s a bit like an alternative writer’s AA. We should start the session with a statement along the lines of, “Hello, my name is David and I have written every day since...” Oh, hang on, we do!’ (CIQ1.3)

As the writing groups continued, it was apparent that sharing writing was central to the building of the community, as David commented in his second CIQ:
'The most engaging thing is] being able to discuss writing that you are working on, getting advice and input. Plus, now we have started to read each other’s work, I feel this is really valuable' (CQ2.3)

The following extract records an interaction about a piece of my writing that was shared at the end of a session. The preamble to me reading aloud my extract comes perhaps from following the ‘expert’ (Ruth) and also an uncertainty about what I have written. However, the interaction also contains some examples of light-hearted exchanges, which hint at a community that has become a safe place to both critique and to exchange more informal comments. There is a sense of collegiality, and of members feeling comfortable with one another:

**Ruth:** Ok, who wants to read their sentences now?

**Me:** I will. So this follows on from, so I’m talking about the academic role and how it’s always been, or traditionally it’s been kind of teaching, research and admin, a kind of 3 bits, so it, um, and that’s been challenged, and I say, “However, there are two factors that may mitigate against this more fluid interpretation of the academic role. The first is pressures on individuals to bring their constructions of academic identity into line with corporate identity...”

**Ruth:** No thank you!

**Me:** I said ‘pressure on’, not that you have to do it!

“...and in addition, the fragmentation of the academic role is further emphasized by the use of research-led and teaching-led to differentiate between the traditional and the post 1992 universities. As an applied university ours might be argued to have a keen focus on teaching rather than research. The clamour for credible research output is highly audible nevertheless. The potential for an academic identity crisis is ever present.”

**Ruth:** Ooh, I like that.

**Mary:** I like the word clamour in there

**Ruth:** The clamour and the crisis

**Micah:** I’m having it all the time!

**Ruth:** Very nice

(WG7 T2)

In his interview, Micah commented that sharing writing was one of the ways that helped him to make sense of what he was doing:

‘Talking about it helped me to frame my research...talking about it and maybe discussing it a little bit, it made more sense to me as well. So it’s kind of producing something, in a way, almost like producing together...It’s nice to create something by discussing it with other people...One more thing...I learned about how other people work, how they think about writing, which I think was added value for me.’ (IN1)
What is striking here is Micah’s comment that he now saw a degree of co-creation now evident in his writing. This was a clear indication that the nature of the dialogue that the group afforded was making a significant contribution to the development of his writing.

One strand of this developing community was a growing sense of solidarity, which sometimes allowed practices to be challenged and changed. During several writing groups, interactions that were informally categorised as ‘PhD therapy’ demonstrated, at times, a subversion of the status quo. This exchange, between Ruth and David, was typical:

*Ruth:* How did you get on David?
*David:* Um, I've got a sort of rough sketch of each of the papers in, and I'm just going through, trying to, cos it’s very difficult not to kind of review them or just summarise them but to pick out the key connections between them all. I’m not sure that I've done that very strongly, that it would be enough, but I’ve run out of time to actually go through and tidy all that up...And I've done all four, and just going through and trying to say why, why are they connected?
*Ruth:* Oh, is this for your connective tissue statement for your PhD?
*David:* Yeh...So, I’m, and I think it’s working but I haven’t gone through, I need to finish tidying up but I’m gonna have to send it like this because they’re just getting, they keep sending me emails saying you haven’t sent us anything, so I’m, ‘well I haven’t finished it yet, so what do you want?’ you know, but I think I’ll send it to them and let them get
*Ruth:* Irritated
*David:* Yeh, and uh, well then they can, they’ve got something to chew over and then, um, get anxious about
*Ruth:* Yes, good idea [general laughter]. Why send them something near perfect?
*David:* Yeh
*Ruth:* When they’re paid to...
*David:* Well exactly, you know and that’s the, ultimately, then I can, they’ll say, oh blah, blah, blah and I’ll say well it’s not finished yet, it’s not even, you know, it’s not drafted yet, so, and I've got until October to submit this. (WG3 T3)

Although in one sense, this is peer support, the slightly subversive tone is evident in the ‘blame the supervisor’ narrative that David and Ruth construct together during the second half of the interaction. At one level, it could be argued that this is unhelpful; working to find a solution for a more constructive relationship with his supervisors might be a more positive approach. However, at another level, the conversation challenges the power dynamic in the PhD relationship and shifts ownership of the thesis-writing process to David.
This sense of subversion is evident again in a brief exchange in Writing Group 7, when the group was discussing the changes to their writing that had occurred since the group began. For Ruth, the solidarity that had grown amongst group members had both changed priorities and positioned writing as a form of conspiracy against the institution:

**Ruth:** For me what's changed, I suppose I see it now as my top priority, I see it as a form of rebellion against the operation, and as a rebel it really works for me [laughter] and we have a bet on today about when the operational will knock on the door. Every time.

**David:** There's a great line in a Public Enemy song that goes along the lines of er, ‘the cell is hell, I'm a rebel so I rebel’ [laughter] and it's kind of like well yes if you put a rebel in a cell then they going to do that, it's their nature, it's like, what do you expect?

**Ruth:** Yes! (WG7 T1)

Overall, what is striking about each of the interactions in this section is that the nature of the conversation, the sometimes slightly subversive turn that it took, the affirmation and gentle challenge and the emergence of some shared ways of working hint at the idea of the writing group as a community. Two extracts, one from the start of the writing group and one towards the end of the research period, capture the ways in which the group had a potentially important contribution to make to the University:

‘On balance, what I find most engaging is the fact that it is so counter-cultural – silence, not noise, focus not fragmentation, community not individuality. We feel like a revolutionary group plotting sedition in a South American jungle. We arouse suspicion and envy, yet we are an open group. Anyone who wants to can join the writing revolution, but it is as though somehow, we are taking our writing too seriously. We should be in a committee, or writing emails, to earn our salaries legitimately. They whisper, we need teachers, librarians and compliant people, not thinkers, writers, revolutionaries.’ (CIQ1.4; Ruth)

**Ruth:** ... I think we’ve got a group identity now...it’s small but I think we’ve got [it]...And I don’t think we’d know each other half as well if we weren’t meeting in this way. It’s quite intimate and I think that’s brilliant, but...somehow, if we’re to change the institutional culture, we need to replicate it. (WG9 T1)

However, whilst this was a clearly identifiable theme in the data, it was challenged by two of the participants in the interviews. When they were asked to choose three words about the writing group that resonated with them and one that did not, both Micah and David selected the word ‘rebellion’ as the word that did not resonate:

‘You mentioned that for some members of the group it was a space of rebellion. I wouldn’t use the word, but I also acknowledge or recognise that different members of the group they have different positions within the university, they have their history. So,
when I joined the writing group, I was quite new at the university, so for me it was about creating a new culture in the institution that I joined.’ (IN1)

‘You know me, I quite like rebellion, but I didn’t see it as rebellious, I saw it as, in a way, completely the opposite, because...despite the fact there is no expectation here, that seems to be a dysfunctional thing with this institution, there is a sense that what we were doing is exactly what we were supposed to be doing.’ (IN2)

In contrast, in her interview, Ruth chose ‘rebellion’ as the first word that did resonate:

‘The [first] one I will choose is ‘rebellion’. I think the writing group was utterly counter-cultural; it rebelled against the orthodoxies in higher education that somehow it’s a guilty pleasure to write...It created a space for people to write that was physical, community-oriented and...somehow that held people together and that was the counter-cultural narrative.’ (IN3)

Thus, the significance of the community that the writing group became was clear, but the ways in which this functioned for different participants was a notable feature of the data.

4.2.2.5 Producing writing

For each member of the writing group, a primary motivation for participating was the desire to find the time to write uninterrupted. It was therefore important to examine the data to see the extent to which this aim was achieved. The planning sheets that were completed at the start and end of each session tell the story of each individual’s progress with their writing projects. In summary, writing was produced directly as a result of participation in the group, but the exact nature and extent of the writing varied.

In Chapter Two it was noted that a common measure of the success of a writing intervention is the number of publications produced by its participants. On this measure alone, the planning sheets record the participants who completed and submitted journal articles during the course of the writing group’s existence, as shown in Table 11.
Table 10 Total articles completed and submitted by participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>No. of articles submitted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, what is captured here is simply the submitted outputs of members of the group; the data captured a richer picture of ‘productivity’. Firstly, some members of the group were working on longer-term projects. Four of us were completing doctoral level studies and one a Master’s, alongside our other writing projects. Naturally, this limited the number of completed projects recorded in our planning sheets. Secondly, as section 4.2.2.1 noted, what counted as ‘writing’ and the ways in which ‘productivity’ was defined, became broader as the group established itself. This is reflected in the planning sheets, in which short-term, session-focused goals were set and achieved, demonstrating progress with longer-term projects. Keeping ‘big-picture’ plans in mind, targets were set for each of the morning and afternoon sessions, with achievements noted:

- **Set up JiME article template and lay out contents for the paper Achieved**
- **Start bringing current material and data into template to structure writing and start commenting on existing writing Achieved** (Joel, PS1)
- **Plan ‘Demographics’ section Achieved**
- **First draft of ‘Demographics’ section [for my Master’s report] Achieved** (Esther, PS3)
- **Write the context section of the IJAD paper Achieved**
- **Draft the introduction for the IJAD paper Achieved** (Me, PS5)

There were, however, other occasions on which plans were not achieved. For example, one planning sheet records David’s intention to complete the editing of a co-authored paper during the morning session and then continue with his PhD commentary in the afternoon. However, his planning sheet recorded that he ‘didn’t do the PhD. I need to focus on this’ (David, PS8).
Overall, the planning sheets paint a picture of progress with writing, but they also record some false starts, derailments and changes of direction. Exploring the stories of three individuals in particular allows a greater depth of understanding of the challenges and triumphs of the group and the ways in which they contributed to the writing practices of the participants. Thus, this chapter now turns to the narratives of the three most regular attendees.
4.3 David’s story

David was a Course Leader and Senior Lecturer in the University’s School of Media Arts and Technology. When he joined the writing group, he was nearing the completion of his PhD. As part of this process he had published four articles and was now writing the connecting commentary to complete the PhD ready for submission. He also maintained his own blog, although he acknowledged that this had been rather neglected in recent months due to the more pressing priority of his PhD completion. David was invited to join the group as the result of his ongoing engagement with the Academic Development team, during which he had expressed his desire to write and his frustration at the lack of time available to him to do so. He became the most regular attendee, convening sessions in Ruth’s absence when the group continued its existence beyond the first academic year that is the focus of this study.

4.3.1 David as a writer

From the start, David positioned himself as a writer whose attempts to write were frustrated by circumstances that were largely beyond his control. His first narrative, which occurred right at the start of the writing group’s first session, was in his discussion with another group member, Philip, about his Writing BASE (See Appendix 6):

‘I’ve been trying to explain to my supervisors when they start nagging me; it’s like, I haven’t done anything for three months because I am already at the limit...They take slices out of the time you have got, so you feel like they are stealing from you. Like, I’ve just got a couple of hours, but I have to do this admin...

...And the thing is, you don’t - like I’m constantly aware...of literature I want to read. I’ve got piles [of reading], I’ve got a huge backlog of stuff I want - that I don’t have time to read...

...I’m just about – I’m at the point where I need to write up the commentary for it now and they had said I need to write five papers, but now I only need to write four, so actually....

(David, WG1 T1)

Two external relationships were problematic for David in terms of his writing development. This first was his relationship with his PhD supervisors, who he
consistently presented as more obstructive than supportive in his narratives at various times across the writing group sessions. The second was the otherwise nameless ‘they’ who seemed to represent those who in one way or another placed institutional demands upon his time. His language was quite emphatic as he talked of ‘them’ taking ‘slices out of the time’ and ‘stealing’ time from him. This meant that although ‘I have so much I could be writing about, I have papers coming out of my ears’ (David, EM3.3), he simply did not have the time to get the writing done. What was not clear was whether this is a tension between his desire to write and the lack of time to do so, or the institutional expectation to write versus the reality of time available. David clarified his perspective on this in his post-group interview:

‘There is no expectation to write, there is no expectation to do research at all. I’ve had no pressure...nothing, absolutely nothing. I keep pushing for the only PhD person in our department to develop a research culture...but nothing...There’s no sense that this is a team of academics that should be engaged in research.’ (David, IN2)

Despite these frustrations, David had several publications to his name and in the writing groups he had clear targets for each session. He was one of the most focused participants in the group. His planning sheets recorded a range of activities that constituted writing for him. For example, in Writing Group 3, he noted that his blog ‘had been sidelined and I want to get to it’. He also wanted, during the same session to ‘summarise my PhD papers and identify a critical thread’ and, once completed to ‘tidy the text’. The mention of the blog as an activity to be scheduled during writing group time suggested that this more informal and personal writing project had significance for David and warranted the undivided attention that the writing group afforded it.

David’s identity as a writer was further revealed in his response to the music task in Writing Group 6 (see Appendix 4):

‘So, there’s this kind of massive castle floating on a cloud. You have to get up there with this ladder and there’s a big gate with a massive padlock on it and you can see the castle in the distance, and there’s me saying, “Gosh, anyone fancy a pint?”. And so I guess it kind of signifies the point where you ask yourself, is it really worth all the effort just to get me into this fairy world, this fairytale kingdom, when you could just go and have a pint and enjoy your life?’ (David, WG6 T1)
Both the image (Figure 7) and the narrative seem to present the locked castle as a metaphor for an academic writing community from which he is currently excluded. This is interesting given the fact that he has already published in his field, but his representation of a ‘fairy tale kingdom’ suggests that he sees full acceptance into the traditional academic community as still beyond his grasp.

Figure 7 TK6 David

4.3.2 David’s experience of the writing group

In the early writing groups, David’s contributions to discussions centre, to a quite significant extent, on the many factors that act as a barrier to him finding time to write. The following extract followed an activity in which participants were asked to list a series of verbs that capture the main activities of their academic role:

‘Um, a little bit of teaching and very little researching. Dealing and coping is the primary activity that I see, that I find myself doing, on a personal and on a kind of leadership level as well, but mostly on a personal level, I think.’ (David, WG3 TR2)

However, the writing group quickly has an impact on the way that David sees the potential of writing as an activity that may in fact be possible as part of his role. For him, one major impact of his participation in the group was the way that he thought about writing:

‘It’s interesting you know because [the writing group] is in my diary and I’m really vociferous about making time, blocking it out – and you know even this morning on the way in I’m kind of rehearsing what I am going to write, so I think that, you know, and I was picking up other things and thinking, you know, ooh, I could feed that in there. So, there is still a process of writing going on, because there is a space for where it is going to manifest if that makes sense... I don’t actually get to write outside, but on the other hand I’ve done quite a lot in terms of planning.’ (David, WG3 T1)

This connection between his thinking outside of the group and his activity during it occurred several times in David’s reflections on the role of the group in developing his
writing. What seemed to be significant was that the session became the place that all his
activity outside the group could feed into and be transformed into actual writing.
Although David would largely continue to say that he was unable to find the time to
write outside the group, the reality was that a great deal of activity occurred between
sessions that bore fruit in the group itself. Ultimately, David did in fact reach a point
where he found himself writing between groups, noting that ‘I seem to recall there
being work done at home…at first, I didn’t do anything at all, and then suddenly I wrote
loads of stuff’ (David, WG6 TR2).

Another feature of David’s narratives suggests that one function of the group is that it is
a space for him to rehearse his ideas. The ‘scenes’ in the following narrative record two
ways in which he draws on the other members of the group in this way:

**The process**

‘It’s interesting because what I’m trying to do, I’m reading the papers and just writing
notes in Mendeley and then copying them into the headings in the hope that I will have
something which will start to look – that will pull out…the common threads that they all
hang from…

Here, David articulates the process he has adopted to tackle a problem he has
encountered in his writing, which is the need to write a commentary that connects
together the articles he has produced for his PhD. At this point in the transcript, there
are affirmations from other group members, simply in the form of ‘Mmm’ and ‘yes’, but
enough to encourage him to move on to test out the core concept that he thinks he has
identified. The narrative is presented in brief below but was more extensive in its
rehearsal of his argument:

**The concept**

AND it’s to do with this, um, there’s two aspects coming out of it. One is that our
narratives our incorrect, our narratives are wrong, not the students…In order to really
understand project-based learning, you have to differentiate it from problem-based
learning…Actually, this sees projects as an ontological thing, a lived experience.’ (David,
WG3 TR2).

For David, the writing group seemed to offer a space that was not on offer amongst his
colleagues in his department (he had earlier noted that he was the only ‘research-active’
academic in his team) and it seemed to provide a momentum for his writing that had
been lacking previously. By the end of Writing Group 4, during which he had continued
to work on his commentary, David reported that, ‘I think I have a sense of how to
theoretically frame the commentary’. The writing group environment had unlocked both
a process and concept that had been troubling him for some time.

For David, then, the presence of like-minded colleagues was an important factor in his
writing development, something that featured on several occasions in his narratives.
Both his CIQs, one completed early on in the group’s existence and one towards the end
of the research period, reflected this:

‘It feels like I am among friends, people who share my goals and who can help keep me
on track. I guess it’s a bit like an alternative writers’ AA’. (David, CIQ1)

‘Being able to discuss writing that you are working, getting advice and input. Plus, now
we have begun to read each other’s work, I feel this is really valuable.’ (David, CIQ2)

A recurring theme in David’s planning sheets was a stark contrast between his feelings
about writing between sessions, and the way he felt about the writing group sessions
themselves. The former was a consistent source of frustration and distraction; the latter
was entirely the opposite:

‘[It’s] easier to get started, and I look forward to the opportunity to write. There is always
satisfaction at the end of the day’ (David, PS7).

4.3.3 David: Challenges, tensions and disappointments

There is no doubt that the writing group offered David space and time in which to write
and that he wrote more and enjoyed writing more as a result. What did not change was
his ongoing frustration with the other aspects of his role that he felt detracted from
both writing and teaching. For David this was often expressed quite forcefully in his
narratives:

‘[The problem] is the excessive workload that I have to manage and the complete lack of
time. The constant prioritizing of nonsense. It just means that [writing] always gets put
on the backburner because…there’s no operational need…So, this constant task
switching and juggling and time slicing makes it impossible to just sit and think and kind
of work through issues to do with the writing.’ (David, WG6 TR 3).
Whilst David uses the phrase, ‘I have to manage’, he positions the responsibility for causing this workload at the operational level of the university. For him, it is institutional demands that cause his writing work to be marginalized. He also goes further than requiring time for the activity of writing; he recognizes the role of thinking and problem-solving in the writing process yet deems it ‘impossible’. For David, whilst the writing group provided valuable respite from the other demands of his role, it remained something of an oasis in the desert. In his first CIQ, he responded to the question, ‘What about being involved in the writing group has surprised you most?’:

‘That it doesn’t feel like work, how focused I can get in the right environment and how productive I can be.’ (David, CIQ1)

4.4 Ruth’s story

Ruth was Head of Academic Development and Professor of Research-informed Teaching in the institution where the research took place. In line with the Learning and Teaching Institute’s operational plan, she was tasked with increasing the number of publications by academics. Establishing the writing group was one response to this priority, and Ruth acted as convener and facilitator throughout. Ruth herself is an experienced writer, with multiple publications to her name. She had several writing projects in progress during the time that this research took place, both individual and collaborative. The inclusion of Ruth’s story acknowledges that, despite her senior role in the University, her participation in the writing group often positioned her in ways that were remarkably similar to her more junior colleagues.

4.4.1 Ruth as a writer

Ruth’s poem (Figure 8) sets the scene for her narrative about herself as a writer. It establishes the way in which her writing identity is deeply embedded in personal and professional contexts. Her love of ‘coffee, wine, books’ crosses both contexts, perhaps
reflecting that the spaces in which she writes are sometimes at home and sometimes at work. The second half of the poem reflects some of the tensions of the professional context. The ‘fear of being swamped’, the hope of ‘fresh thoughts, completion and new angles’ all hint at the pressure to produce and contribute encountered by an experienced academic. The poem is also framed by the mixed emotions about writing that are evident in several of Ruth’s narratives, located in writing group session transcripts, critical incident questionnaires and email reflections. ‘Exuberance’ and ‘joy’ are tempered by ‘fear’ and ‘frustration’ both in the poem and in Ruth’s narrative as a whole.

For example, in the first writing group session, participants completed and then discussed their ‘Writing BASE’ (Sword, 2017; see also Appendix 6). In the subsequent discussion with other participants, Ruth’s comments focused primarily on the emotions she associated with writing, with only minimal reference to the other elements of the BASE. At this point, the emotions expressed were almost exclusively negative:

‘Emotionally, I’m perhaps less excited than [other members of the group] are. I sort of have mixed feelings – when I hit a wall, you know, and I can’t quite get through it. So sometimes I’m excited but slightly drained by it and the environment and feeling tired and trying to push through on low energy’ (Ruth, WG1 T3)

In positioning herself in relation to other members of the group, Ruth recognizes that her experience as a writer brings with it the challenges of continuing to meet the expectation to publish. This, at times, comes at the cost of both energy and enjoyment.

Similarly, when Ruth discusses how she sees herself in terms of the quality of crafting her writing, there is a degree of uncertainty, perhaps surprising for someone of her experience. She says that when she compares herself to others who write in her field, she feels that she has ‘some distance to travel’. On this occasion, then, Ruth positions herself in relation to those she regards as more experienced than her and finds herself wanting as she cites the names of particular authors that she admires. As a writer, it seems that Ruth sees an identity for herself within her discipline, but one that is shifting and changing both in relation to others and her own emotions.

Although she expresses some reservations, however, Ruth appears to have well-established processes for tackling writing projects; she describes folders on her
computer that contain multiple, dated drafts of each article she is working on. She never submits a journal article that she has not had ‘loads of feedback on’. She aims to write fluently, without editing as she goes along, recognizing that she writes ‘much more and much better if I just spill my guts on paper’. There is a sense here that Ruth knows what works best for her even if it is not always possible to achieve the ideal. On occasions during the writing group, Ruth speaks at length about the writing process, and how she tackles projects. These narratives were further discussed in section 4.2.2, as examples of the theme ‘making the tacit explicit’, but it is worth noting here that they offer clear evidence of an experienced writer at work. In these narrative passages, Ruth performs the role of the ‘expert’ making her practices and processes explicit for others in the group.

4.4.2 Ruth’s experience of the writing group

Despite this experience, Ruth’s narrative offers some clear evidence of the role of the writing group in further developing her writing practices. Changes were apparent right from the start and are captured in this extended narrative from her email reflection after the first writing group. For the purposes of analysis, the narrative is reproduced here as a series of ‘scenes’ that tell the story:

The power of retreating

I can’t quite capture how magic it is to spend a few silent hours writing with friends and colleagues you like and trust. Words and phrases like peaceful, intentional, church-without-a-sermon, productive, bonding and creative spring to mind. There is something completely centring about writing in silence, for no other purpose than to carve out a clear line of argument and structure your thoughts about theories and evidence that are meaningful to you.

There is a striking shift in emotions here. In stark contrast to the emotions expressed above, this extract reflects a peaceful, almost meditative feeling during the writing group. It results in a purpose for writing, but one that is some distance from the rather wearier need to produce reflected in the second half of Ruth’s poem. Instead, the writing is meaningful to Ruth personally, and it is this that seems to release the energy and focus to write.
The power of distraction

Yet, when I sit at my desk at home or at work to write, I find myself distracted. The dog needs to go out. I need another cup of coffee. A Facebook push notification intrudes. Shall I just check my emails? I know I was not entirely devoid of distraction in the retreat but I felt much more focused.

The distractions Ruth describes here mirror the fact that this short interlude in the narrative interrupts the more meditative flow of the first ‘scene’. Here is an acknowledgement that distractions are ever-present interruptions to the flow of writing. Again, the personal and the professional interweave – the dog, the coffee and the email interruptions are all recorded here.

The contradictions of academic life

This is the bit of my life as an academic that I love the most, and yet I find the hardest to carve out space to do. Maybe that is slightly romanticised because sometimes I get sick of writing or constrained by the samey-ness or clunky-ness of tired sentences, especially about the virtue of formative assessment.

In this scene, Ruth moves away from the distraction and back towards a reflection on the writing retreat. However, she pauses en route to acknowledge the contradictions in her writing life. It is interesting to note that she is tired both by the area of the discipline about which she has written most (formative assessment), but also the constraints on creativity that academic writing can produce.

The power of retreating

So in the retreat, I felt forced to focus through bonds of trust and community, and the intentional and bounded space to write. I feel accountable in chatting to a partner after each block of writing about how it has gone. It is bounded space, which feels good but almost too brief an encounter, leaving you wanting to linger for longer over your writing, even with the lure of a celebratory glass of red wine in the pub afterwards.

(Ruth, EM1.3; post WG1)

Here Ruth returns to her theme of the power of the writing group as a place of retreat. In this scene she explores the idea of the group as a community, with trust and accountability singled out as significant features. This scene also introduces the concept of the group as a ‘bounded space’ and it is her active engagement in the shaping of this space that has proved instrumental in transforming her emotions and motivating her to write.
The theme of emotions is repeatedly evident in Ruth’s narrative. There is a pattern to these: she often begins a writing group session with negative emotions, describing herself as anxious and referring on more than one occasion to feeling guilty about carving out time to write. However, discussions at the end of a day of writing feature such comments as, ‘So I’ve really enjoyed it; I love sitting here and writing’ and ‘I’m having quite a lot of fun with it...I feel as though I’ve made progress and enjoyed it’. At the end of one session, she comments:

‘So that’s me. How do I feel about [my writing]? Better than I did this morning’ (Ruth, WG4 T3)

However, even in the penultimate session, when we revisited the Writing BASE to see whether our habits had changed, Ruth described her emotions as ‘more of a sigh and a groan than pure pleasure’ (WG9 T1).

Whilst Ruth’s narrative is underpinned throughout by strong emotions, it is also clear that the writing group has played a role in her writing more frequently both in and beyond the group sessions. Her email reflection after the first session records the completion and submission of an article during the session itself, but also notes that this ‘prompted me to finish another article’ and that she has ‘done a tiny bit of work on the lecture capture paper’. This increased productivity is maintained; by the start of Writing Group 4, for example, Ruth has submitted three papers and drafted a fourth; by Writing Group 10, she is able to record that her writing during 2018 amounts to four peer reviewed articles and one chapter published, with three further peer reviewed articles in review. She compares this to ‘two chapters in 2017 and one peer reviewed article and 2 magaziney ones in 2016’. Ruth’s first Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ1.4) clearly attributes this momentum to the Writing group, noting that it ‘generates much more sustainable and ambitious writing plans, and gets some way to accomplishing them’. In her second CIQ she states that what has surprised her most about the Writing group is:

‘that putting aside days influences productivity. Although I am not sure you can attribute everything to writing groups, it has changed the focus of my work.’ (Ruth, CIQ2.4)

It is clear, then, that being part of the writing group has brought about significant changes for Ruth and further exploration of her narrative helps to reveal the nature of these changes and the possible factors that account for them. At the start of several
writing groups, we posed the question, ‘What have been the significant changes in your approach to writing, talking or thinking about it?’ Ruth’s responses highlight several changes. At the start of the second meeting of the group, she commented:

‘I just find myself writing a bit more and recognizing different kinds of writing... and I’m beginning to see that the main part of my job is writing and I’m just much more intentional since we had that [first] writing group.’ (Ruth, WG2 TR1)

In subsequent sessions, Ruth notes that writing has ‘become more prominent in my thinking’ and that ‘it is much more of a priority. I do the writing first’. In fact, by Writing Group 7, Ruth simply asserts that writing ‘is my top priority’.

This shift to seeing writing as a priority is underpinned by several key factors. In particular, Ruth’s view of the writing group as a ‘bounded space’ is a recurring theme, and this space has several important characteristics:

‘I love the purposefulness of the day, the bonds of a shared purpose across individual research projects. On balance, what I find most engaging is the fact that it is so counter-cultural – silence, not noise, focus not fragmentation, community not individuality.’ (Ruth, CIQ1.4)

In this first CIQ, written after four writing group meetings, there is a sense that, for Ruth, the group has clear significance; it has released her to write, given her like-minded colleagues to share the journey and strengthened her sense of writing purpose. The extent to which she values writing alongside others is a recurrent theme in her narrative. Partly, this was about feeling ‘accountable in chatting to a partner after each block of writing about how it has gone’. However, there was perhaps something more profound than this, too. The extract above also suggests that the sense of community adds an important dimension; it legitimizes writing as a valuable and valid activity.

A second change is Ruth’s definition of what she sees as writing, which broadens as time passes. She talks of ‘recognising different kinds of writing; so now when I’m editing, I see that as writing’; at the start of one session she reports analyzing data for a research paper as part of her writing activities. Finally, she notes that she has become increasingly aware of ‘how all my work – writing and teaching – is connected. [A talk] feeds into a book, a book feeds into [a talk] etc’. This broader view of what counts as writing fed into the activities that Ruth undertook during writing group sessions. Her planning sheets variously reveal drafting articles, peer reviewing, analyzing data and
preparatory reading, suggesting that she has begun to see each of these as intrinsic to
the writing process and therefore valid activities for a writing group session.

For Ruth, there were also some wider benefits of participation in the group, and, bearing
in mind the strategic priority the group was designed to address, these are worth noting
here. Early in the group’s existence, the University began the process of identifying
which units of assessment would be included in the REF submission for 2020. The
process was almost entirely controlled by the University’s Research and Innovation
department, which has historically disregarded pedagogic research. Ruth noted that
after the first writing group, she had felt confident enough to act on her conviction that
she should challenge Research and Innovation’s position and propose an Education unit
of assessment:

‘So, I went and saw the Vice Chancellor and I said, look, these are the publications we’ve
got in train, we have a writing group meeting once a month, we’re going to get this done
and I want to take on the challenge of leading it. I wouldn’t have had the confidence
without the writing group.’ (Ruth, WG2 T1)

The journey towards succeeding in the inclusion of an Education unit of submission
(although, disappointingly, it was ultimately excluded at a later stage) took some time,
and Ruth reported on more than one subsequent occasion that the existence of the
writing group made her ‘much more willing to take on Research and Innovation’.

4.4.3 Ruth: Challenges, tensions and disappointments

It is clear so far that the writing group was a largely positive experience for Ruth and
that its influence on her writing was significant. However, there remained some
frustrations and these, too, are significant, because they allude to the stubbornly
persistent challenges that Ruth experienced as she
continued to carve out a
writing identity in her
academic role. Perhaps the
most difficult of these
challenges, which manifested
itself in several different

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My field notes 2
‘At the end of the session, Adam entered the room.
We hadn’t finished our conversation, but he wanted
to speak to Ruth...The option apparently wasn’t there
for us to say, “No, we’re not done, Ruth can’t talk to
you yet. It felt like a perfect example of the tension
we face here: there is the need to write, yet the
perception is that it is a luxury that can be
interrupted.’
ways, was the perceptions of others about both the act of writing in general and the existence of the writing group in particular. One incident that occurred in the second meeting of the group was captured in both my field notes and in Ruth’s first CIQ. Adam’s interruptions became a regular feature of the group, and Ruth captured her own frustrations several weeks later:

‘At first I thought it was an over-reaction when a colleague criticised my boss for pulling me out of the group before it ended. Then the next retreat I had to phone him about something urgent (yet not urgent); then there are spikey emails from others about not booking the room. There is a pattern of incursions into the time. We have done well having it on site, but it is interesting how outsiders cannot resist disrupting it.’ (Ruth, CIQ1.4)

On another occasion, my field notes record Ruth returning to the room after yet another interruption and scribbling me a note: ‘Protecting the space is hard’. Thus, for Ruth, as leader of the group, and with responsibility for developing a culture of writing across the University, there was an ongoing frustration with the mixed messages that seemed to come from management level about the importance of time for writing and research.

On more than one occasion she described her motivation for writing coming from ‘finding writing an active institutional rebellion’ (WG9 T1). There was an ongoing struggle in Ruth’s relationship with writing in the context of her role as Professor of Research Informed Teaching. She seemed to see it simultaneously as a contractual obligation and something that she felt guilty about taking time out to do; it was a potential source of pleasure and yet something that had the ability to drain her energy. The conflict between the individual and the institutional remained consistently apparent:

‘I prioritise [writing] above everything else. So, what’s stopping me? Other stuff, juggling stuff, too many projects, lacking focus, dropping balls. And then, what’s stopping me? Nothing…but I feel guilty about dropping the balls...’ (WG7 T1)
A second aspect of Ruth’s experience related to her emotions around writing. Whilst the positive impact of the writing group in this respect has previously been noted, it should also be acknowledged that the overall picture was quite complex. This was captured most poignantly in two of the creative exercises that were used at the start of writing group sessions (See Appendix 4).

In the postcard activity (Figure 9), Ruth expresses the ebb and flow between the positive and negative emotions that influence her writing. It is interesting that this activity came after two sessions of the writing group that had been disrupted by interruptions of others. In conflict with her growing sense that writing was her top priority was the sense that she ought to be doing things that others would regard as more valuable work. This conflict has a direct effect on the emotions and Ruth acknowledges the difficulty of writing when she is ‘stressed and anxious’. In this particular extract, the ‘shadow side’ of writing seems to have resurfaced, suggesting that, however positive the writing group sessions were, the difficult emotions lingered and were easily aroused.

Ruth’s response to music stimulus in Writing Group 6 (TK6, see Appendix 4) captured similar highs and lows: the ‘delight in the writing and getting published’ contrasted with the feeling of being in the ‘twilight’ of her career, in which she described herself as like a rabbit in headlights, ‘poised on the edge of the road’ in danger of getting run over by a car before she had written all that she wanted to say. Thus, whilst her participation in the writing group had undoubtedly been of real benefit and enjoyment, some of Ruth’s frustrations and uncertainties ultimately remained.
4.5 Micah’s story

Micah was a Senior Lecturer in Football Studies and was relatively new to the university when he joined the writing group. Ruth invited Micah to join after he attended several of a series of writing workshops run by the Learning and Teaching Institute. Micah had a PhD and several publications and conference presentations to his name, but was new to the UK university sector, having completed his studies overseas, and English was his third language.

4.5.1 Micah as a writer

Micah first joined the writing group at its fourth meeting; as a result, he did not complete the Writing BASE (Appendix 6) or the bio-poem that others completed during earlier sessions. This was one of the challenges posed by the rather fluid nature of the group’s membership when the process of data analysis began. However, I had conducted some interviews with participants of the writing workshop series that Micah attended, and had his permission to use the data in his writing group story. In this interview, Micah acknowledged that he was still shaping his lecturing role and exploring how best to find a way to make space for writing and research.

When asked about the emotions he most associated with writing, Micah noted ‘concern’ and ‘excitement’:

‘The concern, somehow it’s always there in my brain, you know, that I have to, I should write. Although most of the day I do other things, so maybe there’s a bit of concern. And then excitement relates to certain periods of writing when you find out new things or you write [an] interesting sentence or when you publish something.’ (Writing Workshop interview with Micah)

He was also clear that there was, for him, an expectation that he should write, that ‘if you want to be in this career, then if you don’t publish, you perish...so probably in a way it’s structural’. Micah felt that he had brought this expectation with him from his previous university (where he had completed his PhD), rather than seeing it as a feature of his current context. He acknowledged that this may have been because he was new to the university, but at this point, his main pressure to write seemed to come from himself and his desire to be a ‘high-level lecturer’, able to ‘integrate my own research
results into my lectures’. For Micah, the teaching, research and writing aspects of his academic role were clearly and inextricably linked.

Micah tended to talk in terms of writing and research as synonymous; he talked about both the writing workshops and the writing group as helping his ‘understanding regarding the whole research process’ (WG4 T1). His activities during the writing group largely focused on data analysis in preparation for an article he was writing, rather than on the writing itself. For example, he listened to interviews, developed a coding frame and identified further reading. He had a systematic approach, and writing appeared to be the final stage in the process, rather than something that occurred throughout. He also used quite mechanical language to describe the research and writing process; he described the workshops and the group as places where he was introduced to the ‘tools’ of writing, seeing them as an opportunity to build his skills.

4.5.2 Micah’s experience of the writing group

Micah had a specific project that he was working on for the duration of the writing group meetings, which was an article and accompanying conference presentation relating to his research about the professionalisation of sport. In the group meetings he worked on various aspects of this. He had a methodical approach, often working with headphones on, and demonstrated a high level of self-discipline at times when others in the group were distracted.

At lunchtime on the day of his first attendance at the writing group, Micah commented on the writing environment, comparing it to week-long writing retreats he had attended in Finland when he was writing his PhD. For Micah, the group allowed the same sense of focus and lack of distraction. This was a recurring theme in Micah’s comments on the benefits of the writing group; he contrasted the environment with that of his busy office where it was hard to write because of regular distractions. For him, the writing group offered an environment that he found more ‘efficient’ and ‘productive’.

Despite joining the group at a later stage to others, including both Ruth and David, Micah was an active participant in discussions right from the start. My field notes from Writing Group 4 note that:
‘Micah has joined today – but he is straight into the discussions. Is this because he has experience with writing, so he is comfortable with the discourse?’

It may also have been the case that the group, in gradually becoming a community of writers, was able to offer Micah a welcoming space in which he felt able to contribute from the beginning.

Close analysis of the data from the writing groups seems to reveal two different dimensions of Micah’s identity as a writer. As noted in section 4.4.1, he seemed to identify more as a researcher than a writer. His activities and comments during the writing group sessions confirmed this. There are no occasions in the data when Micah describes his activity as ‘writing’; instead the tasks he completes are more recognizable as stages in the research process. At several points in the field notes, I reflect on the possible explanations for this: procrastination; a lack of confidence with writing; a systematic approach to research established during his PhD studies.

However, several of the creative tasks at the start of the writing group sessions reveal a different dimension altogether. Despite English being neither Micah’s first or second language, his participation in several of the creative tasks that were used at the start of each writing group demonstrated his creativity and a keen awareness of audience and genre. For example, in Writing Group 5, participants selected a postcard image (Figure 10) and reflected on how it related to their hopes and dreams about their writing. Micah’s use of the word ‘harmony’ reveals a potentially positive relationship with writing, although its distance perhaps suggests this as an aspiration rather than an immediate reality. He is aware both of the broad landscape of a piece of writing and its finer detail. There is a hint of struggle in his acknowledgement that the ‘distance can be hard and far away’, although the possibilities of writing are potentially endless.
In addition to the beach postcard reflection, Micah’s response to a music task showed evidence of figurative language, describing the act of writing through metaphor, referring to the conductor of an orchestra:

‘It just came to my mind in the music towards the end, maybe it’s related to writing in the sense that you have to lead, you have to be a good leader of yourself, be responsible for what you’re doing and know what you’re doing.’ (WG6 T1)

In contrast, another task asked participants to describe an artefact (in this case, a teapot) in the language of their discipline. On this occasion, Micah stated that he had opted for the ‘quite dry language of sociology’ (WG4 T1), and his writing began:

‘If you want to understand how to use the object on the table, known as a teapot...we have to bear in mind the social and cultural context in which it has developed.’ (WG4 T1)

Micah seemed able to confidently switch between genres, depending on the demands of the task, and had a clear awareness of the expectations and conventions of his own discipline. The creative tasks seemed to allow Micah the opportunity to play around with language a little, releasing potential for other ways of approaching his more formal writing activities.

The planning sheets that Micah completed at the start of each session reveal some gradual changes in his thinking about writing. On two occasions he notes the ‘positive pressure’ (PS5, PS6) of the group; reporting on progress between groups added a sense of accountability that motivated him. In addition, he described being ‘more excited about writing’ (PS5) and noted that ‘writing is on my mind continuously’.

4.5.3 Micah: Challenges, tensions and disappointments

For Micah, perhaps the main challenge of the group came from the fact that English was not his first language. On more than one occasion he noted that this prevented him from completing the creative tasks in the time available (although others in the group were continually impressed by his contributions). On other occasions, he required clarification of some of the concepts others were discussing in their writing. However, the data suggests that this apparent language barrier in fact proved to be highly beneficial for both Micah and others. This is apparent in the following exchange. Ruth had just read an extract from the draft of an article she was writing, and Micah questioned a particular concept:
**Micah:** Er, what do you mean by the contingent approach?

**Ruth:** We’ve discussed it earlier in the paper, but basically it means that actually the whole exercise of being a professional doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Other things come in, it’s complicated. It’s contingent.

**Micah:** So, it’s happening in a context?

**Ruth:** Yes, it does...

**Micah:** Does it mean also, contingent, kind of incremental?

**Ruth:** No you mean that it’s contingent – it means a whole lot of other things come in all the time, so it’s not like you have one task and you finish it, tick, but actually some other things come in to subvert it, change it, change the nature of the task so it’s always kind of a moving target, ambivalent, because context influences people (WG7 T2)

In this exchange, Micah asks for and receives clarification of a concept. Simultaneously, Ruth has to adapt her first explanation, refining it to make it more explicit in order that Micah might better understand it. Both gain in equal measure from the interaction.

### 4.6 The end of a chapter

During Writing Group 9, participants repeated the Writing BASE (Sword, 2017; Appendix 6) task that they had first completed at the start of their participation in the writing group. They were asked to reflect on the changes they had observed in each aspect of the BASE over the course of their group membership. In addition, towards the end of the research period, a second CIQ was sent to participants. In response to the final question (‘What about being involved in the writing group has surprised you most?’), David wrote:

> ‘I guess it would be the idea that it’s extremely productive, but more than that, how addictive it is. I have more things I want to write and now, rather than think that I won’t have time, I am getting them done and spending the time to write them. This includes the blog I have, which I have returned to with renewed vigour.’ (David; CIQ2.3)

David’s reference to the group’s positive effect on his productivity was echoed by others and was discussed in detail in section 4.2.2.5. In addition, his CIQ response highlights a greater intentionality in his approach and the return to writing his blog suggests a renewed sense of enjoyment of writing. Naomi also noted a change in her approach, a
greater freedom to write, which seemed to be released in the writing group environment:

‘Even in a room full of tapping keyboards my level of concentration was deep. I was given permission, it seemed, to have the space and time to write whatever flowed or what came to mind at the moment, and I left my guilt outside of the room.’ (Naomi; CIQ2.2)

Joel referred to the sense of community the group provided:

‘I like the small failures (some sighing, taking a minute break, sharing a lack of productivity, or shifting to another activity like reading – or swearing!). It helps to relieve some of one’s own anxiety when the writing does not flow well, or you are stuck on the same sentence for ages. It’s a nice reminder that we are all humans and not machines, and it is okay to struggle with writing.’ (Joel; CIQ2.1)

In the final interviews, two of the participants reflected that the writing group had, ultimately, also been productive:

I think the changes it brought about were a much more dogged, determined, regular routine around writing. I think it sort of foregrounded the fact that writing mattered. I thought it made me immensely productive, it was the most productive year of writing I’ve had ever, so I can’t but attribute it partly to that, that sense that somehow that thing, the writing group solidified my identity as a writer, made me feel it was ok to write, made me feel quite joyful about writing, even though sometimes I sighed, there’s a sense in which the writing group created the space for productivity and for pushing on. (Ruth, IN3)

Productivity obviously was kind of key because it gave key points where time was blocked out and that time was sitting down and concentrating.... So yes, it was very productive, it’s a shame it was just writing my PhD – I could have written some more interesting things. So the thinking about writing is kind of linked to that because what it does it creates the sense of, well I’ve got this identity of someone who’s a writer, I’ve got this way of being productive so now I’m thinking about what I’m going to write. (David, IN2)

What is clear from these reflections is that it was the space and community that the writing group provided that enabled writing to be produced. Micah described it as becoming ‘more conscious of the writing environment that I can write in very well’ (Micah, IN1).

However, there were continued frustrations and challenges with writing, which persisted to the end. For David, whilst the group was a welcome space in which to write, and for which he carefully prepared, he continued to find it ‘impossible to do any writing at all’ (David, PS9) outside of the group. Ruth, whilst acknowledging greater discipline with her writing and more often ‘clearing space to write’ still wrote:
‘Lately, I have struggled to concentrate and focus on doing one thing, I am sighing more and feeling slightly burned out.’ (Ruth; CIQ2.4)

The writing group had provided space to write, and had changed some aspects of our practices, but there were some challenges that it had not been able to entirely overcome.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has told the stories of the writing group and its participants through a series of narratives interwoven with my interpretations as a participant researcher. This is consistent with an ethnographic approach to a case study, which aims to preserve participants’ words, whilst acknowledging that the contribution of the researcher brings an additional perspective. The group’s story demonstrated that the writing group was a place where participants were able to think differently about writing; where the tacit became explicit; ideas and understanding were co-constructed; a community was built. These themes were also present in the individual narratives, which reveal some of the ways in which these participants’ writing practices changed over time. Furthermore, the narratives demonstrate that the role of writing and research gradually became a more established aspect of participants’ academic identities through their participation in the writing group. The significance of the social context was evident throughout; extended narratives were analysed to explore the ways in which these contributed to the changes that occurred.

These findings indicate that, for the participants in this study, the writing group became a significant space in the university and that their participation in it contributed to the development of their writing practices. Chapter Five discusses these findings in terms of what they reveal about these changes and the ways in which they influenced participants’ wider academic identities. It also discusses what the findings reveal about the nature of the writing space that the writing group occupied. Finally, it explores the ways in which these both were and could be significant not just for the writing group participants, but for the wider institutional context.
Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings in the light of the research questions posed for this study and in relation to the existing literature. The aim of the study was to explore the potential of a writing group as a means of stimulating academics’ writing. The main research question asked:

What is the role of a writing group in the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices?

Two sub-questions sought to establish the nature of the changes in practice that occurred and the importance of the relationship between the writing group and its individual participants on the development of these practices:

1. How do the writing practices of group members change over time?
2. What factors might account for these changes?

These questions rested on the assumption that writing practices would change, and that it would be possible to identify the factors that accounted for these changes. This supposition drew on the findings of McGrail et al. (2006), whose study concluded that writing groups were effective not just in increasing publication rates, but also in developing writing skills, building momentum for writing and positively impacting other academic activities. This chapter will argue that the findings of this study do demonstrate ways in which the writing group re-shaped the academic writing practices of its participants, although there were factors that limited the extent to which these were sustained.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the ways in which, at the start of the research period, participants viewed writing in the wider context of their academic roles. This is an important starting point because it allows the changes in practice to be framed within the context of the institution in which the study occurred. Next, each of the research sub-questions is addressed in turn, to better understand the specific changes that occurred and the factors that underpinned them. The discussion then moves from
these specific aspects to a broader focus on the main research questions and thus the role that the writing group played in developing lecturers’ academic writing practices.

5.2 Starting points: participants’ perspectives on writing

The participants in this study had each been invited to join the writing group because they had expressed an interest in developing their academic writing. In this sense they had already identified themselves as writers. In addition, early sessions of the writing group revealed that lack of confidence about writing was not their primary concern. To an extent, this might be expected; participants had opted to join the group because they wanted to find the time to write, rather than because writing per se was something they found difficult. In addition, to varying degrees and in different ways, they saw writing as part of their academic role and cited the institutional context as the main barrier to doing so. At the start of the research period these participants tended to see teaching, research, writing, and administration tasks as largely occupying separate ‘boxes’ in their experience of the academic role. As a result, they found time to write regularly squeezed out by what seemed to be more pressing priorities. Table 9 (Section 4.2.1) demonstrated the many different activities that participants associated with their academic roles and the extent to which the particular focus of this study, writing for publication, was marginalised. For these participants, teaching was at the heart of their academic role with other activities more peripheral as a result.

This is consistent with King et al.’s (2014:264) description of the ‘disjuncture between expectation and lived reality’ and with the observation that academic identities have become increasingly fragmented in a neo-liberal, marketized higher education sector (Malcolm and Zukas, 2009). All this suggests that these academics differed from those in studies such as Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher (2009) and Gale (2011), which concluded that academics in new universities tended not to see writing and research as a significant part of their academic role. At first glance, it might seem that the participants in my study would be better described as ‘frustrated academics’ rather than as ‘reluctant’ (Gale, 2011). The desire to write seemed evident; in their experience, the context contrived to prevent it.
These factors were important in establishing the nature of the group and the kinds of activities that were undertaken during the sessions. In contrast to other interventions (see, for example, Steinert et al., 2008; Grzybowski et al., 2003; Murray, 2002), a structured focus on writing skills was not a priority for the writing group in this study. In this sense, the writing group was not a writing intervention, but rather an opportunity to write. From the start, the group aimed to create a space in which writing would occur, rather than an intentional strategy for developing the skill of writing for publication.

Participants’ early discussions about their writing suggested that they saw the writing group as a space in which they might focus on writing projects that could result in publication. The tension between their desire to write (as something that they saw, at least to some extent, as a part of their academic responsibilities) and the opportunity to do so was regularly expressed in terms of frustration with institutional expectations. One possible explanation for this lies in the studies that have suggested that the foundations for building a research role tend not to be firmly established in newer universities (Gale, 2011; Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009). However, these two studies presented a linear picture; making time for research and writing did not seem consistent with the ways in which academics perceive the values and priorities of the institution. The data for my study present a more complex landscape. Whilst an improved ranking in the REF was a stated institutional priority, in the participants’ experience, the expectations surrounding how this might be achieved did not seem to be clearly articulated by the university. The result was that, for these academics, both the place and the purpose of writing were unclear and at times it seemed to be viewed as a peripheral activity by both managers and peers.

From this perspective it can be argued that the writing group was a necessary step in supporting academics to deal with the competing priorities of the institution. In this sense, the group’s purpose could be consistent with McLeod et al.’s (2012) understanding of containment theory. It had the potential to clarify the task of writing within the wider institutional context, making it possible for academics to overcome their existing anxieties about writing as a legitimate activity by creating the time and space to do so. From this starting point, the discussion now turns to the ways in which
the group both supported this activity and developed the writing practices of its participants.

5.3 Changes in practice

This study’s findings present clear evidence of the ways in which participants began to make subtle but significant adjustments to their writing practices. In summary the key changes related to the degree to which participants prioritised writing as an activity, an understanding about what constitutes writing and the ways in which participants talked and thought about writing.

5.3.1 Changing priorities

Firstly, there was a change in the level of priority participants afforded to their writing. This change was almost immediate as participants began to view writing from a different perspective. David described setting aside time before the group meetings to plan the writing he would do during them (Section 4.2.2); Joel followed up from the first meeting by resolving to intentionally book time away from his desk to write (Section 4.5.2). David also talked of making time for reading and planning between sessions, suggesting that his writing had become a more prominent part of his conscious thought outside of the meetings. For Ruth, the group was instrumental in re-establishing the place of writing in her academic role, and the time that she set aside for writing at other times increased significantly (Section 4.3.2). Thus, this study demonstrates that the writing group enabled participants to begin to view writing as a higher priority beyond the group itself.

One of the reasons for this was that the writing group began to establish writing as a legitimate academic activity. This is important in the context of the literature review’s findings, which noted that institutional constraints can marginalise the extent to which writing is seen as a priority within the wider remit of the academic role (Lopes et al., 2014; Gale, 2011). The prominence of this writing group as a regular occurrence in the diary made writing visible and of value, both to the group’s participants and to their colleagues.

In addition, once the activity of writing became a more focused priority, participants found themselves able to draw on the strategies that the writing group offered to
maintain some momentum outside of the group itself. There were practices established within the group that participants began to apply when they undertook writing outside of the group. These transferable practices, such as using planning sheets to set achievable goals, and working for uninterrupted periods with scheduled breaks, drew on the structure and discipline of the group sessions. Other studies have highlighted similar findings (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Pololi et al., 2004; Morss and Murray, 2001), suggesting that participants in similar writing initiatives were able to internalise practices from a writing retreat and apply them to writing activity in other contexts.

Thus, the writing group acted as a catalyst for writing both within and beyond the sessions and participants’ writing practices became more intentional as a result. However, this change in priority proved difficult to sustain. The final interviews with David, Micah and Ruth at the end of the research period demonstrated that they were once again finding the time for writing squeezed out by other activities and that the writing group had lost momentum. What this suggests is that academics begin to prioritise writing if they are part of a supported, in-institution group; when this is removed the priority diminishes. In some ways this outcome is disappointing; it demonstrates that the writing group had limited success in transforming the wider culture of the university. However, its potential for change is clear, making a strong case for writing groups as integral to a strategy for developing a writing culture, because their existence would raise the profile of writing across the institution.

5.3.2 What constitutes writing?

A further change in practice was that all things associated with writing became legitimate activities, both within and beyond the group sessions. For example, peer reviewing, analysing data, preparatory reading and writing blog posts were all activities that participants recorded on their planning sheets. In addition, the findings demonstrate that there were several occasions on which a discussion of writing led to a discussion of pedagogy and vice versa (Section 4.2.3). Writing influenced teaching in material ways; for example, when participants recontextualised activities from their writing group in seminars and lectures, or even ran their own writing groups with final year dissertation students. This contrasts with other studies of writing initiatives, in
which, with the exception of peer reviewing, these activities are not explored as part of the writing process. If similar types of activities did occur during other initiatives, they were not reported; the overriding aim of increasing the productivity of academics resulted in a focus on developing writing skills and productive writing habits.

The findings of this study indicate that broadening what counts as writing to include other, related activities in turn provides rich material for the writing itself. This is consistent with the view that the process and product of writing are intertwined (Adams St Pierre and Richardson, 2017). Ruth’s observation that an increasing awareness of the connections between her reading, writing and teaching activities (Section 4.2.2), had resulted in a more purposeful approach to her writing is a stark contrast to the literature about writing productivity. For example, Boice (1990), taking a psychological perspective, advocated that writing constitutes a separate activity that should be part of a strict regime; other aspects of the academic role should be set aside for the duration of a daily writing period. In addition, other studies (Moore, 2003; Morss and Murray, 2001; Murray, 2001) tend towards skills development as a key outcome.

In contrast, the socio-cultural perspective of my own study positions writing as a situated practice rather than as a set of skills to be acquired (Archer and Parker, 2016). It recognises the connection between ‘the writing process, its products and the institution in which they are produced’ (Roberts and Weston, 2014). This perspective enables a broader understanding of the nature of writing practices and highlights the connection between academics’ writing and their wider sense of academic identity. Each of the activities that occurred in the writing group was accepted as a legitimate part of the writing process. As a result, the data suggest that participants moved towards a more integrated sense of their academic identity, recognizing and intentionally setting out to exploit the connections between the teaching, research and writing aspects of their academic roles. Consequently, the benefit of this change in practice became more than simply writing-related. Roberts and Weston (2014) argued that a more integrated sense of identity enables the individual to exercise greater agency within their institutional structures. The data for my study demonstrate that there were some moves in this direction as individual participants took their writing practices beyond the group and into other aspects of their academic lives. Ruth’s willingness to argue for the inclusion of
an education unit in the university’s REF submission was one example (Section 4.2.2). However, other impacts, such as the discussions about pedagogy that fed back into participants’ classroom practices (Section 4.2.3), were also significant. They demonstrate the ways in which these more coherent academic identities offered participants constructive ways of working within the institutional constraints they had previously identified as barriers to their writing.

5.3.3 Talking and thinking about writing

A third change in practice related to the ways in which the writing group facilitated both thinking and talking about writing. As the task of writing moved from a solitary to a communal activity, so the opportunities for dialogue became increasingly significant. At the start these interactions often related to participants’ difficulties in finding the time to write, and there was a pre-occupation with institutional barriers. However, as the group became more established, there was a noticeable shift in the nature of the dialogue. For instance, the findings record many examples of the co-construction of ideas and understanding (Section 4.2.2.3). One recurring feature of these interactions is the way in which there is an interplay between the writing and the discussion, with each shaping the other. The discussion about ‘legitimate peripheral shaping’ (Section 4.2.2.3) and Micah’s request for clarification of the concept of a ‘contingent approach’ (Section 4.5.3) are both examples of the ways in which discussion and questioning contribute to the co-construction of difficult concepts through a peer discussion.

In this way, the group operated as a dialogic space that enabled participants to articulate, discuss and develop ideas through a continual interweaving of writing and discussion. Micah’s post-group interview (See Section 4.2.2.4) emphasised that the dialogue within the group was even more significant than simply providing a place for sharing and refining ideas. It was a space of co-production; whilst the final piece of writing may remain single-authored, there was a very real sense in which the writing community had made its contribution in shaping its arguments. Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher (2009) noted academics’ frustrations at the lack of time for discussion and debate in the normal course of academic activity. Not only did the writing group facilitate this kind of dialogue, it also provided the collaborative space in which
the ideas that emerged might be translated into participants’ writing projects. The connection between thinking and writing (Bean, 2011) was very evident, with the writing group having a positive impact on both.

In addition, the findings record several instances of extended narratives in which individual participants reflect on their writing. One example of this is Naomi’s narrative on the greater freedom she was beginning to find in her approach (Section 4.2.2.1); another is David’s articulation of the increasing integration of his reading and writing activities (Section 4.3.2). Furthermore, the narratives include examples of participants reflecting on their own individual writing processes, surfacing a greater awareness of how they approached the task and discussing this with others in the group. This was particularly evident in Naomi’s narrative about how her approach to writing was transitioning from one way of working to another (Section 4.2.2.1) and in David’s narrative about the process of writing his PhD commentary (Section 4.3.2). Thus, in some small but significant ways, this heightened awareness of the process and possibilities of writing contributed to changes in practice when participants came to the academic writing tasks they had set themselves for the day.

What is noticeable about these and other examples is that, whilst they are largely individual narratives, they tend to occur in midst of discussion with others, suggesting that a level of trust emerged from the communal nature of the group. Another factor at work was the space and time for participants to think and reflect, rather than simply to write. In addition to the discussion and debate of ideas, the findings also demonstrate that the writing group provided an individual space in which participants were able to move beyond simply reflecting on what they were writing about to focus on the process of writing itself.

In these ways, the interactions that occurred developed writing practices in a way that contrasted with the approaches evident in other studies (Cable et al., 2013; Murray, 2001). Even when the expressed intention of an initiative was to allow time for participants to learn from one another about the writing process (see, for example, Moore, 2003), little was reported about the activities and interactions that supported this intention. The data for my study identify the writing group as both a *dialogic* and a *reflective* space in which participants both refined the ideas they were writing about and
the ways in which they wrote about them. Furthermore, both dialogue and reflection occurred within the natural course of the writing group’s activities. Sessions were lightly structured, rather than intentionally designed to provide such opportunities. One advantage of this is that it responds to the challenges of time-intensive support strategies, which rely on more experienced writers offering structured feedback (Roberts and Weston, 2014).

5.4 Key factors in facilitating change

The second research sub-question aimed to consider the particular characteristics of the writing group that underpinned the changes in practice identified above. This section identifies two key factors. Firstly, the group was a community where writing was both individual and social. Secondly it was a protected space, yet visible within the university. The significance of these factors is further explored in each of the sections that follow.

5.4.1 Writing as both an individual and social activity

The writing group was a space in which individuals wrote independently, but in community. The findings demonstrate that this community was characterised by shared experience, shared emotions, shared accountability and shared enjoyment, each of which was evident in the interactions that were recorded in the individual and group narratives in Chapter Four. The social spaces played an important role in forging the identity of the group. These were created both within the physical environment of the writing group, and in the spaces where we gathered for lunch and post-group drinks. Early narratives establish the value of these social spaces (Section 4.2.1) and the field notes from the first group session record the ease with which the shared experience of writing frustrations established a firm footing on which these social relationships were built.

This suggests that the relative weakness of participants’ social habits, evidenced in the Writing BASE (Appendix 6) questionnaires completed during the first session, was not due to lack of willingness, but lack of opportunity. The writing community, with its mix of dedicated writing time, peer support and informal conversations, created the conditions in which social habits were strengthened. The early sense of solidarity recorded in my field notes during Writing Group 2 (Section 4.2.1) was evident
throughout the remaining meetings, suggesting that the shared space offered participants a highly supportive place in which to write.

Thus, these social relations shaped the nature of the activities that occurred within the writing community. For example, the shared experiences that participants brought to the space regularly featured in the examples of peer support for writing (see for example the exchange about a piece of my writing in Section 4.2.3). This exchange, and others like it, highlighted some important benefits of the writing group as a collegial space, which Grant (2006) suggested was uncommon in a sector often characterised by competition. It is also consistent with Morss and Murray’s (2001) observation that shared approaches to writing problems became a feature of the writing group in their study.

However, the findings from this study identify that, rather than being supplementary benefits of the writing group (in addition to productivity), these activities were central in characterising the writing group as more than simply a space to be productive. This differs from the studies reviewed by McGrail et al. (2006) where the primary focus was on the effect of each writing intervention on participants’ productivity. This study’s findings suggest that a deeper understanding of the social relations that shape the writing space can help to identify practices that will support the writing development of academics, rather than simply increase their productivity.

In addition, the writing group brought together participants at different stages in their academic careers and with various levels of writing experience. One of the ways in which this developed writing practices relates to the theme of ‘making the tacit explicit’, which is the focus of Section 4.2.2.2. The narratives in this section record examples of participants describing their processes and approaches to writing in the course of their interactions with other group members. Whilst one example records Ruth, the most experienced writer in the group, sharing her process of working with draft, others reflect interactions between colleagues of more similar levels of writing experience. For example, the conversation between David and Ezra (Section 4.2.2.2) makes explicit some of their assumptions they make about the peer review process and some of the practical ways in which they respond. The result is a clear strategy for a methodical approach to
the task of revising the article, which has not required the intervention of an ‘expert’ but has emerged from the opportunity of dialogue within the writing group space.

In contrast to a structured module (Morss and Murray, 2001), in which there remains a somewhat hierarchical relationship between tutor and participants, these dialogues occurred as a natural part of the group’s interactions. What this demonstrates is that the term ‘expert’ can be interpreted in different ways. Undoubtedly there were many occasions on which Ruth, as the most experienced writer, talked at length about her own writing and the ways in which she tackled different aspects of the process. However, at other times, when members of the group shared an example of their own writing, the individual became the expert on their own work and the process of peer review similarly positioned others as ‘experts’ as we related our own approaches to the writing challenges we encountered. This is a powerful example of a collaborative community at work in the development of writing practices. Many aspects of the writing process were demystified through participation in the writing group.

Thus, whilst there is literature that highlights the collegial and collaborative benefits of a writing group in, for example collective problem-solving and peer review (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Grzybowski et al., 2003; Morss and Murray, 2001), this study has identified an additional benefit. Prior to the writing group, writing was characterised by participants as a solitary task, completed away from others. The group established writing as an activity that occurred in the company of others; the writing itself was not collaborative, but the act of writing and talking about writing was communal. The space for thinking and reflection that this enabled heightened consciousness, clearer articulation of concepts and ideas and contributed to the development of new writing practices. The idea that the writing group offered space to think was one that recurred in individual narratives and across the whole research period. David’s comment that the group functioned ‘like an isolation tank’ (Section 4.2.2) highlights its role in providing a space for individual writing, as well as being in the company of others.

**5.4.2 The writing space as both protected and visible**

Secondly, the writing group created a space for writing, with space defined as both the physical environments in which the group met and the time that was set aside in
participants’ diaries to attend. This combination of time and place proved to be a central factor in enabling writing practices to develop.

The main physical spaces occupied by the writing group were within the confines of the university campus. With the exception of the pub, where we gathered at the end of each session, the other spaces were a meeting room, several teaching spaces and the university cafeteria where we ate lunch together. Nevertheless, some participants did note the benefit of being able to write away from their normal working environment. Located on campus, the writing group in this study was different from Grant’s (2006) annual off-site writing retreat, which makes a case for removing the activity of writing from the physical environment of the university. In contrast, the writing group can be seen as both protected and visible. The space to write was described by one participant as ‘bounded’, whilst at the same time, the positioning of the writing group spaces mainly within the university campus made a clear statement about the value of writing within the institutional space. The pub was the exception, since it was located just off campus. However, it was a space where academics from across the university regularly gathered, so that we often encountered other colleagues there and found ourselves discussing our writing activities with them. Thus, whilst the writing group space itself was bounded, its physical location can be viewed as a challenge to existing institutional structures, which, at least in the view of this study’s participants, had otherwise tended to marginalise writing as an activity that was expected to occur outside the confines of established academic practices.

In addition, rather than a single event, the writing group was a monthly fixture in participants’ diaries over the course of a whole academic year. As a result, rather than protecting a single occasion, such as a writing retreat, in their diaries, participants found themselves protecting writing group time on a regular basis. This highlighted the extent to which writing became more of a priority, rather than something to be squeezed into the diary if time allowed and then squeezed out by more pressing demands. Writing became an established, ongoing activity. This contrasts with, for example, Dickson-Swift et al.’s (2009) three-day on campus writing retreat, which positioned writing as separate from the regular daily activity of the academic role.
This regularity was also a factor in building the relationships that underpinned the
dialogic nature of the group. As the group continued to meet, there was a noticeable
shift in the kinds of interactions that were valued by participants. This was evident in
David’s CIQs (Section 4.3.2). In the first he commented on the value of participants’
shared experiences, whilst in the second he focused on the discussions of writing and
peer feedback opportunities that had developed over time. This shift demonstrates the
ways in which the writing group helped to build participants’ social writing habits within
the context of a supportive environment, which Sword (2017) identified as one of the
four components of the Writing BASE. However, the data in my study suggest that the
social aspect of the writing group moved beyond simply supporting one another. The
examples of co-construction (Section 4.2.2.3) and Micah’s reference to the significance
of this for his own writing (Section 4.2.2.4) suggest that the group moved from shared
experience and understanding to a sense of collective interest in and at times
contribution to each other’s writing projects.

In these ways, the protected yet visible nature of the writing group was a significant
factor in developing academics’ writing practices. The protected nature of the group
created the space in which writing could proceed uninterrupted. At the same time, its
visibility on campus legitimised writing in the wider institution. In addition, by protecting
the time for writing on a regular basis, participants were able to build supportive
relationships with colleagues that simultaneously enriched their writing projects.

5.4.3 Summary of changes and factors

So far, in response to the two research sub-questions, this chapter has established that
participation in the writing group did result in changes to writing practices and that it
also contributed to a more coherent sense of academic identity for its participants.
There was a greater integration between the academic roles that had previously existed
in largely separate ‘boxes’. The factors influencing these changes were a series of three
apparent contrasts: the writing group was both protected and visible, individual and
communal, reflective and dialogic. The group’s ability to offer each of these things
contributed to its flexibility, so that participants were able to draw on these
characteristics in ways that suited them.
5.5 The role of the writing group

Having established the nature of the changes in practice that occurred and the factors that underpinned them, it is possible to return to the main research question, which focused on the role that the writing community played in developing academics’ writing practices. This section argues that the data for this study suggest two theoretical lenses through which the role of the writing group might be viewed. The first is the extent to which the writing group acted as a containment force (Macleod et al., 2012), and the second is the possibility that it acted as a boundary space (Savin-Baden, 2008).

5.5.1 The writing group as ‘containment’

The data demonstrate that the writing group enabled participants to become more conscious of their writing behaviours and practices in ways that both developed a more integrated academic identity and released them to write. This is consistent with MacLeod et al.’s (2012) definition of epistemological containment, which is defined as academics’ sense of the relationship of writing and publication to their overall role and purpose. The three key changes identified in Section 5.3 reflect this. Establishing writing as a priority, clarifying the range of activities that constituted writing and finding the space for thinking and talking about writing all helped to define this relationship more clearly.

In addition, the writing group became a place in which participants were able to manage and overcome some of the barriers to writing that they experienced in other contexts, suggesting a degree of emotional containment was also possible. Macleod et al. (2012:645) defined this as the ways in which a particular activity enables participants to grapple with ‘unthinkable or unmanageable feelings’ so that they become ‘thinkable and manageable’. This proved to be an area in which the writing group made a significant difference. Conversations that at the start had focused on what were perceived to be barriers to getting writing done gradually became interactions that were characterised more by collective approaches to addressing these difficulties. The writing community was a space in which participants acted together to begin a transformation of a previously more negative narrative around writing. In these ways, the writing group can also be seen to reflect something of Soja’s (1980) concept of the socio-spatial dialectic,
because, within the physical space, the nature and purpose of the writing community were shaped by the activities and interactions of its participants. As a result, the group became both a place in which writing practices were developed and academic identities reframed. Thus, there were significant ways in which it operated as a containment force.

However, the findings also highlight that the application of containment theory as a framework for theorising the role of a writing group is ultimately problematic. MacLeod et al. (2012) began from the assumption that writing is institutionally identified as one of several competing primary tasks in a university. My findings indicate that, despite an improved standing in the REF being a stated priority, writing for publication was not seen as integral to the regular activity of an academic member of staff. These unclear expectations led to other activities taking priority and to a sense of ‘writer’s guilt’ when colleagues did not recognise the value of research and writing activities. Ruth’s description of the writing group as a form of rebellion against a metrics-driven culture (Section 4.4.3) and both David’s (Section 4.4.4.2) and Micah’s (Section 4.5.1) observation that they did not sense a clear expectation from their managers that they should be writing suggest that the university, at least for these participants, had not succeeded in clearly articulating the significance of writing as part of the academic role. One result of this was that, whilst writing practices developed, frustrations remained. In particular, whilst the legitimacy and value of writing was better understood by participants, it remained marginalised in their wider professional lives. Some practices did move beyond the writing group into participants’ wider practices and this is consistent with MacLeod et al.’s (2012) findings. However, my findings demonstrate that the writing group participants found these changes difficult to sustain.

These findings reflect a particular difficulty with the different ways in which MacLeod et al. (2012:645) applied the concept of ‘organisational containment’ in their study. In general terms, they defined it in terms of ensuring that policies, procedures and institutional practices both clarify and support the primary tasks of an organisation. However, in discussing their findings, they limited the concept to the policies, procedures and practices of the writing retreat, rather than to the wider institution. As a result, they argued that the retreat operated effectively as a form of organisational
containment. Whilst my findings are consistent with this interpretation, it can be argued that this is a limited, contextually-specific application of the term.

The problem is that the focus remains on the role of a writing initiative in clarifying the task and related practices of writing only at the individual level. This study’s findings have shown that, to a degree, this clarity can result in the development of writing practices and the working out of a more integrated academic identity. However, such an interpretation neglects the vital role of the wider institution in clarifying writing as a primary task and embedding in its culture the policies, procedures and practices that will establish it as such. This is problematic because institutional factors remained a significant barrier to maintaining their commitment to writing beyond boundaries of the writing group, so that the group could not, ultimately, act fully as a containment force. Organisational containment in its widest sense would require the policies, procedures and practices of the institution to be consistent with a clearly articulated definition of the role of writing for publication in the academic role.

5.5.2 The writing group as a boundary space

The literature review established that the activities that occur in any space within a university have the potential to shape the identities and practices of the individual, the group and the wider institution. This study’s findings demonstrate that individuals brought with them their existing understanding of the place of writing in the context of their overall academic identity (Section 4.2.1). They reveal that the writing group did facilitate writing that might not otherwise have occurred (Grant, 2006) and enabled participants to more clearly define the nature of this activity for themselves (Macleod et al., 2012). In addition, the findings chart the ways in which participation in the writing group resulted, to varying extents, in participants’ development of a more coherent academic identity, with writing becoming a more established priority in shaping the academic role. Thus, to some extent, the writing group space enabled participants to shape the adjacent, individual space in new ways (Bhabha, 1990) and can be seen as a site of both identity and writing work (Archer and Parker, 2016).

In this way, the group reflected some of the characteristics of Savin-Baden’s (2008) description of a ‘boundary space’; it offered a space between the individual and the
institution where academics could establish their writing practices as part of a newly constituted academic identity. The exchange between Naomi and me (Section 4.2.2.1) demonstrates this clearly; the writing group offered a space in which we were able to articulate our evolving sense of ourselves as writers.

In addition, the data from this study indicate that the writing group enabled participants to enact closer links between the apparently competing priorities their roles demanded of them. As these links were recognised, so they moved beyond the boundaries of the writing group. Ruth’s increasing recognition of the links between her reading, writing and teaching, David’s more conscious preparation for writing and Joel’s application of a writing group model to his students’ dissertation module are all examples of the ways in which writing crossed the boundaries of the group into the wider professional lives of its participants. In these ways, the writing group was a space in which roles and identities became more clearly defined and integrated in ways that had an impact beyond participants’ writing practices.

This also resonates with the description of the ‘interlinked’ self, in which multiple activities can be connected across boundaries (King et al., 2014:264). The result is a more coherent academic identity. Coupled with White et al.’s (2014) conclusion that the activity of writing itself played a valuable role in the development of academic identity, my findings suggest that a writing group of this nature can be a site of identity work as well as writing. In this way, rather than resignation (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009), the writing group offered participants the opportunity of ‘taking flight’, by developing a greater freedom and agency. This study’s findings demonstrate that as the writing group became established, it presented participants with opportunities for developing more integrated ways of working. In these ways, it is argued that the writing group did provide a ‘boundary’ space in which participants’ transformations of both practice and identity could occur, very much in the way that Archer and Parker (2016) described the function of their Writing Centre.

Nevertheless, there remain moments in participants’ narratives where they position themselves to a lesser or greater extent as trapped by the institutional context. They simultaneously articulated a desire to write and maintained the argument that it was impossible (see, for example, David’s reflection on his excessive workload in Section
4.3.3). There are at least two possible readings of David’s persistent frustration about
the time available to him to write. Firstly, his image of a castle on a cloud and a fairy-tale
kingdom (Section 4.3) resonates with the findings of two studies (Lopes et al., 2014;
Findlow, 2012), which both observe a tendency for academics who have come from
other professions to resist an academic identity that prioritises research, holding instead
to the professional identity that they brought with them to their academic roles. David’s
reflection on whether he wanted to make the effort to enter the padlocked castle
suggests some reticence in fully embracing this aspect of his academic identity. In
positioning himself as, in Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher’s (2009) terms, ‘entrapped’
by his institutional context, David was able to maintain his resistance to a wider notion
of academic identity that he was not entirely ready to adopt.

A second possible reading is that David had positioned himself not as fully entrapped,
but as a ‘victim’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009) of the ways in which
institutional structures and values constrained the possibilities of his role. What this
suggests is that, whilst the group provided opportunities for identity work, some
tensions and contradictions remained in the lives of some individual participants. From
this perspective, the degree of agency that David acknowledged for himself was limited.
This may have affected the ways in which he responded to the opportunities that other
participants took to ‘take flight’ (Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher, 2009). Whilst other
participants, to an extent, moved the practices they had developed within the writing
group beyond its boundaries into their wider academic lives, David continued to find this
problematic.

Further research would be required to fully uncover the complex reasons why the extent
to which the group began to resolve these tensions varied amongst participants.
However, it is important to acknowledge that whilst the potential of the writing group as
a boundary space is clearly apparent in this study’s findings, this potential was not fully
realised. The findings suggest that one of the reasons for this was the relationship
between the writing space and the wider institutional context.

Whilst the group provided a space in which writing could occur, it remained situated in
the wider institutional context. It has already been argued that there were ways in
which this was a positive thing; it established writing as both visible and legitimate.
Despite this, the findings record many ways in which the demands of the institution remained apparent, from the intrusions of one manager to the distractions of emails and marking to which each of us succumbed to one degree or another. This suggests that the task of writing was not clearly defined at an institutional level and that this acted as a barrier rather than an enabler in terms of developing a writing culture. As a result, it proved difficult for the writing group culture to permeate beyond its boundaries and thus enable academics’ writing practices to be more explicitly situated within the wider context of the university. The barriers to writing that were identified when the writing group first met were articulated through the ways in which participants positioned the ‘institution’ as the ‘villain of the piece’, conspiring against their desire to write (Sections 4.2.1, 4.3.1, 4.4.1). The frustrations were still evident at the end of the research process (see, for example, David, Section 4.3.3 and Ruth, Section 4.4.3).

The findings suggest that the reasons for these ongoing frustrations relate to the complex interrelationship between the individual and the institution. Firstly, the findings highlight that the extent to which writing was seen as legitimate and of value in the university was unclear. For Ruth, the group at times felt like an ‘active...rebellion’ (Section 4.4.3); for Micah and David it was simultaneously an activity they believed to be part of the academic role and one for which there was no existing institutional expectation. Chapter One argued that new universities, in common with their more established counterparts, need to produce credible research outputs to survive in the sector. The university where my study took place had stated that an improved standing in the REF was an institutional priority. However, the findings suggest that, for this study’s participants, this priority was not matched by clear messages about how such an improvement might be achieved, nor underpinned by a clear articulation of the legitimacy and value of writing. This is consistent with Gale’s (2011) study, which suggested that new universities are not laying the foundations for research and writing. Whilst Gale’s research focused on early-career academics, my study suggests that the effects were also acutely felt by those who were at later stages in their careers. If these activities are not ‘automatic or evolutionary’ (Gale, 2011:222), then they are not likely to be integrated into the roles of either new or more experienced academics. Within the
boundaries of the writing group, the participants in this study grappled with and came to better understand the place of writing within their wider academic identities and were able to develop their writing practices. However, their perception that the university itself seemed less able to clearly articulate the role of writing and to position it as a valued activity, made it hard for these changes to cross the boundary into the wider institutional context. The protected space of the writing group was capable of bringing about change, but similar spaces remained elusive beyond the boundaries and in the wider institutional context. As a result, the writing group was not able to fully bridge the gap between the place of writing within individual academic identities and the culture of writing within the institution.

The way in which a space is constituted says something about its nature and purpose. Thus, the positioning of the writing group spaces largely within the university campus made a clear statement about the value of writing in the institutional space. The on-campus location, along with the regularity of its meetings, identified the writing group as a potential ‘boundary space’ (Savin-Baden, 2008). However, the findings also demonstrate some ways in which this representation is problematic.

5.5.3 The writing group as a site of identity work

The findings suggest that the writing group did not ultimately operate as a boundary space between the individual and the institutional understandings of the place of writing within the academic role, because its inroads into the wider writing culture of the institution were limited. In one sense, this is not surprising; the study of the group took place over nine sessions and its membership was fluid. However, drawing on Savin-Baden’s (2008) assertion that space production, rather than simply space creation, is vital, it is argued that the participants of the writing group did still shape a legitimate and valued space in which writing could occur. The changes in practice that were identified were the result of a dialogic community in which writing became significantly more than committing words to paper and increasing productivity. As a result, the writing group became a space in which writing practices and academic identities were shaped simultaneously. This is consistent with the theoretical perspective of the ‘identity trajectory’ (Leibowitz et al., 2014) in which identity construction occurs within the context of the activities in which individuals engage.
In this way, the writing space constituted a different kind of ‘boundary space’ (Savin-Baden, 2008) where participants were able to wrestle with the place of writing within the context of their overall academic identity. Through their writing activities, participants began to make stronger connections between the different facets of their academic roles; writing, teaching and research became more closely intertwined. In this sense, the writing group did, to an extent, operate as a boundary space, through the ways in which it existed at and began to traverse the boundaries of the different facets of participants’ academic identities. In the light of this finding, it can be argued that the writing group played a part in the integration of the roles of teaching, research and writing. As these became more closely entwined, so a more coherent sense of academic identity and a more integrated approach to practice began to emerge.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has set the findings of this study within a wider theoretical framework that views academic writing as a situated practice and draws on concepts of academic identity and space to better understand the role of the writing group in the development of academics’ writing practices. From this perspective changes to practice and the factors that influenced these are best interpreted in the context of the interrelationship between the individual and the institutional. The study’s findings have demonstrated that the ways in which the writing group was shaped by its participants contributed to changes both at the level of writing practices and academic identities. They have also highlighted the ways in which the wider institutional context imposed some limits on the long-term impact of these changes.

In establishing different kinds of writing and related activities as valuable and valid activities, this study posits that a writing group can become a place where academics have space both to think and to write. In common with the findings from Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher (2009), writing group participants in this study found space for discussion, debate and developing ideas. This suggests that a writing group has the potential to became an antidote to the ‘quick-fix’ culture that permeates other spaces in the university (Grant, 2006:485). The ways in which the participants in this study shaped the space together lends weight to Sword’s (2017:5) conclusion that a ‘flexible heuristic’ rather than a regimented approach to writing is more likely to produce successful
writers. The writing group was a context in which writers could develop their writing in ways that suited their individual characteristics and motivations. Such an approach reflects an important shift from a deficit view of the writer (Boice, 1990; 1997) to a constructive and supportive one (Sword, 2017).

Thus, this chapter has outlined the extent to which the findings of this study have addressed the research questions. Through their engagement in the writing group participants came to view writing as a higher priority and to define the task of writing more broadly and in terms of process rather than simply as product. The simultaneously individual yet collaborative nature of the writing group also proved significant in developing participants’ writing practices.

However, it has been noted throughout this study that participants found it difficult to maintain the changes in their writing practices that the writing group helped them to develop (Sections 4.3.3, 4.4.3, 4.6). Whilst the findings suggest that the group operated to some extent as a form of containment and also in some ways as a boundary space, both these concepts have also proved problematic. This chapter has argued that the reasons for this relate at least in part to some of the characteristics of the institutional culture that proved difficult to shift. The next chapter draws these findings together and examines their implications at both an individual and an institutional level.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

This chapter begins by identifying the ways in which this study answered the research questions posed at the start. These focused on the role of a writing community in the development of academics’ writing practices. The presentation and discussion of the findings in Chapters Four and Five demonstrated that a writing group does indeed result in changes in individual practices. However, this study has also revealed that these changes can prove difficult to sustain. In drawing together the findings of the study, this chapter builds on the boundary space model presented in Chapter Five to provide a visual representation of the space that the writing group occupied in the context in which it was situated. The model demonstrates that the complex interplay of institutional and individual factors at work in the writing community simultaneously explain its successes and challenges. However, it is also acknowledged that, to an extent, the study’s focus on the writing group, limits the depth in which the institutional context can be explored. This wider perspective would lead to a better understanding of the ways in which the task of writing is defined at this level might be better articulated. In the light of this, the chapter makes some recommendations about further avenues for research.

The chapter also reflects on the research process, demonstrating that an ethnographic approach has enabled a fresh perspective on the ways in which the activities of a writing group enable the development of academics’ writing practices. It acknowledges the potential challenges of such an approach and demonstrates how this study has attempted to mitigate against them.

In addition, the ways in which the study has influenced my own personal and professional learning are explored. Key aspects of this learning were also reflected in the narratives of other participants, suggesting that our collective experience as presented in this study could be relevant to other contexts where academics’ writing needs to be developed. Thus, the chapter concludes with a summary of the key characteristics of the writing group and restates its potential for bringing about changes in practice and identity.
6.1 Making space for writing

Both this study’s findings and those of the literature review have established an urgent need for academics to find the space and the time to write. This study builds on the existing literature because it moves beyond a discussion of the benefits of a writing initiative on the productivity of its participants. The writing group enabled participants to gain sustained momentum with one or more of their writing projects. More than this, however, they engaged deeply with the writing process in ways that resulted in a wider definition of what constituted writing and a greater sense of its legitimacy in the context of their day-to-day academic role. Shaping the space together gave us the freedom to write and had a liberating effect on participants’ wider academic identities and practices.

The implications of these findings point to the important characteristics of an effective writing space. Firstly, there is a need for a flexibility that allows participants considerable agency in shaping the nature of the space, rather than for its characteristics and outcomes to be too tightly defined from the outset. Although the writing group in this study was founded loosely on the principles of a writing retreat model, its activities evolved over time as we collectively developed an approach that worked for us.

Secondly, it was significant that the space to write was both individual and communal. The two were continually interwoven, each offering its own contribution to the writing process. The shared purpose of individual writing times created the atmosphere in which sustained writing was possible. At the same time, its communal nature opened up a dialogic space. Whilst other studies have retrospectively acknowledged the value of dialogue between participants, this study has revealed more about the nature of these interactions. It has shown the ways in which they make the writing process more explicit and the extent to which ideas and understanding are co-constructed in ways that subsequently enrich writing. Thus, the dual individual and communal nature of the writing group space can be seen as instrumental in supporting the development of writing practices.

Finally, this study’s findings present a strong case for an ongoing, regular writing group that meets in visible spaces within the institution. This contrasts with the examples of
off-campus, periodic opportunities for writing that were reflected in a significant number of the studies that featured in Section 2.4 of the literature review. The writing group in my study became a regular opportunity to write rather than a single initiative. As such its value lay in the way that it helped to establish writing as a legitimate and central activity. In this way, the space to write was protected through the clear integration of writing within the context of the role of the academic. In contrast, removing writing from the academic’s regular role and context has the potential to reinforce its position as marginal and difficult to achieve in the normal course of academic life.

6.2 The individual and the institutional

However, the study has also shown that, for these participants, in this context, the writing space was unable to influence the development of a shared institutional understanding of the place of writing in the academic role. This was evident in Chapter Five, which demonstrated that whilst the writing group operated at the boundaries and intersection of three different facets of an academic’s identity, there was no obvious impact on the institutional culture. The reason for this was that, for participants in the writing group, the nature and purpose of writing in the context of the wider institution was not clearly articulated, and this was something that did not change during the course of the research period. It was apparent that the university’s messages about writing were mixed; the research, teaching and bureaucratic conversations collided, with the writing culture remaining largely under-developed as a result.

This finding was entirely consistent with the literature on post-1992, teaching-intensive universities, which are widely seen as having emergent rather than established research cultures (Gale, 2011). Had the group been able to simultaneously develop its participants’ conceptualisation of writing within their academic identities and roles, whilst also influencing the institutional writing culture, the changes that occurred within its boundaries might have proved more sustainable beyond them. Instead, participants returned to the theme of institutional barriers in their dialogues throughout the research period and beyond. Whilst it proved possible to develop individual practices, they still occurred within the same institutional context. Given Lopes et al.’s (2014) assertion that there is an interplay between the individual’s view of themselves and
what they want to become, and the constraints and opportunities that their context presents, this is likely to have limited the long-term impact of the writing group.

However, the writing group model does have the potential to shape both the individual and the institutional space, with the practices of the group crossing the boundaries of individual academic identities and institutional cultures. The findings of this study suggest that the writing group space can help to define the role and purpose of writing within a wider academic identity and that the dialogues that occur there enable participants to grapple with complex ideas and practices in ways that might also help to shape the wider narrative of the university.

Seeing its potential in this way makes it viable to argue that the writing culture that develops within a writing group could be key to unlocking the potential for writing amongst academics in a new university, strengthening an institutional writing culture that goes beyond a focus on productivity to one that makes a wider contribution to both individual and institutional academic identities.

6.3 Possibilities for further research

One way to build on the findings of this study would be to investigate whether implementing a similar writing group model in another post-1992 university resulted in similar findings, since this would build the evidence base for the value of such an initiative. However, replication of the study would not address the significant institutional challenges that participants continued to experience. Chapter 1 framed the institution in this study within the context of a wider understanding of the challenges that post-1992 universities face in an increasingly metrics-driven sector. The findings of the study suggested that, for the participants of this writing group, the nature and purpose of writing was not clearly defined in the context of their academic roles. Thus, one of the ways in which the findings of this study might be strengthened in their contribution to building a writing culture would be to investigate the ways in which new universities perceive the role of the academic and writing in particular. This work needs to explore ways in which the task of writing might be better articulated at an institutional level and supported through the provision of the kinds writing spaces that enable writing to become an integral part of the academic role. As a result, the changes
in practice and identity that occurred for individuals though their participation in the writing group could also have impact at an institutional level.

In addition, whilst this study has focused on the particular context of the post-1992 university, it may be that the barriers to writing it has identified are not exclusive to this particular type of university. Thus, whilst this study has demonstrated that there are unique challenges for teaching-intensive universities, it is acknowledged that there may be some degree of shared experience across the higher education sector. As a result, whilst the findings of this study are set in a specific context, they could also prove highly relevant across the higher education sector as institutions grapple with how to establish and position writing groups in order to effectively develop sustainable writing cultures. Further research in different university contexts would reveal the wider value of such a writing group and the extent to which academics’ identities and writing practices were similarly developed and changed.

6.4 Reflections on the research process

This study set out to capture the stories of the writing group and its participants using an ethnographic case study approach. This was an intentional response to two reflections on existing literature. The first was that the studies on academic identity that were reviewed in Section 2.3 were characterised by participants’ accounts of the reality of their academic lives. This led to a second observation in relation to the studies of writing initiatives, which was that these tended focus on their retrospective responses, rather than giving an account of the writing initiative as they experienced it at the time. This study’s ethnographic approach was able to draw on a range of methods to interrogate the social context in ways that other studies had not. As a result, the nature of the dialogue that occurred between participants was revealed to be a significant factor in the development of writing practices. In addition, the use of data from the creative tasks surfaced participants’ emotions and perceptions of themselves as writers that may not have emerged in retrospective accounts.

Thus, the construction of the narratives, which form the basis of Chapter Four, was an attempt to retell the story of the writing group as faithfully as possible, with participants’ own words at the forefront of each narrative. Preserving the social context
of the dialogues in these narratives was a central way in which the communal and
dialogic nature of the writing space could be more deeply explored to reveal the precise
function of these two characteristics in developing writing practices and building more
coherent academic identities. Whilst the case for using narratives in this way was
therefore compelling, I was conscious of some possible pitfalls too. Throughout their
construction I was aware of the potential for individual voices to come to the fore at the
expense of capturing the significance of the writing group’s dialogic nature.
Simultaneously, I knew that it was important to preserve the varied experiences of
participants by presenting their individual stories. These tensions influenced the decision
to produce a group narrative alongside the three participants’ stories. It allowed both
the individual and the social aspects of writing to be examined, since this interplay
emerged as a central way in which the group functioned effectively.

Another potential pitfall was that, whilst the narratives might tell compelling stories,
these might not address the research questions. To mitigate this, I made the decision to
interweave findings and analysis in Chapter Four, so that my commentary began to
highlight some of the sensitizing concepts that I had identified in the narratives. These
concepts were revisited in a more thematic structure in Chapter 5 where the research
questions were fully addressed. I remain aware that others may have constructed the
narratives in different ways and that multiple interpretations remain possible. However,
I also maintain that the narratives contain extensive evidence of the ways in which
academics’ writing practices developed through their participation in the writing group.

It is an inescapable fact that the writing group was both the focus of the study and
provided me with the time and space to complete a significant amount of the writing-up
of the final thesis of which it was the focus. Through the process, therefore, there
remained the danger that my own positive experience of the group would offer a
distorted lens through which to view its value. There is no doubt that my own writing
practices were developed and refined through my participation in the group; some of
the core ideas in my thesis were scrutinised and parts of my other writing projects were
subject to peer review. However, this can be seen as a strength of the study. My
immersion in the writing group facilitated the involvement of participants in discussing
my emerging themes and ideas during some of the writing group meetings. In addition,
David, Ruth and Micah were able to respond to their individual narratives in their post-group interviews. In these ways a determined effort was made to ensure that the four stories told in Chapter 4 and their analysis in Chapter 5 were as authentic as possible. In this way, it is hoped that participants’ experiences have been preserved and that my immersion in the research context has contributed to the distinctive nature of the study (Peshkin, 1988).

6.5 Personal and professional learning

Carrying out this study has had an impact on both my own academic identity and professional practice. My own previous practice as a primary school teacher had led to a long-held conviction that writing can act as a powerful tool not just in presenting ideas, but in developing and clarifying them. In the classroom I had also witnessed that value of enabling opportunities for talk as well as writing, recognising that each contributed to the other. Moving into higher education, I reflected on my personal blog that at times I felt that I was reducing the teaching of writing to ‘essay plans, recipes for writing structured paragraphs, rules for writing a good paraphrase – the familiar language of study skills’ (Saunders, 2018). The writing group contributed to my own developing sense of myself as an academic and as a writer, allowing me the kinds of conversations with colleagues that moved forward both my writing practice and sharpened some of the ideas that I was writing about. It also gave me the confidence to write in a community and to embrace rather than fear the peer writing review process.

My personal experience of the writing group was shown by the study’s findings to be consistent with the experiences of other participants. This suggests that the creation of spaces where writing can occur, coupled with the opportunity for participants to produce those spaces through writing alongside one another and engaging in meaningful dialogues, is one way in which academics in new universities might begin to build a writing culture in their own contexts. What remains is the challenge of allowing the significant changes that this writing group produced to move beyond its boundaries, beyond its impact on this one group, to permeate the wider institutional culture.
6.6 Conclusion

This study has confirmed that a regular, ongoing and visible writing group is able to support the development of academics’ writing practices. Through its focus on the experiences and interactions of its participants, the study has demonstrated that, through the development of their own individual writing practices, participants came to see writing as more of a priority in the context of their academic role. In addition, changes in participants’ thinking about writing and their understanding of what counted as writing began to influence their sense of themselves as writers and of the place of writing within their wider academic identity. The study has also shown that the relationship between space production and identity development is evident in a space that allows room for reflection, debate and discussion. Participants’ increasing sense of the integration of teaching, research and writing resulted in a more coherent sense of their wider academic identity and allowed them to see writing as a legitimate and valuable activity.

In addition, this study has clearly identified some important characteristics that should underpin the development of similar initiatives in other institutions. Firstly, the writing group in this study highlights the value of communal and dialogic writing spaces in developing writing practices. It is also evident that a focus on the writing process rather than on skills and productivity can precipitate changes in practice that might be sustainable beyond the confines of the writing group, given a favourable institutional culture. It has also concluded that there is value in writing spaces that are both social and individual, and that are visible but protected.

In addition, this study’s findings suggest that a writing group can simultaneously develop writing practices and offer the kind of ‘principled and valued’ (Archer, 2008a:268) space for creativity, debate and dialogue that enable new forms of thinking and practice to seep beyond its boundaries into the wider institutional culture. However, since the interplay between individual and institutional factors is central to the development of academic identities, the need for the university to clearly articulate the nature and purpose of writing within the institution has been identified as an important next step.
This study therefore concludes that a writing group can be a powerful mechanism for change and that this change could be more significant where a university is able to clearly define the role of writing and research in the wider university context. Such a group can develop the writing practices of its participants, but it can also be one of the ways in which the perceived fragmentation and loss of autonomy of the academic identity in a neo-liberal sector (Beck, 1999) might be surfaced and challenged. The evidence presented in this study makes a clear case for regular, ongoing writing group spaces that are both individual and communal, reflective and dialogic, protected and visible. It thus presents a model for their integration within the institution that could be applied beyond the single institution in which the study occurred.
References


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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Critical incident Questionnaire

Writing Group – Critical Incident Questionnaire

1. What has been the most engaging moment of being involved with the writing group so far?

2. At what moment during the writing group have you felt most distanced from what was happening?

3. What action that anyone has taken during the writing group that has been most affirming and helpful?

4. What action that anyone has taken during the writing group has been most puzzling or confusing?

5. What about being involved in the writing group has surprised you most?
Appendix 2 – Participant Information Sheet

The role of a collaborative community in the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices

Researcher: Claire Saunders

As part of my study for the award of Doctorate of Education, I am carrying out a study investigating the role of a collaborative community in the development of university lecturers’ academic writing practices. This doctoral research is hosted by The Open University. Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to explore what happens when a community of university lecturers comes together in a blend of face-to-face and online activity around a perceived professional development need (the promotion of academic writing for publication). I am interested in describing, analysing and interpreting the activities of the academic writing group to discover the learning processes that occur and how they influence both ways of thinking about writing and the writing practices that participants develop.

Why participate in the study?

You have been invited to take part because you are a lecturer at SSU and you have expressed an interest in developing your academic writing practice. This may be because you are relatively new to lecturing or because you have entered higher education from industry at a later stage in your career. It may be because you are required to or want to publish research outputs. The study will deepen understanding of academic writing processes through a collaborative community approach.

Do I have to take part?

No. it is entirely your decision to take part in the study. Non(engagement) with the research will not affect how your performance and willingness to publish are assessed.
What is involved?

A writing group will meet regularly face-to-face over the course of a six-month period. These sessions will allow you some interruption-free time to write and a quiet space within a community of writers, along with opportunities to discuss various aspects of the writing process. Field notes will be used to document these sessions. You may also be asked to participate in some online activities. A critical incident questionnaire will be used at three points during the six-month period to gather your reflections on the process.

Will the information I provide be confidential?

The data that is collected via focus groups and interviews will be recorded on a portable recording device. All participants’ contributions will be anonymised in the reporting of the findings and analysis. Field notes from the face-to-face sessions will be recorded either by hand or on an iPad and will be stored securely. The data from these field notes will be anonymised in the reporting of the findings and analysis. The online elements of the community will occur within a Solent Online Learning unit designed specifically for this purpose and only accessible to writing group members. All contributions will be anonymised in the reporting of findings and analysis.

You will be invited to review transcripts and analysis the data collected from the various activities of which you have been a part. You will also be invited to read a full copy of the final thesis should you wish to do so.

All original data will be stored securely in a password protected folder on a password protected Solent University computer and will be deleted within ten years of the end of the research project.

What are the risks?

There are no anticipated risks associated with taking part in this study.

Can I change my mind?

If you agree to take part in the study, you have the right to withdraw at any stage during the research. You have the right to request at any point that data that has not yet been analysed and amalgamated with the data of other participants be excluded from the study. All data that is used will be in anonymised form.

Who has reviewed this study?

The procedures for this research have been given a favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (ref. HREC/2689/Saunders). SSU Ethics Committee has also give a favourable opinion.
What are the benefits of taking part?

Taking part in this project will give you the opportunity to develop your academic writing, which could have a positive influence on your standing within SSU and in the wider higher education community.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will be reported in the final dissertation report to be submitted for the award of Doctorate in Education. SSU and individual participants will not be named in the study.

Who do I talk to if there is a problem?

Please contact Claire Saunders (x6989) if you have any further questions. Alternatively, you can contact my EdD Supervisor, Professor Judith Lathlean (J.Lathlean@soton.ac.uk).
Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form

The role of a collaborative community in the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices

Please initial

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information sheet dated November 2017 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I understand that the data collected will be seen only by the researcher and her supervisors and that all information will be anonymised in the reporting of the findings and analysis.

4. I understand that the data will be securely stored in an anonymous form and destroyed after a period of 10 years.

5. I agree to take part in the above study.

__________________  ______________  __________________
Name of participant  Date  Signature

__________________  ______________  __________________
Name of researcher  Date  Signature
Appendix 4 – Creative Tasks

Overview
This appendix includes a brief description of the creative task that was used at the start of each writing group session.

Writing Group 1
No creative task – participants completed the Writing BASE (See Appendix 6)

Writing Group 2 – Academic Identity Task

(A) Individual reflection
What are the verbs you associate with your role as an academic? Make a list!

(B) Group discussion and drawing exercise
Discuss each person’s reflections. What things did you have in common? Were there things you disagreed on?
As a group, draw something metaphorical (animal, person, machine, something else…O the represents to concept of ‘academic identity’ for you.)

Writing Group 3 – Bio-poem
Use the following prompts to write a poem about yourself:

Line 1: Your name
Line 2: Four character traits
Line 3: Love of… (list three things)
Line 4: Who feels… (three things)
Line 5: Who needs… (three things)
Line 6: Who fears… (one thing)
Line 7: Who hopes for… (three things)
Line 8: And who finds… (three things)
(Adapted from Bean, 1996:110)
Writing Group 4 – Artefact task

Participants were presented with an artefact: an ornate teapot. They were asked to describe the artefact in the language and style of their discipline.

Writing Group 5 – Postcard Task

Choose a postcard and write answers to these questions:

a) How does the picture relate to your hopes and dreams about academic writing?
b) How does it reflect your plans about writing?
c) In what way does it capture any fears or the dark side of your writing identity?

Writing Group 6 – Two trumpets: Music and image task

Listen to the two trumpet concertos. Whilst listening, draw a picture of how you are feeling about your writing. Use metaphor, analogy and be creative! Share your pictures with the group.

Writing group 7 – Bio-poem

Write a poem walking in the shoes of either a) one of your research respondents or b) a theorist who influences your work.

Line 1: Their name
Line 2: Four character traits
Line 3: Love of... (list three things)
Line 4: Who feels... (three things)
Line 5: Who needs... (three things)
Line 6: Who fears... (one thing)
Line 7: Who hopes for... (three things)
Line 8: And who finds... (three things)

(Adapted from Bean, 1996:110)
Writing Group 8 – CV Task

Read Brian Bilston’s CV (below; available at: https://brianbilston.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/img_0218.png)

Choose a section and write your own version in the same style:

---

**EDUCATION**

UNIVERSITY OF LIFE - 1988 TO 1991
My time at university saw diminishing returns. Studied Scottish poetry. Got third degree Burns.

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS – 1981 TO 1988
School for me, I must confess, proved to be an unqualified success.

**INTERESTS**

In my spare time, I like to ponder the fragility of existence as it hangs, like the industrious spider’s silk-sewn threads blowing in the late afternoon breeze, with the delicacy of death.

I also enjoy ten pin bowling and the films of Bruce Lee.

**REFERENCES**

Sadly, my references have altered their preferences; their words are harsh and abhorrent.

Even mother and father have said they would rather not comment.

Brian Bilston

---

Writing Group 9

No creative task – participants completed the Writing BASE (See Appendix 6)
Appendix 5 – Consolidated Data Themes

Theme: Thinking differently about writing with additional data sources

Theme: Making the tacit explicit with additional data sources

Theme: Co-construction with additional data sources

Theme: Sharing and building a community with additional data sources
Appendix 6 – Writing BASE

Appendix 7 – Planning Sheet Example

Reflection

How is your writing going?

What changes (if any) have you noticed in how you approach writing or talk or think about it, since the last writing group?
Planning

**Big picture plan** - the project(s) you are working on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Achieved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Writing group** – Part 1: 10.30-12.30

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Achieved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Writing group** – Part 2: 13.30-16.00

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Achieved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Wrapping up** – 16.00-16.30

Pair sharing:

a) What is the one sentence you are most proud of writing today?

b) What aspect of writing has been most troublesome for you today?

Sharing our work: ideas and discussion

**Next steps**: What I intend to achieve before the next session:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Achieved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix 8 – Schedule for Final Interviews

Post-writing group interviews

Firstly, thanks for taking the time to read your individual narrative and for agreeing to do this interview today. The aim is to capture your response to your narrative, and to ask you a couple of additional questions about your experience of the Writing Group.

1. To what extent did you think the narrative reflected your experience of the writing group? (Were there things that particularly struck a chord? Things that surprised you? Interested you? Things you didn’t agree with?)
2. On these cards are some words that represent some of the key themes in the data*. Could you pick three that resonate with you and one that doesn’t? Can you explain your choices?
3. For you, what changes did you see in your writing as a result of attending the group (Thinking about writing? Your writing practices? Thinking about yourself as a writer?)
4. Which of these changes have been sustained beyond the group?
5. Do you have any other comments about the significance of the writing group for you?

* Words on cards:

space; creativity; solidarity; routine; structure; community; resistance; thinking about writing; talking about writing; rebellion;