**Publish or perish… and the Women@TUoS NETwork Writing Club**

The currency of academia is publications. And the data that comprise publications are typically supported by grant income derived from writing successful grant applications. Yet for many academics, making the time to invest in this currency is thwarted by other academic duties such as teaching and administration. Having fewer publications, or reduced grant income, can curtail promotion. Women academics generally tend to have more non-research academic obligations, along with more familial responsibilities, which makes investment in writing even more challenging despite these large costs. Moreover, academic writing can be a lonely, isolating task; a task that may differentially negatively affect women given that they may already feel isolated due to the gendered nature of academia.

Many interventions have been trialled to help improve academic writing productivity given its importance. One activity in which there is a growing literature regarding positive interventions is that of writing groups/retreats. Writing groups can be many things: they can focus on writing training, or group papers, or individual writing, be one hour long or an afternoon, or a combination of all these. Writing retreats generally tend to be week-long residential "escapes" from your academic environment. Such retreats can help accomplish a lot of writing in one go, but doesn’t allow for sustained writing activity.

We wish we could say that the idea to start a Writing Club at the University of Sheffield was well-researched prior to embarking on the initiative, grounded in this – what we now know – knowledge-base. But it wasn’t. It was borne out of desperation, personal frustration and guilt. And while desperate, frustrated, guilt-ridden academics are probably a dime a dozen, being in that maelstrom is neither a desirable nor productive place to be. What we did know is what we desired to create: a supportive environment for women academics to pursue their writing, away from departmental demands, and that represented a significant, sustained but manageable time investment.

The idea for Writing Club is not novel, it’s not ours, and we heavily modified our guiding principles from colleagues at Michigan State University who run a Writing Boot Camp. But given how transformative this initiative has been for Women@TUoS, we wanted to share how we’ve organized Writing Club and what it has accomplished for and by its members.

**Organizing the Writing Club**

The initiative is run by Women@TUoS NETwork and so membership for Writing Club is drawn from the Network. A general email for a call for expression of interest was sent to members. During this call, we outlined the structure of the Writing Club (Box 1). After this call, there were some frequently asked questions (Box 2) about the structure. Most of the concerns were about the commitment (“I can’t possibly commit to a minimum of two Fridays a month for a semester – I’m too busy”) or the day (“I can’t do Fridays”). But we still got a core group of about 10 members signing up for the first date. Since then, we’ve expanded to 17 members many of which met the recommended minimum attendance. These members range from PhD students writing up their thesis to professors working on their next book.

We scheduled the Writing Club for an entire semester and booked the room in advance so that we could get comfortable with the room and not have to worry about where Writing Club was any given week. We provided free coffee, tea and biscuits throughout the day for our formal breaks. Individuals work on their own projects but do so in a supportive environment, where everyone is writing. We do not work on a collaborative Writing Club project. For other groups this may work, but our members come from across the University, sometimes with little in common regarding research and a desire to set aside time to write.
What worked for us?

Apparently – and we say this because we were ignorant of this information at the start of the initiative – several organizational factors contribute to successful writing groups: commitment, firm but flexible structure, dedicated time and small group size. Based on guidance from other writing groups, we started with a strong ethos of commitment, a firm but flexible structure, and dedicated time. The initial group was 10 members. We deliberately chose an all-day, weekly format to make it worthwhile for members. If Writing Club only met occasionally, or only for a short period of time on the day, then this may allow more people to attend, but would mean that members may not get enough benefit out of attendance, weakening – rather than strengthening – the goals of Writing Club. Writing can be a long process so setting aside a significant, sustained but manageable amount of time to commit to writing, and to the group, seemed like a reasonable requirement. Over the course of a semester, the incremental writing made weekly added up to a substantial amount of progress (Box 3).

Talking at the start of the day about what we wanted to accomplish really helped focus members on their task. Because we knew we had to state our ambitions out loud, we had to think about our goals prior to arrival, which meant we were more prepared to invest in that goal during Writing Club. And we made a verbal commitment to ourselves, witnessed by others, about what we wanted to accomplish.

Oddly, sitting in a quiet room with a group of people also sitting quietly in the same room, was not as weird as we initially predicted. Instead, it fostered an environment of dedicated work. Everyone got their head down and rapidly got into their work with no distractions of colleagues or students knocking on the door, or of temptation/pressure to deal with emails. But all work and no play makes for an exhausted academic and a poor writer. So the breaks were always welcomed. While it may appear that there is too much break time in our schedule, we found that the informal networking occurring during breaks formed a strong bond within commitment to the group and re-energized people for the next writing session. There is no hierarchy at Writing Club – PhD students writing their first thesis chapter/paper sit beside professors working on their next book. We all share the frustrations and joys of the writing process. In this way, senior academics represent role models to junior academics.

We started out small. We got larger as news spread about how motivating it was to be part of Writing Club. If every member came each week, then the group size would be too big. But there are currently enough of us that go every week to maintain group momentum, and enough that attend occasionally, to maintain group size in any given week. If we get much larger, or have members attend all the time, then we will have to consider splitting the group.

When members found out that Writing Club wasn't scheduled for the summer, it was near mutiny. Writing Club was subsequently booked for whole calendar year.

Box 1. Writing Club Guidelines

Writing Club is a Women@TUoS NETwork initiative to build a supportive writing community with accountability. Writing Club is a day-long writing retreat, repeated weekly. Academic staff from across TUoS can participate and sometimes the only commonality between participants is that they want to block off regularly scheduled time to write, with the peer support that a Writing Club provides. Much research has suggested that female-only communal writing retreats are a great way to support your writing.

Writing Club is 1 day per week; we have originally scheduled it for Fridays so that we can end the week on a high note – feeling good about making time for essential writing. Currently we have reserved a room for all Fridays of Semester 2. Experience in other institutions running similar schemes indicate that only 2-3 people need to participate to make it work. However, there must be regular commitment for participants to get out of the Writing Club what is intended.

Based on successful Writing Clubs at other institutions, we have the following rules for participation.

Rules:

1. No internet during writing blocks – except for looking up papers.
2. No talking during writing blocks
3. If you say you are coming, then you need to come. It is a commitment you make to the group.
4. If you cannot make it at the start time, then wait to arrive during one of the breaks.
5. This is about writing (manuscripts, grants) – not preparing for class, responding to emails, etc.

Schedule:

9–9:20am: Arrive and get settled, check email last time, set up computer.

Start by going around room and briefly say what you are working on today and what you accomplished at last Writing Club.

9:20–10:30: Writing

10:30–11:00: Refreshments (provided); emails, informal networking

11:00–12:00: Writing

12:00–13:15: Lunch (not provided; away from the room) and resettling if coming to PM session

13:15–14:30: Writing

14:30–15:00: Refreshments (provided); emails, informal networking

15:00–16:30: Writing and go home

Go around and say what you accomplished for the day.

A note: Given that this is the first time we have run Writing Club, this is a tentative schedule and can be modified based on how the group feels about this.

www.sheffield.ac.uk/womens-network
Regardless of time of year, women show up every Friday to write in this supportive environment. Some members stay until the building closes at 6 pm. Some work through lunch. Being flexible to meet the needs of the group builds trust between members.

We also organized a celebratory lunch at the end of the semester to acknowledge the accomplishments of everyone as a result of Writing Club. Ten of us went out on a Friday lunchtime, during our normally scheduled Writing Club, and celebrated the members achievements. The output was outstanding (Box 3).

**Box 2. FAQs**

**Do I have to commit for every Friday?**

We understand that not everyone can make every Friday. But commitment to the group is necessary for the group to work and for it to work for you. We recommend that you attend at least every other week to maintain group cohesion and your own momentum. We will provide an online signup sheet which will then link to your calendar to show when you’ve indicated you can attend.

**Does it have to be Friday?**

Yes…and no. Fridays were chosen for a variety of organizational considerations. However, we understood from the beginning that Friday may not be good for everyone. If you can’t make that day, but there was a group of you within a department or faculty that wanted to do this on a different day, the Network can help organize this.

**Do I have to commit all day?**

No. You can attend either for the morning session, the afternoon session or all day. We understand that school run commitments may result in you entering late in the am or having to leave early in the pm, but as long as disruption is kept to a minimum, the most important thing is attending for as much time as you can.

**What is the room format?**

A large conference room that will be set up as a conference table with electric leads, etc. It will not be in an IT suite/computer lab, etc. We’ll be able to have drinks, eat some food, and face each other while we are working. Overall, a nice atmosphere conducive to quality writing in a supportive environment.

**Box 3. Accomplishments (after one semester) and Thoughts on the Writing Club**

From the 10 members attending the celebratory lunch accomplishments totalled this:

- 13 papers or book chapters were submitted (and some even published in the time frame)
- 4 thesis chapters were sent to supervisors
- 4 (different) thesis chapters were commented on by supervisors
- Several grant proposals were submitted and at least one was invited for full proposal.

**Thoughts about Writing Club:**

“Friday was for me”

“There is no hierarchy at writing club”

“Protects a whole day of research time”

“This is my time; I’m doing it for me”

“I can’t imagine having made the deadline without Writing Club”

“Makes you start on the blank screen”

“Writing club has enabled me to make fantastic progress with my PhD thesis. The supportive, inspiring but disciplined nature of the group makes maintaining concentration and motivation much less of a challenge, enabling me to get far more done than when I am writing on my own. It has also made the process of writing much more enjoyable!”

“The writing club has been an invaluable support for me. It forced me to protect some time to write and gave me the opportunity to meet a group of inspiring and supportive women. It is difficult to put the feelings about the experience into words but for me it has been a very positive and stimulating experience.”

“I love the Women@TUoS writing club. It has helped me to feel good about the time I spend writing research papers and grant proposals, and I’ve made new friends.”

“As a mid-career academic, I have found the women’s writing day the most helpful and beneficial initiative; it has enabled me to submit several papers to deadline which would have dragged on and not been submitted otherwise and triggered a huge improvement in my time management strategy”