

The Benefits of Padlet in Online Writing Retreats

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Abstract

This case study describes the use of Padlet to enhance writing skills among postgraduate students during online academic writing retreats amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Four online writing retreats were held at the University of Waikato providing uninterrupted writing time, mentorship, peer support networks, and question and answer sessions for students. Padlet was used as a collaborative tool, enabling students to engage with each other, share resources, and express their thoughts on a virtual bulletin board. The study reveals that Padlet facilitated collaboration, engagement, and the development of academic writing skills among students by fostering a supportive online learning community. Despite potential limitations such as interface clutter with large groups, overall Padlet proved to be a valuable asset in supporting student learning, collaboration, and community building in virtual environments during the writing retreats.

Over the past two years, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented challenges in providing students with the experience of face-to-face interactions in an online environment. For several years previously, Student Learning at the University of Waikato had organized four annual face-to-face writing retreats at University Lodge. Nestled among picturesque trees and overlooking a serene lake, the venue provided an idyllic setting for students to focus on their scholarly writing. Equipped with a well-furnished kitchenette, the Lodge warmly catered to students, offering coffee, tea, snacks, lunch, and afternoon tea to ensure their comfort and nourishment throughout the retreat.

The Lodge's setting allowed students to pick their ideal spot for quiet and uninterrupted writing. In addition to creating a conducive environment, the authors curated a reference area stocked with indispensable academic resources, including research methodology books, grammar and APA referencing guides. Inviting participation through a Google form yielded an overwhelmingly positive response, with over 30 eager students annually. Participants from both the Tauranga and Hamilton campuses contributed to a diverse group with unique needs, writing stages, educational backgrounds, and expectations. Valuable feedback from previous retreats underscored the efficacy of face-to-face writing sessions, which motivated, engaged, and fostered a sense of belonging among students.

The pandemic compelled us to adapt, leading to the innovative organisation of an online writing retreat via Zoom platform in 2020. To enhance the virtual environment and cater to students' needs in this new format, we explored various tools like Google Classroom, Jamboard, and Moodle. After careful evaluation, we found that Padlet perfectly suited our objectives. A user-friendly tool, Padlet (<https://padlet.com/>) facilitates increased participation, nurtures an online community, and visually showcases student thinking. With Padlet's virtual 'wall', students can effortlessly share diverse content, including images, videos, web pages, and reference materials, in real-time, making it an ideal platform to express their thoughts on shared topics with ease (Simon & Fierro, 2023).

Padlet's interface resembles an online sheet of paper, enabling users to place content anywhere on the page. This feature encourages creativity among students and serves as an 'idea bin' where they can collect and share ideas, images, and more. Advantages include the perpetual availability of content created on Padlet and its support of reiterative learning, as a valuable repository for future reference (Gill-Simmen, 2021). By considering the capabilities of Padlet, we aimed to foster collaboration, engagement, and an enriched online writing experience for our higher degree students.

Padlet as a Learning Tool

The integration of technology in teaching and learning is crucial to keep up with current educational trends and in our case on language learning environments. Several researchers have found that Padlet, as an online platform, enabled autonomous learning, bridged communication gaps between educators and students, supported collaborative work

practices, and facilitated peer-to-peer connections (Ahmad et al., 2022; Park et al., 2022; Simon & Fierro, 2023). Its adaptability allows for collaborative note-taking, online discussions, and assignments, as observed by Beltrán-Martín (2019). Padlet has emerged as a versatile digital tool with considerable potential to enhance student learning, as evidenced by growing academic interest and literature on its educational applications (Ahmad et al., 2022; Deni & Zainali, 2018; Park et al., 2022; Simon & Fierro, 2023). It aligns with the principles of social constructivism, which emphasise learning through participant interactions (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). Creating a supportive online learning community was a key goal during the writing retreat.

Deni and Zainal (2018) emphasised the importance of setting clear objectives and instructions to maximise Padlet's utility. They identified challenges like technical issues, student readiness, and the need for structured guidance in using Padlet effectively. Continuous evaluation and reflection also help optimise incorporation of Padlet into teaching practices. Overall, their work highlighted Padlet's potential to enhance student motivation, teacher-student communication beyond physical classrooms, and as a tool to aid academic skills development. These factors highlight the potential benefits of integrating Padlet into educational practices such as online writing retreats.

Padlet has proven effective in improving students' writing skills. Alwaleedi (2022) examined students' attitudes towards using Padlet for online collaborative writing activities at the Arabic Language Institute in Saudi Arabia. The results showed that students had an overall positive attitude, and demonstrated Padlet's ability to foster brainstorming, collaborative report writing, and overall writing competency through peer editing (Alwaleedi, 2022). Padlet's basic editing and plagiarism prevention tools, along with the option for public or private boards, ensure privacy and a conducive environment for online discussions (Simon & Fierro, 2023). Padlet also promotes independent research skills, motivating students to seek information from various sources to contribute effectively to discussions and debates (Gill-Simmen, 2021). Padlet is a useful online tool to develop students' writing skills because of these features.

It is also vital to consider Padlet's impact on involvement and autonomy. Students become more immersed in their learning through active engagement and communication (Bakar et al., 2022). Padlet's support for flexible learning and accessibility across several platforms increases students' autonomy in the learning process (Dianati et al., 2020).

Inclusivity is another key aspect of Padlet's positive influence on learning environments. Creating an inclusive context for diverse learners fosters collaborative writing communities (Simon & Fierro, 2023; Thompson & Stevens, 2020). We found that Padlet accommodated the needs and learning styles of a wide range of students, ensuring equitable access to collaborative learning experiences (Dianati et al., 2020).

Overall, Padlet is a versatile online environment that enhances collaboration, writing competency, engagement, autonomy, inclusivity, and the integration of various other learning tools. It offers a user-friendly and secure environment for students to actively participate in their learning processes.

Setting up the Padlet

In our setting, we created a Padlet specifically for the online retreat to assist higher degree research students in enhancing their research writing skills. As outlined on the [Padlet.com](https://padlet.com) website, creating a Padlet involves a straightforward three-step process: 1) creating an account, 2) giving the Padlet a name, and 3) selecting a template. Once the Padlet is set up, students can freely add as many posts as they desire, which are displayed in a free-form manner when double-tapped. Readers have the ability to view the contents of the Padlet and leave comments. As noted, this fosters ongoing communication and allows for asynchronous interaction.

The Online Writing Retreat

Based on the success of our in-person retreats, we decided to host a two-day online retreat during the time of Covid. To evaluate student interest and involvement, we used a Google form invitation, giving students the choice of enrolling for both days, a single day, or a portion of a day based on their availability. We sent a Google calendar invitation, as well as an email, to higher research degree students (those who had previously attended the face-to-face writing retreat on a regular basis, plus all other students enrolled on the Moodle Hub for Developing Research Skills) to allow them easy access to the virtual sessions. We also included a link to the Padlet on the invitation.

Participants

The online retreats drew a broad range of research students from many fields and approaches, including interdisciplinary research studies, at various stages of their academic career. We received a positive response, with more than 30 students willing to participate, either for one or both days. Students from both our Tauranga and Hamilton campuses took part, resulting in a diverse range of opinions and experiences. A number participated from overseas, keen to have the opportunity to meet with other research students.

Sharing the Padlet

Padlet proved to be an efficient platform for sharing and accessing writing tools throughout the online writing retreat. The Padlet link was sent through email beforehand and on the days of the writing retreat. We introduced Padlet using the ‘canvas’ format, allowing students to create postings arranged in a brick-like layout of varied sizes. In the first week of our remote learning experience. The Padlet posts (see Figure 1) included a daily schedule, a general welcome message, daily goals, instructions on how to comment on the entries, and connections to various useful writing resources. These resources covered a variety of themes, including literature reviews, academic voice, and more.

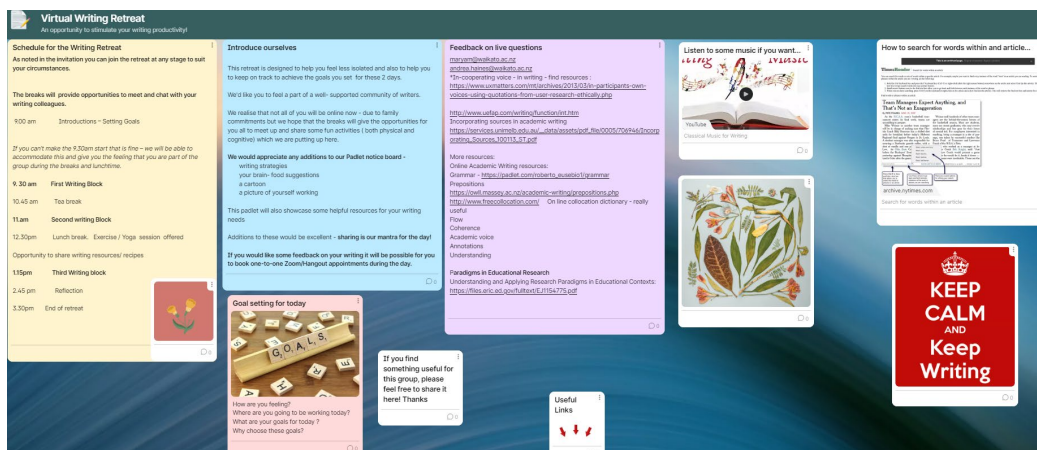


Figure 1. The Virtual Writing Retreat Padlet

In keeping with Simon and Fierro's (2023) and Ahmad et al.'s (2022) findings, we discovered that participants were eager to contribute to the Padlet. Its visual layout mimicking a notice board facilitated engagement and enabled individuals to learn from one another's viewpoints and experiences in a range of areas (Gill-Simmen, 2021). Furthermore, Padlet's asynchronous nature also allowed for continuing debates and dialogues, allowing people from different time zones and regions to participate (Deni & Zainal, 2018). Participants could contribute to the Padlet at any point during the retreat

Access to Writing Resources

During the online retreat, the Padlet served as a hub for several writing-related materials. By including a timetable, welcome message, and goals for the day, participants received a clear framework and direction for their writing efforts. The Padlet also linked to important resources including literature reviews, academic voice guides, and more. Alwaleedi (2022) discovered that providing relevant materials on Padlet enabled students to obtain vital support throughout the writing process to improve their writing skills. Comments from participants suggested that they valued these tools and were able to use them at various stages of their academic writing journey.

Furthermore, allowing others to post their own material on the Padlet boosted the pool of resources as shown in Figure 2. Students were invited to provide links to writing and research resources, videos, images, and document files, resulting in a collaborative library of materials that benefited the entire writing retreat community. This collaborative resource sharing encouraged students to actively participate in the learning process and promoted a culture of knowledge exchange.

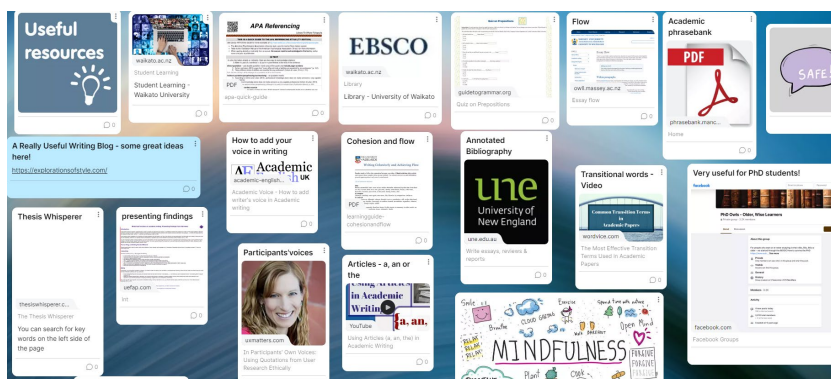


Figure 2. Virtual Writing Retreat Padlet - Useful Resources

Individualised Writing Support

Individualised writing assistance was provided through the usage of breakout rooms and the Zoom Chat function. Participants could ask facilitators for help and direction via Zoom Chat, ensuring that their specific needs and questions were handled. Facilitators assisted participants one-on-one, answered questions, and provided individualised feedback on their work. This support, along with the Padlet's collaborative nature, presented users with a well-rounded writing experience. They benefited from not only facilitator guidance, but also peer interactions and feedback via the Padlet.

By using Padlet's features and functionalities, the online writing retreat successfully provided a platform for engagement, collaboration, access to resources, and customised guidance. Participants had the opportunity to improve their academic abilities, network with friends, and contribute to a thriving online learning community.

Limitations

Although Padlet provides many advantages, we discovered a few drawbacks. Padlet's free-form layout can be difficult to organise, and too many comments can clutter the interface, especially in large groups (Dianati et al., 2020). Some students remarked that it can be difficult to see specific content when there are too many postings:

"It's not great for large group work."

"It gets chaotic with too many comments on the Padlet."

To improve this, we changed the format of Padlet in subsequent writing retreats later in 2020 and 2021. We introduced categories and encouraged participants to organise relevant comments and items together, which simplified navigation and minimised clutter. We also experimented with other Padlet layouts that provided greater structure, allowing participants to communicate their contributions more clearly. The brick, wall, and shelf format appeared neater and more organised to us. Introducing these changes produced a better organised and more successful experience when using Padlet in big group settings. These modifications improved Padlet's utility for collaborative work on writing retreats.

Conclusion

Our findings highlighted Padlet as an effective educational technology tool that can be used to meaningfully engage and support student learning in virtual environments, as necessitated during the pandemic and beyond. While this study focused on multi-day retreats, Padlet can also be used in an ongoing manner to provide peer support for postgraduate and international students. For example, ATLAANZ members who may not have the option of running 2-day retreats could use Padlet to create a continuous virtual bulletin board for resource sharing, discussion, and networking among postgraduate and international students. Students could post questions, writing samples, links to academic writing guides, and words of encouragement to one another. Padlet's flexibility allows it to be moulded to fit specific peer support needs of tertiary learning advisors and their students, whether through private boards for small groups or larger public boards. With facilitator guidance, Padlet offers an interactive online space for community building and skill development beyond the timeframe of concentrated retreats.

In conclusion, this case study of postgraduate writing retreats indicates the utility of employing Padlet to foster online collaborative learning and provide academic writing support. Padlet's dynamic design encourages student participation, ideas exchange, and resource sharing. Padlet is able to establish an online community where students interact, support one another, and co-construct knowledge in line with social constructivist learning principles. While managing large groups can present interface and clutter challenges at times, overall Padlet offers an adaptable platform to meet key objectives of online learning and teaching, including building community, fostering interactivity, and advancing writing skills.

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