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DO LIVE WRITING/ STUDY SESSIONS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS, IN AN ONLINE, DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, DEMONSTRATE THE SAME BENEFITS DOCUMENTED FOR FACE-TO-FACE SHARED WRITING EVENTS?

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Abstract

A recent project focussing on students studying an Arts and Humanities Access module at the Open University revealed that students in IMD Q1 are disproportionately more likely to 'passively' withdraw than their peers (i.e. not submit an assignment, not register with the university their intention to defer, ultimately leading to a 'fail' grade for that module: Lavery & Padley, 2022). Recent data shows a significant award gap for students studying Arts and Humanities modules who have a mental health need registered with the university. Colleagues were therefore motivated to assess whether the inclusion of synchronous, online, study and support opportunities, training students in the use of the Pomodoro technique, might support success for participants. This paper outlines the approach of two projects that applied techniques associated with group writing sessions, reflecting on whether their findings demonstrate similar benefits for participants in an online, distance learning environment as for those traditionally run in the physical space (i.e. writing retreats).

Keywords:

Academic writing support; arts and humanities; synchronous online delivery; coach-mentor; low socio-economic; mental health; retention; student success; writing retreats; writing communities.

Research tools and methodology

Scholarship on the use of writing retreats for supporting academic colleagues' development of writing skills talks of the numerous ways in which attendance at shared, live writing experiences can benefit the attendee. Kornhaber et al.'s (2016, p. 1210) survey of scholarship in this area enabled them to define the characteristics of writing retreats that make them 'conducive to increasing publication output': these are, protected time and space; development of a community of practice; development of academic writing competence; intra-personal benefits; and organisational investment. There is further evidence that study groups or academic writing groups can have a positive impact on wellbeing (Eardley, et al., 2021), which could have beneficial outcomes when supporting students with mental health needs, as well as for students from non-traditional backgrounds studying at a distance. Although much of the literature focuses on the use of writing retreats to support teachers and academics, we produced this paper, bringing together findings from two current projects focusing on student support, to explore whether the same benefits could be seen to apply to groups of adult learners at a distance learning organisation, where the live writing/ study sessions are provided online and at a distance.

The project follows an action research methodology, as the development of our projects' support sessions utilising the Pomodoro time management technique (Cirillo, n.d.) arose in response to student feedback as well as the respective teams' reflection on earlier support interventions focussed on other pedagogical approaches (respectively, direct teaching in the form of 'catch up' sessions; and 'Learn – Grow – Connect' group coach-mentoring approaches). Additional support was therefore added to existing provision in the form of group live writing/study sessions. Evaluation was completed via survey of participants, with plans to follow up with quantitative analysis regarding the impact on student outcomes for these cohorts of students. (A limitation of the

current approach is that, in the absence of an RTC evaluation, causal 'impact' cannot be definitively shown because there may be a self-selection bias).

Approach and content

'Catch up and Write' sessions

In response to earlier findings regarding the higher likelihood of IMD Q1 students passively withdrawing having not submitted an assignment, we implemented a series of 'catch up' sessions after each Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA) on our three Arts and Humanities Level 1 modules (February 2022 cohort. NB this followed similar pilots on a Social Sciences module DD218 and English Literature module A233). Students who had not submitted their TMA within 10-14 days of the deadline, and had not recorded an extension with their tutor, were invited by email to attend. Each session ran for c. 30-45 mins (depending on level of student participation), with an additional 15 minutes allocated for welcome and final Q&A, and were hosted in Adobe Connect. We organised for an experienced tutor to provide each session, with two iterations scheduled to run over two weeks.

Suggested content for the 'catch up' session included:

- standard skills support (e.g. time management; contacts when students face challenges; how to plan and draft a piece of written work)
- focus on both the relevant module materials and specific TMA task that had been missed
- activities focussing on unpacking the question and how to use the guidance notes
- preparing students to catch up with work toward the next assignment.

From October 2022, building on previous work undertaken on the Level 2 Literature module A233 (2021), an additional 30-45 minute live writing session ('Write Now') was added to the series of catch-up sessions running across 12 x 60 credit undergraduate modules: 3 x Level 1, 2 x Level 2 English, 1 x Level 2 Classical Studies, 1 x Level 2 History, 2 x Level 3 English, 2 x Level 3 Classical Studies. The rationale for this part of the session was to encourage attendees to immediately build on the support and encouragement they had gained from the catch-up session, by staying online for a further 30-45 minutes to make progress with a specific aspect of their TMA planning or writing, and gain practice in using the Pomodoro technique introduced in the session.

The aim for this part of the session was to encourage students to feel that they were not alone in falling behind and that they had the support they needed to help them move forward and complete the TMA. Influenced by feedback from the A233 pilot, we allocated two tutors to each session, and encouraged tutors to engage in dialogue for their delivery. They were also asked to share with students the writing task they were completing during the 'write now' part of the session, to reinforce the idea that this approach to goal setting, planning, and writing is valuable for all writers, not just students.

Given that these students are at most risk of passive withdrawal, attendance figures are heartening for the first phase of this initiative (Figure 1). In addition to this, there are high numbers of viewings of the 'empty room recordings' for each session.

Figure 1: Attendance at 'Catch up and write' sessions, October 2022 cohort.

Attendance rate (as a % of students invited)	Number of sessions	Total number of students invited (per band)	Total attendees (per band)	Average attendance rate (per band)
0-5%	59 (70%)	12421	209	2%
5-12%	22 (26%)	1938	152	8%
Over 12%	3 (4%)	197	85	43%

Similarly, attendance at a 'Catch up' session does appear to have positive student outcomes in relation to submission of the missed TMA, with an average submission rate of 94% for attendees (for the missed assignment), compared to an average of 75% for the overall module submission rate.

'Study Together' with the Open University's Personal Learning Advisory (PLA) Service

'Study Together' sessions were designed in response to student feedback on a programme of group coaching workshops aimed at OU students with mental health declarations. The programme was entitled 'Learn, Grow, Connect' and aimed to provide a forum for sharing study successes, challenges and the intersections with lived experience. Of a potential target population of 283 students on A&H modules, we had a 17.7% response rate. (This response rate to the group sessions was higher in the current academic year - 17.75% - than the response to the one-to-one offer in the 21-22 academic year - 15.2%).

Student feedback gathered in response to a regular survey on the Learn, Grow, Connect programme demonstrated demand for a space to study and connect with other students – to help motivation and sense of connection. The context of distance learning and mental health is important here as students told us that they:

- Feel alone in their studies
- Struggle with internal motivation to study and procrastination
- Want techniques to develop study habits
- Value opportunities to focus on study

'Study Together' sessions for Level 1 students in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences were therefore launched by the centralised coaching and mentoring service (PLA) in March 2023 as a follow-on intervention. These sessions are exclusively for students with a declared mental health condition who also have a pass probability prediction of less than 70%.

'Study Together' creates a quiet study space online for students to focus on their studies in a facilitated way. Students sign up for an 80-minute session hosted by the PLA service in MS Teams. Using the structure of the Pomodoro technique, students are invited to set their own study goals for the session, work quietly online with other students, and then share their achievements. PLAs hold the space for students to develop their focus (as they do in coaching and mentoring) but the study is the student's own. Study Together also gives space to connect with other students.

Analysis

Scholarship has shown that barriers to writing can be overcome through the 'legitimisation of time and space for writing' offered by participation in a shared, live writing experience clearly demarcated from attendees' usual working environment (Girardeau et al., 2014; Grant, 2006; Moore, 2003; Murray & Newton, 2009; Pololi et al., 2004). The common model for a writing retreat involves participants physically travelling to a location, separate from the usual work environment, which therefore offers attendees associated benefits in terms of removal from caring responsibilities in the home, for instance. As a distance-learning organisation, at the Open University we rely on synchronous online software to ensure our teaching and support sessions are delivered to the largest group possible. The majority of students at our sessions were therefore likely to be participating in our live writing sessions in their 'usual' study environment. Nevertheless, some initial feedback from surveys from the 'Catch up and write' sessions records:

I am often called upon at home to 'put out [sic] fires' and so it is nice to have a reason to say no, now I am looking at this.

The online delivery of these sessions therefore still enables students to take 'legitimate time away from conflicting demands and priorities' (Kornhaber et al., 2016, p. 1217); and once students have reflected on the value of this legitimate space for writing they may be able to better embed this within standard study time.

Physical space is also implied by Moore's notion of a writing retreat as a 'sanctuary', connoting a safe, supportive, secure and comfortable space (2003). In the PLA-led Learn, Grow, Connect sessions, which targeted students with mental health needs, meetings were held in Microsoft Teams but not recorded. A stripped-back, accessible version of session materials was sent to students in advance of each session. Students were required to register with their Personal Identifier so hosts were able to identify them in the event of any safeguarding issues; however, students were able to join the sessions with their initials/alias so they did not have to (implicitly) declare their mental health condition to other students if they chose not to. There was the option for 1-2-1 follow ups and/or check-ins where issues were raised in the group setting. Additionally, there was a named contact in the institutional mental health casework team to discuss possible referrals into mental health support from a caseworker. This time spent constructing a safe space online is reflected in the feedback comments received from the follow on 'Study Together' sessions attended by students who had engaged in Learn, Grow, Connect. Students referenced feeling being with others and the value of 'seeing' facilitators with video camera functionality, as well as feeling 'accepted':

Being in a virtual room with others who were doing the same thing as me made me feel settled within myself, so it helped with my concentration and focus.

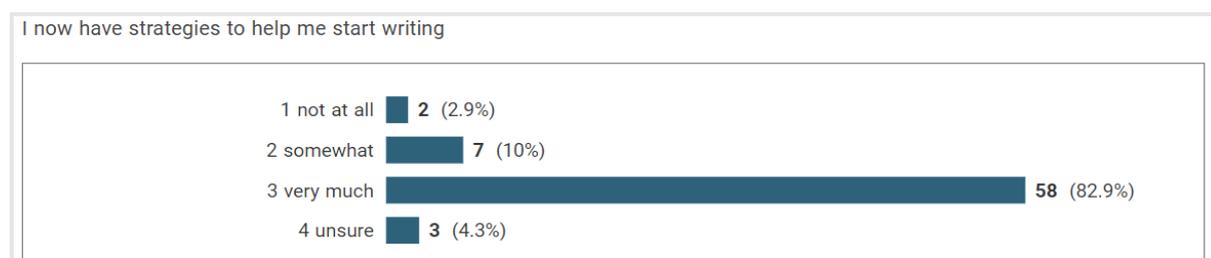
It made a massive difference to my mood and concentration being involved in a group activity.

Nice to see friendly faces with the people running the session. They were all pleasant and professional.

I really liked the way it was run. I felt welcomed and accepted.

Note is made in the scholarship of the need to help participants develop follow-up strategies, to maintain momentum when back in the work (study) environment. This appears to be a particularly effective part of the current delivery of the 'Catch Up and Write' sessions (Figure 2).

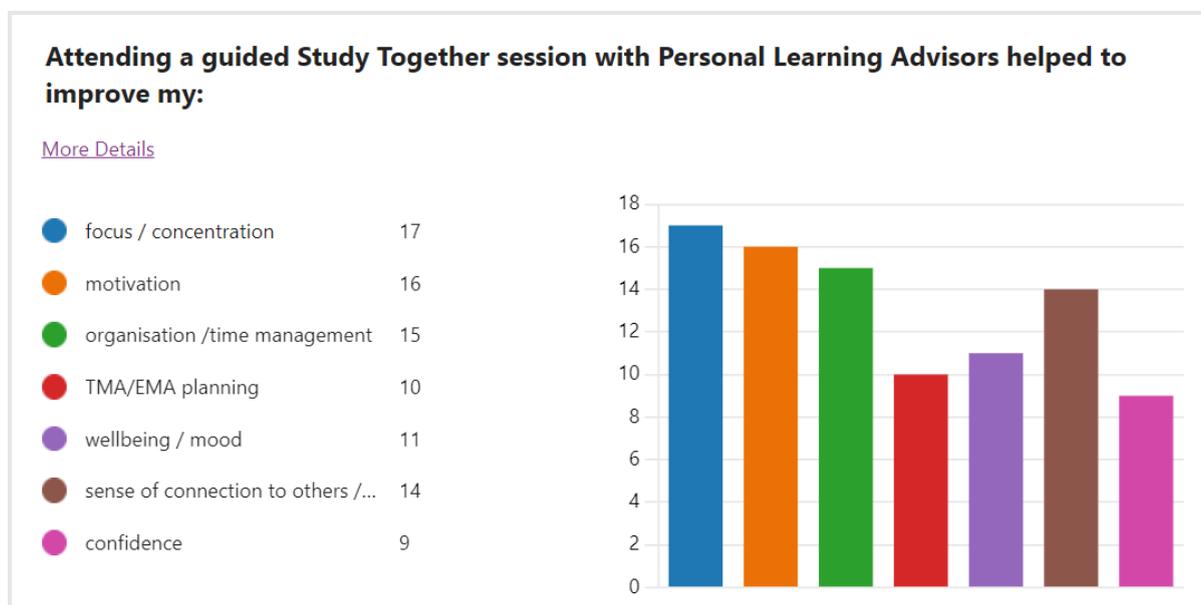
Figure 2 'Catch Up and Write' student feedback survey (n=91)



The development of a 'community of practice' model in relation to the face-to-face writing retreat notes positive outcomes for participants in terms of providing a shared vision, collegial support, mentorship and social interaction (Cable et al., 2013; Jackson 2009; Murray & Newton 2009; Rickard et al., 2009). Again, previous studies generally focus on retreats that enabled the building of communities of practice over a longer time period (i.e. a day or weekend), and in a space where colleagues would be physically present together. Instead, our projects are based on the principle that by creating opportunities for students to learn actively together we also create a community of practice – defined as people "joined together by shared interests and a mutual participation in a particular practice" (Chavez et al., 2021), in an online, distance space. Student feedback survey data for A233 'Write Now' sessions (n=72) shows that 69% of respondents found it useful to talk with other students and share experiences in the sessions.

With a particular focus on supporting students with mental health needs, studies have shown that the act of working on something synchronously with others (even in silence) helps to forge a ‘we-community’ with associated positive emotions – ‘including sense of belongings, mutual support and dependence, and satisfaction’ (Koulaxi & Kong, 2022, p. 13). Furthermore, a recent study (2019) which surveyed c.2800 Australian students found that regular interaction with peers and staff for students with mental health needs is a ‘protective’ factor for student wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019, p. 10). In the Study Together session feedback to date students have identified wellbeing and mood, as well as sense of connection, as something positively impacted by attending guided study sessions (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Student Feedback Survey: Areas of positive impact following attendance at a Study Together session



Recent case studies have highlighted a significant role for student support teams in combating loneliness and isolation in the context of online learning (Morley & Aston, 2023; Chakma & Kahung, 2021). From the A233 Catch up and write sessions, 9 from 47 respondents to the survey register that they appreciated finding that they are ‘not alone’ in their struggles with academic writing and assignment preparation. There is also evidence that study groups or academic writing groups can have a positive impact on wellbeing (Eardley et al., 2021), as well as helping to maintain productivity. Intrapersonal benefits of participation in writing retreats, noted in Kornhaber et al.’s analysis (2016, p. 1223), include increased self-awareness, confidence and motivation; and reduced writing-related anxiety. Evidence from the ‘Study Together’ sessions so far record that 87% of attendees feel that they are able to achieve their goals in this setting (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Student Feedback Survey: Study Together Session Attendees

I achieved the goals I set for myself in this session



Study Together students also stated the benefits in terms of a sense of accountability:

By being held accountable with my studies, I was able to achieve more than I expected

I am normally quite last minute with things and have to cram in hours of study but the 25 minute bursts are helpful , i [sic] can try and fit them in at work

Similarly, attendees at A233 'Write Now' sessions, when asked if the session had made them think or feel differently about any aspect of their writing process, responded positively:

Yes, made me calmer when writing.

Yes, it's given me the tools to be more confident approaching essay writing and not feel so over whelmed.

In terms of the specific content and approaches that had an impact on attendees, Murray and Newton (2009) note that the 'proximity and balance of experienced and inexperienced writers provided a forum for constructive synchronous feedback that was instrumental to building confidence and writing capacity and alleviating writing-related anxiety'. Our decision to include two tutors to co-facilitate the 'Catch Up and Write' sessions was positively received by attendees, with one student noting that they appreciated the mix of student and tutor input to the sessions:

[t] makes you realise that you are not alone in experiencing difficulties and that others have the same issues - no idea what to write, procrastination etc. The tutors were also great at sharing their ideas on how to tackle some of these issues. It also helped to reaffirm that I am doing some things right which helps to build confidence.

We also noted the positive adaptations our respective projects made to this approach, bringing in pedagogy of care. Particularly in the sessions organised for students with mental health needs, the use of 'holding silence' for students can show 'care, attention and respect to students who prefer to join in conversation through the text chat, to allow them the necessary time to think and type their thoughts and ideas, without unintentionally excluding them from the community or prioritising those on microphone and camera' (Morley & Aston, 2023). Both the case studies discussed in this paper used software that allowed participants to elect whether to participate using video, microphone, chat, or any combination of those. Arguably, this could mean that shared study/writing sessions delivered online and at a distance might better serve inclusivity and accessibility for the students we are targeting.

Conclusion

During a time of financial constraints, it is heartening to see that students attending online, distance live writing/study sessions appear to receive many of the same or similar benefits as experienced through attendance at face-to-face writing events. There are additional challenges, but with thought and attention it is possible to create safe spaces (or 'sanctuary'), in which students report the value of sharing experiences, receiving support from both tutors and peers, reduction in writing-relating anxiety, and the development of strategies for on-going management and development of their own academic writing skills.

Some of the aspects of face-to-face delivery that are missed include benefits associated with repeat participation, which has not been explicitly encouraged in the format of existing projects. Colleagues are aware that “identifying a group of people as a community of practice does not make them one”: the community has to be actively cultivated (Li et al. 2009; Wenger et al., 2002, in Benvenuti, 2017, p. 103). Furthermore, success of that depends on “knowledge of participants’ needs... skillful engagement by participants” with benefits seen from “repeat participation”. (Benvenuti, 2017, p. 105). This is an area for further exploration in the online, distance learning space.

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