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Writing Retreats Responding to the Needs of Doctoral Candidates Through Engagement with Academic Writing

Émilie Tremblay-Wragg¹, Cynthia Vincent², Sara Mathieu-C.³, Christelle Lison⁴, Annabelle Ponsin⁵ & Catherine Déri⁶

- 1) Didactics Department, University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada.
- 2) Faculty of Education, University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada.
- 3) Faculty of Permanent Education, University of Montreal, Canada
- 4) Department of Pedagogy, University of Sherbrooke, Canada
- 5) Faculty of Sociology, University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada
- 6) Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Canada.

Date of publication: February 28th, 2022

Edition period: February 2022 – June 2022

To cite this article: Tremblay-Wragg, E., Vincent, C., Mathieu-C., S., Lison, C., Ponsin, A., & Déri, C. (2022). Writing Retreats Responding to the Needs of Doctoral Candidates Through Engagement with Academic Writing. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 11(1), 29-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.9195>

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.9195>

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Émilie Tremblay-Wragg
University of Quebec in Montreal

Cynthia Vincent
University of Quebec in Montreal

Sara Mathieu-C.
University of Montreal

Christelle Lison
University of Sherbrooke

Annabelle Ponsin
University of Quebec in Montreal

Catherine Déri
University of Ottawa

(Received: 18 October 2021; Accepted: 19 February 2022; Published: 28 February 2022)

Abstract

During dissertation writing, PhD candidates face challenges engaging with academic writing, among other things, which leads to their participation in writing retreats with their peers. Developing a better understanding of PhD candidates' needs to optimize engagement with writing is important for improving the overall doctoral experience and reduce attrition. We then conducted a qualitative longitudinal experimental study with PhD candidates from Canadian universities: 15 respondents who participated in a writing retreat and 15 respondents who never participated in such event. Based on our findings, this article presents a complementary perspective to the theoretical model of engagement with writing by Murray (2015). Thereon, we expand on the intersectionality of components (cognitive, physical, social) to illustrate the influence of structured writing activities. These intersections highlight the benefits of writing retreats to answer the needs of PhD candidates to engage with writing: planning dedicated writing periods, implementing effective work methods in environments enabling concentration, and engaging with collective writing activities. By way of supplementing the most recent literature on the subject, we suggest that the participation in structured writing retreats serves as a pedagogical benchmark for graduate programs to offer students comparable conditions in support of their writing requirements to enhance academic success.

Keywords: writing retreats, academic writing, doctoral education, engagement with writing, dissertation

Los Retiros de Escritura Responden a las Necesidades de los Doctorandos a través del Compromiso con la Escritura Académica

Émilie Tremblay-Wragg
University of Quebec in Montreal

Cynthia Vincent
University of Quebec in Montreal

Sara Mathieu-C.
University of Montreal

Christelle Lison
University of Sherbrooke

Annabelle Ponsin
University of Quebec in Montreal

Catherine Déri
University of Ottawa

(Recibido: 18 de octubre de 2021; Aceptado: 19 de febrero 2022; Publicado: 28 de febrero de 2022)

Resumen

Mientras escriben su tesis, los doctorandos se enfrentan a retos de compromiso con la escritura académica. Poder entender mejor las necesidades de compromiso con la escritura de los doctorandos y la relación entre estas necesidades y la asistencia a retiros de escritura son importantes para mejorar la experiencia doctoral en general. Realizamos un estudio experimental longitudinal cualitativo en el que participaron 15 doctorandos que asistieron a un retiro de escritura y 15 doctorandos comparables que nunca participaron en dicho evento. Basado en el modelo teórico de compromiso con la escritura de Murray (2015), este artículo introduce una perspectiva complementaria ampliando los componentes en cada intersección del marco para ilustrar la influencia de las actividades estructuradas de escritura. Entre los requisitos de los estudiantes para los retiros de escritura son clave: la planificación de períodos de escritura dedicados, la implementación de métodos de trabajo eficaces en entornos que permitan la concentración y la participación en actividades de escritura colectiva. Este artículo original presenta los beneficios de los retiros de escritura para responder a las necesidades de los candidatos al doctorado de comprometerse con la escritura junto con la literatura más reciente sobre el tema. A la luz de los resultados de nuestra investigación, sugerimos que su participación en retiros de escritura estructurados podría servir como catalizador para que los programas de posgrado ofrezcan a los estudiantes condiciones comparables.

Palabras clave: retiros de escritura, escritura académica, educación doctoral, compromiso con la escritura, disertación doctoral

Since 1960, the number of students admitted to graduate study programs has quadrupled in Canada (Universities Canada, 2020). However, between 40 to 50% of students drop out without obtaining a diploma (Litalien & Guay, 2015). Moreover, among those who succeed, a majority complete their academic journey beyond established and financed deadlines (Denis & Lison, 2016; Litalien, 2014). Doctoral studies generally consist of training “to” research “by” research (Berthiaume et al., 2020). During this process, candidates across the world develop skills and autonomy in the quest for knowledge in their field of study by going through, more often than not, phases of confusion, doubt, and disorientation (Keefer, 2015).

In Canada, “a typical doctoral journey” starts with approximately two years of formal courses and seminars. During this stage, doctoral students conceptualize their research project and then are subject to a form of evaluation to complete the mandatory coursework. Following this certification, students become PhD candidates and start data collection and analysis to fuel the writing of a dissertation. During the drafting of this comprehensive document, needs for support and guidance have been recognized among PhD candidates. Those needs can be categorized in terms of pedagogical supervision (Denis, 2020), anxiety and stress management (Haag et al., 2018), as well as socialization/enculturation, and professional development (Stouck & Walter, 2020). Yet, given the relative novelty of the topic, the specific needs in doctoral writing are hardly ever addressed in the literature (Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2022; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). Support in this regard could be part of the answer to curb high dropout rates, especially among “All But Dissertation” PhD candidates (Kelley et al., 2016). The present research aims at giving a voice to PhD candidates to clearly hear and better understand what they need to engage with writing.

Literature on Writing Retreats

In recent years, several scholars have examined the benefits of writing retreats, particularly in regard to productivity. The findings of a systematic literature review completed by Kornhaber et al. (2016) and more recent studies established that retreats provide organizational, professional, and personal benefits contributing to publication outputs. More specifically, retreats:

- (1) legitimize the act of writing (without interruption) in a comfortable environment where community support is fostered (Quynn & Stewart, 2021; Stevenson, 2020);
- (2) value time and space dedicated to writing (Bullion et al., 2017; Ratković et al., 2019);
- (3) develop writing competencies by establishing a structure and setting specific goals (Ratković et al., 2019);
- (4) enhance personal interest toward writing (Bullion et al., 2017), motivation (Rentzelas & Harrison, 2020), and self-confidence (Stevenson, 2020);
- (5) reduce anxiety associated with academic writing (Maheux-Pelletier et al., 2019; Stevenson, 2020).

According to the description of activities in this literature review, academic writing retreats usually involve less than 20 participants from a single discipline, the same department, or a specific university.

In the book entitled *Writing in Social Spaces*, Murray (2015) offers that: “It provides dedicated writing time. People who attend retreats regularly over a period of a year or so say that this changes their writing habits and makes them write and publish more” (p. 57). In that respect, retreats propel participants into action. Yet, to our knowledge, little has been explored regarding the relevance and benefits of structured writing retreats for PhD candidates. Papen and Thériault (2018) analyzed interviews with 19 PhD candidates who participated in a writing retreat organized by faculty staff. This study revealed that the retreat was not only enjoyable for participants, but also represented a positive event in their doctoral journey and contributed to improving their rapport to writing. Similar observations were shared by Stewart (2018) with respect to the increased academic output of graduate students participating in writing retreats. Even though this field of study is currently emerging across Anglo-Saxon countries, including the United States, United-Kingdom, and Australia, it remains largely unexplored in Canada, especially in the French-speaking province of Quebec.

Engagement with Writing as a Theoretical Foundation

When discussing academic writing, Lindsay (2015) considers that adopting healthy habits at the beginning of graduate studies facilitates the process of learning, the integration of new knowledge, and the output of research

papers. In this regard, Murray (2015) identifies three components (cognitive, physical, and social) that enable the adoption and durability of effective writing practices in the context of higher education. This theoretical framework, based on empirical findings from studies involving scholars engaged with writing activities, is used here to explore the collective nature of academic writing for PhD candidates.

Cognitive Component of Engaging with Writing

Cognitively engaging with writing means to consider the task as essential and a priority, which implies disengaging from other tasks unrelated to writing or tasks related to writing but of low priority. In other words, if academics spend a significant amount of time in meetings, conferences, and teaching, they must legitimize writing activities in priority to other professional engagements. Moreover, while engaged with writing, efforts to legitimize priority tasks must prevail to avoid scattering and improve efficiency.

Physical Component of Engaging with Writing

Physically engaging with writing requires considering challenges associated with time appreciation and the space dedicated to writing activities. Murray (2015) recommends the scheduling of writing periods similar to other work-related commitments. Since academic writing is a complex task, it is essential to select timeframes during which concentration is optimal. In addition to carefully identifying dedicated writing periods, Murray (2015) suggests creating conditions conducive to writing, such as choosing an environment free of potential distractions, disconnecting from social networks, and establishing a space reserved exclusively for writing.

Social Component of Engaging with Writing

Socially engaging with writing consists of eradicating: competitive dynamics, beliefs that writing is essentially a solitary task, and taboos surrounding academic writing. In this sense, Murray (2015) invites scholars to consider writing as a social experience by participating in writing sessions, support groups, and structured retreats. The relationships built with others who also recognize the importance of writing contribute to increasing

motivation, maintaining an effective writing pace, and progressing academic projects.

In Figure 1 below, the aforementioned three components (cognitive, physical, and social) are represented in a theoretical framework on engagement and disengagement with writing (Murray 2015)¹. Accordingly, engagement with writing requires a temporary disengagement from other personal and professional spheres.

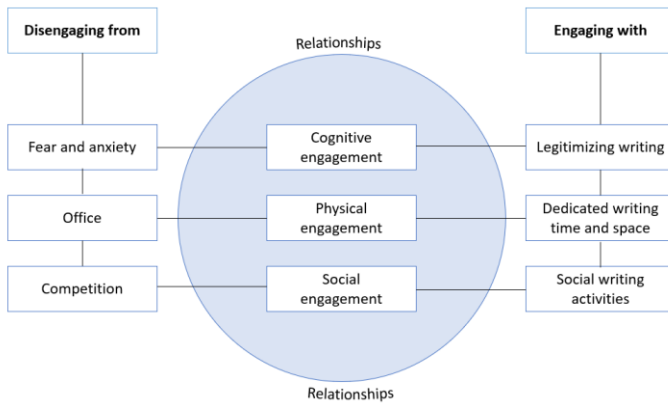


Figure 1. Model for engaging with writing (adapted from Murray 2015, p. 100)

***Thèse-z-vous* Writing Retreats**

As a non-profit organization (NPO), *Thèse-z-vous* has designed and implemented a model of structured writing retreats to support graduate students' engagement with academic writing. Inspired by similar initiatives (Murray & Newton 2009; Kornhaber et al., 2016), the model was designed and adjusted following an iterative "research-action" dynamic to respond to graduate students' needs by considering effective pedagogical methods. Broadly, a *Thèse-z-vous* writing retreat is broken down into six steps (Figure 2) bringing together 40 to 50 students from diverse universities and disciplines for three days of focused writing.

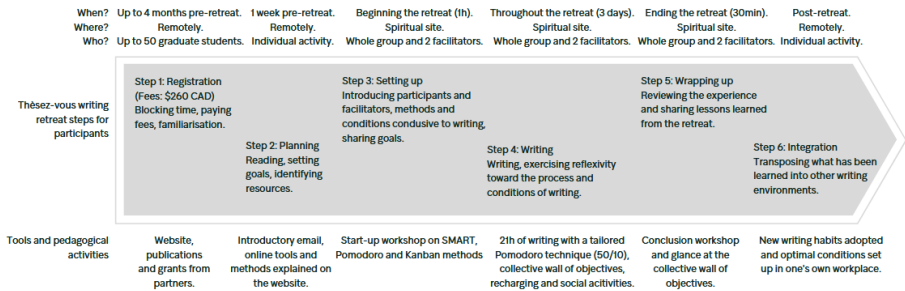


Figure 2. Pedagogical model of *Thèse-z-vous* structured writing retreats (Vincent et al., 2021)

During the retreat, participants identify optimal writing conditions, as well as participate in workshops to further develop writing competencies and engage in resourcing activities (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). Immersed in natural settings (i.e., spiritual sites, wellness centres, recreational areas, etc.), participants are guided through a prearranged program to (1) progress dissertation writing based on realistic individual goals; (2) identify conditions that facilitate their writing that are transferable after the retreat; and (3) break from feelings of isolation by developing a sense of belonging to a community. In a peer-based perspective, each retreat is facilitated by two trained graduate students, who are responsible for supporting participants in a structured environment and encourage participants to solely focus on writing by socializing only during specific periods.

Research Objectives

The purpose of our study was to gain a better understanding of if and how *Thèse-z-vous* structured writing retreats support PhD candidates' engagement with writing by responding to their specific needs. Based on Murray's (2015) theoretical model of engagement with writing, we (1) describe and categorize what emergent PhD candidates need in order for them to engage with writing; (2) explain the benefits and limits of *Thèse-z-vous* structured writing retreats through the lens of those needs; (3) suggest sub-components to Murray's (2015) model to enhance its specificity and relevancy to engagement with dissertation writing.

Method

To meet our objectives, we included a controlled condition, given that previous work did not rely on qualitative experimental design to identify the effects that participating in a writing retreat would have on writing engagement. This research protocol allowed for the attribution of perceived effects of the intervention and, in our case, the understanding of the extent to which retreats could answer what French-Canadian PhD candidates need to engage with writing.

Protocol of Recruitment

A research protocol was operationalized with an Experimental Group (EG) that participated in a *Thèsez-vous* writing retreat and the perceived effects of this intervention were documented, while a Control Group (CG) did not engage in the same activity (Cohen et al., 2013). Following ethical clearance from Université du Québec à Montréal (certificate no. 3957_e_2019), we sent a recruitment message to doctoral programs at all Quebec universities and to graduate students registered for upcoming *Thèsez-vous* writing retreats during the winter of 2019. To inquire about the needs of PhD candidates to engage with academic writing, this email invited them to take part in a longitudinal study including three interviews conducted over the span of a year. The profiles of initial respondents were analyzed to select 15 students in the EG and 15 students in the CG with similar gender and discipline characteristics. To meet research eligibility criteria, we only selected participants enrolled in doctoral programs from the provinces of Quebec and Ontario who had completed their coursework (i.e., were at the dissertation writing stage).

Participants

The EG was constituted of 15 PhD candidates participating in one of 10 *Thèsez-vous* writing retreats offered between January and August 2019. The CG was composed of 15 PhD candidates who never participated in writing activities organized by *Thèsez-vous*. As shown in Table 1, the EG and the CG are relatively equivalent with most participants representing social and

human sciences. Recruiting males for our study proved to be difficult, especially in the EG, since most participants in writing retreats are female students.

Table 1.

Demographic comparisons for qualitative data between the Experimental Group and Control Group

Demographic	Participants	
	Experimental Group	Control Group
Research sample	15	15
Participant gender, <i>n</i> (%)		
Female	11(73.3)	9(60)
Male	4(26.7)	6(40)
Non-binary	0	0
Discipline, <i>n</i> (%)		
Social and human sciences	12(80)	12(80)
Health, natural, and applied sciences	3(20)	3(20)

Qualitative Measures: Interviews

The timeline of all three interviews, over a year, is illustrated in Table 2. All interviews were recorded as audio files and lasted approximately 60 minutes for the EG and 40 minutes for the CG, since there were additional questions on the topic of structured writing retreats posed during the EG interviews.

Table 2.

*Pre-experimental design timeline. *T = time*

	Intervention	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Experimental Group	Writing retreat	T1: the day after the retreat	T2: six to eight weeks after T1	T3: A year after T1
Control Group	None	T1: at the participant's disposal (at comparable time to the experimental group)	T2: six to eight weeks after T1	T3: A year after T1

The interview guide at T1 was developed based on our research objectives with the goal of capturing details on what PhD candidates need in order to engage with writing. More specifically, we were interested in examining the impact of the EG participation in *Thèsez-vous* writing retreats on the students' engagement with writing. The interview guide had three distinct sections. The first section allowed to draw a portrait of participants' sociodemographic and educational profile. The second section included questions about PhD candidates' motivation to write for both of CG and EG groups: *What motivates you to write your thesis?; Are there any particular events that have influenced your motivation to write since the beginning of your doctoral journey?* Three additional questions were asked of EG to specifically ask participants about their motivation for participating in the writing retreat such as: *What motivated you most to write at this retreat?; Was your motivation to write at the retreat similar to or different from what you typically feel when writing under other conditions?* The third section focused on writing habits and the same eight questions were asked of both groups. For example, *What do you think are the conditions that make you more productive?; Do you think you will be able to meet your writing goals for the next week?*

The data collection instrument was pilot tested by six PhD candidates. The interview guides for T2 and T3 were similar to that of T1, although for T3 we adjusted questions in the instrument to address the COVID-19

pandemic. During these follow-up interviews, the interviewer often reminded participants of what had been previously discussed (e.g., dates or needs) to identify any changes or evolution in the participants' situations.

Qualitative Analysis

After data collection, all 60 interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through a comprehensive research paradigm to better understand the dynamics of the studied phenomenon based on the researcher's privileged access to the experience of others (Savoie-Zajc, 2011). The transcriptions were examined using qualitative content analysis, including establishing a list of emerging themes in conjunction with research objectives and the theoretical framework. This list was used to code all data with the NVivo12 software, in accordance with Van der Maren's (2003) proposed manifest content analysis. Two distinct strategies were adopted to ensure that excerpts from the transcripts were linked to the appropriate theme (category). First, a validation of each coder's categorization (excerpt versus associated theme) reached 85% agreement in keeping with criteria established by Cohen (1960). Secondly, an inverse coding was conducted for each code to ensure each excerpt did belong to that associated theme.

Findings and Literature

This section reports 1) the needs of PhD candidates during the writing stage as well as 2) the benefits and setbacks of *Thèsez-vous* writing retreats in response to the identified needs.

The Emergent Needs of PhD Candidates During the Writing Stage

In general, our findings reveal that PhD candidates, be it from the EG or CG, share common needs to engage with academic writing activities and actively seek means to fulfill their needs.

Cognitive Component: I Need to Legitimize and Prioritize my Dissertation over Other Academic Engagements

It appears that regardless of their profile, all participants need to legitimize dissertation writing in relation to other professional engagements. Some students (127 excerpts/27 participants) noted working or investing time outside of dissertation writing to vary their activities and develop professional competencies. Among respondents, we notice two student profiles: those benefiting from scholarships and those without this type of funding. Members of the latter group are forced to combine multiple teaching and/or research contracts to make ends meet, which impacts their engagement with writing: “If I had a scholarship from FRQSC² or SSHRC³, it could have been different. I would probably be writing full time. Currently, I am part time: (...) course load, (...) research contracts, (...) it impedes [my writing], then again, I don’t have a choice [translated]” (CG5). Even for PhD candidates with scholarships, the requirement to work or get involved in activities other than dissertation writing is present, although they are motivated to do so for different reasons. In order to develop professionally, it seems that progressing their dissertation is not sufficient, especially for those aspiring to professorships. Therefore, these participants also apply for research contracts to enhance their publications, take on teaching course loads or organize conferences or other scientific events. When enquiring about these professional engagements, one respondent mentioned that despite her scholarship, she still considered it necessary to diversify her engagements, even though it hindered her writing tempo: “Working consumes time, then again, I don’t know to what extent I would have been able to solely focus on my dissertation. (...) I think that it is good to do multiple things, I also think that working as a lecturer and research assistant supplements our development [translated]” (CG6). To succeed, students would rather turn down offers unrelated to their doctoral project and better establish their limitations through self-regulation. Furthermore, those who are parents experience unique challenges related to progressing their dissertation (50 excerpts/13 participants). More specifically, they mention daily engagements and responsibilities associated with parenthood, compelling them to juggle between dissertation workload and caring responsibilities. Indeed, even when these students choose what to focus on,

many recognize that prioritizing writing constitutes a significant challenge in their situation (57 excerpts/22 participants).

In sum, despite challenges to legitimize writing in relation to other tasks, it appears that the situation improves for some PhD candidates over time, due to enhanced self-awareness (22 excerpts/12 participants) and gained experience (22 excerpts/12 participants). Nevertheless, this experience is gained through the necessity of engaging in priority activities simultaneously, which further limits the time devoted to dissertation writing.

Physical Component: I Need Dedicated Space and Time to Write my Dissertation

Our research findings show that PhD candidates understand the importance of scheduling writing activities based on their concentration capabilities. The majority of PhD candidates consider it necessary to plan writing periods in their agenda (86 excerpts/27 participants) at a time when they feel most productive. For some students, the morning is ideal; thus, they schedule writing periods early in the day (36 excerpts/19 participants): “I need to dedicate two hours, ideally every morning, every other day. (...) Create time, short bursts, but recurrent [translated]” (CG12). This CG PhD candidate adds that those short periods are productive because she would not be able to cognitively sustain longer time spans. In contrast, other respondents prefer to “complete a large chunk of work [translated]” (61 excerpts/18 participants) over a longer period, spanning from a full day to two consecutive weeks. This means that they set aside full days dedicated to writing, allowing them to “maintain a common thread [translated]” (CG5) or “finalize the first draft [translated]” (EG1) of a section of their dissertation.

The majority of PhD candidates express the importance of adopting effective work practices to progress their writing (53 excerpts/23 participants): post-it notes, agenda, writing software, to-do lists, time management techniques, etc. These tools and methods improve writing and facilitate the tracking of established goals: “It is on my to-do list, then the fact that it is done, I check it, then it is like self-motivation and self-satisfaction [translated]” (CG11).

Emerging from the analysis of interviews are additional needs associated with the physical component of dissertation writing. PhD candidates use common qualifiers to describe work environments conducive to writing.

They mention the importance of working in a calm space, in total silence or where there is background music playing without lyrics (31 excerpts/18 participants), and with access to coffee, tea or water (30 excerpts/16 participants). Also, they consider it advantageous to have the possibility to work at different locations (26 excerpts/14 participants), especially at geographical proximity to their personal residence (23 excerpts/10 participants), for example in a library, in a cafe or at their university office. It appears that, for some respondents, having a dedicated workspace (37 excerpts/17 participants) with abundant lighting (16 excerpts/10 participants) facilitates concentration. Finally, it is not surprising that PhD candidates raise the requirement to access suitable material and equipment prior to writing (21 excerpts/12 participants). As university campuses were closed at T3 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students had to equip and re-organize a space at their homes that met these criteria in order to work effectively.

Social Component: I Need to Break the Isolation and Belong to a Community

Several PhD candidates stipulated in their interviews that the act of writing leads to a feeling of isolation (42 excerpts/19 participants). Some respondents even described their situation by using evocative terms, such as “a big trauma [translated]” (CG1), reflecting challenges associated with isolation spanning an extended timeframe. Students expressed the need to break from this feeling of isolation and by the same token to socialize (66 excerpts/17 participants) by working in the company of others. During dissertation writing, the key role played by peers (80 excerpts/20 participants) was undeniably recognized by most of the participants to our study. It is reassuring to be surrounded by colleagues with similar experiences and with whom it is possible to discuss common challenges, but also to share writing strategies and resources: “To have doctoral students around, it is a support circle, mutual aid. It is helpful. [During the retreat], we experienced the same problems, the same joys. We could help each other to do certain things when someone knew more about it than the others [translated].” (EG4)

The excerpts from interview transcripts categorized under the social component highlight the magnitude of isolation associated with dissertation writing and the students’ desire to gather with peers to break from it. Regardless of their participation in a retreat, it appears that EG and CG

PhD candidates require similar means to facilitate writing. In fact, respondents from both groups want to legitimize writing, establish physical conditions conducive to writing, and share their reality with others.

However, the exercise of categorizing engagements identified by Murray (2015) revealed that the components are not mutually exclusive. For instance, scheduling writing periods in an agenda can be associated with both cognitive and physical engagement components. Additionally, establishing an efficient workspace relates to both physical and social components. The complexity of these categorizations is even more evident when identifying benefits of writing retreats in response to said PhD candidates' requirements.

***Thèsez-vous* Writing Retreats to Respond (or Not) to PhD Candidates' Needs to Engage with Writing**

The analysis of interviews with PhD candidates who participated in writing retreats revealed benefits and links to literature falling under all three components of Murray (2015). Drawing from this model, figure 3 below presents these three components with the addition of adjacent components, that we named inter-components, related to benefits from writing retreats for PhD candidates.

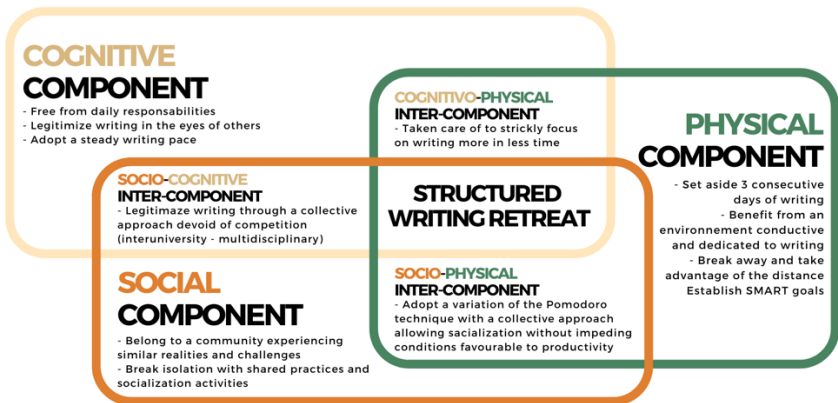


Figure 3. Model of benefits from structured collective writing retreats

Cognitive Component: Retreats Enabling PhD Candidates to Engage with Writing

As previously mentioned, one of the main challenges faced by PhD candidates during dissertation writing is to prioritize this activity in relation with other tasks, be it personal or professional. According to our research findings, it appears that participating in retreats frees students from their daily obligations (34 excerpts/14 participants) to solely focus on writing for a fixed period. Furthermore, when asked about what was most appreciated from the retreat, a respondent answered that she was able to legitimize writing in the eyes of those around her. When she writes at home, she is constantly distracted because she gets interrupted by her loved ones who do not recognize writing as legitimate work, but when she participates in a retreat, she feels that she is taken more seriously. These results echo studies from Carter et al. (2013) and Webber and Dismore (2020) who report that PhD candidates, especially women, experience difficulties to legitimize writing with their immediate entourage.

Additionally, the structure provided during retreats pushed participants to sustain a continued writing tempo before (23 excerpts/8 participants), during (48 excerpts/15 participants), and after (27 excerpts/11 participants) the retreat, for only a few weeks. Preliminary work was completed based on instructions sent to participants to establish specific goals before the retreat began. This enabled them to start the retreat prepared and ready to write. The participants who followed these instructions noticed the impact on their productivity: “It changes everything to prepare in advance [translated]” (EG1). During the retreat, it is recommended to avoid other tasks (reading, data analysis, etc.) and only focus on writing to maximize the quality and quantity of written products. Regarding the pursuit of effective writing practices post-retreat, the second set of interviews conducted at T2, revealed that participants were able to maintain a prolonged writing tempo (27 excerpts/11 participants), notably due to their legitimization of writing. After one year (T3), however, it seems that participants are unable to maintain these strategies over time because they seem to lose or forget how to prioritize dissertation writing. Participants mentioned that they would either need to participate in writing retreats again or attend workshops about scheduling and prioritizing writing. Quynn and Stewart (2021) also demonstrate that graduate students have difficulties post-retreat maintaining

writing habits over a long period of time. The specific COVID-19 pandemic context at T3 worsened the situation, as mentioned by few participants, because PhD candidates' lives were uprooted in many ways.

Cognitivo-physical Inter-component

At the intersection of cognitive and physical components, we can identify additional retreat benefits and areas for improvement. First, several respondents mentioned that writing retreats facilitate the production of a substantial amount of work in a compressed scheduled timeframe over three days (physical component): “a full chapter [translated]” (EG7), “a section [translated]” (EG10) or “a large chunk of work [translated]” (EG11). This is not surprising considering that Kornhaber et al. (2016) literature review highlighted the effectiveness of retreats on productivity. Our results confirm the same effect on PhD candidates. Associated with the cognitive component, when participants prepare prior to retreats, the writing periods are optimized (Jutras, 2019). By doing so and focusing on writing during the event, participants will most likely recreate these newly acquired practices post-retreat. Also, PhD candidates appreciate being looked after by the organization (meals, lodging, schedule, activities, etc.) to solely focus on writing (26 excerpts/11 participants): “Everything is taken care of, I have a nice view, meals are prepared for me, the bed is there. Everything is ready, I have no excuse to procrastinate [translated]” (EG5). Therefore, “the turnkey aspect of retreats [translated]” (EG1) related to the cognitive component freed the mind to enable participants to concentrate on writing. Participants in the Ratković et al. (2019) study also reported appreciating the gift of time and physical space that writing retreat can provide. As for the physical component, it is illustrated by the participants' appreciation for a temporal structure (22 excerpts/13 participants) with a predetermined schedule. An aspect that seems to be debated according to participants is certainly the accessibility to Wi-Fi in a writing retreat. Most participants mentioned that Wi-Fi is essential while one respondent reported at T3 having terrible headaches due to an overexposure to Wi-Fi in a room where up to 50 people use it.

Physical Component: Retreats Providing an Ideal Environment to PhD Candidates

Participating in a retreat requires PhD candidates to commit three consecutive days to writing, which, in their views, allows the progression of a large part of their work. A dozen respondents insisted on the fact that nothing is equal to writing retreats. They further explained that the strength of a retreat resides in its intensity, whereas past writing experiences never reached the same level of productivity. The environment exclusively dedicated to writing (20 excerpts/8 participants) represents a major factor enhancing productivity (Quynn & Stewart, 2021): “I enjoyed being in a dedicated workspace, I made the association in my head: ‘here, we write and that’s it!’ [translated]” (EG15). As a matter of fact, due to being confined to a suitable space for writing, PhD candidates found themselves in physical conditions enhancing productivity (47 excerpts/14 participants). Sources of distraction were limited since participants are encouraged to disconnect from social networks by leaving their cellular phones on a table earmarked for this purpose and block their application notifications on their computers. Additionally, retreats offer an environment tailored to writing since participants are provided with comfortable chairs and tables, as well as supports for computers, keyboards, and mice. Participants also reported that retreat venues are selected based on specific criteria, such as lighting, comfort, calm, and unlimited supplies of non-alcoholic beverages. One of the participants described the retreat as “an ideal place for writing [translated]” (EG15). Carter et al. (2020) previously reported that a writing retreat is a “quiet space allowing real thinking” (p. 57). Furthermore, the very nature of retreats contributes to the creation of an ideal environment for PhD candidates (Ratković et al., 2019). Since these retreats are organized away from large urban centres, participants find themselves in serene environments. The participants appreciated having a room on their own. In comparison, apparently one of the retreats included shared rooms and this was less appreciated in regard to comfort and privacy.

Lastly, those who participated in retreats value setting goals using the SMART method (adapted from Doran, 1981). The establishment of specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (SMART) goals facilitates the identification and accomplishment of tasks in a fixed timeframe. To this end, participants mentioned that they were offered a workshop during which they

are invited to record individual goals on post-it notes for reference at each writing period. This practice is greatly appreciated by participants (33 excerpts/12 participants). Other types of writing retreats have used similar management methods and their results are as revealing (Kornhaber et al., 2016). Several PhD candidates mention wishing they had been educated on using this goal setting method earlier in their doctoral journey. One of the respondents mentions that the technique should be included in “a mandatory course in all graduate studies [translated]” (E6).

Socio-physical Inter-component

At the intersection of social and physical components is the application of the Pomodoro technique (Cirillo, 2006) in writing retreats for PhD candidates. Participants use terms such as “discipline” and “structure” to characterize the framework imposed by this approach. They expressed their appreciation for the adherence of retreat facilitators to a strict schedule adapted from the technique developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s and put into practice by self-employed individuals. This technique has been adapted by *Thèsez-vous* to provide a full 50 minutes of writing followed by a break of 10 minutes. The sustained intensity of the writing tempo during retreats enhances productivity and the achievement of common goals as stipulated by Moore et al. (2010).

In regard to the physical component, scheduled breaks seem essential from the participants’ perspectives, to delineate writing periods: “by taking short breaks, I think that it ensured that I sustained a higher level of productivity [translated]” (EG14). The vast majority of PhD candidates who participated in retreats (14/15) mention appreciating this structured approach (24 excerpts/14 participants) without even being asked questions on this specific topic. They further explain that the Pomodoro technique limits procrastination by its sequence including a short break before quickly returning to work, spurring students to self-regulate, as explained in detail in another one of our articles (Vincent et al., 2021). Additionally, this time management technique provides participants with opportunities to socialize every 50 minutes, converging toward the cognitive component. For example, one of the participants summarizes his experience as following: “I find that it is just the right balance because it gives a true incentive to concentrate and to progress. Then again, there is always like a reward at the end that is not

too far, that is to be able to talk, and exchange during the 10-minute break [translated]” (EG8).

Social Component: Retreats Facilitating the Integration to a Writing Community

PhD candidates from our study felt isolated during dissertation writing. At each retreat, it appears that the creation of a community occurs around issues related to academic writing (66 excerpts/16 participants). Just as Olszewska et al. (2016) reported that writing groups represent a safe space for participants to share their work, writing retreats seem to have the same beneficial effect. In this respect, PhD candidates who participated in the study reported being grateful to have lived a collective writing experience. On several occasions, they mentioned that without the *Thèses-vous* community, their doctoral journey would have been difficult (15 excerpts/11 participants). One of the respondents reiterated the importance of socialization: “The social aspect, I find it interesting and important during retreats. I often have wonderful encounters, then there are individuals with whom I developed relationships. Now, we talk and it plays [on my motivation] [translated]” (EG11). In large part, it is because they appreciate being “in the company of other people who are writing [translated]” (EG13) and who “share the same challenges [translated]” (EG15) that PhD candidates decide to renew their participation in retreats. Sharing common preoccupations regarding their doctoral journey makes them feel good: “We are in the same boat [translated]” (EG3; EG6; EG14). Indeed, Mantai (2019) reported that social support for doctoral candidates promotes novice researchers’ sense of belonging, making the community a “source of sanity” (p. 372).

Socio-cognitive Inter-component

The emerging group effect during retreats influences productivity (36 excerpts/16 participants). It is motivating to be surrounded by people who are doing the same thing: “Everyone arrives, sits down, and starts working, it’s serious [translated]” (EG6). A sort of energy emerges and motivates participants, thus contributing to their perseverance (cognitive component). This group effect leads PhD candidates to experience a form of *flow*

(Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021; Janke, 2018) that leads them to limit procrastination and to double their efforts in their own writing due to a social pressure qualified as positive. In this case, the social pressure (social component) exerted by collective writing is positive for participants. PhD candidates avoid diverging from the collective and shared task, for example by surfing Facebook, on one hand due to the proximity of others being able to see what everyone is doing, but also to avoid distracting their peers. In fact, participants no longer feel alone facing this writing task considered by many as challenging and take advantage of the wave of energy emanating from the group. At T3, this inter-component was greatly missed by participants since they had fewer social encounters and desperately wanted to be productive during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Central Component: Structured-collective Writing Retreat

The data analysis based on engagement components from the theoretical model by Murray (2015) not only brought to light inter-components, but also the central role of structured and collective writing retreats within these intersections, as per illustrated by the following excerpt: “[The retreat] helps to set goals and fully commit to writing, in a dedicated space. Therefore, there is the question of space, time, and people [translated]” (EG2). In sum, it is the amalgam of winning conditions that is effective for participants to progress their dissertations. A respondent at T3 shared this positive impact: “Basically, [the retreat] was a little like the start of an exponential growth in my writing. I was able to invest more and more time to write and become efficient in my work methods, to finally submit my dissertation two weeks ago [translated]” (EG15). Far from being the only one to experience this effect, many participants were able to integrate proposed writing practices for replication afterwards for a few weeks of productivity (36 excerpts/13 participants).

Conclusion

The present study aimed at replicating and extending previous research on PhD candidates through three main objectives. Our first goal was to (1) describe and categorize what a diverse sample of Canadian PhD candidates from different disciplines and universities across the province of Quebec

need in order for them to engage with writing; (2) explain the benefits and limits of *Thèsez-vous* structured writing retreats through the lens of those needs; (3) suggest inter-components for Murray's (2015) theoretical model making it more specific and relevant to the engagement with dissertation writing. These objectives were critical given the lengthy and isolated dissertation writing stage of universities across the selected French-speaking province. Our study is among the first to focus on what PhD candidates need in order to engage with writing during an academic writing period. The research intended to give a voice to PhD candidates so that their needs about writing be heard by academic stakeholders. The added value of this article is to directly apply how these needs are fulfilled by writing retreats by interrogating two different groups (experimental and control), when this dichotomy of perspectives has received little attention in scientific literature on PhD candidates.

Our research findings suggest that PhD candidates from both groups (EG and CG) have similar needs. They all wish to adopt effective work methods in an environment conducive to writing, which is what is provided by writing retreats organized by *Thèsez-vous*, notably through the teaching of organizational methods in an optimal environment. Also, it turns out that retreats offer an environment devoid of distraction, as recommended by many authors (Bullion et al., 2017; Garside et al., 2015; Ratković et al., 2019), which was identified by participants as a necessity for concentrating. The question is whether a PhD candidate would be able to maintain the same writing pace over an extended period. It appears hard to believe considering constraints on everyone's lives and the fact that it is difficult to recreate the conditions provided in a structured writing retreat in one's own personal and individual space. The 11 studies reviewed by Kornhaber et al. (2016) about benefits of writing retreats impart the importance of community during such events. In between retreats, Déri et al. (2022) encourage graduate students to seek peer support in various forms of academic writing groups, such as writing studios or writing platforms. In that respect, PhD candidates from both the EG and CG mentioned requirements to socialize with peers sharing similar experiences, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond this necessity, our research findings, as well as others, reveal that the participation in a retreat fosters the emergence of a community of practice (Quynn & Stewart, 2021; Stevenson, 2020) around issues related to academic writing, comparable to a sub-culture that Guerin

et al. (2013) designate as an academic culture. This is an interesting element insofar as the community radiates an energy enhancing individual motivation (Janke, 2018).

Based on our findings, writing retreats answer the needs of PhD candidates, notably legitimizing the act of writing, being looked after by the organizers, increasing writing outputs in a short period, establishing a work environment conducive to writing, adopting SMART and Pomodoro techniques, integrating into a peer community focused on writing, and fostering group effect.

Limitations

Our research findings deserve to be interpreted while considering certain limitations. Firstly, since the EG was composed of participants from a convenience sampling, they may have overrepresented the benefits of writing retreats. Even though the interviewer was trying to capture balanced views, participants only had positive things to say about retreats. Finally, even if our research findings suggest that PhD candidates from both groups express similar requirements, CG participants did present certain disparities from EG respondents in that they tend to prefer writing alone. The relevance of such difference should be revisited, considering that members of this group never experienced collective writing.

Call to Action in Higher Education

In light of our research findings, graduate programs should consider offering students writing retreats under favourable conditions like those set up by *Thèsez-vous*. By doing so, universities could foster a positive relationship with academic writing for PhD candidates who need supportive work methods to become more productive under less pressure. Programs wishing to establish a space dedicated to writing on campus should do so based on all needs of PhD candidates reported in this article. For example, the coordination of writing spaces should include workshops on Pomodoro and SMART practices. Ideally, PhD candidates should not have to pay for individual writing activities. Instead, this should be funded by their doctoral programs. In the meantime, higher education institutions could promote the participation of PhD candidates in writing retreats by facilitating student

gatherings from various universities and disciplines for dissertation writing in an environment devoid of competition.

Notes

¹ Dr. Rowena Murray was consulted by the authors of this article and provided comments on its content, including her acknowledgement that her theoretical framework on engagement with writing would serve as the inspirational basis for the development of our proposed model on benefits from writing retreats.

² Fonds de recherche du Québec Société et Culture.

³ Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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Émilie Tremblay-Wragg is Assistant Professor of the Department of Didactics at University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada. ORCID: [0000-0001-5411-6058](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5411-6058)

Cynthia Vincent is a PhD candidate in education at University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada. ORCID: [0000-0002-6778-2700](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6778-2700)

Sara Mathieu-C. is a community researcher and a lecturer at the Faculty of Permanent Education, University of Montreal Canada. ORCID: [0000-0001-8192-6611](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8192-6611)

Christelle Lison is full Professor of the Department of Pedagogy at University of Sherbrooke, Canada. ORCID: [0000-0003-1570-6463](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1570-6463)

Annabelle Ponsin is a PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Sociology at University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada. ORCID: [0000-0003-0809-0402](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0809-0402)

Catherine Déri is a PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Education at University of Ottawa, Canada. ORCID: [0000-0001-9689-3517](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9689-3517)

Contact Address: Émilie Tremblay-Wragg, Département de didactique Université du Québec à Montréal, Case postale 8888, succursale Centre-ville Montréal (Québec) H3C 3P8 Canada. Email: tremblay-wragg.emilie@uqam.ca