

Writing Groups in Teacher Education: A Method to Increase Scholarly Productivity

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Writing groups have been used in a variety of academic disciplines to support and encourage faculty in their scholarly endeavors. This article gives an overview of the impact a writing group within a Teacher Education department at a teaching institution had on scholarly output over a two year period. The structure of the writing group is shared along with how it might benefit other departments in other institutions interested in increasing scholarly productivity. Benefits of the writing group for the faculty participants included: accountability, structure, collaboration, motivation, and an increase in scholarly productivity.

This article is an overview of the impact a writing group within a Teacher Education department on a mid-sized teaching university campus had on scholarly output over a two year period. The purpose of this article is to share how the writing group was structured and how it might benefit departments in other institutions that are interested in increasing scholarly productivity. We will provide background information explaining the impetus of the group, share a review of literature about academic writing groups, explain the structure of the writing group, and the benefits the group members have encountered.

Background information

Prior to the formation of the group, writing was done in seclusion in this department and the overall scholarly output was minimal. Most faculty members focused their time and efforts on teaching and service. At this university, the faculty are able to establish their workload

within the following guidelines: teaching (45%-70%); service (10%-40%); and professional development and achievement (10%-40%). According to university policy, it is possible to receive favorable annual reviews while devoting very little time to scholarship.

When junior faculty work at a teaching-focused institution with a 4/4 teaching load, writing is often neglected as attention is shifted to other responsibilities. However, the reason that many junior faculty decide to go into higher education is for the ability to write and create scholarly publications. This was certainly the case in our department. Our department of sixteen had five junior faculty members who were on tenure tracks and were interested in increasing scholarly output. It is important to note there was no pressure on the junior faculty to increase their scholarly output; most of them were told the expectations were to have a couple of articles and several presentations completed before applying for tenure and promotion. However,

the members are now glad they began the group. The small, teaching-focused university is now consolidating with a research one health sciences university. The result of this consolidation will be a comprehensive research university in which consistent faculty scholarship will be an expectation.

In an attempt to find guidance on how to balance teaching, service, and writing, one junior faculty member discovered a book by Paul Silvia (2007) entitled *How to Write A Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. After reading the book, he shared it with the department chair and several copies were purchased to be shared with other members of the department. Silvia's work is very easy to read and provides practical examples of how to carve out time for writing. He also describes how his department began a writing group. With this information, the assistant professor approached the other junior faculty in the department and asked if they would like to establish a writing group, a bottom-up initiative rather than a top-down mandate. The department chair also asked to join the junior faculty members in the group because she wanted to be more productive in scholarship since most of her workload focused on administration, leadership, service, and teaching. The group's purpose was clearly defined - to help every member be a more productive scholar.

Literature review

It has been documented and stated by many scholars that higher education has not always been the best place to find collaboration and support. Reeson (2008) states, 'Instead of sharing grand thoughts, we end up grabbing for meager resources. Frustrated in our ambitious desires, we blame our colleagues for the failure of our departmental communities' (para. 6). However, collegiality and collaboration are becoming common occurrences on campuses around the nation. Through the use of research and/or writing groups, junior faculty are able to share

ideas, work collaboratively, and motivate one another.

Many scholars have written about the benefits of writing groups for faculty at the university level. Hara (2009) summarized these benefits and described how to begin an initiative. Hara also referenced an article in AAUP by Jennifer Friend and Juan Carlos Gonzalez (2009) in which they provide details of a writing group they formed. There are numerous examples of writing groups at universities and colleges across the nation. The Writing Circle project at Western Carolina University was introduced to provide faculty with a supportive environment to share their work and to help one another create publishable manuscripts (Hall, Mueller, & Stahl, n.d).

At the University of Washington, Bothell created interdisciplinary research groups for faculty interested in writing. 'Research Circles consist of groups of three (at most, four) faculty members who meet every two weeks to share three pages of their current academic writing, usually research and conference papers or grant proposals' (Gillespie, Dolsak, Kochis, Krabill, Lerum, Peterson, & Thomas, 2005, p. 151). Three junior faculty in the School of Education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham formed the Support Network for Assistant/Associate Professors (SNAP) which is a peer mentoring group. 'The peer mentoring group was intended to reduce the isolation common to new faculty, share information about scholarly writing, offer suggestions and collaborate on joint authorship' (Santovec, 2009, p. 1). SNAP received money from their dean to help provide lunches, resources, and conference travel. They offered membership to fifteen faculty and twelve agreed to participate. All those who participated reported having a favorable experience and their scholarly output did increase.

Collins, Slough, and Waxman (2009) describe their experiences in forming mentoring groups for junior faculty at a major research university in

the southwest United States. The authors suggest that junior faculty today are different in regards to age, sex, and ethnicity than most senior, tenured faculty, therefore their needs and concerns also differ from previous generations. The authors believe: 'Motivational benefits – encouraging each other and not wanting to let your colleagues down are equally important to the opportunity of working together' (Collins, Slough, & Waxman, 2009, p. 8). There is no doubt that we are seeing a difference in the age, race, and ethnicity of junior faculty in relation to senior faculty, so it could be that these differences lead to the desire to work together and collaborate.

The examples above are ways in which junior faculty can work together to increase their scholarly output and experience a sense of worth and belonging. By working together and having a sense of community, faculty can become better prepared for the tenure process while decreasing the isolation that is often attributed to higher education. As these examples show, writing groups can have different forms and purposes, so we describe the structure of the group we established.

Writing group structure

The simplicity of the group's structure makes it practical, manageable, and productive. The group consists of tenure-track, junior faculty members in the department as well as the department chair. The group meets every two weeks for approximately 30 minutes. At the beginning of the academic year, each member sets writing goals for themselves to be reviewed mid-year and at the end of the year. In addition, the group has a short-term goal whiteboard with everyone's name on it. At each meeting, members write realistic and measurable goals for the following two-week period. The goals are always related to scholarship (writing or preparing presentations) and the goals must be measurable. The goals from the previous meeting are reviewed and each member reports to the group on the

progress towards meeting his/her goals. This also serves the purpose of keeping each other abreast of the research and writing we are doing. We often support one another between meetings as well. For example, we review manuscripts for each other as time allows and brainstorm ideas for research studies, literature reviews, or methodology designs.

Flexibility also plays a sizable role in the success of the group. Due to committee work, there were meetings where some were unable to attend and those members sent their update by email. During the summer months, we meet via online meeting rooms.

A final key component of the writing group is celebration. We celebrate when a member gets published, a grant is funded, or a proposal is accepted. Our articles are posted on a bulletin board in the office suite and the department chair includes links to them in the weekly newsletter. At the end of each academic year, we enjoy breakfast together and hold an informal awards ceremony, celebrating the number of publications each member accomplished that year. These moments help to take the isolation out of scholarship and acknowledge the very important work of the group members.

Benefits/Outcomes

We have observed five primary benefits of the writing group: accountability, structure, collaboration, motivation, and an increase in scholarly productivity.

Accountability

In the world of higher education, we are held accountable in our teaching by our students and in our service by our colleagues. However, in the area of scholarship we are not truly held accountable until it is time for annual reviews or tenure and/or promotion. While the other areas of the faculty role model, teaching and service,

have schedules and built-in deadlines, scholarship does not. The writing group offers members self-imposed and voluntary accountability. As one group member stated, ‘The accountability keeps me going.’ Reporting your progress to the group every two weeks builds in accountability that is very helpful to all of us. There were several times when various members were not able to meet their goals and reported this to the group receiving encouragement and gentle admonishment to stay focused and get it done. Writing groups require members to be held accountable to one another.

Structure

Being a part of the writing group has assisted each member in bringing structure to his/her individual writing processes. Having regular meetings and conversations have a side benefit of anchoring us into a routine. Some group members now follow regular writing schedules, and one group member commented that the writing group ‘helps me focus on one project at a time.’

Collaboration

Even though we are all faculty in a teacher education department, we have our own specialties, and, at first glance, many of us thought that we would not be able to collaborate and help one another other than to hold each other accountable. However, we soon found that we could assist one another beyond simply holding each other accountable and several collaborative projects have been initiated as a result of the group.

Motivation

The comments from group members speak to the motivation they have experienced as a result of participation in the group:

- ‘I am more motivated.’

- ‘[The group] gets me thinking about ideas and moving on them.’
 - ‘It allows me to bounce ideas off colleagues and work with others to produce more.’
 - ‘Writing doesn’t seem like an impossible task.’
 - ‘I am actually thinking about writing a lot - I have ideas for the first time in my life.’
- Increase in scholarly productivity

Perhaps the greatest benefit that we have seen in the department is the increase in scholarly productivity. Table 1 displays the submissions of group members for the year prior to the beginning of the writing group compared to the same length of time once the group began. A significant increase in manuscript submission occurred.

When considering actual publications, the data reflect great progress from the group. Table 2 shows a comparison of actual publications from group members for the year prior to the beginning of the writing group, the first year of the group and the second year. In the year prior to the writing group, the collective total of publications from all of the members was three. That number increased dramatically the second year to 12 and then the third year to 14.

Conclusion

The tripartite nature of the professoriate demands intentionality. Teaching and service tend to occur naturally through opportunities and necessity. However, most educators would agree that the professional development expectations, including scholarship, require educators to be intentional and proactive. This reflects the classic time management tension of the tyranny of the urgent versus the important. Teaching and service is often viewed as urgent, with professional development trailing. Our writing group leads to a stronger balance between the three expectations of the academy.

The benefits of the writing group include an increase in accountability, the development of a personal structure or routine for writing, strengthened collaboration with colleagues, and an increase in personal motivation. In addition, it is critical to note the increase in scholarly productivity within the department. As a result of this initiative, the entire culture of the department has shifted. Several faculty members have formed book groups delving into methodology and faculty members are meeting informally to discuss future research projects. Due to increased interest in scholarship, the chair developed a departmental research resource room. Departmental funds were allocated to purchase research texts, publication resources, and technological research tools.

Faculty members who are interested in beginning a writing group need to design a structure that meets their unique needs. The structure should reflect the culture of their university and of the department. Existing literature also enumerates the individualized and unique approaches used to design support groups, but the key question is, does the design work for our team? If not, the structure of the group needs to be adjusted to better reflect those needs.

Change is difficult and none of us know the impact the impending consolidation will have on our work. However, each member in this group is convinced they are better prepared for the increase in scholarship requirements due to his/her participation in this group, and they can face the future as a unified team. Next year, membership in this group will be open to all interested faculty members in the department. We are looking forward to reporting even more positive results in the future.

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Tables

**Table 1:
Manuscript Submission**

Faculty Member	Submissions	
	Summer 2009 - Summer 2010	Fall 2010 - Fall 2011
A	3 publications	7 publications 4 presentations
B	0 publications 1 presentation	8 publications 6 presentations
C	0 publications 1 presentation	4 publications 3 presentations
D	0 publications 3 presentations	1 publication* 1 presentation
E	1 publication 2 presentations 1 grant	3 publications 4 presentations 1 grant

Table 2:
Actual Publications

Professor	Aug. 2009-July 2010 Pre-writing group	Aug. 2010-July 2011 1st year of writing group	Aug. 2011-July 2012 2nd year of writing group
A	2	5	5
B	1	0	0
C	0	3	5
D	0	4	3
E	0	0	1
Total	3	12	14