

Title: A writing retreat as a community of learning

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Explain the benefits and limitations of retreats for building and maintaining a Community of Learning among academic colleagues
- Identify critical success factors for leading a Writing Retreat
- Establish good practice for evidence-informed educational development activities

Session Outline

A recent TQEF evaluation (Dexter & Seden, 2009) has identified that busy academics have difficulty in protecting time to write and publish work, especially when teaching is their main focus. At The University of Derby, an allocation of TQEF final year funding was used to establish its first Writing Retreat, with the aim of providing time, space and support for writing for 32 members of staff. An early event evaluation exercise provided sufficient evidence to convince Senior Management to allocate internal funding for this to become an annual event for academics. In addition to allowing individual achievement in publishing, the event represented an emergent Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) as it provided a valuable opportunity to network and share both across disciplines and levels of expertise. Writing Retreats are becoming more common (Grant, 2008; Murray, 2008), but there is as yet little formal evaluation or publication relating to their principles and practice. An Action Research methodology (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005) was initiated to evaluate the Derby experience, with immediate and 6-month post-event feedback gathered through questionnaires and informal interviews. The research explored participants' perceptions regarding the value and outcomes of the event and identified 'critical success factors' (Porter and Parker, 1993) for potential use by educational developers planning to run such an event.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

15 minutes – outline of the research findings

30 minutes - open discussion to address any issues arising from the presentation, to explore the participants' experiences of writing retreats and to share good practice. Questions will include "To what extent can Writing Retreats contribute to emergent Communities of Practice?" and "How should we best manage such events?"

References

- Coghlan, D. & Brannick, T. (2005) *Doing Action Research in your own Organization*, London: SAGE.
- Dexter, B.P. & Seden, R.S. (2009) "It's really making a difference!"; a case study of how small-scale research projects can enhance teaching and learning. Staff Educational Development Association Spring conference, Brighton, U.K. May 2009.
- Grant, B.M. (2008) *Academic Writing Retreats: a facilitators guide*, Milperra, New South Wales: Higher Education Research & Development Society of Australia.
- Murray, R. (2008) 'Writer's retreats: reshaping academic writing practices', *Educational Developments* Issue 9.2, pp14-15.
- Porter, L.J. & Parker, A.J. (1993) 'TQM - the critical success factors' *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 4, pp 13-22.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.