I heard the birds sing:
transforming the experience of the writing-up stage doctoral students through Thesis Writing Retreats

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Acknowledgements

• Retreat team, collaborative design and implementation
Outline

- Background to the project
- Explain research project for masters in education
- Four themes & implications
STEMM scene

- STEMM research intensive
- 3,500 PhD students
- Over 1,000 theses produced per year
- 4 year deadline for full-time students
- Focus on experiments
- Write up in final 4-6 months
STEMM writers

- Many have had no further formal academic literacy training since age of 16
- Many have limited experience of, or avoided, extensive writing
- Many view thesis as write-up or reportage of experiments
- Many undertake an express write up
- Many leave writing 100k words to last few months
- Miss the opportunity to make meaning through writing
Wellbeing Surveys

Final stage wellbeing has been a concern raised in our surveys from 2009 and 2014.

A higher percentage of our late-stage/writing up students are stressed compared with other stages.

PGR administrators felt they should leave them alone to write.

Hargreaves C., De Wilde, J. et al. 2017, available from Graduate School website
Retreat:

- 2 days residential, Cumberland Lodge
- Principles
  - to build a micro-community of practice in natural surroundings
  - to provide time and space for reflection and/or reframing of prior experience and assumptions
  - to focus on the process and quality of writing as well as the product
  - to bring together and integrate targeted support from two teams of experts

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Study Design

Masters in Education
Research
J De Wilde

• Interviewed 7 STEM students
• Phenomenological approach
• To understand the individual experience of the writing retreat
Study design

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Research
J De Wilde

• Theoretical framework
• Transformative learning
• Mezirow, 1978, 1990
Study analysis

Masters in Education Research
J De Wilde

- Transcription, coding
- Thematic analysis
- Identified 4 themes
  - Shared Experience
  - Impact of the Physical Environment
  - Learning gain
  - Supervisory Experience
Shared Experience

Theme 1

Transformative Learning Retreat
Shared Insecurities

- Comfort gained from ‘shared insecurities’ (Wegener, Meier & Ingerslev, 2016)
- Through the retreat students reflect together
- They learn that facing the challenges of writing is a normal aspect of the journey to becoming a researcher
- Being a researcher is about handling uncertainties
  - Research is uncertain
What is the main thing about the retreat is also meeting people who are writing and who are struggling as well and suddenly you feel less alone, you feel you are not alone to struggle, you feel that you are not alone to think that you will never be able to do it.

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Shared Insecurities

- Other sources of insecurity
  - The thesis is a public statement of our research ‘thinking’
  - Judgement of potential
  - Huge investment in the thesis 4+ years of work
  - The thesis is an assessment point and links writing to assessment
Impact of the Physical environment

Theme 2

Transformative Learning Retreat
Learning space

- The interaction of a person and their environment creates their ‘learning space’ (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).
- The descriptions that the participants gave the retreat location shows how they created their own imaginary image of the space.
It was like being thrown on a island
[It met] my desire as I had had before to scoot off to a faraway place and lock myself up, go to the foothills of the Himalayas or something where there are few distractions.
Location

• The students’ physical engagement with the natural environment promoted mind and body wellbeing.

• As such, the retreat environment was restorative, re-energising and promoted focus.

• The location allowed students to address the emotional investment in their doctoral thesis writing alongside the practicalities of writing.
London can have a lot of physical anxiety all around so that was completely absent, that was good.... I heard the birds sing.. that was nice

De Wilde, J. 2019 MEd.
Natural settings are known to have restorative benefits (Bowler et al., 2010).

When I am in nature... I kind of feel energised

De Wilde, J. 2019 MEd.
Learning gain

Theme 3

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I think that in terms of the actual quality of my writing there was a MASSIVE difference, a MASSIVE improvement. erm, by implementing just very straight forward and simple things, erm, you know, in terms in the way the writing flowed
Supervisors’ perception?

Ross et al (2011) interviewing both postgraduates and supervisors on STEMM writing revealed:

“a dominant view that learning to write was a difficult component of the doctoral candidature, one that had to be suffered by both the student and the supervisor.”

Self-efficacy

• Research identified students’ self-efficacy was key to their experience and learning gain
• Bandura (1977) related realistic goal setting to achievement and self-efficacy
• In the interviews it was clear the role the supervisor had in developing a student’s self-efficacy for completing
• Regular constructive feedback

I’m afraid to tell you but they were not there for me

Loads of feedback

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Student agency

- Tapped into student’s agency to manage the feedback process

The ball’s in their court, you know

I managed them, I assigned chapters to them

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My research showed the relationship between:

- Writing Competency
- Research competency
- Environment support
- Supervisor Support

Thesis

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Student experience: self-efficacy and agency

Writing Competence
Research competence
Environment support
Supervisor Support

Thesis

RETREAT
Conclusions

• Retreat provided environment for transformative learning
• The value of retreating and reflecting for developing the researcher
• Recommendations for improved advice to supervisors & students
• The supervisor’s role in developing the self-efficacy of student
• The role of academic literacy for both STEMM students and STEMMM supervisors