PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTION ON WRITING RETREATS AS HELD BY A TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTRE IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVED SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

The aim of the paper was to explore the role of writing retreats in promoting scholarship of teaching and learning. The study followed a qualitative research approach and adopted a case study research design as a genre. Four Teaching and Learning Centre staff members were purposively sampled comprising less experienced and more experienced staff. Questerviews were utilised to collect data on participants' reflections. Data were analysed thematically and the study found that it was important to have writing retreats in the centre in order to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning. Furthermore, it was found that practitioners experienced some challenges during writing retreats, which calls for training prior to the retreats. The study concluded that writing retreats, in a number of ways, benefited both seasoned and novice researchers through collaboration and learning to write together. The study recommended that universities should have on-going writing retreats in order to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Key words: Academic developers, writing retreats, research, teaching and learning, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Teaching and Learning Centres in South Africa have the mandate to steer the agenda of teaching and learning. Recently, amongst other activities, these Centres have also been given a mandate to champion Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Amidst much debate, this phenomenon has grown substantially internationally and has since gained prominence as a formal activity even in the South African higher education context. Vithal (2016) advances that since Boyer's (1990) seminal paper, 'Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate' in which a case was made for one of the major pillars of higher education, that of teaching, to itself be conceptualised as a scholarship, substantial literature and academic activity has grown over the recent decades in what has come to be referred to as the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). The SoTL discussion is also thoroughly discussed in one of the sections of this paper (Vithal, 2016). As a result, SoTL has since been positioned as one of the major activities in a number of Teaching and Learning Centres in South Africa. As such, the

institution in which the study is based has taken a similar approach. This has, therefore, meant that strategically, Teaching and Learning Centres have had to change their key performance areas to include SoTL. In this vein, Huber and Huctchings (2005) maintain that Academic Developers should teach and work towards transforming institutional cultures grounded in evidence about student learning and scholarly teaching being critical to their work.

In order to assert itself operationally and strategically, the Teaching and Learning Centre under study has employed a Senior Research Professor to steer the agenda of SoTL. One key activity that the current incumbent has cultivated to advance the SoTL is the conducting of Writing Retreat activities with the Academic Developers of the Centre. The intention is to improve participants' research skills and has the ultimate objective of having a joint Special issue on a SAPSE accredited journal. These retreats are done through a formal structure where a facilitator conducts one day training and thereafter Academic Developers are required to write. The paper, therefore, explores how this experience has benefited Academic Developers and by gauging their reflections, possible implications to their SoTL are assessed. Tracing the advent of academic development in South Africa, therefore, is important as a point of departure as the work of Academic Developers has never really had a bigger significant focus on research. Also, SoTL as a growing phenomenon is discussed with the intention of finding its location and significance within Academic Development (AD). Writing retreats as phenomena are also discussed with their implications for continued SoTL by AD practitioners.

2. THE IDENTITY OF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT AND THEIR ROLE AS RESEARCHERS

Academic Development (AD) in South Africa came as a result of a range of contending issues, key amongst them being the politics of the country and also higher education politics, as far back as the 1980s. Boughey (2007) paints this picture articulately as she states that the field of Educational Development grew out of an initial endeavour, termed 'Academic Support', which was established in the early 1980s to provide support for black students who gained admittance to the four English-speaking, historically white, liberal universities (Cape Town, Natal, Rhodes & Witwatersrand). These students were deemed to be 'under-prepared 'for tertiary study because of the poor quality of the educational experiences previously offered to them under the apartheid regime.

However, throughout the years subsequent to the 80s, the identity of Academic Developers has often been obscure. As Quinn and Vorster (2013) highlight, there is no definite route to academic development. As a result, Linder and Felten (2015) point out that Academic Developers have scholarly backgrounds in disciplines ranging from engineering, linguistics and psychology to social work and education and many are migrants from a range of academic tribes. Amidst the confusion, their role remains common across higher education institutions - that they are responsible for enhancing the development of academics and students in teaching and learning. Leibowitz (2014)

advances that in her own sense, academic development is about creation of conditions supportive of teaching and learning in the broadest sense. She continues to say that this would include the provision of the support, as well as the generation of conditions that are supportive. So, one could deduce that their core function largely resonates with one of the key roles of university, that of teaching and learning, alongside research and community engagement. The core business in any university is learning and teaching, research and community engagement, but the relationship and connection of learning, teaching and research is often argued in the academic arena (Toni, Maphosa & Wadesango, 2013).

In view of this, there has always been an on-going discussion on which one of the three pillars is credibly recognised among teaching, learning and research. Land (2003) highlights that involvement in research is seen as adding the credibility to the academic development function, despite the often difficult operational climate in higher education in which the privileged status of research often serves to undermine the status of teaching. One of the reasons for this, as Quinn (2012) puts it, is that in European British traditions, promotion depended on qualifications and publication or research and the same views affected South African higher education institutions where she reports that in her study, a Vice Chancellor responded that lecturers were saying 'I didn't get a PhD to help some moron learn first year Chemistry'. Publication is of importance too as it helps the individual with career advancement and, in some cases, for remuneration (Kramer & Libhaber, 2016).

3. SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR AD PRACTITIONERS

The advent of the SoTL in higher education has been necessitated by a range of factors. Much debate has taken place over the years on its meaning and purpose. One enduring significant thematic thread in the literature is around the definition and meaning of SoTL (Vithal, 2016). However, this has changed in recent years as a plethora of definitions have arisen in an attempt to assist academics to gain a deeper understanding of what SoTL really engenders (Swart, Luwes, Olwagen, Cameron & Carel-Korff, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, however, we will resist to be drawn into those debates, but rather focus on locating the SoTL movement within higher education and how this, in turn, requires Academic Developers to be fully responsive to this initiative.

For many years, research staff have been rewarded by promotion for the quality, quantity and impact of their research (Vardi & Quin, 2011). With this reality remaining a status quo in higher education institutions, certain countries had become adamant that this had to change. As a result, Chalmers (2011) demonstrates that in the 1990s, there were independent movements to improve the status of teaching taking place in North America, UK and Australia respectively. This resulted in higher education institutions changing focus and beginning to value teaching alongside research. In this vein, Chalmers (2011) points out that it was widely acknowledged that the reward and recognition systems of academic work were out of balance and in order to redress this imbalance, teaching

needed to be recognised and rewarded. One could say that SoTL as an academic activity was born out of these deliberations. Vardi and Quin (2011) agree that over the years, these deliberations placed teaching alongside and equal to other scholarly endeavours. Steirer (2008) believes that all lecturers in higher education should be encouraged to take a scholarly approach to their teaching - rather than view teaching as a set of technical skills that they can be trained to execute. Strong statements such as these have gradually solidified the position of SoTL within higher education. As a result, McKinne (2012) agrees that the SoTL movement within higher education has created renewed interest in teaching and learning and has requested an increase in academic professionals' accountability to teaching and learning. The SoTL, therefore, is defined as a kind of norm or ethos which usually defines academics' consciousness and behaviour related to academic work (Toni & Martinson, 2013). The most recent definition states that SoTL is the scholarly inquiry into student learning which advances the practice of teaching by sharing this research publicly (Swart, Luwes, Olwagen, Cameron & Carel-Korff 2016 in Pelts 2015).

Writing Retreats have been seen as an ideal capacity development exercise, especially in bolstering research. The Research Associate Professor employed in the Centre has used this as a form of capacitating Academic Developers as they adapt to scholarly work since this has become imperative. Little (2014) emphasises that Academic Developers need to continue to seek ways of making our scholarly projects more useful and their useful projects more scholarly. Similarly, Toni and Martinson (2013) advance that scholarly teaching for Academic Developers is an intellectual activity intended to bring about documented developments in student learning and academic staff development, and those developments should be shared publicly.

4. UNDERSTANDING WRITING RETREATS

Coughlin (2012) recognises that becoming a scholar- after years of study or work in other roles- is a major shift in identity and practice and if it is not well managed, it can be painful and aversive. Barriers to writing are said to include the lack of self-confidence and difficulty with anxiety of failing, finding writing to be intimidating and having writers block. In addition, lack of time, interrupted time and workload are often identified as major obstacles to writing (Kramer & Libhaber, 2016). In fact, Murray and Mutton (2009) in Murray (2011) note that many academics in current university environments feel they lack the experience and expertise in writing for scholarly publication. Writing retreats have been seen as an ideal opportunity to change this reality. Murray and Mutton (2009) posit that a writing retreat could be seen as a legitimately peripheral activity, in the sense that it was used to move academics from a position of pheripherality. Retreats, therefore, are designed to create an atmosphere of trust, safety and empowerment, increased motivation and have the potential to transform learning (Coughlin 2012, 80 in Gant & Knowles 2000; Moore 2003; Wittman 2008). Moore (2009) attests that writing retreats produce a community of writers who are likely to learn faster about the conventions and

challenges of writing. Writing retreats allow participants protected time to change pace and find space to think, plan, write and dedicate themselves to productive outcomes, which ultimately increase research output (Cope, Sundin, Smyth, Wang, Baum, Ewens & Foxall, 2016). In addition, writing support groups such as retreats give the participants an opportunity to work together to improve one another's writing and outcomes (McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006). Writing retreats provide the opportunity for the attendees to be supported by their colleagues and mentors. A group of writers gathered in one setting allows for different perspectives about writing and individual skills to be discovered and shared. Therefore, this in turn means that close and on-going relationships are formed that may not have happened in the educators' daily lives at the university (Cope, Sundin, Smyth, Wang, Baum, Ewens & Foxall, 2016).

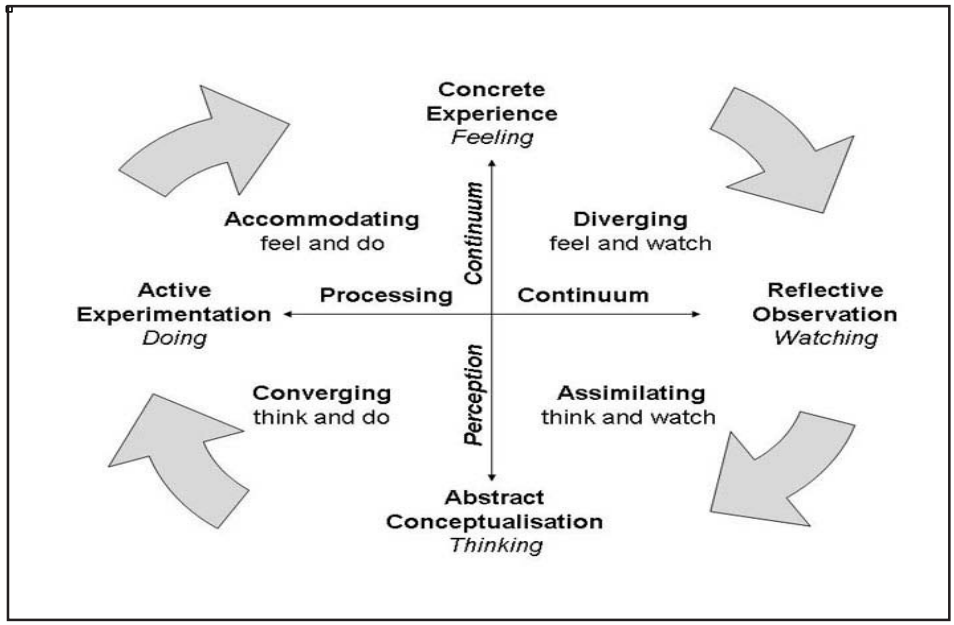
Conclusively, retreats provide benefits for the participants. The Academic Developers involved in the study are relatively new to the sphere of writing and scholarly writing. Their understanding of the writing retreat process is fundamental to the success of the activity. The more academics actively engage in SoTL, the more effective they will become in their teaching with a corresponding boost in student learning (Swart, Luwes, Olwagen, Cameron & Carel-Korff, 2016). This would then apply to Academic Developers as well in that, the more they reflect on their activities in a scholarly manner, the more effective and responsive those activities will be in enhancing teaching and learning. Scholarly teachers are armed with the skills and expertise in curriculum adaptation, teaching, learning, assessment, among others and they have sound understanding and appreciation of the diverse needs of students (Maphosa & Wadesango, 2014).

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 Brief description of Kolb learning style in the context of higher education

Kolb's Learning theoretical framework (1974) views learning as an integrated process with each stage being mutually supportive of and feeding into the next. It is possible to enter the cycle at any stage and follow it through its logical sequence. In the context of higher learning, the common practice is that of starting with theory before practice. However, effective learning only occurs when a learner is able to execute all stages of the model. Therefore, no one stage of the cycle is as effective as a learning procedure on its own. Kolb explains that different people naturally prefer a certain single different learning style. Various factors influence a person's preferred style. For example, social environment, educational experiences, or the basic cognitive structure of the individual.

Figure: Kolb's Learning Style adopted from Kolb (1974:32).



Kolb believed that we cannot perform both variables on a single axis at the same time (e.g. think and feel). Our learning and writing style is a product of these two choice decisions. In the context of higher learning, writing is centered on thinking and feeling. In the context of teaching and learning centers, academic development practitioners write about teaching and learning issues that concern higher education. Academic development practitioners are encouraged to think critically and research about issues that affect teaching and learning in higher education. It is often easier to see the construction of Kolb's learning styles in terms of a two-by-two matrix. Each learning style represents a combination of two preferred styles. The diagram also highlights Kolb's terminology for the four learning styles: diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating.

6. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What kind of research and writing skills do participants acquire through their participation in writing retreats?
- How important is it to have writing retreats for Teaching and Learning Staff members in the Universities?

7. RESEARCH METHOD

This study explored the utilisation of writing retreats in the promotion of scholarship of teaching and learning using a qualitative research methodology. The researchers used qualitative research as the methodological approach which is used for in-depth investigations. Qualitative research seeks a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon; it represents an inquiry about a field and explores the participants' experiences and understanding of these experiences (Creswell, 2009). In this study in-depth investigation was done to find out the role

of writing retreats in improving Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. According to Ary et al. (2010), qualitative inquiry "seeks to understand and interpret human and social behaviour as it is lived by participants in a particular social setting". This case study was designed to investigate the experiences and reflections of academic developers during and after writing retreats. A case study involves an in-depth analysis of a single or small number of units (Merriam, 2009). Research questions that address critical thinking and critical pedagogy are best suited to qualitative inquiry (Janesick, 1994).

Therefore, in the context of this study, critical pedagogy was suitable to investigate academic developers' experiences on writing retreats to improve their research and writing skills. The choice of methodology was guided by the philosophical stance of the researchers to see knowledge as personal and, therefore, to encourage the involvement of the researchers with the research participants to capture the uniqueness of the context, without attempting to change it. The sample was made up of four staff members of the Teaching and Learning Centre who attended the last two writing retreats in the centre. Purposive sampling was used to select experienced staff members and less experienced staff members. The type of qualitative research used was a basic interpretive study. According to Ary et al. (2010), this type of study "provides descriptive accounts targeted at understanding a phenomenon using data that might be collected in a variety of ways, such as interview, observations, questerviews and document review". The purpose of this study was to get an understanding of the experiences of the target population and the meanings they assign to them.

8.1 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through questerviews to enable the participants to provide their responses verbally and in writing. This type of data collection accommodates both participants that are good at expressing their views in writing and verbally. Therefore, researchers have managed to gather rich information since some of the information that was not captured verbally was captured in written form. From the data presented, themes were identified and analysed using a thematic approach. From the themes identified**,** discussion and analysis were generated. In the presentation of results, keys were used to represent participants of this study. The keys were used as follows:

- P1: Participant one (experienced staff member)
- P2: Participant two (less experienced staff member)
- P3: Participant three (experienced staff member)
- P4: Participant four (less experienced staff member)

For the sake of gender balance, two participants were male while the other two were female.

9. RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in the form of themes. The following themes were extracted from the participants' responses.

Table 1: Summarises themes and issues raised as extracted from participants' responses to questerviews.

Themes	Sub-themes	Issues raised
Understanding of writing retreat	Cooperation	Assisting one another
	Enhancing writing skills	Practising writing
Attendance of writing retreat	Everybody's contribution	Co-authoring
	Active participation	Working together
Purpose of writing retreats	Writing	Skills in conducting literature searches Identifying appropriate methodologies Writing for publication
	Research	Research skills
Skills Acquired	Academic writing skills	Addressing journal requirements Use of appropriate research discourse in writing
	Research skills	Skills in conducting literature searches Identifying appropriate methodologies Actual writing of articles
	Collaboration skills	Identifying colleagues with similar research interests Identifying and working with mentors Co-authoring papers
Further training to supplement writing retreats	Article development	Continuous sessions
Strengths and weaknesses of writing retreats	Developmental; non-threatening environment	Assist one another; create user -friendly environment

Table 1: Themes, sub -themes and issues raised

Theme 1: Understanding of writing retreat

Writing retreats are conducted differently by universities and they serve different purposes for universities. Participants in this study have also presented different understandings and experiences of writing retreats. P1 has presented a very clear understanding of a writing retreat and mentioned that:

> "*I understand a writing retreat to be a session wherein academics gather together as a group from the centre and dedicate time to write articles*".

A similar understanding was advanced by P2 who argued that a writing retreat is a "*sort of gathering for a common goal which is writing academic research papers for publications. That is where discussions of the steps and procedures of academic writing are done*".

Both participants were of the view that writing retreats are arranged for the purposes of writing papers for publications. However, P2 has further stretched his understanding by highlighting that during writing retreats, practitioners assist each other by clarifying common approaches to research which allow them to learn from one another.

On the other hand, P3 presented a straight response when he responded that a writing retreat is:

> "*A way of enhancing writing skills of a researcher".*

Considering the fact that P3 was a junior staff member in the centre, one would understand that his understanding was very limited and was very reflective on his

personal experience. P4 was of the view that being in a writing retreat space gives one an opportunity to write without any distraction. In his response, he mentioned that:

> *"A writing retreat is just a setting where researchers or writers get an opportunity to engage with other researchers or writers to produce papers away from any distraction. Everyone focuses on the work at hand".*

Reflecting on this response, one can sense an element of maturity in this participant. This participant does not only view a writing retreat as a space where everyone sits and writes, but there are some engagements and collaborations that are also taking place. From participants' responses, two sub-themes were revealed: collaboration and enhancing writing skills. Such sub-themes are discussed in detail in the discussion section.

Theme 2: Attendance of writing retreat

Participants were asked who should participate in the writing retreat in the centre. In this regard, participants shared a similar view that all members of the centre should attend the writing retreat. When quoted verbatim, they mentioned that:

P1: "*everyone in the centre should attend and be guided on how to write*".

> P2: "*I think members of the centre should attend the writing retreat because in one way or the other, members will be involved in writing. Therefore, they need to learn academic writing skills since it is important to know how to put ideas on paper/in writing in order to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning".*

On the other hand P3 and P4 shared a very similar response, when they argued that:

> "*Everyone should attend a writing retreat because that is the space where much work is done. Unlike in the offices, during writing retreats there are no distractions. One is able to focus and do a great deal of work."*

Looking at the above quotations, participants understand that to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning, all members of Teaching and Learning Centres need to come together and write. The space wherein the scholarship of teaching and learning can be promoted is at a writing retreat. From participants' responses, one sub-theme emerged: everyone's contribution counts. This sub-theme was discussed in detail in the discussion section.

Theme 3: Purpose of writing retreats

Writing retreats may serve different purposes for many universities. In this study, participants were asked their views about the purpose of writing retreats after reflecting on their own experiences. P1 in his response mentioned that the purpose of a writing retreat is to write a monographic article. On the other hand, P2 gave a detailed response that the purpose of a writing retreat is to:

> "*Gain knowledge on the writing of articles, and also to offer an opportunity to novice researchers to actually learn from seasoned researchers".*

Similarly, P2, P3 and P4 also shared the same view that the purpose of a writing retreat is to write and engage more on research issues. P3 mentioned that the purpose of a writing retreat is to:

> "*Understand deeply what a monograph is all about and to be exposed to how to write articles and also understand how articles differ from monographs".*

On the other hand, P4 mentioned that the purpose of a writing retreat is to:

> "*Prepare for conference papers and to seek advice on the preparation of papers to be presented at a conference.*"

Reflecting on the above responses, one can argue that the purpose of a writing retreat is to provide practitioners with writing space to get their research done, without disturbances that may take place in their offices. Furthermore, it came out from these responses that a writing retreat equips participants with research and writing skills. Such sub-themes are discussed in detail in the discussion section.

Theme 4: Skills acquired from writing retreats

Writing retreats may expose practitioners to multiple skills. In this study, participants were asked the kind of skills they had acquired during attendance of a writing retreat. In their responses it was found that they had learnt academic writing skills and research skills. P3 responded that the skills acquired included:

> *"How to write a book, journal and articles."*

In addition, P1 mentioned that during writing retreats, she had learnt to write an abstract – a skill which she had not felt very confident about and she had enhanced some research skills that included searching for information on the internet and also how to reference the sources. The other two participants were not confident enough to point out that they had learnt during a writing retreat and this translates into understanding that a great deal still needs to be done. However, all in all, participants learned and acquired some research skills and academic writing skills during their writing retreats. The two sub-themes (research skills and academic writing skills) are discussed in detail in the discussion section.

Theme 5: Further training to supplement writing retreat

Participants were asked if they still needed more training on writing for publication, in addition to the writing retreat they had attended. Participants were of the view that more training was needed. P1 mentioned that:

> "*The other retreats should be based on developing an article, since writing needs to be a continuous thing. More writing retreats and training will be need for us to be familiar with the scholarship of teaching and learning".*

On the other hand, P2 was also in need of training as he mentioned that:

> *"Yes, until we have produced more than three articles, we need more training on academic writing. Writing retreats provide an opportunity for practitioners to write and if they experience some writing challenges it will be difficult for them to be productive. Therefore, it is important to be offered training".*

P3 also agreed that training is also needed since not everything had been covered during the writing retreats. Looking at the above responses, one can argue that more writing retreats are needed to promote writing and research skills of practitioners that would ultimately promote their scholarship of teaching and learning.

Theme 6: Strengths and weaknesses of writing retreat

Participants have presented some strengths and weaknesses of writing retreats that emerged from their experiences of writing retreats that they had attended. Some weaknesses advanced by P2 were that:

> *"If one is not knowledgeable about writing/research, it becomes a challenge for one to put ideas together. Therefore, for that reason one tends to become discouraged that one will not fit well into academia or grow in the scholarship of teaching and learning"*

On the other hand, P1 mentioned some of the strengths of writing retreats as "*encouraging people in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and also to instil some confidence in them*". At the same time, P1 advanced some weakness that during writing the element of mentoring does not come through strongly and as a result, it only benefits those that are experienced in research and writing. Reflecting on the above mentioned responses, one may argue that during writing retreats it is important to assist the novice researchers more so as to capacitate them and get them on board.

10. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of the study is guided by the following themes: Understanding of writing retreat; Attendance of writing retreat; Purpose of writing retreats; Skills Acquired; Further training to supplement writing retreats; and Strengths and weaknesses of writing retreats. Writing retreats can be understood differently, especially if one has to reflect on one's experiences. During data collection, the researchers asked a question that was based on the understanding of a writing retreat in order to determine if participants understood writing retreats. To fulfil the main purpose of this study, questerviews were used to collect in-depth information. Participants discussed their understanding of writing retreats based on their own experiences. Some of the sub-themes derived from this theme were: collaboration and enhancing writing skills.

Collaboration is the process in which two or more people or organizations work together to realize or achieve something successfully. During research and writing retreats, collaboration becomes very important to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning. For both seasoned and novice researchers, collaboration becomes important for one to promote scholarship of teaching and

learning. In line with this argument, Malatji (2016) argues that cooperative learning has a positive effect on academic achievement, inter-ethnic relationship and development of writing skills. In this study, the word `collaboration' came through very strongly when participants were discussing their understanding of writing retreats. Some participants explained a writing retreat to be a sort of gathering for a common goal which is writing an academic paper for publication/presentation at conferences. Reflecting on the above response, it becomes clear that collaboration becomes central during writing retreats which, in turn, promote scholarship of teaching and learning.

Different understandings were advanced by participants on the issue of writing retreats since they were discussing these activities based on their own personal experiences. At the university under study, the teaching and learning centre employs eight staff members. From eight members, four are senior staff members while the other four are junior staff members. Therefore, there is a need for senior staff members to mentor the junior staff members with the view of enhancing their writing skills. James (2015) argues that writing in a collaborative project which offers the benefit of learning from one another and improving the writing skills of individuals as compared to individuals writing on their own. As a result, a writing retreat becomes an on-going process that is aimed at capacitating writing skills of junior staff members to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning. Therefore, writing retreats become relevant platforms for staff developers to develop their skills and promote the scholarship of teaching and learning.

On the other hand, other participants described a writing retreat to be a setting where practitioners can focus on writing without any distractions. Therefore, this translates into writing retreats providing opportunities for practitioners to be engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

If academic developers have to be regarded as academic, they have to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning by writing papers on teaching and learning. Also, they must assist with supervision of postgraduate students as academics do. Participants in their responses have argued that everyone in the centre should attend writing retreats because that is where they get much work done, unlike in the offices where there are many distractions. Since they are an academic support unit, they experience many interruptions since they service all the departments of the university. It was revealed that through writing retreats, members were able to learn from one another and were able to share their practices. Based on this argument, one can argue that writing retreats promote quality in terms of writing and publications since practitioners are able to learn from one another. Researchers such as Peters (2016) argue that in most cases collaborative research projects are likely to produce a higher quality of work as compared to individual projects. Therefore, it can be concluded that everyone in the teaching and learning centre should participate in the writing retreats in order to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning.

The purpose of writing retreats may differ from one university to another, but in the study the purpose was to

establish, from participants' views, how writing retreats promoted the scholarship of teaching and learning. Participants were asked what they thought was the purpose of writing in their university. It was found that the purpose of a writing retreat included being exposed to how an article is written; to gaining some knowledge and skills on writing for publication; to developing novice researchers in the area of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Based on the arguments advanced above, writing retreats serve a developmental purpose and promote collaboration among practitioners. It was further found that through writing retreats, practitioners are able to learn how to write in an academic way and, as such, skills were evidence enough when they published their papers. There is a need for practitioners to reflect on the quality of the work they are producing in order to improve their research skills. Malatji, Maphosa and Mavuso (2016) argue that self-reflection helps individuals improve their actions and professional practice. Therefore, it can be argued that the role of a writing retreat is to develop emerging researchers and promote the scholarship of teaching and learning.

We have learnt about writing and language from secondary school up to post-secondary school, but not everyone is taught how to write in an academic way. Therefore, through writing retreats practitioners are able to acquire some academic writing skills that become very important in the pursuit of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Research collaboration was found to be one area in which practitioners are able to learn some writing skills from one another. In the university under study, junior academic developers were paired with some seasoned researchers who then guided them on how to write for publication (academic writing). Therefore, such skills were transferred from experienced writers to notice writers.

In order for the Teaching and Learning Centre to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning, there is a need for on-going development on research and writing. It was found that practitioners needed training until they were able to publish three or more research articles. The argument above translates into universities needing to do more workshops and training on academic writing and writing for publication in order to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Some of the strengths of writing retreats revealed that a well-arranged retreat with a clear purpose is likely to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning. However, participants were also asked to mention some of the weaknesses of writing retreats that they had observed or experienced. Some participants found it difficult to search information and also to align their writing with the requirements for writing for publication. Furthermore, it was found that the university provided them with writing retreat space without them being equipped with some knowledge on academic writing. Therefore, it was difficult for them to conceptualise and come up with complete papers that were publishable. When participants were asked what could be done to address such weakness presented above, they mentioned that the university should offer a research module at an early stage (undergraduate) for students to familiarize themselves with the scholarship of teaching and learning. Furthermore, it was found that being attached to a mentor

that would assist the emerging researcher on academic writing might be one way of promoting the scholarship of teaching and learning in the university.

11. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that writing retreats promote collaboration that enables academics to learn from one another. Furthermore, writing retreats have enhanced both writing and research skills of participants. It was also highlighted that it is important for practitioners in the Teaching and Learning Centre to attend writing retreats. However, beside the attendance of writing retreats, it was found that there is a need for further training on research and academic writing. Overall, it was concluded that writing retreats promote the scholarship of teaching and learning.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Writing retreats should not be once off thing, but on-going;
- The universities should offer workshops on academic writing and research prior the writing retreats;
- Junior staff members should be mentored into the scholarship of teaching and learning;
- Everyone in the Teaching and Learning Centre should attend writing retreats and be engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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