

Academic writing retreats for nurses: developing engagement, dissemination and collaboration opportunities

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Abstract

Background

COVID-19 raised the profile of nursing globally, with widespread recognition of nurses' valuable roles during the pandemic. Concurrently, the United Kingdom played a crucial role in leading COVID-19 healthcare research breakthroughs. There exists a unique opportunity to capitalise on this momentum to support nurses to become more engaged in, and disseminate, their research widely. One approach to enabling this is through the development of academic writing retreats for nurses.

Aim

To report on the development of academic writing retreats to engage nurses in research.

Discussion

Four writing retreats were set-up in South England between September 2019 and April 2021. Two were delivered face-to-face on hospital premises and two online due to COVID-19. The retreats provided uninterrupted writing time to draft an academic publication, mentorship, peer support networks and question and answer sessions. . The retreats were attended by 42 health professionals, with over 25 papers published in peer-reviewed journals. The retreats have enabled learning communities to develop, fostering long-term networking opportunities. Mentorship and uninterrupted writing time were rated 4.7 and 4.9 respectively across all retreats (1 for poor, 5 for excellent), with peer support and networking rated 3.3 and 3.9.

Conclusion

Academic writing retreats for nurses have widespread benefits, providing nurses with uninterrupted time and space to focus on writing high quality publications and creating networking opportunities through peer support and mentorship channels.

Implications for Practice

Academic writing retreats are a simple, yet effective way to get nurses to engage in research by writing about their own sphere of practice. The retreats continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling research to be published that demonstrates the valuable work of nurses across the international healthcare landscape.

Introduction

Clinical research is at the heart of patient-centred care and is fundamental to enhancing the quality and safety of services delivered to patients by healthcare professionals; it develops the evidence base that underpins practice at an international level (Jonker, Fisher, & Dagnan, 2020); Royal College of Physicians, 2020). Nurses are continually engaged in, and developing, innovative practice (Hughes, 2006) and the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated nurses' abilities to demonstrate leadership and advance practice in the face of mounting international public health challenges, staff shortages and ever-changing patient care priorities (Willan et al. 2020; Vindrola-Padros et al. 2020).

However, despite nurses' clear leadership and clinical care competencies, a lack of support to develop nurses as leaders in a research context has been evident, compared to their medical and allied healthcare professional (AHP) colleagues. This is true of nurses working in a variety of clinical and research contexts, whether in clinical academic roles, research delivery roles, or as clinical practitioners with an interest in developing research within their clinical care environments. Factors such as a lack of role modelling, research mentorship and supervision, a lack of protected research time and fragmented clinical research career progression pathways have all contributed to this (Bell and Murray, 2020; Henshall et al. 2020a; Sherwood Brown and Robinson, 2021). However, failure to balance clinical care demands against research priorities can lead to diminishing returns in clinical practice, as well as burnout and attrition amongst staff groups (Sherwood Brown and Robinson, 2021). Furthermore, in the clinical research setting, the expert practitioner skillsets that nurses possess are often downplayed, with a lack of understanding of what 'delivering' clinical research really entails. This is reflected in the lack of principal investigator opportunities available to nurses and the absence of nurses as co-authors on many research study publications that they have made valuable contributions to (Braidford et al. 2015). With increasing healthcare pressures and a shortage of healthcare staff, the need to promote, support and develop research roles for nurses is

vital and is a significant recruitment and retention policy driver at an international level (Francis, 2013).

In recent years, an increasing focus on the crucial role that nurses play in supporting, delivering and designing research has emerged, with the recent publication of NHS England's Making Research Matter policy report (NHS, 2021) setting out clear strategic goals for ensuring that research features in the roles of all nurses, whatever their chosen career trajectory (NHS England, 2021). Similarly, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) 70@70 Senior Nurse and Midwife Research Leader (SNMRL) Programme has produced a cadre of nursing and midwifery research leaders in clinical academic, research delivery and specialist nursing roles, who have successfully increased the research capabilities of other nurses and midwives within NHS organisations at a national level (Henshall et al. 2020b). The clear commitment that both the NIHR and NHS England have given to nursing and midwifery research demonstrates the vital role that they play in the local, national and international research agenda. However, the challenges that nurses face in embedding research within their roles remain; this has intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with many nurses being redeployed to frontline clinical care settings whilst responding to infection control requirements, patient and staff pressures and organisational capacity issues (Willan et al. 2020; Vindrola-Padros et al. 2020).

The role that nurses have played in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic has raised the profile of nursing at a global level; this is reflected in increased student nursing applications in 2021 (UCAS, 2021). Widespread appreciation of nurses' critical roles during the pandemic, alongside the United Kingdom playing a crucial role in leading COVID-19 healthcare research breakthroughs, means that the momentum for nurses to showcase and demonstrate their research capabilities has never been bigger. There exists a unique opportunity to capitalise on this momentum to support nurses, midwives and allied health professionals to become more engaged in leading, supporting and

delivering research at all levels and to disseminate their research outputs more widely. One approach to enabling this increased prominence is through encouraging nurses to publish the findings of the work they have contributed to in peer-reviewed academic journals. However, due to a lack of protected time for research, many nurses find it difficult to pursue this dissemination activity. This coupled with a lack of research skills training and development opportunities (Henshall et al, 2020a) means that many nurses lack the confidence to embark on writing for publication due to a sense that it is outside of their remit.

In recognition of the many challenges that nurses face in developing their research skillsets and as part of the NIHR SNMRL Programme (Henshall et al, 2020b), a series of academic writing retreats for nurses were developed by an SNMRL nurse based in the South of England. The aim was to promote engagement in research and to provide nurses with the time, space and support required to enable them to produce high quality academic research publications for submission to peer reviewed academic journals. Recent literature has reported that key conditions are required to bring meaningfulness and purpose to academic writing retreats. These include transition, space, time, and community (Fillippou and Plamper, 2022). In addition, academic writing retreats can enhance productivity, provide a sense of community and combat isolation, especially in the light of current working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Koulaxi and Kong, 2022; Sherwood Brown and Robinson, 2021). Furthermore, an integrative review to explore the benefits and challenges of writing retreats identified key personal, professional and organisational benefits that included development of academic writing competence; intra-personal benefits, increased publication outputs and organisational investments in staff (Kornhaber et al. 2015).

The aim of this paper is to report on the development and evaluation of these academic writing retreats for nurses and allied health professionals, focusing on their core components and the added value they bring to the nursing research workforce. It is important that these learnings are shared, to

help engage nurses in research and to enable the roll-out of these retreats in other centres across England and internationally.

Discussion

Four academic writing retreats for nurses were set-up and delivered in South England between September 2019 and April 2021. Funding was obtained through local university and NIHR infrastructure funding. The retreats were promoted widely through the university, NHS and NIHR networks in the local region. The first two academic writing retreats were delivered face-to-face on hospital premises and the latter two were delivered online due to restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Attaining a place on the retreat was subject to a competitive application process. Applicants were required to complete an online form outlining their reasons for wanting to attend the retreat, their paper topic, their target journal and the current form that the paper was in (idea, draft, editing stage etc.). This was done to ensure that the planned progress of the applicant's paper throughout the Retreat was based on realistic, achievable, individual goals (Tremblay-Wragg et al. 2020).

Applications were screened by both the writing retreat (WR) SNMRL lead and the WR administrator and suitable applicants were selected. Any applications where a clear research topic was not identified, or where ideas appeared unfocused were excluded at this stage. Priority was given to nursing applicants; however, midwifery and allied health professional applications were also accepted. Applicants were accepted from early, mid and late career researchers, with the benefits of writing retreats to early career researchers and doctoral students apparent in terms of their ability to enhance writing self-efficacy and self-regulation for goal setting and time-management practices (Vincent et al. 2021). Applicants who were awarded a place on the WR were asked to submit a one-page draft, outlining their research topic and the paper outline, four weeks before the WR

commenced. They were also informed that any evaluation data collected during the retreat might be used in promotional materials and publications relating to the retreat.

Key Features of the Writing Retreats

In order to maximise the success and productivity of the retreats key features were built into them.

Firstly, it was important to ensure that course attendees were given sufficient time and space to focus on their paper writing without disturbance or interruption. As such, three full days uninterrupted writing time was provided over the course of each retreat, regardless of whether the retreat was held face-to-face or online. To ensure that a balance was struck between work and personal commitments, one of the three days was held over a weekend and the other two days were working days. Three days was felt sufficient to enable attendees to make substantial progress with their papers, with a view to them being either submitted or close to submission point by the end of the WR. A pre-requisite for joining the WR was that all attendees would be followed up eight weeks after its end point to obtain an update on the status of their paper, with an expectation that their paper would be submitted to their chosen peer-reviewed journal by this point.

During the retreat, attendees were asked to write in silence and not to converse with other attendees apart from during scheduled break periods or specified activity sessions, in order to maximise focus and to create the optimal conditions for writing (Koulaxi, A-M, Kong, J (2022); Filippou and Plamper, 2022; Tremblay-Wragg et al. 2020). They were also encouraged to turn their emails off on their laptops to avoid becoming distracted by ongoing clinical or academic demands on their time. Writing in this way, whilst enriching productivity, can also be quite intensive, especially for those who are not used to writing for long periods at a time. As a result, it was important to build in regular breaks throughout the day. These included coffee and lunch breaks and short 15 minute chair yoga sessions, which were facilitated by an external instructor. Attendees were also encouraged to undertake some physical activity during breaktimes, such as taking a walk, to get a break from the screen and to revitalise their mind and bodies. Breakfast, lunch and coffee were

catered for during the face to face retreats to ensure that all participants had a comfortable environment to work in; rooms that were quiet with plenty of space for laptops were also selected for this reason. As this wasn't possible for the online retreats, attendees were instead sent a package prior to the WR, containing writing materials, a coffee mug and other resources that they could utilise. The retreat also provided an opportunity for social and professional networking with peers, mentors and the SNMRL facilitator. As such, a social event was held on one of the evenings of each retreat. For the face-to-face retreats, this involved a meal in a local restaurant venue and for the online retreats this involved an online social event.

Prior to the WR, each successful applicant was matched with a mentor to provide feedback and support to the applicant over the course of the three day retreat. Where possible mentors and applicants were matched in terms of subject matter or methodological expertise, but this was not a necessity. In fact, some WR attendees valued the fact that their mentor was not an expert in their chosen research area as this enabled the mentor to review the paper from a more objective standpoint than they, or their co-authors were able to. Importantly, the mentors were able to critique the papers objectively and provide advice on how to improve their structure, content and flow. Mentors were sourced from the local university and were experienced academics with a proven track record in writing for publication. Each mentor supported a maximum of three applicants per retreat and committed to meeting with each applicant for between 45-60 minutes on each of the three days of the WR, unless the applicant deemed this unnecessary or wanted to use the time to focus on writing. Where the retreats were held online, mentors and mentees held their meetings in breakout rooms via the online videoconferencing platform that was being used to host the Retreat (Microsoft Teams or Zoom). Feedback was given both verbally during the mentor sessions and via written feedback if mentees shared sections of their manuscript with their mentors to review over the course of the three day retreats.

In addition to the mentorship support on offer, course attendees were also encouraged to link in with their fellow writing retreat peers to gain mutual support, share challenges and facilitators to writing and to discuss aspects of the paper writing process that they wanted to share and get advice on. This formation of a writing community of practice has been shown to be beneficial in progressing scientific outputs, as peers can share challenges and collaborate in an interdisciplinary setting, gaining confidence and growth through the sharing of experiences (Brandon et al. 2015; Tremblay-Wragg et al. 2020). This peer support came in a range of forms including 'buddying up' attendees in pairs and encouraging them to link in with each other every day over the course of the retreat to brainstorm and elicit ideas about how to approach their paper writing. In addition, peer support group sessions were held every day where attendees could update on the progress of their papers and could share any particular challenges they were facing; these might relate to confidence issues, writing styles, 'writers block', paper structure, motivation or organisation of time. In addition, the retreats built in time for question and answer sessions between peers, the WR facilitator and other mentors where possible, so that hints and tips for writing could be discussed, critiqued and developed in a safe, learning community setting.

Evaluating the Success of the Retreats

It was important to collect feedback from WR attendees so that any suggested improvements could be considered to ensure that the WR's were meeting the needs of attendees. As such a short online evaluation form was sent to all attendees at the end of the three days. The evaluation form asked participants how useful they found the retreat, whether they would recommend it and whether they wanted to hear about future retreats; attendance at multiple writing retreats can be beneficial to build and sustain a regular writing practice amongst graduate writing communities (Quynn and Stewart, 2021). It also asked attendees to indicate which aspects of the retreat they valued the most. Data were collected using a combination of both Likert scale and free-text responses. In addition, each attendee was followed up by email eight weeks after the retreat and was asked to

provide an update on the status of their publication output (submitted/under review/published/still in draft). Following this, additional searches were undertaken by the WR administrator using Google scholar to identify any published papers, if feedback was not provided by the attendees.

Profile of attendees

Over the course of the four retreats 42 nurses and allied health professionals (AHPs) attended. Of these 33 (79%) were nurses and 9 (21%) were AHPs, Table 1 details the professional backgrounds of AHP attendees. In terms of research experience, 69% of attendees were early career researchers and the remaining 31% were mid-career and senior researchers (Table 1).

Publication Outputs

Writing retreats and forums have been found to enhance productivity and publication outputs, due to increased productivity, confidence, the creation of a community of practice and a sense of space and time (Brandon et al. 2015; Fillippou and Plamper, 2022; Koulaxi and Kong, 2022; Sherwood Brown and Robinson, 2021). Following the four retreats, twenty-five peer reviewed academic papers were published in a variety of journals including the Journal of Clinical Nursing, Nurse Education Today, BMC Health Services Research, International Journal of Mental Health Nursing and Health and Social Care in the Community (Table 2). Topics covered a range of specialties including critical care, palliative care, mental health, maternal health and nursing practice issues (Figure 1). It is important to note that the actual number of publications may be higher than 25 as the reporting of paper status eight weeks after the retreat was low, meaning that many of the publications needed to be searched for using the Google Scholar search function. This makes it possible that some papers may have been missed due to a change in title or target journal. In addition, on average it took 43 weeks post retreat for the papers that were being developed to be published; this time lag means that papers from the later retreats may still be in production.

Value of the Retreat

Thirty-eight attendees completed the online evaluation form and the course was consistently evaluated across the four retreats. Although the primary focus of the retreats was for attendees to be provided with uninterrupted time and space to produce an academic paper for publication, the retreat was evaluated positively in numerous other ways. One hundred per cent of attendees reported that they found the course useful and that they would recommend the WRs to friends or colleagues. Likert style responses identified that the mentorship and uninterrupted writing time were rated 4.7 and 4.9 respectively across all retreats (1 for poor, 5 for excellent), with peer support and networking rated 3.3 and 3.9 (Table 3). All respondents indicated that they would like to be made aware of future retreats, highlighting the positive experiences of attendees:

“A really great idea for researchers on the ground. Thank you” WR3 attendee

In terms of WR features, 100% of participants rated the uninterrupted writing time and the one to one mentor sessions as being excellent.

“Time, space, collegiality, expert advice & mentorship” WR1 attendee

“Experienced mentors that are not attached to your topic and able to look at it from a fresh perspective.” WR 4 attendee

“Protected time out from clinical commitments to focus on research and complete the write up.” WR 3 attendee

The opportunity to network with fellow researchers was rated ‘very good’ and the peer to peer sessions were rated ‘good’, with attendees valuing the sense of community that the retreats instilled. Some also spoke of how the retreats had enhanced their confidence in writing.

“The collaboration. It's great to think that you are all sitting down to write as a community.” WR 3 attendee

“Surprised I gained so much, was very nervous about attending, thought I would not be up to it, but good to see people doing similar things, and not all academics and researchers” WR 2 attendee

The retreat also provided many attendees with longer term networking and research collaboration opportunities. The chance to engage with colleagues outside of their normal sphere of practice was appreciated by attendees who often reengaged at a subsequent retreat or kept in touch after the retreat's end.

“Peer and academic support, different perspectives and being able to bounce ideas, how to write academically boosted my confidence” WR 2 attendee

“it is very supportive, reduced this fear/threat of academic writing for publication. Great peer experience and support” WR 2 attendee

“Being with others who are learning and managing clinical work at the same time as doing research - helps you not feel alone” WR 3 attendee

“Will remain in contact with new colleagues.” WR 2 attendee

In terms of the benefits of face-to-face versus online WRs, advantages and disadvantages of both were identified. Some of the networking opportunities were felt to be slightly diluted by the online retreats, however many participants valued the flexibility they offered and the reduced travel times they incurred as a result. These findings align with other published literature in this area which has identified that online writing retreats can serve to boost productivity and can help to build and maintain a writing community (Koulaxi and Kong, 2022).

“It certainly helped with writing space and concentration as one is in their comfort zone at home.

However, it made social networking harder in many ways too” WR 3 attendee

“It worked as far as finding time to write. Also, the 1-1 meetings were useful and I got as much out of them as face to face. I don't think that anything can replace the face to face experience for me but

I'm happy with the replacement” WR 3 attendee

“Time was maximised. No wasted time commuting, parking, arriving etc.” WR 3 attendee

“Able to be collegiate without being intrusive. Also, I wouldn't have been able to go away to do this, so being online has really worked for me.” WR 4 attendee

Conclusion

The implementation of regular academic writing retreats may have widespread benefits for nurses and allied health professionals who are working at different stages of their career pathways and who have different levels of research expertise. The retreats provided nurses with uninterrupted time and space to focus on writing high quality publications for publication in peer reviewed academic journals. The success of this is evidenced by the large number of publications that were published by retreat alumni; this productivity has been identified in other publications reporting on writing forums (Koulaxi and Kong, 2022; Sherwood Brown and Robinson, 2021). In addition to this, many other benefits of the retreats were identified. These include the creation of long-term networking and collaboration opportunities through the peer support and mentorship channels created at the retreats. These enabled retreat ‘alumni’ to form learning communities, fostering the development of future nurse-led research collaborations. The retreats have been shown to be attractive to clinician researchers working at all levels, through the provision of a non-hierarchical research setting and the provision of tailored levels of support to meet the needs of individual attendees. Additionally, continuing to run the WRs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic reflected the contribution of nurses

to the research landscape. The WRs provided the opportunity for nurses to showcase their learnings, disseminate their work and share its impact on clinical practice, healthcare settings and patient care outcomes. With the huge pressures facing nurses due to COVID-19, it is important that the work they undertake is recognised and shared at a national and international level so that their efforts are acknowledged and so that any nurse led innovations or changes to practice can be shared across international care settings.

Implications for Nursing Practice

The retreats have important implications for nursing practice; providing opportunities for nurses to attend WRs is a simple, yet effective way to promote research engagement among clinician researchers who may otherwise lack the time or space to publish any research work they have been involved in. In addition to this, the WRs have highlighted that the creation of a supportive writing community can produce collaborations and networking opportunities with fellow nurse researchers as well as increasing confidence in nurses' ability to produce high quality research publications; this has been documented in other papers reporting on the wider benefits of structured writing retreats (Bell and Murray, 2020, Sherwood Brown and Robinson, 2021). Our evaluation has highlighted that there are benefits to running both face to face and online retreats; this is important when considering accessibility requirements for nurses in the current COVID-19 and post pandemic environment (Koulaxi and Kong, 2022). In future, hybrid style retreats may be considered to enable more flexibility for nurses and to increase opportunities for engagement in research. In addition, adaptations to retreat features should be considered. The retreats continually evolve to maximise value and respond to attendees' research development needs. Recent changes include retreats featuring short daily tutorials from established writers to provide support and guidance during the writing process. Additionally, daily mentor meetings during the retreat can be spaced out with one taking place within two weeks prior to the retreat, one during the retreat, and one within two weeks

following the retreat. This change can encourage attendees to start to think about the shape of their paper ahead of the retreat to enable them to fully utilise their writing time during the three days of the retreat. The post-retreat mentor session can provide prolonged support and feedback to attendees to encourage them to continue to finalise and develop their paper following the retreat.

The WR model reported on in this paper can be utilised and replicated in other NHS and university settings to encourage and support more nurse researchers to become part of the academic writing community. Additionally, a writing retreat 'toolkit', containing key requirements for hosting a retreat could be developed and shared across clinical and academic settings to facilitate their timely and effective set up. The retreats have been identified as a valuable resource to support nurses to develop and enhance their academic writing skillsets. This has never been more important than during the COVID-19 pandemic when the global spotlight has shone brightly on both research and nursing. The retreats allow both to be integrated, and for the many innovations and advances to practice that nurses have engineered and led, to be shared, replicated and embedded to uphold and strengthen the evidence base across the whole nursing community.

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Conflict of Interest

None