One writing group’s story: using an ethnographic case study to investigate the writing practices of academics

Claire Saunders

To cite this article: Claire Saunders (21 Sep 2023): One writing group's story: using an ethnographic case study to investigate the writing practices of academics, Studies in Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2023.2261031

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2261031

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 21 Sep 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 565

View related articles

View Crossmark data
One writing group’s story: using an ethnographic case study to investigate the writing practices of academics

Claire Saunders

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT
Persuasive arguments attribute academics’ persistent struggles in making time for writing to the increasing demands of a marketised sector on the academic role (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009; Macleod, Steckley, and Murray 2012). Whilst a significant body of literature promotes different writing interventions as potential solutions, the challenge of building and sustaining a culture in which their positive outcomes are maintained remains. In this paper, I explore the practices of academics writing for publication purposes. Drawing on the concept of academic writing as ‘identity work’ (French 2020), I demonstrate that writing practices are entwined with wider academic and institutional identities, which either work for or against building sustainable writing cultures. I argue for a methodological shift in how writing initiatives are researched, drawing a distinction between my ethnographic case study of one writing group and others that focus either on retrospective accounts or analysing correlations between writing groups and productivity. Specifically, I argue for a focus on the ongoing process of becoming a writer rather than on its production. The study builds on existing literature to explain why writing groups are experienced as valuable to participants. It argues that they offer more than simply protected space for writing; they reframe participants’ understandings of themselves and their academic identities and reintegrate research writing with other aspects of their role. This identity work occurs within visible, protected spaces for writing, where participants work both individually and in community, and reflection and dialogue are central.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 March 2023
Accepted 15 September 2023

KEYWORDS
Academic identities; academic writing; scholarly writing; writing community; writing groups

Introduction
Studies of academics’ writing activities attribute the challenges of finding time for research and writing to the threat to academic autonomy from the increasing marketisation of Higher Education and comparative measures of individual universities’ performance (Collins, Glover, and Myers 2022; Daddow et al. 2023). In the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the primary mechanism for judging research quality in Higher Education, acting as a powerful driver to increase research outputs and attract funding (Morss and Murray 2001). In this climate the pressure to ‘publish or perish’ is acutely felt (McGrail, Rickard, and Jones 2006). Therefore, whilst acknowledging the many different kinds of writing undertaken by academics (Tusting et al. 2019), this paper focuses specifically on writing for publication.
Both institutional and individual barriers to academic writing remain consistent. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) cited attracting research funding, serving on editorial boards and undertaking consultancy as activities eroding time for research and writing. Institutional factors can be more acute in newer universities, where research cultures may be more emergent, and where a significant proportion of staff have come to academia from previous professional careers (van Winkel et al. 2018). Individual barriers compound institutional factors, including competing priorities of work and home life (Murray 2002) and the tendency for writing to be a solitary activity (Dwyer et al. 2012; Grant 2006). Both can exacerbate negative emotions that might accompany the writing process. Emotions are powerful; anxiety, fear of rejection and low confidence can all make writing difficult and thus avoided (Eardley, Banister, and Fletcher 2020; Wiebe, Pratt, and Noël 2023).

Despite these barriers, formal support structures for writing do exist. McGrail et al.’s (2006) systematic review categorised three broad types of activity: writing courses, writing coaches and writing groups (including writing retreats). Potential benefits included improved writing knowledge and skill, more positive writing emotions, writing partnerships and other support, such as grant applications, conference abstracts and presentations. McGrail et al. concluded that writing support groups and retreats ‘were superior… in attaining higher publication rates… in terms of an immediate return of published papers’ (2006, 33). Nevertheless, the challenge of sustaining writing momentum beyond the life of these activities has proved persistent.

A recurring theme in studies of academics’ writing practices is the perceived threat to academic autonomy attributed to the increased marketisation of Higher Education, highlighting an inescapable link between writing and the wider concept of academic identity (White et al. 2014). In line with McAlpine, Amundsen, and Turner (2014), I conceptualise identity development as a trajectory, an ongoing project characterised by construction, reconstruction and disruption. White et al. argued that identities are ‘developed through interaction with others and can be re-framed when circumstances alter’ (2014, 60). The ever-changing relationship between individual values and beliefs and institutional culture and positioning also has an influence (Barnett 2000). Nästesjö (2023, 657) pointed to evidence that identity work requires academics to ‘navigate normative demands’ in order to progress their careers.

Therefore, since identities are ‘forged, rehearsed and remade in local sites of practice’ (Lee and Boud 2003, 188), a preoccupation with published outputs can detract from a richer focus on the social contexts in which writing occurs and the meanings they create for participants (Laurel et al. 2017). Despite this, many studies focus largely on the impact of writing interventions on academics’ productivity and publication rates rather than the processes through which these are generated. This is understandable, since the pressure on academics to produce publishable work is unlikely to subside. It is embedded in the assumptions underpinning the core purposes of writing for publication: contribution to knowledge; individual recognition; career advancement and institutional reputation (Cable et al. 2013; Gardner et al. 2020; Martinez, Floyd, and Erichsen 2011). Often, the methods used in studies of academics’ writing partially reflect the language of metrics, foregrounding quantitative analysis of publication rates. For example Hemmings and Kay analysed the publication records of both academics with limited numbers of publications and ‘those with impressive publication rates’ (2010, 189). They identified a need for appropriate incentives, time and space for research activity and opportunities to develop confidence and writing skills. Cable et al. (2013) described an off-campus writing retreat, pairing junior faculty with senior colleagues as a ‘high-yield’ strategy. Mentoring is viewed through a lens of productivity; it ‘decreases turnaround time for drafts and accelerates manuscript production’ (Cable et al. 2013, 302). Similarly, a study of a writing retreat for health science academics concluded that the setting was ‘conducive to productivity’ (Bullion and Brower 2017, 394). Ramson, Penny-Dimri, and Perry (2021) focused on a writing retreat’s effectiveness in increasing publication outputs.

Even when qualitative methodologies are used, a focus on outputs often prevails. Martinez et al. (2011, 692) highlighted that successful publishing records are the ‘benchmark against which high-stakes decisions about salary, promotion, and tenure are measured at research universities’. As
such, a questionnaire sent to ‘highly productive scholars’ focused entirely on strategies that enabled productivity (Martínez, Floyd, and Erichsen 2011). Similarly, Grzybowski et al. (2003), despite proposing productivity as an additional rather than a central benefit, presented the thematic analysis of qualitative data in table form only; the central analysis focused on participants’ publication rates.

Quantitative measures of publication rates provide only a fragment of information about the value of a writing intervention. Whilst this fragment is undeniably important within the frameworks by which universities are measured and promotions awarded, foregrounding the quantifiable outcomes of a writing initiative neglects the significance of the many factors at work in the production (or non-production) of completed, publishable products. It fails to address the question of not just whether but why an initiative ‘works’ – or doesn’t. Studies that place at least some emphasis on the process of writing rather than only the product offer some clues. Some acknowledge writing groups as supportive communities (Bell and Murray 2021; Ratkovic et al. 2019) where a sense of solidarity emerges in contrast to the dominant competitive culture of higher education (Grant 2006). Peer feedback can also demystify aspects of the writing process (Kensington-Miller and Carter 2019).

To an extent, practices developed through writing initiatives can transfer to participants’ individual contexts, becoming a more regular part of daily academic life (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009; Macleod, Steckley, and Murray 2012). Both within and beyond a writing group, intentionally setting aside time to write contributes to visibility and legitimacy of writing, which can be powerful in a context where competing demands on time and the expectations of others can position writing as illicit work to be done out of view of colleagues (Moore 2003).

These process-related factors hint at the relationship between writing practices and wider academic identities. However, whilst these benefits are well-documented, studies predominantly employ a retrospective stance (see, for example, Wiebe, Pratt, and Noël 2023; Kempenaar and Murray 2018; Laurel et al. 2017), which may document what the benefits were, but say less about how these occurred. This is problematic if we share French’s (2020, 1606) view of academic writing as ‘form of professional identity work’. From this perspective, the writing process represents more than producing writing for publication; the work of writing itself is integral to the process of becoming a writer, constituting a legitimate part of our broader academic identities (Clark and Ivanič 1997; Savin-Baden 2008). It is invested with emotion and mediated through the institutional and personal contexts we inhabit. A methodological shift from reporting on the productivity of a writing initiative to a study of the writing process itself acknowledges the spaces created for writing as important sites of inquiry. Their nature and influence are captured by surfacing and examining the interplay of the individual and institutional factors that influence this ‘identity work’.

**One writing group in context**

The writing group in my study was established by the Head of Academic Development in a post-1992 UK university, responding to the growing institutional importance of research and writing for publication. However, in common with other new universities, these academics often did not identify writing for publication as a core activity (Gale 2011). Teaching was viewed as top priority and the potential connections between teaching, research and writing remained underdeveloped (MacFarlane and Hughes 2009).

In this context, the writing group offered academics space to write. The regular sessions settled into a pattern, beginning at 10am and ending at 4pm. Each began with a creative task before participants set goals for the day, and the remainder of the session loosely followed a writing retreat structure (Murray and Newton 2009). Extended periods of individual writing were punctuated with discussion and peer review activities exploring aspects of the writing process. At the time, I worked as Senior Lecturer in Learning and Teaching with my own research interests in academics’ writing practices. The writing group provided both a fertile research site and an opportunity to join as a participant, pursuing my own writing goals.
Methodology: using an ethnographic case study

Given the established connection between the individual and the institutional in the outworking of academic identities, I used an ethnographic case study approach to explore how the writing group both shaped writing practices and functioned as a site of identity work. I examined participants’ writing practices over an extended period and in situ rather than retrospectively, using three research questions:

(1) What is the role of a writing group in the development of lecturers’ academic writing practices?
(2) How do the writing practices of the group members change over time?
(3) What factors might account for these changes?

Ethnography’s distinguishing feature is participant observation, which builds relationships between researcher and participants (Gobo and Marciniak 2016). I combined field notes and ‘interpretive asides’ (Simons 2009, 117) in my professional notebook. The verbal exchanges that formed the ‘organising focus of everyday experience’ (Goodall 2000, 98) were recorded and transcribed, capturing an evolving group culture and the individual and shared meanings assigned to its activities.

Further data were collected throughout (See Figure 1):

- Critical incident questionnaires (CIQs – Brookfield 1995) completed on two occasions
- Written/visual artefacts produced during creative tasks
- Planning sheets completed at each session
- Email correspondence between sessions
- Semi-structured interviews with three participants at the end of the research period

The original intention to study a writing group with a stable membership over a period of six sessions was disrupted by the very barriers to writing that have been well-rehearsed elsewhere. Instead, a ‘unique and dynamic’ case study unfolded through the ‘interaction of events, human relationships and other factors’ (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 289) over nine sessions during one academic year. All data were stored in NVivo with a separate data set for each session, enabling organisation by

![Figure 1. The research process.](image-url)
writing group, data type or participant, allowing several perspectives to shed light on the overall picture.

The data analysis process reflected Hammersley and Atkinson’s (2007, 4) description of ethnography as ‘understanding what people say and do in particular contexts’. Transcripts, CIQs, email correspondence and interviews all contained instances of extended participant narratives, defined as a sequence of events, connected in particular ways contingent on the intended audience (Riessman 2008). Taking account of the dialectical relationship between participants and context (Giddens 1991), narratives were preserved in full to keep the story ‘intact’ (Riessman 2008, 53), rather than fragmenting it by extracting and coding data segments. Each narrative was copied and pasted into a Word document, accompanied by related annotations from my professional notebook.

Next, the narratives were supplemented by other data to build a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) of the writing group. Artefacts from the creative tasks – drawings, poetry and prose – were combined with completed planning sheets, CIQs and emails to weave a rich tapestry of data. Initial themes were further refined as I began to write up my findings and final themes are presented in the Results and Discussion section below. However, the language of any narrative is not a transparent and unproblematic representation of meaning (Riessman 2008). In identifying core themes, I adopted Goodall’s (2000, 96) approach of ‘making the story’ from the data in response to the study’s research questions. During the final participant interviews I shared my findings, allowing them to be reshaped to reflect the perspectives of the colleagues who had allowed me to document their experience. To this extent, the themes explored below have been co-constructed.

Ethical permission was gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at The Open University, where the research formed part of my doctoral studies. Participants were clear that (non)engagement would have no bearing on evaluation of their performance in any of the University’s formal appraisal processes. Access to the field of study was relatively straightforward; writing group participants were members of the academic community to which I belonged and consented to the study from the start, with their names appearing below as pseudonyms.

Nevertheless, a high degree of reflexivity was required. The writing group facilitator was my line manager and I was newer to the position of ‘academic’ than other group members, with less experience of research writing and publication than some. I acknowledged a personal view on writing as a tool for complex thinking and recognised that I found it a largely pleasurable activity. Realising that others found the process more problematic required empathy with a perspective that did not reflect my own experience. In my professional notebook, I reflected on these aspects, intentionally seeking out subjectivity and considering how this might bring a valuable distinctiveness to the study (Peshkin 1988).

Results and discussion: the story of the writing group

Whilst the research questions were framed around writing practices, the connection between practices and identities proved integral to understanding the role of the writing group in both the individual and the institutional context. The study’s findings move beyond a discussion of the group’s impact on productivity to explore how a deeper engagement with the process of writing simultaneously enabled writing practices to develop and the ‘identity work’ of writing to unfold. For each theme, representative narratives are integrated with other data to build a rich analysis.

In the beginning

Early data highlighted participants’ perspectives on individual and institutional barriers to writing, providing early evidence of a connection between identities and practices. During the first creative task participants wrote a collection of verbs describing their academic role, before collaborating to produce an image that represented the term ‘academic’ (see Figure 2). The accompanying narrative captured a sense of relentlessness:
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: 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?
…
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]
The momentum builds through a narrative rich in metaphor, emphasising the complex academic identities participants brought into the group. Notably, in the list of verbs participants created, ‘writing’ and ‘researching’ rarely featured:

Joel: ... 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 ... I share, I hear what you’re saying and I can relate to a lot of it. (Writing Group 2)

Previous studies have rehearsed the narrative that writing is problematic, but the power of metaphor drives home the point, surfacing the competing demands participants experienced. The exchange resonates with Garratt and Hammersley-Fletcher's (2009, 309) argument that the ‘cultural tensions between priorities of teaching and learning on the one hand and the production of high-level research outputs on the other’ impose institutional pressures that can be particularly acute in a teaching-focused university. The writing group’s shared experience of these pressures as the driving factor in marginalising writing generated a sense of solidarity. My field notes recorded a note of caution, however:

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 group. (Professional notebook)

This hints at the tension between the writing group as a space in which well-documented narratives on the institutional obstacles to writing were re-rehearsed and embedded or forging a new narrative offering participants something different, collectively envisioned and positive in practice.

However, whilst institutional pressures play their part, one narrative highlighted a different perspective. It documents David’s response to a creative task, where a piece of music acted as a stimulus for participants to draw how they felt about their writing (see Figure 3):

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 fairy-tale kingdom, when you could just go and have a pint and enjoy your life? (David, Writing Group 6 transcript 1)

Figure 3. Creative task: castle on a cloud.
The locked castle was a metaphor for an academic writing community from which David felt excluded. Despite several publications to his name, full acceptance into the traditional academic community still felt beyond his grasp. His narrative captures a tension between the act of producing writing and the sense of being a writer. He had adopted the practice of academic writing, but remained uncomfortable with the perceived traditional academic identity that accompanied it.

Together, these narratives highlight the limitations of focusing primarily on ‘what works’ in a writing retreat. They emphasise the wider interrelationship between the individual and the institutional deeply embedded in the process of becoming a writer. They concur that where cultural tensions are experienced through competing demands on time, writing is marginalised (Findlow 2012; Lopes et al. 2014). However, they go further, suggesting that any increased productivity associated with a writing initiative is unlikely to be sustained without opportunities for participants to grapple with the questions of identity surfaced through engaging with the writing process.

**The writing space**

In broad terms, the role of the writing community in developing lecturers’ academic writing practices was to provide a space for writing to occur. My own reflections on the first writing group noted that,

we settled quickly into our writing zones and remained largely undistracted … for the duration of the session …

Group members various commented on the ways in which they had been able to focus. (Professional notebook)

Analysis of the data revealed the characteristics of that space, surfaced the kinds of practices it enabled and demonstrated their contribution to the identity work of becoming a writer.

Firstly, the space was both visible and protected. At the end of the first session, Ruth reflected on a ‘bounded space, which feels good, but almost too brief an encounter, leaving you wanting to linger for longer over your writing’ (Ruth, email). Joel saw the group as ‘a place of discipline and focus I don’t get in the chaos of everyday working’ (Joel, email). Micah captured the way the group was instrumental in shaping his writing practices:

It was an environment that you could come into and there are like-minded people who are doing the same kind of thing … timewise 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. (Micah, final interview)

Participants defined the space as the physical environments where we met and the time set aside to attend. The physical spaces used were located on the University campus. Whilst there is value in off-site writing retreats (Bell and Murray 2021), the on-campus location made a statement about the value of writing within the institutional space. The spaces themselves were ‘protected’ but their physical location challenged existing institutional structures that otherwise tended to position writing outside the confines of daily academic practices. The regular sessions enabled participants to protect space in their diaries, visibly prioritising and thus legitimising writing. In contrast to off-campus, periodic writing initiatives, there is a case for an ongoing, regular writing group meeting in visible institutional spaces, positioning writing as integral to the regular role and identity of an academic. This greater cohesion between individual academic identities and the institutional contexts in which they unfold creates space for the identity work of writing to occur.

The writing group was also both an individual and a communal space. Its activities and interactions were characterised by shared experience, emotions and accountability, each contributing to the writing process. The climate enabled sustained writing and a more positive narrative of writing identities and practices began to emerge:

[It was] a space for discussion and debate … you test and work through those ideas that are kind of bubbling up from the surface. (David, final interview)
The group’s shared purpose was quickly established:

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! (David, CIQ)

The communal space provided a safe environment in which to acknowledge that the writing process is complex and emotionally draining, but ultimately potentially satisfying. The creative tasks were significant in surfacing these emotions. They were largely individual, but their sharing acted as powerful springboard to moments of raw honesty:

Hopes and dreams that writing will feel relaxed and sunny express the ‘writing is a beach feel’, rather than ‘writing is a bitch!’ I write best when I am feeling happy, rather than stressed and anxious. The deckchairs cast shadows so there is always something about the shadow side of writing: the frustration, stuck places, inelegant phrases, the persistent feeling that somehow it is selfish and self-serving, and that I should be doing something instead. (Ruth, creative task 5)

It seemed that the writing group was space in which some of these obstacles could be overcome, releasing a greater freedom to write:

Even in a room full of tapping keyboards, my 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, CIQ)

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, CIQ)

The individual and the communal were continually interwoven. A communal purpose laid the foundations for individual writing times, where the emotional labour of becoming a writer was laid bare. The identity work that occurred emphasises the non-linear trajectory of identity development, influenced both by ever-present individual emotions and institutional pressures.

The writing group space also enabled an interplay between dialogue and reflection, where consciousness was heightened and new writing practices could emerge and breathe. In one session, David was working on the narrative thread for his PhD by publication. He began a dialogue with Ruth, with the rest of the group listening in and occasionally interjecting:

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: Yes
Me: … and the way that we learn with the internet and how we do that now, rather than a more linear path
Ruth: Yes, yes, 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 (Writing Group 4)

The dialogue is the vehicle through which the concept of rhizomes moves from an abstract, metaphorical representation to a concrete application in e-learning pedagogy. In a reflection of the concept itself, the interaction is not entirely linear, but a degree of shared understanding is
reached. Reflecting on the exchange in his final interview, David noted that the writing group became a place to ‘test and work through ideas’ so that they became more clearly articulated in written form. Micah summed up the value of this co-construction to his own writing practice:

Talking about [writing] 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.

This highlights another significant feature of the interactions that occurred. One advantage of the group was the participants’ varied experience and publication records. Less experienced members were given access to the tacit knowledge, skills and practices of their more experienced colleagues:

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 feedback 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, Writing Group 1)

My field notes record this interaction as a ‘masterclass’. In her account of multiple drafts and peer feedback, Ruth makes explicit the process of drafting a paper, including the importance of the apparently mundane task of effectively managing file storage. For the less experienced writer, the narrative highlights the lengthy process that contributes to the production of any written piece; it legitimises their own struggle, casting away any myth that they are failing at something they should find easy.

The value of an expert in the midst was clear. But other narratives demonstrate occasions when a sense of hierarchy was absent; rather participants brought unique perspectives to the table and their combined effect moved writing forward. The narrative below captures a conversation about how best to approach a particular paper:

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].

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.

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

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. (Writing Group 9)

The dialogue reflects particular characteristics of each participant. David relates a similar challenge and a specific perspective he had taken to resolve it; Ruth draws on her extensive experience to comment on the structure and content of the article; Micah brings a disciplinary angle, using his own sociological frame to suggest an approach. Each contribution surfaces a different aspect of the writing process, helping to shape a more confident sense of direction for the paper.

Thus, the power of the writing group is characterised by shared approaches to writing challenges (Morss and Murray 2001). The narratives cast light on the central importance of interaction in
shaping the writing space and its practices. Furthermore, in his final interview, David expressed the link between these practices and a wider sense of academic identity:

So I think the writing group was very much a kind of community and getting to know people, getting to know people from other departments even on a social level … so that’s important, but also that idea that we have an identity as writers, as researchers, the fact that we had very experienced people in there and very junior people … it was very much about that community of practice … I found that kind of exciting, enthralling and very attractive, kind of wanting to be one of those people. (David, final interview)

David’s earlier resistance to a ‘traditional’ academic identity was moving towards resolution. The writing group helped to facilitate a reframing of academic identity that felt more congruent with his own values and beliefs. In the writing group, the individual identities and previous writing experiences of participants powerfully combined to shape both a particular text and each contributor’s own sense of themselves as a writer.

**Sustaining writing**

However, the persistent challenge of any writing initiative is the extent to which reported benefits extend beyond its boundaries to become integral to an individual’s academic role and identity. In my study, participants related examples of practices that had crossed this boundary. Joel adopted the practice of finding a visible but protected space for his writing:

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 (Joel, Writing Group 2)

Micah noted a more structured approach to planning had become a regular feature of his writing practice:

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. (Micah, final interview)

Changes in writing practices were accompanied by shifting identities:

I think the group … 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, final interview)

As the most experienced writer in the group, Ruth’s narrative demonstrates that the work of becoming a writer is characterised by construction, reconstruction and disruption (McAlpine, Amundsen, and Turner 2014). For other participants, too, the writing group was a ‘local site of practice’ (Lee and Boud 2003, 188) in which the identity work of writing unfolded. Furthermore, whilst the group’s role in writing productivity is acknowledged, there is no mention of a rigid set of practices, nor the development of particular skills, but instead the legitimacy and enjoyment of writing that generated productivity as a by-product.

In addition, participants experienced ongoing frustrations related to the complex interrelationship between the individual and the institution. For them, the institutional status of research writing as part of the academic role remained unclear. Ruth described the group as, at times, a site of ‘active … rebellion’ (Ruth, final interview). Micah was relatively new to the university and perceived an ambivalence towards writing and research in the wider institutional culture. For him, the writing group was ‘about creating a space and culture in the new institution I had joined’ (Micah, final interview). Whilst the university had prioritised an improved standing in the REF, this was not matched by clear messages about how it might be achieved, nor underpinned by a clear articulation of the legitimacy and value of writing. Within the boundaries of the writing
group, participants in this study grappled with and came to better understand the place of writing within their wider academic identities and 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, resulted in a dysfunctional relationship between individual and institutional beliefs and values (Barnett 2000). Sustaining writing relies on building an institutional culture in which the interrelationship between writing practices and professional identities has room to breathe and thrive.

**Conclusion**

This study’s findings extend existing literature to demonstrate how writing groups can protect space for writing, reframe participants’ understandings of themselves and reintegrate research writing with other aspects of their role. The importance of quantifiable outputs is not denied, but set in the context of a writing culture where they might be sustained. In moving beyond a common focus on productivity, I argue instead for closer study of the process of writing that unfolds in such spaces. The ethnographic case study design enabled the exploration of a particular social context, revealing the significance of the activities and interactions between participants in surfacing their emotions and perceptions of themselves as writers. Interrogating the process of writing as it unfolded, rather than in retrospect, revealed how a writing group can provide space and time for the work of ‘becoming a writer’ as part of the ongoing development of academic identity. The journey towards a coherent academic identity (McCune, 2021) requires the continuous interweaving of individual and institutional factors. Whilst the institutional importance of published outputs is unlikely to diminish, the path to achieving them presents both individuals and institutions with the challenge of actively creating and protecting the kinds of spaces where the work of becoming a writer can occur.

The visible and protected nature of the writing group space in this study present a challenge to pervasive institutional narratives that subtly position writing as less valuable than teaching. Sustained writing was enabled by the individual and communal environment provided by the writing group, supporting the complex process of becoming a writer. Finally, the central role of both reflection and dialogue in the group’s collective practices made it a site of co-construction where tacit knowledge about writing was made explicit. Thus, the group operated as a space to reflect on the process of writing and to reframe it in ways that simultaneously developed participants’ writing practices and their wider academic identities.

Short-term writing initiatives can increase productivity and may lead to small lasting changes in academics’ writing practices. However, sustaining these changes beyond the lifetime of a time-bound writing initiative remains problematic. In demonstrating the power of community and interaction in the development of writing practices and identities, this study makes the case for such groups as integral to the institutional culture, rather than operating intermittently and at the margins.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**ORCID**

Claire Saunders  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8919-9105

**References**


