Making Space for the Dissertation: a Rural Retreat for Undergraduate Students.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a residential writing retreat for final year human geography and planning students held in a youth hostel in North Yorkshire, considering how it is experienced by students. This is a curriculum innovation for the dissertation module that combines aspects of geography fieldtrip and writing workshop to support the dissertation writing process and build community.

Drawing on the concept of 'the slow university' (Berg & Seeber, 2016; O'Neill, 2014) where the 'slowing down' and 'stripping away' of the usual structures and patterns of teaching and learning create a critical and creative space for thinking and writing, we explore whether and how the Malham retreat makes space for writing. The study is also informed by our spatial approach to the processes and content of research and teaching as geographers (Massey, 2005).

Qualitative focus group evidence was gathered on the student and staff experience and used to evaluate the field trip (Breen, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). This paper presents the results of this evaluation and it is argued that the retreat made space for writing in three ways:

1. The space of countryside, nature and youth hostel.

2. The formal and informal learning spaces staff and students constructed during the retreat

3. 'Head space'- the social, psychological and emotional room the retreat made for staff and students

This model of residential writing retreat could be transferable to dissertation and other modules involving a substantive writing project on all kinds of undergraduate courses.

Keywords: dissertation; field trips; learning spaces; community of practice; transformational learning; writing retreat

Introduction

This paper reflects on a component of the dissertation module for students studying BA Human Geography and BA Human Geography & Planning, which has been running successfully for four years. It is positioned at the start of semester 2 in the third year, when the need to get writing hits home. The students and supervisors attend a three-day retreat at a rural youth hostel in Malham, North Yorkshire, in an area designated a National Park. There is a full programme of writing workshops, discussion groups and tutorials, interspersed with walks in the breath-taking winter landscapes of the Yorkshire Dales. The retreat is offered to all third year dissertation students on the Human Geography and Human geography & Planning courses. The retreat is optional although each year the majority of students choose to attend. This normally equates to around 35 participants, although can be as many as 70. Indicative comments from students indicate that peers 'skillshare' the experience with those who could not attend, in an informal way. Staff are currently thinking about making the retreat available to other courses within the university. One challenge of doing this is how to 'scale up' a retreat such as this, while maintaining the relative intimate and informal learning environment that it fosters.

The retreat was developed as a means of addressing what students and staff on courses across the disciplines widely perceive as a universal 'dissertation problem', whereby students are intimidated by the size and complexity of the task (Hill et al, 2011). This intervention was designed to balance the provision of additional support that students need to do well with their dissertations, with the necessity of developing more independent learning and taking responsibility for designing their assignment than has hitherto been expected of them (Baxter, 1999; Greenbank & Penketh, 2009; Harrison & Whalley, 2008). A key aspect of the difficulty experienced is around writing, and specifically, starting to write (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009; Slinger-Friedman & Patterson, 2012). Hence the initial inspiration for this trip came from academic writing retreats that had helped us with our own writing (Davis, Wright, & Holley, 2016; Kornhaber, Cross, Betihavas, & Bridgman, 2016; Murray 2015; Paltridge 2016; Rosser, Rugg, & Ross, 2001). However, as this paper discusses, the needs of students has meant that the trip has in fact become a hybrid writing retreat / geography fieldtrip / outdoors residential.

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Whilst the results and reflections offered on the dissertation experience are applicable to all kinds of courses that have a comparable writing task, it is significant that within our research process, we bring our geographical perspectives to bear on the spatial and temporal significance of the retreat (Massey, 2005). The programme is packed with workshops, tutorials and other events, but the emphasis is actually on slowing down the pace of learning, and on eking out some space to think and write within the most frenetic period of an undergraduate course. We consider how this place allows for the 'slowing down' and 'stripping away' of frenetic urban educational cultures. The geographies, landscapes and spaces of this learning experience infuse the way we teach our students, and likewise the dissertations that are worked on in Malham involve the students spending time thinking and writing about space and place. Universities and other educational groups have long used youth hostels and similar places for educational residential trips (Biesanz & Biesanz, 1941; Porter, 2010). However, it is our spatial approach to thinking about learning that provides us with particular perspectives that can add to understandings of the way this writing retreat helps solve the 'dissertation problem' for our students in a way that is applicable for dissertation assignments on many other courses.

This paper considers the educational trip from a spatial perspective in three key ways. Firstly, it looks at the spaces of the countryside: the rural youth hostel and the landscapes of the Yorkshire Dales. It is argued that something significant happens to learning when you take urban students studying urban material away from the city to an 'other place'. Here we draw on geographical ideas about the specificity of countryside cultures and practices (Edensor, 2000; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998; Matless, 1998), in addition to pedagogic work on fieldtrips and residentials that identifies the significance of education that takes place there (Foster & McCabe, 2012; Herrick, 2010; Larsen, Walsh, Almond, & Myers, 2017; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2014). Secondly, we map the specific teaching and learning spaces involved in the trip and examine students' experiences of them. This enables us to consider the shifts that result from locating learning in spaces that are significantly different from our usual teaching rooms, whilst encouraging students to construct their own individual temporary universities during these three days by mixing and matching the spaces available to them. We position this section in the context of work on formal and informal educational settings (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Larrivee, 2005). Thirdly, we move on to consider 'head space'. Transplanting the dissertation module here for a short period makes space for reflection and writing that experience shows students consistently struggle with during their everyday student lives. Here, in addition to pedagogic literature, we draw on recent game-changing ideas about the 'slow university' (see for example Berg & Seeber, 2016; Meyerhoff & Noterman 2019; O'Neill, 2014; Ulmer 2017). This work has so far largely focused on the application of slow movement principles to professional academic and institutional culture, pathologising the intense pressures and frenetic speed of the neoliberal university, making connections with negative impact on work quality and mental health. Our research considers the applicability of ideas about speed, wellbeing and the outdoors to this new context of student learning, with an intervention that addresses the connection between dissertation writing, student stress, and the pace of student life.

The research took a qualitative case study approach, using coded recordings of separate staff and student focus groups conducted with 12 students and 5 members of staff in 2017 during the months following a fieldtrip. This represented about a third of the students and half of the staff who attended the retreat. The strategy enabled an in-depth examination of our themes, a method with previous success in situations where an engagement with the complexities of social interactions and events is the focus (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). We were mindful of the complexities of conducting focus groups with students (Breen, 2006; Hennink, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015), weighing up ethical issues surrounding power dynamics inherent in researching our own students, with the value for staff and students of getting detailed feedback on the curriculum, and of talking about our experience together. Focus groups were selected as a way of hearing the student voice, without the intensity of a one on one interview situation with a member of staff. They were held in an informal setting in the summer after the end of the course to reduce the impact of staff/student power dynamics. The research method enabled students to have their voice heard in a meaningful way and feel valued as part of the academic community (Arnot, McIntyre, Peddar, & Reay, 2004; Fielding, 2004). Focus groups facilitated students considering their experiences in the context of the wider group's experiences and addressed the relationship between individual and group learning (Breen, 2006).

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"*It literally felt like a breath of fresh air*": the YHA and rural space

Figure 1 Coming back from a walk in the Yorkshire Dales

A significant aspect of this dissertation writing intervention is the combination of slowing down to reflect and the rural location. Ulmer has suggested the interconnectivity of 'Slow Writing' and the natural environment (2017), born out by our students' experiences. We hold the trip in the countryside to provide the students with a retreat away from their usual geographies and experiences. In addition to living and studying in a busy city, the content of our courses is overwhelmingly urban, compounding students' experience of Malham as an 'other', rural place.

The trip takes place in winter, with a flexible programme that can be moved around to avoid the worst of the weather and exploit windows of opportunity to walk when dry, often encountering snow, ice and fog on high ground. The distinction is striking between the sharp coldness of the air outside and the hostel interiors, warm and steaming with our crowd of students. This is a moment when the landscape is compelling, and the Yorkshire Dales shifts from romantic backdrop to an active component of the learning. In this section we consider the impact of the location of the field trip in a rural youth hostel, and of the walking activities on the learning experiences of the students. When asked about the location, students felt that being in the countryside was significant in the ways they experienced the trip:

> *I don't think it would have had the same impact if it was held in a lecture theatre. Getting the fresh air, the country air, I think it was a good setting*

> *It helped clear your mind and that.*

The discipline of human geography has long highlighted the socially constructed nature of the meanings that are attached to the countryside, invoking urban/rural binaries where the contrast is made between the dirty and polluted industrial towns and cities, and England's green and pleasant land. Consequently, the countryside has become associated with ideas of escape from the urban, the uplift of the human spirit through contact with nature, and self-realisation and discovery, drawing a direct line from the ideas of the romantics (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998; Matless, 1998; Michael, 2000; Williams, 1973). It is significant that we stay at the YHA: founded in 1930, the organisation is still very much entangled with this anti-urban, romantic conceptualisation of the countryside (Cunningham, 2016a). On arrival in Malham, students and staff are given an article providing cultural geographical perspectives on interwar hostelling in the Highlands, so that we position ourselves in a tradition of British geographers hostelling and walking the landscape (Lorimer, 1997).

Students respond to these cultures and traditions, referring to the contrasting quietness and resulting relaxing qualities of the countryside:

> *Because in a city it's constantly busy and you don't get a lot of time to relax and stuff, so it was good to get into the countryside and see some grass and animals*

Walking the landscape was integral to romantic ideas about the countryside, values inherited by the YHA and remaining core to its contemporary cultures. (Cunningham, 2016a; Edensor, 2000; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998). Early hostels clustered in the Lake District and North Wales, a bed for the night for hobby ramblers and serious walkers, and most hostels still have their boot rooms for drying off wet kit in time for the next day's exercise. This particular hostel has these values built into its

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fabric. Opened in 1938, it was one of the YHA's first purpose-built hostels, designed by architect and local resident John Dower, who was instrumental in setting up the National Parks in Britain.

Our trip includes strenuous daily walks to nearby Malham Cove, Janet's Foss and Gordale Scar, and although optional, almost all students join in. We block out 2 hours in the programme each afternoon for walking. This represents a significant chunk of time away from the programme of workshops, tutorials and writing, but pays dividends in shifting in students' mindset. Geography courses have long been associated with the outdoors, our students are used to tramping streets and fields in cagoules and trainers for 'fieldwork.' Geography as a discipline has in recent years reflected about the cultures and histories of walking, as performance, sensual experience, as 'doing geography' (Edensor, 2000; Lorimer, 2011). Geographers describe how the activity of walking draws attention to the urban / rural narrative, but also to the restorative act of walking which has implications beyond our discipline, 'what could be more natural that a stroll in the countryside? The air is fresh, the body realizes its sensual capacities as it strains free from the chains of urban living, and our over-socialized identities are revealed as superficial in an epiphany of self-realization.' (Edensor, 2000, p. 81). Edensor's words are echoed in our students' response to the walks,

> It literally felt like a breath of fresh air. You've not got the busy roads. You've not got all the background noise, like physically and in your head….

> … when you are inside and doing your work it can all kind of get on top of you. To have an arranged walk, get outside with everyone and relax, it's a break but you are also doing something. You can clear your mind, get out in the countryside it's just a way to switch off for a while.

Figure 2 Walking on top of Malham Cove

For both the countryside location and the walking activity, students reported impacts on their state of mind, with a clearing of the head to enable an increased focus on the task of the dissertation:

> You go on them walks and you're just like wow… Its empty, my brain's empty.

> it was nice to get away from everything, to go on the walks, clear your head and be focussed on one thing.

This freeing of the mind was then described a recharging that enabled progression on their dissertation once back in their usual environment:

> I came back definitely like to Leeds and I felt like… I just felt refreshed. I felt ready to go.

Significantly, students saw the walking activity itself as a boost to their own self-belief in the dissertation writing process and re-engagement with their course:

> I think us all getting to the top of the big hill together and taking pictures together and just being like, look we can do this. We're geographers!

"You could see the outdoors, no tables, beanbags, open space, no barriers" fieldtrip learning spaces

The 'slow', reflective approach to writing also infuses the approach to and use of inside spaces, facilitating a disruption of barriers to writing. Underpinning the Malham fieldtrip is the assumption that taking students away from the spaces in which learning usually occurs, and giving them the personal and intellectual space to reflect and think, helps them as they take responsibility for their own dissertation learning. In these ways Malham becomes a liminal space where transformative learning can take place (Meyer and Land, 2005). Here we also draw on work on the residential that considers the power of this format to enable leaps in learning (Foster & McCabe, 2012) in addition to parallel work on geography fieldtrips (Herrick,

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2010; Larsen, Walsh, Almond, & Myers, 2017; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2014). It is important that this shift in responsibility be reflected in the organisation and use of the learning spaces during the fieldtrip. Rather than the traditional classroom that reinforces a tutor-led approach (Larrivee, 2005), learning takes place in a spectrum of formal and informal settings (Boud & Middleton, 2003). Our students are familiar with youth hostels, largely from geography fieldtrips – they are prepared to accept living cheek by jowl with their course-mates for a short period, in exchange for a cheap trip away and help with their dissertations. However, their initial discomfort with spaces and activities demonstrated that they hadn't previously been asked to use hostel spaces in the kinds of ways we were now suggesting to them.

Malham is a classic medium-sized hostel. The restrained, modest 1930s main building express the quiet Quaker cultures of 'plaining' that ran through the YHA's early days, and survive very clearly in the modern YHA's 'no frills' tourist offer, in line with our intention of stripping away distractions discussed later in the paper (Porter, 1998; Cunningham, 2016b). At the more formal end of teaching spaces is the 1930s dining room filled with old wooden trestles and benches, where the group gathers for announcements about the day's events, hearty meals and the rest of the time a quiet work space. Adjacent is the common room, with sofas and tables where the whole group can fit, and where we meet for group social events and discussion groups.

At the informal end is the self-catering kitchen in the 1960s annexe, with banks of windows revealing the landscape on two sides. We keep it well stocked with tea and coffee, biscuits, jam and bread for toast. Staff family accompanying the trip bake cakes for the students, making this a comforting, homely place. We hold some discussion groups here, but it is equally used for chatting with tea and quiet work. Somewhere in between is the education room (The Fold), the jewel in the hostel's millennial refurbishment, and a restatement of the YHA's commitment to young people and education. It is large enough to be used as a traditional-style classroom for the whole group, but we set it up with sofas and bean bags. Tutorials happen wherever there is space: staff settle in to nooks and wait for students to find us: 20th century university-style in the bar / reception, in the cosy new wooden camping pods, over dinner, in the pub or on the walks.

How do students use these spaces? Does the informality of the settings reinforce or undermine the 'message' that the fieldtrip, like the dissertation, is not going to be tutor-led? We were also interested in the apparent paradox that we are formally arranging informal learning spaces. How much do students 'buy-in' to this message? Do they use them as we intended or do they create their own informal learning and non-learning spaces outside of ours? Do they impose their own formality on our informality?

The focus groups provided answers, evidencing a complex relationship between formal and informal learning and learning spaces. For some students the informal nature of the learning sessions was unexpected and a little discomforting, and it became clear that staff and student expectations of what practices and spaces a 'writing retreat' might involve diverged. Many were worried by the lack of computer room, plug points, desks and all the usual academic workspace set-up, dismayed that

> there's not one set place for someone to take their laptop and plug it in and connect to the wifi and actually do some work and stuff.

We were told,

> Yeah, it was a bit more relaxed than I expected. I can only speak for myself ... I just feel more comfortable in the formal sessions.

> I would personally find that hard, to do work sitting on a beanbag with my laptop, I'd want to sit at a table.

At other times the informality of the learning settings did encourage students to lead their own learning. One staff member observed,

> I was watching a couple of guys in the tea room early on, I think they were kind of expecting it to be a bit more formal and I could see the penny drop that nobody was going to tell them to do anything so they started.

This was confirmed by one student who noted,

> The Education Room was the best as everyone was quite informal and talking about things, circle time, all getting together. I think everyone was pretty focussed, the fact that most people were there to get something from it. The separate talks; there was always someone there. It was more chilled out, you could see the outdoors, no tables, beanbags, open space, no barriers, the conversations flowed better in the room.

Another said,

> I think the dining room might have been that sort of place though because it was said [by lecturers] that if you want to do work the dining room is a good place. People were working in there, I worked in there, people were doing their own bit. I did see a few people working on their own outside, the picnic benches and stuff; if you really wanted to you could do it [work alone].

It was clear from the conversation below that sometimes the informal learning spaces weren't used for learning at all. When we asked students which was their favourite room, it turned out it was the kitchen,

> It could accommodate everyone on the course, it could fit us all in.

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It was just like a university kitchen but with quite a lot of tables or us to sit at. So it was quite social and felt homely.

Figure 3 Writing and chatting in the kitchen

And at other times, students created their own informal spaces in which to socialise, particularly the nearby pub. Students sleep in groups of three to six in dormitories in the main building and 1960s annexe, in narrow bunkbeds with cheerful grass-green bedding. Although we hoped these might afford quiet spaces to work during the day, it did more to foster group spirit, and facilitated talking through dissertations with friends:

Mostly we'd just be chillin' inside or in our rooms … It was more discussing between friends – what was discussed in the sessions. But it did help in other ways as it helped understand where you were going.

The focus groups and our own observations evidence a complex relationship between learning spaces and learning which might be described as 'bounded instability'. Some students were encouraged by the informal learning spaces to take ownership of their dissertation. Others however would have preferred a more traditional tutor-led classroom arrangement. At other times students re-ordered the learning spaces into spaces for socialising, and also constructed their own informal spaces in which to learn (Eshach, 2007).

These findings support two broader conclusions. Firstly, they resonate with those who critique a simplistic reading of the relationship between the spatial organisation of learning spaces and learning itself (Larrivee, 2005). Far from the view that 'material spatial form' can be read off in a simplistic way from the social relations that go on 'underneath', (what Thrift (1999) calls 'the building metaphor'), the fieldtrip experience is of a complex interpenetration and entanglement of the social and spatial, and the objective and subjective (Massey, 2005).

Secondly, they stress the importance of the shadow spaces in which learning often occurs (Pelling, High, Dearing, & Smith, 2008). The distinction here is between the formal 'rules of game' that structure the learning process and the hidden, informal learning relations and behaviours that can run in a parallel and unseen way. These can undermine formal learning but can also enhance and re-vitalise it. Arguably, some of the best learning in the Malham fieldtrip takes place in these shadow spaces, and perhaps as Griffin, Shaw & Stacey (2005) argue, the ideal is a balance of 'stability and instability, regularity and randomness'. For it is at this interface of 'bounded instability' that novelty emerges, in ways that are 'recognised (by the formal structures) but are allowed to have a life of their own'.

"Someone's going to pick you back up and say come on you can do this": transformational learning in groups and as individuals

Land et al (2014) conceptualise transformational learning as that which leads to new perspectives and shifts in thinking for the learner. This shift can impact on the learner's sense of self, their interactions with staff and peers, and responsibility for their own learning (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011). During the Malham fieldtrip, there was evidence of this as students began to interact with staff and peers and began to rethink their own roles and viewpoints as student learners. In this way Malham became a liminal space in which students were given space to consider their identity as a student. Liminality is useful to understand spaces which enable transformation, particularly in complex and unsettling ways (Meyer and Land, 2005).

The Malham fieldtrip engaged students in a complex combination of collective and individualised processes of learning and reflection on their dissertation projects. Students reported the intersection between their own individual projects and its relationship to those of their peers as being a productive exercise: whilst the dissertation is a solitary task, they learned to

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accomplish it within an academic community. Again, this intersects with 'slow university' principles, which promote an ethics of care and solidarity (Mountz et al., 2015). Students on the Human Geography and Human Geography & Planning courses reported feeling a strong sense of course identity and collegiality. With some respondents in the focus group suggesting that this sense of community and friendship was one of the most rewarding things about the course. Not only this, but that they saw this as atypical of the university experience when compared with peers on other courses:

> *People are always really shocked when I tell them we do this as a course, or that as a course, we're going on this night out as a course. Oh, do you actually speak to people? [multiple voices in agreement] You live with someone on your course? People find it really shocking.*

This sense of communal endeavour was exploited and developed in Malham, and enabled the dissertation experience, which many students report as stressful, to feel more manageable and collective:

> *I think it's important you feel like you've got the support. You feel like … you're not actually in it on your own. Everyone's going for this, and you're going to be there for each other, and support each other. Like if someone's having a meltdown, someone's going to pick you back up and say come on you can do this. We've all got this.*

It is clear that post-Malham, this sense of community and course identity extends beyond socialising and nights out, to a sense of collective care and mutual aid:

> *I feel like after Malham if I saw someone in the library who was all like [panic noise] you'd be like, it's alright. I feel like you'd approach people on the course more. Or if you saw someone you'd be: how's it going? What chapter are you on? I know I didn't necessarily do it before.*

At Malham Students found it useful to check in with their peers and compare their progress with them, as well as the different focusses and routes through the dissertation they had taken. Staff had designed writing workshops for the Malham trip to develop the relationship between individual student dissertation research and writing and its interface with collective processes of reflection and peer support. One workshop involved reflecting on the core of the dissertation, telling another student about it, then that student in turn telling a third student about the first student's project.

> *saying it out loud helped; you spend a lot of time sitting in silence, reading it and writing it but when you say it out loud it just sounds completely different. My title changed about four times in Malham, someone would say 'that didn't sound quite right' and it helped.*

The students found this process of engaging with peers useful to consolidate their own ideas, both through the need to organise their thoughts and explain their project clearly and the process of presenting their ideas verbally. Another student reported that they thought the exercise:

> *brought us out of our comfort zone a little bit. Because we hadn't really spoke to anyone up to that point about our dissertations I don't think*

On reflecting on their own individualised processes of writing students reported that they did not necessarily get much writing done at Malham, but that the thinking that is a precursor to writing:

> *… Everyone came home clearer on what they were doing and where they needed to be and what they had to do next.*

Whilst clarification and thinking clearly forms part of what students got out of the trip, just as important appears to be the confidence boost that came from working through their ideas with peers:

> *I found during the discussion with peers helped almost as much as with tutors. Reading stuff aloud really helped 'what do you think of this or what do you think of that'*

This indicates that the students were beginning to engage as a community of learners and researchers, rather than individualised students. Instead of solely looking to staff for guidance and support students began to skill share and pool information, engage in tentative processes of peer review. Through an engagement in the production of knowledge, in the forms of an undergraduate dissertation, students not only develop the individual research and scholarship skills we expect at this level of study, but also appear to develop, facilitated through this trip, the collective and collegiate academic skills that these individualised processes rely upon. This transformative experience saw a shift in the students' ways of thinking about the dissertation process and their location within it.

The interaction between students and their peers encouraged them to rethink their own role as an independent learner (Thompson, 2005). Despite students reporting that not a lot of writing was done at Malham, they consistently describe how they got on with writing as soon as they were back in Leeds:

> *The first thing I did when I got back was start writing. It was all fresh and it was at the front of my mind.*

The discovery that students have been using the trip less for writing than for preparing to write has been significant. It has forced us to re-evaluate the importance of this intermediate stage between research and writing. In response, we have explored possibilities for positioning the trip differently within the module to allow for more writing, but remain reluctant to lose the special timing of this intervention in the development of students' learning. As it is, the trip is less a 'writing retreat' than a 'discussion and reflection retreat', which students use to clarify and extend their knowledge of the dissertation process

and devise collective and collegiate strategies to complement their individualised research and writing processes. These both contribute to confidence and motivation building for when students return to Leeds. In these ways Malham provides a liminal space in which transformative learning can take place.

There were, though, limits to the increased responsibility students were prepared to take for their research and academic engagement through the Malham trip, and the dissertation process more broadly. When asked if they would have been prepared to take on more responsibility for leading some talks or workshops, they suggested this would be off-putting. There remains a dissertation comfort zone of easily digestible 'practical' and concrete advice about dissertation structure and discomfort about more open ended and reflexive processes.

Overall students appear to have begun a process of identifying as a learner, writer and researcher. They reflected on this both as individuals with highly particular projects and research interests, but also more collectively as collegiate and supportive peers within a pair of courses with strong and positive senses of identity and belonging. Interestingly, at Malham this process of identity formation extended beyond themselves as students/peers to reflections on academic members of staff. Students reported in the focus groups that there was a process of 'humanisation' of colleagues, through encountering them in a new context and the social space of the Malham retreat. This disruption of hierarchical staff / student relationships mirrors the disruption of teaching spaces, and it is our contention that by pushing students a little out of their comfort zone spatially and relationally, space opens up to think and write.

Conclusion

Each year, students' reaction to this no-frills winter trip to a local youth hostel turns from an initial incredulity, to enjoyment, and then to a new productivity and focus on writing,

> Especially when they say take a lock, I was like OMG where are you taking us [laughter]. I liked it because it felt like back to basics, hotels are segregated, but Malham it felt like a school trip and it helped with the atmosphere. But it didn't feel like we were on holiday, it felt like we were there to do work.

Although in their handbook, this is called the 'Malham Fieldtrip', we often refer to this trip as the 'dissertation boot camp' with our students, a tongue-in-cheek yet effective way to signal the intensive focus on the dissertation that takes place there. The name has stuck. Indeed, we have a full programme of activities from breakfast until dinner and we lure students to the Dales with the suggestion that if they come, and make it through the sheer hard slog that they envision, something magical will happen: the dissertation will appear. Yet each year, a significant shift in students' relationship with their dissertation module and with the academic community they are part of does indeed take place. It is this transformation that our paper has explored.

In important respects, 'boot camp' is a misnomer, as it is intended and structured as a quiet writing retreat, with a strong emphasis on slowing down, reflecting and taking time. It has proved an environment to trial the application of 'slow university' principles and approaches to student writing. Every aspect of the programme is optional, and we encourage students to go off and find their own place to write if they want to. In these ways Malham takes on characteristics of a liminal space where the student's sense of self as a learner can be transformed. A key thing that emerges from the focus groups is that our students say they don't get much writing done. When we push them to unpick this, it becomes clear that what does happen in Malham is the crucial mental tussle that leads to the clarity of thinking about the dissertation: crisp phrases to hone the research aims and questions, a vision of the shape of the chapters, the confidence to go home and write at the end of the trip. We have suggested in this paper that this happens through 'making space' to think and write; enabled by being in an 'other' rural, space and slowing down the pace; using a series of hostel spaces to work differently and reconfigure the relationship between student, supervisors and dissertation, and transform the personal values and identity of learners.

This research has explored the student experience of the Malham dissertation retreat using three spatial themes, and their impact on transformational learning and communities of practice. 1. The role of nature and the countryside and their role as an 'other' space away from and in a dynamic with the usual university routines and pressures; 2. The organisation, production and use of informal learning spaces to destabilise and rebuild approaches to academic writing, and 3. the interplay between the 'head space' of individuals, the social space of peer groups, and the reconfigured staff / student inhabitation of fieldtrip spaces. This invites thinking about other ways in which disruption of the usual academic spaces of the university could help student learning and build a better academic community. Just as 'slow university' scholarship has been critiqued for the uneven, privileged ability to access its remedies (Meyerdorf and Noterman 2019), as the programme is developed and rolled out to other courses, consideration must be given to the way student circumstances relating to gender, race, disability and financial hardship might limit ability to engage with this valuable 'other space' for writing.

Biographies

Bronwen Edwards is a senior lecturer in Human Geography at Leeds Beckett University, and leads the dissertation field trip. She is a cultural and historical geographer, and her research in concerned with the design, experience and navigation of urban space, particularly from a feminist perspective. She leads a research group: Women and the Built Environment and facilitates writing retreats.

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