A/part: Writing retreats as spaces fostering a sense of belonging for academic staff

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2022, I attended a teaching and learning writing retreat with other early career researchers, the deputy dean of teaching and learning of the faculty, and the teaching and learning specialist for our faculty. I had recently completed my teaching portfolio as part of my probationary requirements and had been asked to join the retreat to guide and assist the other early career researchers who were working on their teaching portfolios at the time. At this specific retreat, we had quite a few frank discussions about our teaching and learning background experiences and we were given the space to be vulnerable and open with one another. At the time, I was working on a paper on student belonging, and I noted the parallel between what I was reading about student belonging and what I was experiencing at the retreat: a profound sense of being a part of a group, of belonging.

At this retreat we were able to talk about challenges in our teaching practice, about comparing ourselves to others and feeling like we don't quite measure up to them, and about what it means to be an educator at our university. It was a space where we could talk freely, where we could cry if we wanted to, and where we could be without judgement. Writing a teaching portfolio is inherently a challenging process that requires self-reflection, introspection, and honesty, facing up to our strengths -

what makes us good at what we do - as well as our weaknesses as educators. We found that through this process of creating a teaching portfolio we were made to feel competent and incompetent, good and not-good-enough, and proud of our achievements and like we were lacking in some regards. The conversations around the expectations and experiences of teaching were like a vulnerable exhale of a breath we had all been holding. As I was looking around the room at my colleagues, I was filled with a sense of gratitude for the space that the writing retreat gave us to share our experiences, our fears, and our hopes.

This paper arrives at a confluence of overlapping recent events and old thoughts. Aside from the writing retreat - which in itself overlapped with other research I was doing at the time about student belonging - there are two other aspects that inspired this paper. Firstly, I have always been interested in the linguistic strangeness of the distinction between 'a part (of)' and 'apart' – that 'a part', where the words are separated from one another means 'togetherness', while 'apart' which is just one word means to be separated from others. These two concepts are so close to one another, yet so different (and often get confused with one another with unintentional effect). 'A part (of)' has often made me think of the connectedness of the many and how we may be 'a part' of something even as we are individuals.

The second aspect is related to an incident I had with a former colleague of mine. A few years ago, my colleague and I went to the end-of-year function for our faculty. At the time, I was newly appointed in my permanent position, while she had been at the university for quite a number of years. As we approached our faculty colleagues, my colleague turned to me and said 'I don't know any of these people; I don't belong here'. I, on the other hand, was excited to be seeing so many of my colleagues again and went around introducing my colleague to many of our fellow faculty staff. This was especially strange since I had been part of the faculty for so much shorter than she had been and at that stage had had very little opportunity to meet staff members outside of our department. Although there had been many contributing factors to my colleague leaving (including imposter syndrome), one of the reasons she left academia was because she felt like she did not belong. I, on the other hand, felt like I did belong, that I was part of the wider faculty (this feeling does wax and wane, though). One of the biggest differences between us is that I had gone to writing retreats, while she had not.

THE WRITING RETREAT TO MOVE FORWARD[1]

The main aim of writing retreats is to provide staff members with the opportunity to focus on writing for publication, by enabling staff to get away from the "humdrum of institutional work" (Garraway 2016: 72) and the daily demands that may impede, impact, or even prevent writing (Kornhaber et al. 2016; Murray & Newton 2009). Writing retreats are usually at an off-campus location, such as a hotel, and last for about two to three days (Grant 2006; Grant & Knowles 2000), though they can also be longer. Writing retreats can be unstructured, where colleagues are free to write by themselves with very little in terms of overall arrangements and time frames, or structured where colleagues write together and share their progress throughout usually within an arranged programme (Murray & Newton 2009). At our faculty, we have two primary writing retreats[2]: a teaching and learning writing retreat, where the aim is to focus on research and writing related to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and a faculty writing retreat, where researchers can focus on their research regardless of field. From past experience, teaching and learning writing retreats usually have fewer people, while faculty writing retreats tend to have more people, with the result that the teaching and learning retreat often feels more intimate. Both types of writing retreat make provision to get to know colleagues, through socialising events and shared meal times. Both retreats are usually semi-structured in nature, as colleagues may either join communal writing spaces to share ideas, seek advice, and collaborate with one another or write alone in their rooms. Generally, there is a plenary session at the start of each retreat to indicate what each staff member aims to focus on, and there may be one at the end to focus on what has been achieved.

Although largely meant to help increase the research and publication output of staff and faculties (Grant 2006; Hammond 2021; Kornaber et al. 2016), writing retreats also have a number of other benefits. For example, writing retreats may enable staff to establish their writer identity (Grant 2006), they may lead to increased writing confidence (Kent et al. 2017; Kornhaber et al. 2016), and they may function as opportunities for professional development (Moore 2003). Perhaps even more importantly they may lead to a greater sense of community and collegiality (Grant 2006; Murray & Newton 2009), as staff members may use the opportunity to share ideas, to get advice, and to commiserate over the communal challenges of writing (Garraway 2017). Despite these benefits, writing retreats also occupy a strangely liminal space, perhaps best described by Hammond (2021) as "supportive surveillance". Those who participate in writing retreats may feel the pressure to publish, in order to justify their participation in the writing retreat, while simultaneously enjoying the supportive environment. At the same time, casual conversations about (lack of) progress may create an air of competition and may inadvertently and subtly make staff question their 'worthiness'.

Before my first teaching and learning writing retreat in 2020 (just before the

Covid-19 pandemic led to lockdown and online learning), I was slightly nervous. Although I 'knew' many of the colleagues I would be joining on the retreat, I did not really know them outside of work-related matters and I was worried that I would not fit in, that I was not smart enough, and/or that I was not good enough to be there. And although I certainly had moments of 'oh boy, am I out of my depth here - I am such a noob![3]' I mostly found the experience to be enlightening. I could focus on my research and writing without having the daily distractions of groceries, laundry, or cooking; I could selfishly focus on my writing and not feel rude, neglectful, or guilty. I managed to get more writing done at the retreat than I had in the weeks before it. More importantly, I got to know my colleagues, got to know the people behind the official (and often intimidating) designations, and got to know people outside of my own department. I naturally signed up for all the writing retreats I could – often saving writing projects for those retreats and consoling myself during the busy semesters about my lack of writing by reminding myself that a writing retreat was approaching. These writing retreats helped me to feel like I'm part of the faculty in a way that meetings had not - it helped me feel like I belong.

BE ALONE OR BELONG

The concept of 'belonging' is central to much research in higher education, especially in relation to students; this has increased in recent years (see, for example, Aelenei et al. 2020; Edwards et al. 2022; Kahu et al. 2022; Procentese et al. 2020; Scoulas, 2021; Tice et al. 2021; Veldman et al. 2023; Ahn & Davis 2020; Ahn & Davis 2023; Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman 2020). Belonging may broadly be defined as a sense of being a valid, valued, and valuable member of a community; that is, the extent to which someone feels a part of something larger (Loose & Vasquez-Echeverría, 2023). Having a strong sense of belonging is important for aspects such as commitment, engagement, motivation, and enjoyment (Kahu et al. 2022; Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

Most research in higher education contexts tends to focus on student belonging, with little research being done on academic staff belonging. Drawing from student-focused research on belonging, we may broadly distinguish between academic belonging and social belonging (Kahu et al., 2022). Academic belonging refers to the sense of connection to the university as a whole, whether it refers to academic ability and competence, or to degree programme and career choice (Edwards et al., 2020), while social belonging refers to being a part of a larger community, to feel like you are part of a group of people, and that you are valued, supported, and accepted by others in the community (Goodenow and Grady 1993). For academic staff members, academic belonging may be equated with feeling like they belong in the profession, whether as educator, researcher, or both, while social belonging may be equated with feeling like a part of the academic community, the faculty, the team. My experience with writing retreats, and the incident with my former colleague, made me reflect on how much of 'belonging' is about being active in a community, about getting to know other people, and, perhaps most importantly, letting them get to know you. Belonging is not something that can happen in a vacuum. Perhaps it can happen passively over time, but it does require some effort. This may, however, also depend on the type of belonging: A person might feel like they belong in their profession (academic belonging) but not like they are part of the faculty or teaching community (social belonging), or even vice versa.

For myself, I have increasingly over the years realised that I 'belong' as an educator. When I started teaching, I very much doubted whether I would be good at it. I'm introverted and shy by nature and generally try not to be at the center of things. I fell into teaching, and despite other people telling me that I would make a good educator, it was not something I necessarily saw myself doing. Yet, as I have found, teaching is something I enjoy, it is something that I'm fairly good at (I have won an award for it so I must be good, right?), and it is something that I'm constantly working at improving. I have adopted a teaching persona who has 'fooled' people into thinking that I am extroverted and confident. And although I have days where I feel like I could have

done better or when I doubt whether I am good enough, for the most part, I feel like I belong in the teaching profession.

A large part of my feeling like I belong in education is due to the influence of some of my educators. I have always been a bit shy, and because I was not very sports-inclined or theatrical, I was drawn to studying and learning. I was (still am!) a huge nerd. I was very lucky that I had teachers who encouraged this aspect of me and who enabled me to enjoy learning and teaching. I have also subconsciously emulated many aspects of their teaching styles over the years. There was Ms Rossouw in primary school who enacted the ethic of care by showing interest in my wellbeing outside of the classroom; Mrs Visser throughout high school who instilled a love of English - language and literature - who encouraged me to write, to be a grammar nerd, and to dream big; and Mrs Winckler, my first-year English tutor, who managed to make me feel at home at university when I felt very out of place. I work with a lot of first year students, and my module - an academic literacies one - aims to introduce students to the ways of knowing, being, and doing of the university to help them feel like they belong at university. It is because of the wonderful educators that I've had who made me feel like it's okay to love learning and studying, to be a nerd, that have made me feel like I belong as an educator.

HOWEVER, when it comes to being a researcher, I often feel like the chemistry cat meme (see Figure 1), and I struggle with imposter syndrome quite a bit. Imposter syndrome is "a psychological term that refers to a pattern of behavio[ur]r wherein people (even those with adequate external evidence of success) doubt their abilities and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud" (Mallungi & Jagsi 2019: 403). Imposter syndrome, therefore, may lead to a feeling that one is not necessarily 'good enough' or competent enough to be doing research, writing, and/or teaching; that is, that one does not belong at a higher education institution (Breeze 2018).

Imposter syndrome is especially prevalent in female academics and early career researchers (Bothello & Roulet 2019; Tulshyan & Burey 2021; Mullangi & Jagsi 2019; Wilkinson 2020) and may lead
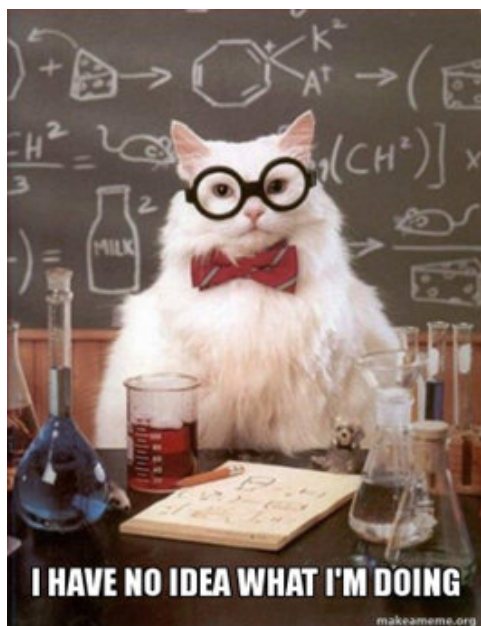

Figure 1: Chemistry cat meme

to a dual sense of feeling motivated to do 'as well as others' and feeling demotivated for not being 'as good as others'. The publish or perish culture in higher education - that is, the pressure to constantly publish research in order to get recognition, funding, promotions, etc. - may greatly contribute to feelings of competition, inadequacy, and 'unworthiness' (Rawat and Meena 2014) that could impact staff's sense of academic belonging. Writing retreats may lead to staff overcoming or lessening this sense of imposter syndrome as they are useful spaces to foster a sense of academic belonging. Writing retreats may enable staff to experience a community of practice, to develop writing competency, and to decrease writing related anxiety, while also increasing publication output (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Garraway 2017). Perhaps most importantly, they may enable staff to realise that "many of the problems they encounter [in writing] are commonly and widely experienced" (Garraway 2017: 85) by others.

For myself, participating in writing retreats has helped me to realise that everyone struggles with writing, that everyone has good days and bad days, that

everyone has had feedback from Reviewer 2 that made them doubt themselves. Writing retreats have also made me feel paralysed with incompetence because wow, some people are prolific! Where do they get the time? When imposter syndrome creeps in and makes me want to feel like I don't belong as a researcher, I remind myself that I have published, that I am still fairly new to researching, and that I must just keep working at it.

Social belonging, in contrast to academic belonging, may be slightly easier to develop, especially at a department-level, as there may be greater daily interactions with colleagues (though, this does also depend on personalities, politics, and precedence). However, feeling like you belong in your department with your colleagues - that you are part of a team[4] - does not necessarily translate to feeling like you belong in your faculty, especially since social belonging is greatly dependent on interacting with others in and outside of the work environment. Writing retreats are therefore ideally situated to foster a sense of social belonging as they enable staff to get to know their colleagues in a more informal manner (Hammond 2021). Getting to know colleagues could lead to greater compassion, communication, and collaboration between one another and could greatly increase collegiality and a sense of community. For myself, this was at first the most visible way in which I felt that writing retreats contributed to my sense of belonging – I now had colleagues, friends, in other departments as well, who were happy to see me and whom I was happy to see. We could motivate and encourage each other, push each other, and support one another. Yet, social belonging is also perhaps a very tenuous thing. What if I'm deluded? What if, instead of belonging, I am actually just an over-eager child that all the grown-ups tolerate because they have to? What if I think I'm part of the team, when I'm actually just a spectator? But, this is often just my own social insecurities drowning out common sense. Even if others don't see me as part of the team, I see myself as part of a team and that contributes to my own sense of belonging, which ultimately makes me a better colleague.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Now, at the start of this paper, I made the claim that I feel like I belong in my faculty. I almost immediately wanted to retract that statement. Claiming a sense of belonging - an a-part-of-ness - feels like an extremely voor op die wa[5] kind of thing to do. Thinking 'I belong here' feels like I'm setting myself up for disaster. Belonging is such a fragile concept - it can easily be shattered by an unkind word, a perceived slight, a misunderstanding, or being excluded from something. I will probably always feel like I am not good enough, not smart enough, not accomplished enough, that I don't - academically speaking - belong. But at the same time, when I'm with my colleagues and we're discussing our experiences, frustrations, and successes, I do feel like I belong with them. And that is a nice feeling.

ENDNOTES

1. The subheading is inspired by the title of the season 3 episode 9 of *30 Rock* (created by Tina Fey) called "Retreat to move forward" (2009)
2. There may also be smaller departmental writing retreats that are more discipline specific.
3. "a person who is inexperienced in a particular sphere or activity, especially computing or gaming" (*Oxford Languages*, 2024).
4. I am extremely fortunate to be in an incredibly supportive and collegial department.

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