

## Dissertation Boot Camps: Facilitating Writing, Facilitating Identity Formation

Rachael Cayley  
School of Graduate Studies  
University of Toronto  
June 24, 2016

Could the value of  
dissertation boot camps be  
explained by a model of  
writing facilitation?

### Writing Time

experimenting with different approaches

### Writing Community

interacting with peers

### Writing Instruction

receiving formal presentations

### Dissertation Boot Camp Details

- Doctoral writers at the University of Toronto
- Between 2014 and 2016
- Each camp was open to 20 doctoral writers
- Nominal fee
- Schedule (three days):
 

9:00-10:00	Formal presentation
10:00-12:00	Writing block
12:00-1:00	<i>Lunch break</i>
1:00-2:15	Writing block
2:15-2:45	Group discussion
2:45-3:00	<i>Break</i>
3:00-4:00	Writing block

### Questionnaires

Voluntary questionnaires were emailed to each participant as soon as the camp concluded

- 45 responses (from a possible 73)
- Stored anonymously
- Separate opportunity for boot camp evaluation

## Experimentation

## Experimentation Prompts

Please reflect on how helpful the uninterrupted writing time was.

What did you learn about your self as a writer during the boot camp?

## Overview

- Everyone (n=45) rated uninterrupted writing time positively (positivity was measured by a characterization as 'helpful' or comparable adjective)
- Key themes:
  - Benefits of time constraints
  - Understanding distractions
  - Externalized discipline
  - Role of peer support
  - Emerging self-awareness

## Benefits of Time Constraints

“The writing times were extremely productive. I couldn’t believe how much I could accomplish in such a short writing period.”

## Understanding Distractions

“I didn’t realize how much of my everyday writing is interrupted until I actually went to boot camp and had to eliminate distractions. I didn’t know how much of an effect it was having on my productivity.”

## Externalized Discipline

“Normally in writing, when I get ‘stuck’, I move away from the work—with an aim to clear my mind. What I realized in this camp is that this is a strategy of procrastination. I need to sit with the difficult ideas and writing through them.”

## Role of Peer Support

“Supremely important—arguably the most important part of the process. It was surprisingly rewarding and satisfactory to be working on this solitary endeavor in a room full of people also working on solitary endeavors. The frame and expectations were enough to keep me conscious of how I was spending each moment of the writing time.”

## Emerging Self-Awareness

“...that I like to write, so I resist writing poorly...”

“...that I’m more social than I thought...”

“...that I can write even without a clear outline...”

“...that the other work I take on is a kind of procrastination...”

“...that the more I romanticize writing and productivity, the more difficult it is for me...”

“...that there are still ways that I can experiment with productivity...”

“...that I don’t love my own writing but that with better editing skills I am more likely to want to edit and re-read what I’ve done...”

## Interaction

## Interaction Prompts

Please reflect on how helpful the group discussions were.

How did you find the experience of writing among a group of other writers?

## Overview

- Most people (n=40) rated group discussions positively (positivity was measured by a characterization as ‘helpful’ or comparable adjective)
- Most people (n=43) rated writing in a group positively (positivity was measured by a characterization as ‘helpful’ or comparable adjective)

## Group Discussions

“It is the whole misery loves company thing—I have been quite isolated from my department and it is nice to talk to other students about their experiences, share resources and feel connected again—this helps to give me the confidence to continue.”

## Writing in a Group

“I found this created a very comfortable and inspiring environment for writing. When your own productivity/energy wanes, it’s nice to look around the room and see other students writing well, and knowing that they too are working on their thesis. This helped to motivate me in a very gentle yet positive way.”

## Instruction

### Instruction Prompt

Please reflect on how helpful the presentations on writing were.

### Overview

- Most people (n=40) rated formal instruction positively (positivity was measured by a characterization as 'helpful' or comparable adjective)

### Writing Instruction

“The advice/information offered was super valuable. Some of it wasn’t exactly new but said in a way that made me shift my thinking.”

“This was all new to me, so I really appreciated these aspects.... I will likely consider going to more of the structured classes from the writing centre to get more of this content.”

Did participants make connections between the different elements of the boot camp?

### Connections

“I can’t imagine that [uninterrupted writing time] would have been as effective, however, without the discussion on writing in general—and I found it really helpful to focus our breaks around a conversation about writing.”

“[Uninterrupted writing time] was very helpful, especially in light of discussions and lectures about preparing writing and productivity.”

## Connections

“I appreciated that these were not discussions and lectures in isolation from the practice.”

“I like that the discussions felt like a break but that they also kept me thinking about writing—they definitely added to the immersive boot camp feeling of the whole process.”

Facilitating Writing,  
Facilitating Identity Formation

Rachael Cayley

email: [rachael.cayley@utoronto.ca](mailto:rachael.cayley@utoronto.ca)

blog: [www.explorationsofstyle.com](http://www.explorationsofstyle.com)

twitter: [@explorstyle](https://twitter.com/explorstyle)