Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/csje20

Sustainably on the seas of academia: comparing metaphors of social and independent academic writing

Camilla Lindholm & Emilia Luukka

To cite this article: Camilla Lindholm & Emilia Luukka (27 Aug 2024): Sustainably on the seas of academia: comparing metaphors of social and independent academic writing, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2024.2394403

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2394403

SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2394403

Sustainably on the seas of academia: comparing metaphors of social and independent academic writing

Camilla Lindholm [a] and Emilia Luukka [b]

[a]Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; [b]Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT

Navigating academic writing, the waters of academic life, should be a sustainable practice, which supports the learning and personal development of writers. However, cultures of writing differ in their sustainability. The sustainability of writing cultures relies heavily on whether writing is a solitary or social practice and whether it is process- or product-oriented. This paper compares metaphors of independent and social academic writing and considers what the metaphors convey about the culture of writing. We facilitated social writing sessions and collected metaphors from writers during focus group interviews. The metaphors were analyzed using Sword's (2019. Snowflakes, splinters and cobblestones: Metaphors for writing. In S. Farquhar & E. Fitzpatrick (Eds.), *Innovations in narrative and metaphor: Methodologies and practices* (pp. 39–56). Springer Singapore Pte. Limited) DEEPER-framework. The metaphors mostly conveyed a sustainable approach to writing, though more fleeting encounters with both independent and social writing were described. Only rarely were non-sustainable approaches described. As competition and comparison can impede benefiting from social writing, we propose drawing attention to writers' learning and professional development in each social writing session.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 20 May 2023
Accepted 8 August 2024

KEYWORDS
Metaphor; academic writing; wellbeing; culture of writing; academic development; writing to publish

1. Introduction

Academic writing is littered with challenges both on the level of individuals and organizations. These challenges are varied and can result in delays and stalls in publication, which, in turn, can lead to decreased wellbeing of academics (e.g., Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2023). Over the last decade, social academic writing has been documented as an effective way of overcoming obstacles related to writing and maintaining wellbeing (e.g., Quynn & Stewart, 2021; Stevenson, 2021; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022; Vincent et al., 2023). Previous research has identified organizational, professional, and personal benefits associated with writing retreats (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022). Retreats legitimize writing in a comfortable environment, value time and space dedicated to writing, develop writing competencies, enhance personal interest towards writing, and reduce anxiety associated with academic writing. Previous studies are usually based on data from writing retreats with less than 20 participants from the same discipline, same department or same university (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022, p. 32). Although social academic writing is enjoying a great flux of interest in scholarship, previous studies have used data from writing retreats with less than 20 participants from the same discipline, same department or

CONTACT Camilla Lindholm camilla.lindholm@helsinki.fi Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, P.O.Box 24, FIN-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2394403.

same university (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022, p. 32) or have included doctoral researchers rather than academic faculty as subjects (e.g., Quynn & Stewart, 2021; Scharlau et al., 2021; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022; Vincent et al., 2023).

We use Helen Sword's (2019) DEEPER framework to analyze metaphors of social academic writing and consider what the prevalence of particular kinds of metaphors communicates about the culture of academic writing in the given context. We also consider how the metaphors of social academic writing compare with metaphors of independent academic writing, and argue that social academic writing provides a sustainable framework for supporting healthy writing practices in higher education. Our understanding of sustainability follows that of Olszewska and Lock (2017, p. 135), who view sustainability not as longevity but as "developing a culture that grows confidence and builds individual capacity in terms of academic writing for publication". A sustainable writing culture is needed to meet the increasing demands placed on academics to publish. Understanding the status quo is the starting point for change. The process of combining a session of social academic writing session with a comparative metaphor exercise, which we describe in section four, can be applied to other contexts of writing.

Our aim is to understand the current culture of writing through metaphors of writing in our context of study. Our study adds to the existing research by contrasting metaphors of social and independent writing and broadening the demographic backgrounds of participants in studies on social academic writing. Including academic staff is significant, as we believe it poses a significant problem for institutions and individuals if tenured or otherwise permanent staff find writing excessively challenging. These challenges we discuss in section three. We address three research questions:

(1) What kinds of metaphors do our participants use to describe social and individual academic writing and which are the most common metaphors?
(2) What experiences do these metaphors convey of academic writing?
(3) How do the metaphors used to describe social academic writing differ from metaphors used to describe individual academic writing?

2. Paddling in shifting waters: metaphors as cultural signposts

We understand metaphors as a way in which language is used to enact and develop culture. Language, and metaphors as a particular feature of language, are understood as collective cultural objects following the Finnish philosopher Lauri Rauhala (2005, p. 67, 71), and, as we describe below, we see metaphors as relaying shared meanings writers associate with academic writing.

We chose metaphors as our focus of analysis because metaphors condense a rich variety of meanings, and because, as Rauhala (2005, p. 71) observes, metaphors as units of language both enact and develop the culture of academic writing. Gee (2018, p. 31) describes this phenomenon by noting that "metaphorical systems, built into the grammars of our languages, shape how we talk and think, especially when we are not critically and consciously investigating things". Pyykkö (2014, p. 189) further observes that language conveys information on individuals' manner of thought and world view (see also Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). By examining language used to describe academic writing, we draw out various challenges and sources of strength in the open waters of academic writing, and are better equipped to both employ existing practices and invent new ones to navigate past these challenges. Using metaphors to examine participants' conceptualizations has been practically implemented and its theoretical underpinnings rigorously examined by numerous scholars, such as Armstrong (2008), Kövecses (2005) and Low (2015).

Culture is a complex construct that has attracted the interest of scholars from many different disciplines for decades. In our study, we have understood *culture* following Rauhala (2005, p. 17) who defines it as an ever-changing entity, comprising of systems of meaning, the cultivation of humanity's spiritual potential, the intentional and conscious development of humanity's material conditions of living and the results of this developmental work. These systems of meaning Rauhala

(2005, p. 17) sees as rising from interaction of situated and embodied individuals and as reciprocally impacting how individuals interact. Kramsch and Zhu (2020, p. 1) also define culture in a way that highlights systems of meaning and the situated nature of individuals' interaction, as "meaning-making practices mediated by symbolic systems of various kinds across various social and historical contexts and through various communication technologies". While Kramsch and Zhu's (2020, p. 1) definition reflects our interest in what our participants' use of metaphors can tell us about the culture of academic writing in our given context at a particular point in time, Rauhala's (2005, p. 17) definition also takes into account our aspiration to assess and develop the writing culture towards something that is more sustainable.

While Rauhala (2005), basing his work on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, discusses the ontology of an individual within the field of culture at length, our scholarly interest is drawn particularly to language, which Rauhala (2005, p. 67) positions as a collective aspect of culture. Collective aspects of culture he sees as including institutions and cultural objects, by which he means not only the physical and tangible objects but also the non-material phenomena, such as language in its various registers.

Individual and collective aspects of culture have been widely discussed and researched in the scholarship on culture, and have been used, for example, to compare and contrast cultures (e.g., Singelis et al., 1995). The complex interplay of language and culture have similarly been studied in numerous disciplines, such as applied linguistics, cognitive linguistics and cultural studies. We endeavor to compare and contrast metaphors of independent and social academic writing, which has, as of yet, received little scholarly attention. Research incorporating both individual and culture-level research can help us overcome stereotyping and clarify the individual differences within cultures (Singelis et al., 1999, p. 320). Rauhala (2005, p. 89) observes that community members receive and embrace the collectively developing culture in accordance with their own individual prerequisites. In our study, this means our participants approach social and independent academic writing from their individual vantage points with varying experiences and ways of experiencing and understanding academic writing.

Our interest in using metaphors to develop the current culture of academic writing is motivated by a search for sustainable writing practices. Cultures develop as new practices, for example, are introduced to communities. In the context of institutions and communities, this happens through planned and effectively organized action (Rauhala, 2005, p. 91). Transferring cultural practices requires community members to carefully consider and take responsibility for which cultural aspects are transferred and how. This idea stems from the recent shift in the way in which culture is understood. Kramsch (2014, p. 43) describes this as a shift from an essentialist view on culture to one which sees culture as a performative process, where "old words can be given new meanings and can give birth to new thoughts". This process Rauhala (2005, p. 89) describes as taking place through community members' "digesting, critiquing, combining and pruning material put forth by the members". This understanding of culture underscores reflecting on the temporal context and position from which interpretations are made (Kramsch, 2014, p. 43). Given the challenges of academic writing, we are encouraged to examine metaphors describing independent and social academic writing to assess the current culture of academic writing at our institution, and to consider how we might contribute to strengthening and developing it further. Our goals are thus aptly described by Rauhala (2005, p. 89) when he notes that the study of culture aims to "understand and to at least some degree regulate the flow of culture". According to Low (2015, p. 15), the study of metaphors in the context of education frequently aims to contribute to understanding "how metaphor can be used to improve teaching and learning", which is not far from our aim either.

3. Learning to navigate the shoals beneath the surface: living with challenges of academic writing

Higher education today poses a number of challenges – metaphorical shoals beneath the surface of day to day academic writing life – such as pressure from increasing competition and measurable

individual performance. Rowland (2002), identifying various primary fractures within academia, argues that fragmentation of work characterizes academia in the neoliberal era. One central fracture lies in whether the purpose of higher education is assumed to be creating wealth for a global economy or fostering critical thinking. Current higher education also involves distance between teaching and research. Increased external research funding and the different reward systems for research and teaching create a tension between the two, and pressure for academics to succeed in both. Another fracture relates to the nature of knowledge itself, and is caused by the increased total volume of global knowledge. Disciplines are divided into highly specialized sub-disciplines and academics feel they share only little intellectual interest with colleagues from other areas. Opportunities for critical engagement with other disciplines and development of new knowledge are lost. Moreover, the Englishization of academia challenges multitudes of scholars for whom English is not their first professional language (see for example Hyland, 2015; Lillis & Curry, 2010).

The fragmentation of higher education leads to conflicting expectations on academics. Conflicting work priorities result in challenges of time management, identified in the research literature as a main obstacle to doing research. Handbooks of academic writing (e.g., Jensen, 2017; Silvia, 2007) note the importance of securing time to write for establishing an academic career. Murray (2015) approaches the perceived lack of time from a scarcity theory perspective. Mazak (2022) claims academia conflictingly conditions us for scarcity but promotes an abundance mindset as crucial for academic career development.

Additional aspects of higher education exist that may negatively impact the wellbeing of academics. Over the past two decades, higher education has transformed from a public good to a global marketplace, exposed to market pressure (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). This competitive marketplace is built on evaluations and critical feedback, which leads academics to constantly measure themselves and their colleagues against often vague institutional criteria (Jensen, 2017). Constant evaluation predisposes academics to impostor syndrome, referring to individuals with objectively outstanding accomplishments feeling incompetent and fearful that others discover their incompetence (Fujie, 2010). Although repeated rejections, impostor syndrome, and burnout are common amongst academics, these experiences are often stigmatized (Jaremka et al., 2020). Besides destigmatization, changes in university policy and programming as well as concrete measures are needed to overcome the negative effects of impostor syndrome (Parkman, 2016).

Recent scholarship has focused on social writing as a path to wellbeing. Stevenson (2021) describes how social writing retreats can improve participants' wellbeing, for example, by providing time and space for writing, and fostering collegiality. Beasy et al. (2020) describe how writing groups function as spaces of wellbeing by mitigating doctoral candidates' feeling of isolation. In turn, Eardley et al. (2021) highlight the way in which retreats can positively affect participants' wellbeing by mediating the conflicts of work priorities and time pressure. Whereas Murray and Newton (2009) discuss writing retreats in terms of communities of practice, creating writing time and building collegiality, Eardley et al. (2021) take the idea further, treating writing retreats as communities of coping in academia. In our study, we collected data in conjunction with social writing retreats we ourselves ran, in order to provide our colleagues with a potentially novel experience of social writing and a brief writing retreat in the midst of otherwise busy schedules.

4. Data and methods

The data consist of focus groups interviews with writers of diverse academic backgrounds, disciplines and career stages, representing seven faculties at one Finnish university. A total of six hour-long interviews (six hours of data) were collected over a three-month period in the spring of 2022. Each session involved four to six participants, altogether 32 participants, as well as the two authors of this article. Everyone participated remotely and the interviews were recorded via Zoom.

We recruited participants by sending information about the study to mailing lists and the university intranet. According to Valtonen (2005, p. 229), selecting participants for a focus group

requires an understanding of the similarities and differences which the intended group members may have, as well as having a shared interest in discussing the topic – experiences of academic writing both independently and in groups, in this case (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 81). Although the career positions and the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants in our interviews were heterogeneous, the significant role academic writing plays in their day-to-day work and academic development provided a common basis from which participants were able to relate to one another. As the aim of the study is to examine the differences in how independent and social academic writing are perceived, academic faculty and doctoral students proved an appropriate group of informants. As our focus has been on the experience of academic writing, we have not collected background information on the participants' linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Participants were asked to join either the Finnish or English-speaking sessions depending on which language they felt more comfortable with. Both English and Finnish speaking sessions, however, included multilingual participants. The interviewers themselves have multilingual backgrounds in Finnish, Swedish and English.

We presumed all participants to have experience of independent academic writing. In relation to knowledge or experience of social academic writing, on the other hand, the participants were more diverse. Only some of the participants knew of or had attended social writing meetings before participating in this study, while others were new to the social writing practice. To ensure all participants had at least some experience of social academic writing on which to base their reflection and produce metaphors reflective of these experiences, we first engaged the interviewees in a writing session led by the first author of this article. The session followed the structured writing retreat format created by Rowena Murray (e.g., Murray, 2015; Murray & Newton, 2009). The writing session conducted in this study was an adaptation of the structured writing retreat format to a single 2-hour session, which was conducted online due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The session involved initial peer discussion and goal setting, a warm-up writing exercise, a 60-minute writing session with cameras on or off depending on the participants' preferences and a winding down session with peer discussion.

The social writing session was followed by the focus group interview. Focus group interviews were deemed an appropriate fit for this study as they enable drawing out socially constructed meanings related to a particular topic (Smithson, 2000). The second author of this study conducted the interviews, though both authors attended. The interviewer used a series of prompts (see Appendix 1) to elicit the group's reflective discussion on social writing and compare this experience to independent academic writing. The participants were asked to describe their experience of social and independent academic writing by completing a fill-in-the-blank question: "[Social/independent] academic writing is … ". Low (2015, p. 17) describes these as elicited explicit metaphors. The participants could create as many metaphors as they liked. The participants fed the responses into an online collaborative whiteboard (Flinga), which was cast onto a screen in the writing space on Zoom. This allowed the participants to share metaphors anonymously, which we hoped would encourage metaphor generation. After allowing the participants a few minutes to generate the metaphors, the discussion was begun by the moderator who read out loud the metaphors on the board. Participants were then asked what they thought about the metaphors and whether they thought any particular metaphor resonated with them in particular.

The interviews resulted in a data set consisting of 99 pages of transcription and 122 metaphors (61 metaphors for social writing and 61 metaphors for individual writing). While a few Flingaboard entries had to be divided into single metaphors, only one metaphor entry was excluded from the analysis because it was a proverb, not a metaphor. The metaphors were analyzed using Helen Sword's (2019) DEEPER framework, which examines metaphors using six different dimensions. In the initial phase of the analysis, we categorized all metaphors with regard to the dimensions of (D) domain, (E) emphasis, (E) emotion, (P) people, (E) empowerment, and (R) resonance. Each metaphor was examined from the perspective of each dimension and considered if they included said dimension. Not all metaphors featured all dimensions of the DEEPER

framework. In the second phase of the analysis, we classified the metaphors into snowflakes, splinters, and cobblestones (Sword, 2019). Sword (2019, p. 47) describes *snowflakes* as ephemeral and easily forgotten metaphors, *splinters* as destructive metaphors and *cobblestones* as substantial metaphors that can "bear the weight of our arguments and serve us for many years". Though we use the term snowflake to describe the third category of metaphors, we do not intend to engage in the discourse related to sensitivity. In discussing the results, we consider what the prevalence of particular kinds of metaphors and their qualitative nature communicate about the culture of social and independent academic writing in the given context. By comparing the metaphors, our aim has been to draw attention to the process rather than the products of writing and the impact of writing and publishing. Our findings support viewing social academic writing as a sustainable framework for supporting academic writing in higher education. We concluded the interview session by presenting the participants with the exercise "Re-story your metaphors" from Sword (2017, pp. 191–192), which we hoped would enable the participants to use metaphors to navigate the challenges of academic writing. Sword (2017, pp. 191–192) instructs writers to use metaphors to describe a writing challenge, and then to reframe and overcome the challenge using the same metaphor.

5. Analysis and results

This section presents our analysis of the metaphors our participants used to describe independent and social academic writing. We first present the metaphors of independent academic writing both quantitatively as well as qualitatively through Sword's (2019) three categories of metaphors and the tropes which we created to describe the metaphors. Examples of metaphors from our data are italicized throughout. The tropes were abstracted from our data, though they find points of connection with prior research of writing-related metaphors (esp. academic writing as a journey [Sword, 2019]). We have not collected quantitative data but rather have quantified our findings to support our qualitative analysis. We then present an analysis of metaphors of social academic writing. The discussion compares metaphors of social and independent academic writing and considers what these convey about the culture of academic writing at our university, how this culture might be further developed and how the exercise might be applied in other contexts to explore the culture of writing.

5.1. Lone ships traverse dark waters: metaphors of independent academic writing

First, we analyzed the metaphors using Sword's (2019) DEEPER framework. It is important to note, however, that not all dimensions of the framework were present in each of the metaphors we collected.

Then we sorted the metaphors into cobblestones, snowflakes, and splinters. Of the total of 61 metaphors of independent academic writing, we identified 40 cobblestones, 13 snowflakes and 8 splinters. Thus, metaphors identified as cobblestones constituted two-thirds of all metaphors, whereas snowflakes and splinters made up the remaining third of these metaphors.

We grouped the 61 metaphors into a total of 18 tropes. Cobblestone metaphors fell under seven tropes, five under snowflake metaphors and eight under splinter metaphors.

The tropes used to describe cobblestone metaphors included:

1. A journey (18 metaphors)
2. Process of outdoing one's self (six metaphors)
3. An analytic, iterative and incremental process (five metaphors)
4. Craftsmanship (four metaphors)
5. Healthy practice (with or without others) (three metaphors)
6. A self-disciplined, self-regulated and internally motivated practice (two metaphors)
7. Highly individual work or practice with no mention of others or outside of a community (two metaphors)

Metaphors related to the journey trope constituted almost 50% of the cobblestone metaphors and approximately 30% of the total number of metaphors used to describe individual academic writing. Most of the other cobblestone metaphors described various types of processes and practices. These metaphors viewed independent academic writing as an individual endeavor and only scarcely made references to others.

The 13 snowflake metaphors fell under five tropes:

1. A state of mind (six metaphors)
2. Consumables (four metaphors)
3. A frustrating and cathartic experience (one metaphor)
4. An encounter with someone or something friendly (one metaphor)
5. Something currently immaterial or non-existent (one metaphor)

Snowflake metaphors most frequently defined writing as a state of mind, highlighting aspects such as attention and peace of mind. Interestingly, individual academic writing was also described as consumable on four occasions.

The splinter metaphors could not be grouped into tropes, as they had little in common. Therefore each metaphor was formulated into a trope of its own:

1. Means to produce writing/publications
2. An encounter with someone or something unfriendly
3. An unpleasant, analytic process
4. Drifting
5. Trespassing
6. Recognition for competitively produced work

The splinter metaphors focused on various characteristics perceived as unpleasant, such as drifting without a goal, trespassing on somebody else's territory or having to produce writing in order to meet goals set by an external authority.

5.2. Identifying commonalities within the categories of independent academic writing

We also wanted to consider what the metaphors within the identified tropes had in common from the perspective of the DEEPER framework. The most common trope involving cobblestone metaphors described individual academic writing as a journey. The metaphors in this trope demonstrate movement forward, either as driven and goal-oriented, as in *wandering in forest (you can find the path)*, or as frustrating and clueless, as in *arduous trek through an industrial zone*. Sometimes, the unknown goal was considered a positive aspect of the journey, as in *adventure* and *detective story*. Other tropes also involved both positive and negative emotions. For example, in the metaphor *climbing the mountain*, indicating a process of outdoing one's self, we interpreted the related emotion as both positive and negative, because overcoming a significant hurdle is likely to be challenging, but rewarding. The cobblestone metaphors mostly indicated the dimensions of 'self', human experience, and empowerment. Furthermore, these metaphors mostly referred to processes rather than products, as in the metaphor characterizing individual writing as *solving a puzzle*. One participant used the metaphor of *a chain* to describe individual academic writing. This metaphor would easily lead one to believe that it describes a product, perhaps the way a study connects to other studies in the field. The interview data, however, revealed that the chain metaphor was used to refer to a process with one link following the other.

The snowflake metaphors frequently referred to individual academic writing as a state of mind, demonstrating deep focus (*meditation*, *structured mindfulness*), peace of mind (*peace*, *spiritual retreat in the mountain monastery*) and focused attention (*immersing oneself*). These metaphors showed a

variety of characteristics and were difficult to assess with regard to certain dimensions. For example, the metaphors seemed to refer to the dimension of 'self' rather than 'other', and to be inclined towards positive rather than negative emotions, but not exclusively so. The strongest tendencies indicated that these metaphors are personal and include a fairly strong aspect of agency. The metaphor describing individual writing as *the man in the moon* constitutes an exception from the later pattern, because it describes the writer as a 'pawn' without individual agency. Whereas the most frequent pattern in both cobblestone and snowflake metaphors described writing as processes and inner states, snowflake metaphors also included a group peculiarly comparing writing to consumables, such as *mango*, *passion fruit* or *beer, hot or cold.* These metaphors relate to the natural world rather than to human experience and to products rather than processes. Regarding the dimensions of emotions, people, and empowerment, we found these metaphors difficult to categorize in the DEEPER framework.

The seven metaphors classified as splinters could not be combined into tropes. The small number of metaphors in this category made it difficult to identify commonalities, but the perhaps most prominent feature of these metaphors is their weak prevalence of agency or learning. Most splinter metaphors reflected a lack of agency or an experience of being used by others.

5.3. Refreshment, rest and recovery when lone ships join a fleet: metaphors of social academic writing

Examining the metaphors through Sword's (2019) categories for cobblestone, snowflake and splinter metaphors, the metaphors which the participants created to describe social academic writing came in the same ratio as the metaphors for independent academic writing. These 61 metaphors included mostly cobblestone metaphors (37), a significant number of snowflake metaphors (21) and only three metaphors which we deemed to represent the splinter category.

The cobblestone metaphors fell under the following tropes:

1. Highly individual work or practice within a community (nine metaphors),
2. A refreshing place to rest and recover (with others) (eight metaphors),
3. A healthy practice (with or without others) (six metaphors),
4. A refreshing place to rest and recover (no mention of others) (four metaphors),
5. Community membership (three metaphors)
6. A journey (two metaphors)
7. Harvesting (two metaphors)
8. Craftsmanship (one metaphor)
9. A hidden practice that produces visible fruit (one metaphor)
10. A tool or vehicle enabling forward movement (one metaphor)

More than 70% of the cobblestone metaphors fell into the first four categories of tropes. The cobblestone tropes highlight social academic writing as a regular practice which, though individually driven, can be conducted within a community, rendering the practice both refreshing and healthy. Only a few references were made to academic writing as harvesting or a hidden practice producing visible fruit, and only one metaphor suggested seeing social academic writing in a more utilitarian way, as enabling forward movement.

The metaphors in the snowflake category fell under the tropes:

1. An encounter with someone or something friendly (six metaphors)
2. A source of positive feelings (five metaphors)
3. A boost to one's practice (four metaphors)
4. A (life-giving) force of nature (four metaphors)
5. A state of mind (one metaphor)
6. Self-care (one metaphor)

The snowflake metaphors fell mostly (90%) into the first four categories of tropes, approaching social academic writing less as a regular practice and more as an encounter, occasions which gave rise to positive feelings or a boost to one's own practice. The metaphors within this category demonstrated less a sense of agency or an approach to academic writing as a regular practice.

The category for splinter metaphors included three metaphors, which we grouped under the trope of academic writing as a test of strength or skill. The three metaphors likened social academic writing to competitive sports like the Olympics or chess, and to an exam in a school context. All suggest seeing social academic writing as a fairly stressful, high-stakes context to work in.

5.4. Commonalities within the categories of social academic writing

We then examined what the metaphors within the identified tropes had in common using the DEEPER framework. More than 70% of the cobblestone metaphors fell into the first four categories of tropes. The metaphors describing social academic writing as highly individual work or practice within a community (such as *walking in a crowd* or *eating at the same table*) were all clearly process-oriented, focused on human experience, and recognized the role of self and others. Interestingly, while not all were clearly positive in the emotions the metaphors signaled, all included an element of agency or learning. Social academic writing was also compared to a refreshing place to rest and recover with others, such as *sharing the joy of a forest* or *sitting at the campfire*. The trope differed from the previous in that all but one of the eight metaphors signaled a positive emotion related to it, the exception being the metaphors which likened social academic writing to an Alcoholics Anonymous -meeting, which we interpreted as signaling both positive and negative emotions. Nevertheless, the metaphors in this category were not all focused solely on human experience: three metaphors included the dimensions of human experience as well as the natural world. Further, while only half of the metaphors highlighted the writer's agency, three included both agency *and* learning. The metaphors which compared social academic writing to a healthy practice all related to exercise or physical activity, such as going to the gym, practicing yoga, or going for a run. These metaphors indicated the dimensions of self, agency, and personal resonance. The trope defining social academic writing as a refreshing place to rest and recover (no mention of others) included four metaphors which were an interesting mix of including the dimensions of human experience (*warm bath*) or both human experience as well as the natural world (*a calm haven)* (two cases of each). Two metaphors were self-focused, while two were focused on both the self and others. All four metaphors conveyed clearly positive emotions.

All snowflake metaphors that described social academic writing as an encounter with someone or something friendly conveyed positive emotions. Interestingly, they all recognized the role of both self and others, and were mostly (four of six) process-oriented (such as *having a slow lunch together*). Further, all but one metaphor, which compared social academic writing to an encounter at a campfire, focused on the human experience. Five metaphors were grouped under social academic writing as a source of positive feelings. All conveyed, obviously, positive emotions, and were, with one exception, process-oriented. Additionally, again with the one exception, experiencing *social academic writing as a comfy fur*, four were observant of both self and others. Interestingly, all but one metaphor were quite personal, the exception being *social academic writing as a fenced-in field where each individual can frolic together, but at their own pace.* During the focus group interview, this metaphor immediately resonated broadly within the group, though we recognize that the aim of focus group interviews is not to reach a consensus. Four metaphors were grouped under social academic writing as a boost to one's practice, and all focused on the human experience. With the exception of seeing *social academic writing as a shared benefit,* all metaphors implied a sense of agency on behalf of the writer. The metaphors were positive in nature, except for *social academic writing as a race against time*, which we interpreted as recognizing both positive and negative feelings. This metaphor was also the only one which we considered rather universal in nature, while the four others were rather personal, such as *social academic writing as an*

effective task-force. We grouped four metaphors under *social academic writing as a (life-giving) force of nature.* Fascinatingly, of the four, all focused on the natural world, and positioned the writer as a pawn with no sense of agency. We interpreted all four as rather personal in nature, such as seeing *social academic writing as a sea.*

Only three metaphors were characterized as belonging to the splinter category. Interestingly, all three approached social academic writing as a test of strength or skill, which in the context of academic writing is, of course, ill conducive to a pleasant or productive writing session. Although all three focused on human experience, they had little more in common. One metaphor approached *social academic writing as an exam*, making a reference to the set time limit for the writing group. Another metaphor saw *social academic writing as an Olympic event,* and another as *chess,* both of which can be considered as high-stake, high-stress environments to work in.

As noted above, our data included the same number of metaphors (61) in both categories of individual and social academic writing. The categorization of metaphors into cobblestones, snowflakes and splinters demonstrated the same ratio of metaphors, with cobblestones being the most frequent and splinters being the least frequent category, with snowflakes holding the intermediate position. Even though both categories demonstrated the same ratio of metaphors, some differences occurred. Within the group of metaphors for individual writing, cobblestone metaphors constituted approximately two thirds (40/61), whereas snowflakes and splinters formed the remaining third (13 snowflakes, seven splinters). The group of metaphors for social writing contained approximately the same amount of cobblestones (37/61), with 21 snowflake metaphors and only three splinters. Overall, snowflake metaphors were more frequent and splinter metaphors less frequent in the category of social academic writing than in individual academic writing.

6. Discussion

A comparison of the tropes we created to describe the cobblestone metaphors teases out a picture of academic writing within the community in question. Examining the tropes describing 70% of all cobblestone metaphors of social academic writing depicts social academic writing as highly individual work which provides an opportunity to rest and recover (with, and even without) others and to engage in a healthy practice. This is certainly sustainable in terms of writing for publication (Olszewska & Lock, 2017). When compared to the tropes describing a little over 70% metaphors of independent academic writing, the attention is turned more inward, to the inner experience of writers, describing independent academic writing as a journey or process, perhaps reflective of the changes in each writer's cognitive landscape. Understanding writing thus as requiring persistence, commitment and developing through incremental progress is similarly sustainable. Interestingly, in neither of the groups was academic writing seen frequently as craftsmanship, though this mentality has often been called for in books on academic writing (see e.g., Janks, 2012; Jensen, 2017). Further, both sets of metaphors describing social and independent writing recognize academic writing as highly individual work, which is not diminished or lessened even when the environment in which the writing takes place is social rather than solitary.

We also compared the tropes describing the snowflake metaphors. While all metaphors within these tropes depicted academic writing as "ephemeral, like flurrying snowflakes" (Sword, 2019, p. 47), the tropes describing social academic writing highlight encounters and the positive feelings one may experience when engaging in social academic writing. We see this as signaling the potential social academic writing has for supporting writers' wellbeing. This echoes arguments for seeing social academic writing as a sustainable practice frequently made in the scholarship of social academic writing. The tropes describing independent academic writing, on the other hand, suggest experiencing academic writing as a state of mind, or a consumable (of varying degrees of pleasantness). Academic writing as a state of mind was a trope we identified in both categories. This trope was more frequent in independent than in social writing. While positive experiences encourage writers to return to the work, sustainable practices cannot be built on emotions driving practice,

however positive. Likewise, both sets of tropes included academic writing as an encounter, though this cannot be considered a typical pattern, as the total number of metaphors comparing writing to an encounter was relatively small in both sets (1 + 6). Interestingly, encounters were not restricted to the category of snowflake metaphors, as they were also found in the category for splinter metaphors.

The metaphors we grouped as splinters formed an interesting set, as the splinter metaphors of independent academic writing resisted being grouped under any particular trope. On the other hand, the splinter metaphors of social writing were grouped under the trope of social academic writing as a test of strength or skill. Thus, our results regarding independent writing indicate that challenges experienced by academic writers are individual. These results align with research on the feelings of alienation and disempowerment amongst academics in the neoliberal area (Poutanen, 2023), where scholars are invited to primarily focus on issues related to their own individual careers. The results also imply that some writers compare themselves with other writers in attendance. In terms of sustainability, all metaphors classified as splinters are unhelpful at best, most even "subtly destructive" as Sword (2019, p. 47) observes.

The DEEPER model provides multiple points of entry for reflecting on writing for publication as a sustainable practice. In practice, this happens through unpacking metaphors using the DEEPER model and systematically addressing writing-related beliefs through the dimensions of the model. Particularly relevant dimensions to consider include emphasis on the product vs. process of writing (E, Emphasis), attention to emotions related to writing (E, Emotion), the supporting presence of other writers (P, People) and writers' sense of agency (E, Empowerment). Comparing metaphors of independent and social academic writing demonstrates differences in processes and practices of writing. The idea of writing as a highly individual practice occurred in two metaphors in the category of individual writing and nine metaphors in the category of social writing. In the category of independent writing, these descriptions did not contain any mention of others, but in social writing, the independent practice is described as taking place in a community. Thus, metaphors of social writing seem to highlight the individual nature of writing, while highlighting the polarity between the independent nature of the work and the support of the community.

Furthermore, metaphors of social and individual writing differ with regard to the dimension of self versus others in the DEEPER model. This is, of course, not surprising given the point of departure of social versus independent writing, but is still worth reflecting on. The journey trope was much more frequent in metaphors of individual writing than in metaphors of social writing and the individual nature of writing was stressed in both categories of metaphors. Individual academic writing is related to a strong element of internal movement, manifested both in the journey trope and in tropes describing internal processes. On the other hand, social academic writing is associated with encounters with others. Social academic writing was described as a place to rest and seemed to imply paucity.

In reflecting on the social writing session of our study, some participants felt the hour reserved for social writing was too long, and might have thus preferred a more Pomodoro-type of approach to writing. This we attempted to alleviate by instructing the writers to take breaks to e.g. stretch during the session, as they saw fit. We found it important that writing group facilitators explicitly instruct participants to disconnect from email and phone for the time of the writing session. Low (2015) offers a fascinating step-by-step method for studying metaphors and questions to probe the validity of research involving metaphors. The group of participants all had experience in independent academic writing, and through our session on social academic writing had at least this much experience to base their metaphors on. While our focus group interviews demonstrated that many writers had a rich variety of experiences with different forms of social academic writing, the focus of this study and the limited space do not permit an extended discussion of the interviews. In making decisions about data exclusion, coding, classification and conflation (Low, 2015, p. 16), the data was processed and discussed by both authors, and consensus was reached in how each Flinga-board entry was processed. All groups of interviewees were presented with the same explanation of the

metaphor and examples, which did not relate to academic writing. While it is challenging to assess to what degree our findings have ecological validity throughout our institution, our findings do find resonance in the scholarship on academic writing in other contexts. The metaphors refer to various types of communities. The metaphors of social writing in our data indicated a model of working side by side and supporting each other in the process rather than collaborating on texts asynchronously. This view of social academic writing aligns with Murray's (2015) idea of retreats as typing pools, with everybody working on individual projects, but sharing a space. Different types of writing groups differ in the extent to which they involve the sharing of texts versus the experiences the writers have related to writing. While some groups focus on commentary of produced writing, the structured writing retreat model concentrates on the process. The social academic writing experience we offered approached social writing as a typing pool, and the same format has been used in the writing sessions the authors of this paper have run for two calendar years.

Some splinter metaphors suggested seeing social academic writing as a test of strength or skill. This should be considered when e.g. running graduate seminars and other writing groups in higher education. The view implies writers compare themselves with others even when they are only working side by side. We therefore consider it important to highlight that in structured writing retreats, it is not necessary to share or provide feedback on texts, but rather to provide a shared (sometimes hybrid) space with writers who share similar goals, processes and challenges without necessarily collaborating on texts and to draw attention to reflecting on writing as a practice that each of us continue to hone our skills in. There is much we can learn from one another when we engage in social academic writing. This idea is also raised by Olszewska and Lock (2017), who stress that

> The idea of a successful community of practice itself cannot be divorced from the idea of making the practice of learning sustainable over time. Learning is never individual. It is always situated, contextual, and relational. Individual interactions and group and institutional dynamics are important factors in the context of professional development and learning through the work of writing groups. (p. 143)

7. Conclusion

Our results indicate that elements of competition and comparison can impede the positive effects of social writing on participants' wellbeing. This in turn can detract from a sustainable writing culture which cultivates an individual's confidence and capacity to write for publication (Olszewska & Lock, 2017). We suggest reframing a culture of comparison among writers to introspection on personal learning and development as a writer. In practice, this can be done by implementing into the meetings an element encouraging improved reflection and learning. At the end of the sessions, the writers could, for example, be encouraged to write down one thing they have learned or have found surprising in the course of the session.

As previous research has focused on the experiences of participants in writing groups and retreats, little knowledge exists on the attitudes and perceptions of those who choose not to attend social writing events. Because our study included single writing sessions and focus group discussions for participants potentially unfamiliar with structured writing retreats, we might have captured attitudes related to opting out of these events. While our scope is limited, the findings suggest more research, for example, on socio-psychological reasons for opting out, is needed to understand how we might make social academic writing more attractive to writers of greater professional diversity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Camilla Lindholm http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9220-5414
Emilia Luukka http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0533-0266

References

Armstrong, S. L. (2008). Using metaphor analysis to uncover learners' conceptualizations of academic literacies in postsecondary developmental contexts. *International Journal of Learning*, *15*, 211–218. https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v15i09/45948

Beasy, K., Emery, S., Dyer, L., Coleman, B., Bywaters, D., Garrad, T., Crawford, J., Swarts, K., & Jahangiri, S. (2020). Writing together to foster wellbeing: Doctoral writing groups as spaces of wellbeing. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *39*(6), 1091–1105. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1713732

Calle-Arango, L., & Ávila Reyes, N. (2023). Obstacles, facilitators, and needs in doctoral writing: A systematic review. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *45*(2), 133–151. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2022.2026315

Eardley, A. F., Banister, E., & Fletcher, M. (2021). Can academic writing retreats function as wellbeing interventions? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(2), 183–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1744542

Fujie, R. (2010). Development of the state impostor phenomenon scale. *Japanese Psychological Research*, *52*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5884.2009.00417.x

Gee, J. P. (2018). *Introducing discourse analysis. From grammar to society*. Routledge.

Hyland, K. (2015). *Academic publishing: Issues and challenges in the production of knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Janks, H. (2012). The discipline and craft of academic writing: Building writing capacity in institutions of higher education. *Reading and Writing*, *3*, e1–e9. https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v3i1.25

Jaremka, L. M., Ackerman, J. M., Gawronski, B., Rule, N. O., Sweeny, K., Tropp, L. R., Metz, M. A., Molina, L., Ryan, W. S., & Vick, S. B. (2020). Common academic experiences no one talks about: Repeated rejection, impostor syndrome, and burnout. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *15*(3), 519–543. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619898848

Jensen, J. (2017). *Write no matter what. Advice for academics*. The University of Chicago Press.

Kövecses, Z. (2005). *Metaphor in culture: Universality and variation*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511614408

Kramsch, C. (2014). Language and culture. *AILA Review*, *27*, 30–55. https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.27.02kra

Kramsch, C., & Zhu, H. (2020). Translating culture in global times: An introduction. *Applied Linguistics*, *41*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz020

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). *Focus groups. A practical guide for applied research*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. The University of Chicago Press.

Lillis, T., & Curry, M. J. (2010). *Academic writing in a global context: The politics and practices of publishing in English*. Routledge.

Low, G. (2015). A practical validation model for researching elicited metaphor. In W. Wan & G. Low (Eds.), *Elicited metaphor analysis in educational discourse* (pp. 15–37). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Mazak, C. (2022). *Making time to write: How to resist the patriarchy and take control of your academic career through writing*. Morgan James Publishing.

Murray, R. (2015). *Writing in social spaces. A social processes approach to academic writing*. Routledge.

Murray, R., & Newton, M. (2009). Writing retreat as structured intervention: Margin or mainstream? *Higher Education Research and Development*, *28*(5), 541–553. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360903154126

Olszewska, K., & Lock, J. (2017). Examining success and sustainability of academic writing: A case study of two writing-group models. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *46*(4), 132–145. https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v46i4.186346

Parkman, A. (2016). The imposter phenomenon in higher education: Incidence and impact. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, *16*, 51–60.

Poutanen, M. (2023). 'I am done with that now.' Sense of alienations in Finnish academia. *Journal of Education Policy*, *38*(4), 625–643. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2022.2067594

Pucciarelli, F., & Kaplan, A. (2016). Competition and strategy in higher education: Managing complexity and uncertainty. *Business Horizons*, *59*(3), 311–320. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.01.003

Pyykkö, R. (2014). Kulttuuri kielenopetuksessa [Culture in language teaching]. In P. Pietilä & P. Lintunen (Eds.), *Kuinka kieltä opitaan [How you learn language]* (pp. 188–203). Gaudeamus.

Quynn, K., & Stewart, C. (2021). Sustainable writing for graduate students: Writing retreats offer vital support. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(10), 1385–1397. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1875200

Rauhala, L. (2005/2009). *Ihminen kulttuurissa. Kulttuuri ihmisessä.* [An individual in culture. Culture in individuals]. Gaudeamus.

Rowland, S. (2002). Overcoming fragmentation in professional life: The challenge for academic development. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *56*(1), 52–64. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2273.00202

Scharlau, I., Karsten, A., & Rohlfing, K. (2021). Building, emptying out, or dreaming? Action structures and space in undergraduates' metaphors of academic writing. *Journal of Writing Research*, *12*(3), 493–529. https://doi.org/10.17239/jowr-2021.12.03.01

Silvia, P. J. (2007). *How to write a lot. A practical guide to productive academic writing*. American Psychological Association.

Singelis, T. M., Bond, M. H., Sharkey, W. F., & Lai, C. S. Y. (1999). Unpacking culture's influence on self-esteem and embarrassability. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *30*(3), 315–341. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022199030003003

Singelis, T. M., Triandis, H. C., Bhawuk, D. S., & Gelfand, M. (1995). Horizontal and vertical dimensions of individualism and collectivism: A theoretical and measurement refinement. *Cross-Cultural Research*, *29*(3), 240–275. https://doi.org/10.1177/106939719502900302

Smithson, J. (2000). Using and analysing focus groups: Limitations and possibilities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *3*(2), 103–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/136455700405172

Stevenson, N. (2021). Developing academic wellbeing through writing retreats. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(6), 717–729. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1812549

Sword, H. (2017). *Air & light & time & space: How successful academics write (Pilot project. eBook available to selected US libraries only)*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674977617

Sword, H. (2019). Snowflakes, splinters and cobblestones: Metaphors for writing. In S. Farquhar & E. Fitzpatrick (Eds.), *Innovations in narrative and metaphor: Methodologies and practices* (pp. 39–56). Springer Singapore Pte. Limited.

Tremblay-Wragg, E., Vincent, C., Mathieu, S., Lison, C., Ponsin, A., & Déri, C. (2022). Writing retreats responding to the needs of doctoral candidates through engagement with academic writing. *Qualitative Research in Education*, *11*(1), 29–57. https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.9195

Valtonen, A. (2005). Ryhmäkeskustelut – millainen metodi? [Group conversations – what kind of a method?]. In J. Ruusuvuori & L. Tiittula (Eds.), *Haastattelu – tutkimus, tilanteet ja vuorovaikutus* [Interview – research, situations, and interaction] (pp. 223–241). Vastapaino.

Vincent, C., Tremblay-Wragg, É, Déri, C., Plante, I., & Mathieu Chartier, S. (2023). How writing retreats represent an ideal opportunity to enhance PhD candidates' writing self-efficacy and self-regulation. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *28*(7), 1600–1619. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1918661