

Faculty writing groups as communities of practice

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CAREER ADVICE

Shared decision-making and diverse perspectives create opportunities for learning together.

By MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF EDUCATION WRITING GROUP | April 6, 2016

Why are writing groups so difficult to sustain? How can they be cultivated and nurtured? We would like to share our experiences of being a productive and successful writing group over the last seven years. We began with seven non-tenured and/or contractual members who saw academic writing as an important process for developing research ideas and, consequently, for career growth. We also recognized that it was vital to have a circle of friends where everyone can receive supportive critique and informative feedback on their writing. Over the years, the group has grown to include 17 academics at all ranks and stages.

Group membership is open to all faculty, but for many years most members were women. We meet once a week, with one member in Labrador attending via Skype, at lunchtime on Fridays. Our group has evolved over the years in relation to members' needs – those of us who have matured as academics offer advice to newcomers on details relating to publication possibilities and grants, while newer members bring a fresh approach.

While the meeting time is fixed, the workings of the writing group are flexible. We hold a planning meeting at the beginning of the semester where we brainstorm ideas for upcoming meetings. Not everyone attends every meeting; consequently, we have a “roving” chairperson who could be any member. Generally, we begin with a quick check-in on a “light” topic; members can then suggest items for the agenda and the chair notes these items.

Agenda items are wide-ranging and include new joint publication ideas, creative project ideas, news about publications and writing to be read and explored. We discuss what we can do in the meeting and leave whatever we can't to finish the following week. We end with a check-out around the table.

Tangible results from our writing group have included five collaborative peer-review articles and book chapters in addition to successful grant applications, research projects, and published papers by individual members in their respective areas. The intangibles include informal mentoring, socialization into academic life, nurturing during stressful times, research partnerships, ideas on how to balance work and family life, friendships and laughter. We credit the group's commitment to an ethos of inclusivity and care as our antidote to the historical difficulty of sustaining academic writing groups: we share a strict relationships-first, non-competitive philosophy.

The process for group publications is that someone will suggest an idea for a paper. Whoever initiates the project becomes the “champion” and lead author, and will set up a process for collecting data, analysing and writing the paper in dialogue with interested members. Each paper we have written together has followed a different process and the joint publications have been one of the most enjoyable aspects of the group.

What does it feel like to join our writing group? Our newest members shared their experiences: “The writing group especially encourages new faculty members to participate. The experienced group members share a passion of mentoring new faculty members and helping them to not only survive, but to thrive in their academic life by providing collaborative learning opportunities, support for the writing process, and guidance for publishing,” (Saiqa). “Moving to the faculty of education from the K-12 school system has left me feeling disconnected at times, but being a part of the writing group has given me a concrete connection with my new colleagues and is really helping me build my own sense of what academic work means,” (David). “The group allows me a feeling of belonging and inclusion, which encourages me as an early-career academic,” (Leah).

Ultimately our group is more than a writing group – it’s a community of practice. Our community of practice shares several concerns and passions, some of which have evolved over time. While we engage in many writing activities ranging from writing exercises to foster creative thinking to collaborative publication, the work and functioning of the group extend far beyond writing. We have developed rapport and trust over time through ongoing meetings. Our community is premised on relational work, support and encouragement as we experience the tensions and challenges of academic life. Shared decision-making around the focus of the group contributes to its productivity, and the ongoing introduction of ideas from diverse perspectives creates exciting opportunities for learning together.

The following Faculty Writing Group members contributed to this story: Cecile Badenhorst, Karen Goodnough, Saiqa Azam, David Gill, Sylvia Moore, Mary Stordy, Michelle Kilborn, Gabrielle Young, Sharon Penney, Sarah Pickett, Heather Mcleod, Xuemai Li, Leah Lewis, Kiera Galway, Margot Kondratieva, Rhonda Joy and Dorothy Vaandering.