

REFLECTION

Attending a retreat on article writing for community engagement

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As exciting and fulfilling it is to engage with communities, packaging that experience or thoughts on paper is a daunting task. No matter how simple it looks, being able to take the reader through the journey from why the community needed to be engaged, to the reality of the issues that the team had to endure, and then to the final findings of the project, is difficult.

The retreat was organised through the Directorate of Community Engagement at Unisa and so I thought we would be exposed to the types of projects that are available at Unisa. I thought we would be told what makes a community engagement project successful. I expected a formal workshop where we would sit and listen to the facilitator and then score the presentations at the end.

On the first day the ten attendees were given files with notes on all the presentations. We were given pointers on what goes into writing an accredited journal article. An analogy of a sweet in a wrapper was given, where the first flap is the introduction and the bulky part (the sweet) is the theoretical framework and it tapers off to the method, findings, discussion and conclusion, the last part of the flap. Types of articles were discussed and article examples given. After two hours of an introduction, we were told to start writing an introductory section of the article. That proved to be rather difficult - many thoughts and objectives of the project were in my head but being able to write it down took forever. The afternoon session was supposed to be a feedback session on the work written, but the writing was extended to allow us to complete as we had not completed the introduction section. On handing in the introduction section, the facilitator read and provided individual feedback. It was really great to have such personal attention. The theoretical framework section was introduced. There I was thinking: "Cool, I am getting more practice on writing a literature review." We were advised to stay away from heavy literature reviewing

and rather communicate the essence of the paper. The conclusion was the ultimate where you bring your own voice to the paper. Being able to discuss what was found, saying what can be recommended and advice for future research are the key aspects of this section. With each section we were reminded to take the reader by the hand, to find a way of communicating our thoughts. Three days later I walked out with a finished article, which can be sent to a journal.

I would advise anyone who wants to publish and grow within community engagement to attend a writing retreat. It offers a space to sit, knuckle down and write what is happening in the community. Due to the fact that it occurs far from office space, there is less distraction. The initial instruction was for the Chair of the department to be made aware of attendance, so that attendees would be excused from office activities. The days were full (8 am to 5pm sessions) and thereafter individuals could unwind. The break sessions offered an opportunity for representatives to meet and share their experiences. It was interesting to find that some teams within departments collaborate on so many projects and report on their findings. Issues of ethical clearance were discussed and clarified, with some representatives speaking about their own experience and how they got around the hurdles.

The retreat introduced me to a handful of people doing amazing work within their chosen communities, it is important that this knowledge be communicated and celebrated. This knowledge sharing could link onto future research, be it in the same community or it can be used in other communities. Dissemination of knowledge gained also empowers the communities. Through training of community members, the project grows and continues long after the team has left that particular community. As Rachel Naomi Remen puts it:

Everybody is a story. When I was a child, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories. We don't do that so much anymore. Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way the wisdom gets passed along. It is the stuff that helps us to live a life worth remembering.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



Nonhlanhla Masinga a Postgraduate Assistant in the Department of Psychology at Unisa and is currently enrolled for Master's in Research Consultation studies. Her interests include community, social psychology and research and methodology practice.