Mentored residential writing retreats: A leadership strategy to develop skills and generate outcomes in writing for publication

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Summary There is an increasing expectation that academic and clinical nurses will contribute to disciplinary and professional discourses through scholarly writing. However, the difficulties and challenges associated with writing for publication mean that many papers will never be written. This current paper describes an innovative approach developed to support skill development and outcomes in writing for publication. Intensive residential writing retreats informed by the principles of servant leadership and incorporating strategies such as mentoring and peer learning were conducted in 2005 and 2007. Positive outcomes and benefits included publications submitted to peer-reviewed journals, as well as positive effects on collegial relationships, and team building. Novice writers benefited from intensive and sustained support and coaching by experienced writers. Organisational benefits included increased participation by staff and research higher degree students in publication activities, enhanced collegial relationships and opportunities for senior established writers to work with inexperienced writers. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The need to develop skills in the conduct of research so as to build research capacity in nursing is well known (Pearson, 2004; McCance et al., 2007; Jackson, 2008). However, writing is a crucial element of the research process that is often overlooked. Many research projects are incomplete because they are not published, meaning that potentially useful research findings remain inaccessible to the wider community of nurses. Writing is also central to the completion of higher degree studies, and when reflecting on it as a process and product of doctoral work, writing has been considered in terms of mechanics of writing, as a

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means of making thoughts and ideas visible to others, and as a shared and reflexive form of scholarship (Diekelmann and Magnussen Ironside, 1998). However, Kamler and Thomson (2004, p. 195) use the term "reluctant writers" to describe the reaction of some students to the writing aspects of their doctoral work and describe emotions such as "agitation, resentment, despair and fear" from some students facing writing tasks.

Writing for publication requires writing to a particular style and standard. Various technical skills are required. Among the difficulties that can impede nurses writing are a lack of resources and opportunities to develop adequate writing skills. While some are able to develop skills independently to the standard required, many others need support. However, nurses tend to work within organisations with a primary health or education focus, and the demands associated with clinical work and teaching are the major priority. Thus, it can be difficult to prioritise activities such as writing for publication.

This paper describes an innovative leadership strategy designed and conducted to provide an intensive opportunity for novice writers — including clinical staff, faculty and research higher degree students — to develop the skills necessary for scholarly writing and submission of papers for publication. The framework and structure of the retreats are described, as are the benefits and outcomes. Finally, evaluative aspects are explored.

Mentored residential writing retreats

A residential retreat style intervention of three days and two nights duration was developed and has been run on three separate occasions during late 2005 and 2007. Basic but comfortable motel style accommodation and a conference room large enough provide workspace for participants, each with a laptop computer was sourced. Novice writers were partnered with peers, and accommodated in shared twin rooms. They were encouraged to form peer-learning relationships with their roommates, and participate in a peer feedback sessions at night in their rooms. Because they had to read and provide detailed critique and feedback on each of their mentorees papers overnight, writing mentors were accommodated in single rooms.

Aims of the retreats

The writing retreats aimed to contribute to a strong research culture through enhancing publication performance. Specific aims were to:

- develop skills and confidence in novice writers to participate in activities associated with writing for publication;
- facilitate the development of positive and purposeful collegial relationships between people of different writing experience levels; and,
- assist each participant to achieve a publication outcome.

Framework and structure of the retreats

Novice writers were to be placed in a situation of exposing themselves and their work to close scrutiny and sustained critique, and were therefore vulnerable. For this reason, a servant leadership model guided the development and conceptualization of the retreats. Servant leadership is a service-oriented model for leadership that recognizes human vulnerability and is underpinned by concepts such as empathy, and commitment to the growth and development of people (Spears, 2004). A milieu of trust and confidence was essential. The role of the servant leader in establishing and maintaining a culture of trust is noted in the literature (Joseph and Winston, 2005). In convening the writing retreats, trust was established through the use of leadership strategies such as providing clear and timely communication, effective interpersonal skills, committing to creating a milieu of supportive collegiality, being reliable, and delivering agreed services and support (Joseph and Winston, 2005).

A milieu that would promote scholarship, critical dialogue and camaraderie was sought, and so the idea of forming a 'community of scholars' shaped the way the retreats were planned. The concept of community is a central element of a servant leadership framework (Spears, 2004), and can be effective in generating research outcomes (Jackson, 2005, 2008). Within a servant-led framework, community processes can be used to create a social learning environment to nurture the developmental needs of constituents (Jackson, 2008). Furthermore, the value of community processes in developing the potential for writing is noted in the literature (Diekelmann and Magnussen Ironside, 1998). Community values of ethical practice, accountability and personal responsibility informed the conceptualization of the retreats. Participants were accountable to work hard and to complete the agreed activities and tasks. On the first morning of each retreat, all participants briefly introduced themselves and shared their personal aims and reasons for participating in the retreat. On the final session
of the last day, participants were asked to revisit these aims and outline their progress and achievements, including any difficulties they may have encountered in completing their work.

Positive collegial relationships were a central element of the retreats and were essential to creating the 'community of scholars' milieu upon which the retreats were based. The relationship frameworks were mentoring, peer support, and peer-learning partnerships. Supportive mentoring and peer-learning relationships were fostered as a framework for teaching and learning and each novice writer knew in advance who their writing mentor and peer-learning partner would be for the retreat.

Schedule of activities

To ensure best possible use of time, the retreats were timetabled from 7 am through to 9 pm, except for the final day which ended at 5 pm. Days began with breakfast at 7 am in the communal dining room. Each morning after breakfast, novice writers met with mentors to get feedback and discuss their planned day’s work. Mentors were available throughout the day for continued consultation and guidance as needed. Participants spent the day working together in a large, shared working space. Late in the day, the novice writers printed out two copies of their work in progress, and gave one to their mentor for overnight feedback, and one to their peer-learning partner in preparation for the peer feedback period held after dinner each evening.

The plan for each day included three communal meal times and two additional refreshment breaks. Meals were taken together around a single table, as a means of helping establish the sense of community, ambiance and conviviality. Two one-hour free periods (one each in morning and evening) were scheduled into each day, during which participants were able to engage in various recreational activities. Some retired to their rooms for a rest, while others swam, went walking or visited the gymnasium.

Characteristics and role of novice writers and writing mentors

Experienced researchers and writers with substantial peer-reviewed publications, intellectual openness, and effective interpersonal skills, particularly in areas of listening and empathy were invited to act as writing mentors. The role of mentoring in developing desired professional skills has been recognized in a range of contexts (see for example, McKinley, 2004; Redman, 2006), and mentoring was used to frame the relationships between novice and experienced writers. Successful mentoring relationships are characterised by trust, mutual respect, and shared, mutually understood goals, and are entered into voluntarily rather than being imposed (Owens and Patton, 2003). Thus, care was needed in matching mentors with novice writers. For this reason, mentors were asked to nominate 3–4 novice writers with whom they were willing to work. They tended to select people with whom they already had some sort of positive association and existing trusting relationships, such as research higher degree students they were supervising, or colleagues on teaching and clinical teams. In preparing mentors for their roles, they were familiarised with the aims and objectives of the retreats and participated in a preliminary meeting where the structural issues as well as teaching and learning issues were discussed.

The novice writers were selected on the basis of their stated willingness and intent to work intensively within a supportive community context to complete a manuscript to publication standard. Further, they undertook to contribute to the community milieu, and were prepared to contribute to the learning of others through participation in a peer-learning partnership with another novice writer. Within their peer-learning partnerships, novice writers were responsible for agreeing to read and discuss each other’s work in the evenings after dinner. This gave them the opportunity to participate in the learning of their peers, to develop their skills in reflection and critique, and gain experience in delivering (and receiving) critique in ways that were aimed at being challenging, but remaining collegial, supportive and encouraging.

Novice writers had to undertake considerable preliminary work, and 3–6 months prior to the retreat were asked to submit a brief outline of their proposed paper along with information about the proposed target journal. At this point, some participants began consulting and working with their mentors to discuss their preliminary ideas and help to conceptualize their papers. Novice writers undertook to submit a full draft of their paper in progress to the retreat leader seven days before commencement of the retreat. The purpose of this was to reinforce the notion of personal accountability, and also to ensure adequate time for mentors to read and have feedback ready for the first morning of the retreat.

Kamler and Thomson (2004, p. 195) have noted students going through "counter-productive
delaying tactics’ in their avoidance of writing. Some of the novice writers participating in the retreats also described frequently engaging in this type of avoidance behaviour. However, at the retreats, it became impossible to avoid the writing task. The structure of the retreats meant that the novice writers were essentially forced to confront their work. At two of the three retreats, this unavoidable confrontation with writing work resulted in emotional responses from a couple of participants. These occurred on the first day of the retreats when these participants realized it would not be possible to engage in usual avoidance behaviour. However, some brief ‘time out’, and gentle encouragement and support from peers and mentors resulted in these participants being able to reconcile themselves to the task at hand, return to their work and ultimately achieve positive outcomes.

Teaching and learning issues

The focus of the retreats was on learning new skills and gaining confidence in writing for publication. The emphasis was on ‘focused skill based learning’ (Redman, 2006, p. 294) that took place within a community framework and incorporated mentoring as well as peer feedback and learning. The role of peers and teachers in contributing to writing through the provision of timely and useful feedback is noted in the literature (Diekelmann and Magnussen Ironside, 1998), and in these retreats this mentor and peer feedback was frequent and sustained. Mentors took on a coaching role. Coaching is an aspect of mentoring (McKinley, 2004), and involves working closely with another person to facilitate that individual’s development and performance (Byrne, 2007). To be effective, coaching should be targeted to the needs of particular individuals (Byrne, 2007), and within the framework of the retreat, feedback was individualised to best meet the needs of each novice writer. Mentors remained on site at the retreat for its duration, and so were available to novice writers throughout each day and into the evenings. Other than the early morning meetings with mentors, and the evening peer-learning sessions, the novice writers themselves retained autonomy over seeking additional mentor feedback and input.

The basic beginning point for finally finishing a piece of written work, be it thesis or manuscript for publication, is to begin to create text. Those beginnings are often just a set of key ideas and thoughts, that over time and with considerable work, reflection, and reworking, can be developed into something that others might wish to read. The preliminary papers submitted by the novice writers prior to the retreat came in at various stages of development, but were commonly replete with stylistic difficulties associated with new writers. These included excessively long sentences, poor linking of ideas, assumptions not clearly stated, assertions not adequately supported and purple prose. Thus, some of the feedback provided by mentors necessarily focused on issues associated with clarity, linguistic precision, strength of argument, and economy of language.

However, when considering learning issues around scholarly writing, the emphasis on technical aspects associated with producing a written outcome has been viewed as being achieved at the (possible) expense of the ‘substance, complexity, depth or originality reflected in the writing’ (Diekelmann and Magnussen Ironside, 1998, p. 1351). In order to avoid this critique, a holistic learning approach was adopted. Mentors and peer-learning partners did not focus more than was necessary on the mechanistic or technical aspects of writing, and were encouraged to engage with the substance of the work by questioning and critiquing the assumptions and ideas informing the developing papers. This is where the importance of mentor listening skills and intellectual openness came into play. The critical conversations that took place between novice writers, their peers and mentors were useful in assisting the novice writers to clarify their thoughts, and resembled what Mezirow (2003, p. 60) describes as ”critical-dialectical discourse”.

These critical conversations often continued through meals with a wider group of participants contributing to the discussion. Through these conversations, participants gained confidence in discussing their work and benefited from the input of the community of scholars. The value of a community framework in enhancing learning has been noted in the literature (Imel, 1998; Malfroy, 2005; Jackson, 2008). Diekelmann and Magnussen Ironside (1998) have commented specifically on community processes in relation to writing. They assert that community processes can facilitate new ways of thinking, broaden and clarify understandings and nurture thoughtful and reflective community learning and thinking (Diekelmann and Magnussen Ironside, 1998).

Outcomes and evaluation of the retreats

Each of the three retreats held to date has generated positive outcomes that have justified the
investment of time and money (see Table 1). Careful analyses conducted after the retreats reveal their cost effectiveness when compared to other human resource development activities. In addition to gathering data about measurable outcomes such as peer-reviewed publications, oral and written participant evaluation was sought at the conclusion of each of the retreats. Participants were asked to comment on aspects of the retreat such as accommodations, food and also asked to provide some general overall comments as to its usefulness and value to their writing activities. A retreat participant was selected to circulate and collect this evaluative data.

Through this process, participants commented on the importance of the retreats in helping them to develop skills and achieve outcomes. They greatly valued the companionship, collegiality, and sense of shared purpose that connected them to their fellow retreat participants. The retreat provided opportunities for novice writers to spend intensive productive time with colleagues and peers, and experience the benefits of intensive and sustained support and mentoring from experienced writers. There were many positive comments about this aspect of the retreats.

The retreat provided a wonderful opportunity to engage in scholarly activity with like-minded individuals who offered each other support and encouragement... (Novice writer, retreat 1).

It has been a very productive and enriching experience to be mentored and also to be able to share and develop knowledge and writing skills from other participants at the retreat ... (Novice writer, retreat 1).

Discussing with people who are doing similar things can help you come up with so many new ideas (novice writer, retreat 3).

Participants also commented on the value of being a part of a community of scholars, and enjoyed the level of critique and debate.

It was great having time to discuss research, have philosophical debates and have work critiqued by others (novice writer, retreat 3).

Many positive comments were made about the tight and intensive program, and participants felt that it facilitated productivity.

Productivity was high in this academic collegial environment. Mentors gave timely productive feedback that allowed rapid progression of papers (novice writer, retreat 3).

The program was good and it was great to have such a focused agenda (novice writer, retreat 2). Had a very productive three days, It is such a good idea to be able to have people together. Things get moved on very fast because there are so many people who are just there to help (novice writer, retreat 3).

Other feedback suggested that participation in the retreats made them feel valued, in that they were aware of the commitment shown to them in both time and money.

I have never before had this sort of attention and I feel privileged and have a real sense of achievement (Novice writer, retreat 1).

One of the difficulties with writing is finding uninterrupted time to devote to it and retreat participants valued having the time quarantined specifically for writing. Participants experienced having direct access to supportive but challenging critique and prompt assistance when needed, as very helpful.

The retreat provided a great opportunity to focus my energies specifically on writing...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retreat</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Mentors (n)</th>
<th>Novice writers (n)</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>December 2005</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16 Papers submitted to peer-reviewed journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 In revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>November 2007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12 Papers submitted to peer-reviewed journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Accepted for publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>December 2007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9 Papers submitted to peer-reviewed journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Book chapters completed and submitted</td>
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Having experts on hand to provide immediate feedback and guidance was just great and determined that I did not waste time or become too frustrated (which often happens when working in isolation)... (Novice writer, retreat 1).

It was a great opportunity for us to work on a single task and have our mentor’s feedback (novice writer, retreat 2).

The retreats contributed to enhanced relationships by providing opportunities for senior established writers to work with more junior and inexperienced writers. The mentors themselves commented on this aspect of the retreat.

It was a great experience being able to spend ‘quality’ time with students and junior academic colleagues and work with them to bring something to fruition. I found it very rewarding. (Mentor, retreat 1).

Overall, the writing mentors have commented favourably on their participation in the retreat, and all but one has volunteered to participate in future retreats.

It was noteworthy that though a couple of participants had experienced an emotional response on beginning the writing tasks, these events were not referred to in their written evaluative feedback. This was likely because participants were in a supportive and supported environment, the emotional outbursts occurred on day one of the retreats, participants did recover to be able to engage with their work in a sustained way, and ultimately produce a complete written manuscript. Thus, these participants not only faced their fears, they conquered them.

In addition to the benefits to individual participants, and the organisational benefits associated with increased participation by staff and students in publication activities, the writing retreats have resulted in the development of continued and ongoing productive outcomes-focused relationships. Since the retreats, writing mentors have continued to work with novice writers to address feedback on the submitted papers that has arisen from the peer review process. Several have either commenced or have indicated an intent to begin new papers and projects together, and so the relationships continue.

Concluding remarks

Writing for publication is an essential aspect of building research capacity. As nurses continue to develop knowledge that can assist in the provision of better care, more efficacious interventions, and innovations in care delivery, there is a need to be able to report them in ways that are accessible and meaningful to an increasingly global nursing community. The innovative approach to skill development that is described in this paper, provided an environment in which nurses from diverse settings were supported to produce a manuscript ready for submission for peer review. To date, three of these retreats have been held, and they have generated a number of submitted manuscripts and published papers.

Equally importantly, they have facilitated the development of productive collegial relationships between experienced and novice writers. The nature of organisational life can impede the development of supportive collegial relationships (Jackson, 2008), and so it is important to provide opportunities for people to come together to share skills and contribute to a collegially supportive learning community. An essential element of leadership is the ability to be able to contribute to the growth of others through the provision of developmental opportunities. Servant leadership is a model for leadership that provides a supportive and nurturing community framework to support the growth and development of people, and was effective in shaping the planning and conduct of the mentored residential writing retreats.

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