PhD Completion Workshop: How a Writing Group Can Change Your (Graduate) Life
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http://gradschool.umd.edu/writing-groups
-Grad school writing groups: will put out call for new groups once a semester

Presenters: Linda Macri , Andrea Wiggins (Assistant Prof, iSchool), Alexis Y. Williams (TLTC), Christine Maffuccio (doctoral candidate, English)

Research on writing & writing groups:
- writing is a social act
  - learned, shaped by social contexts, activities, interactions
  - academic writing, in particular, results from a process of negotiating between what has been said and what you say
- writing is a knowledge-making activity
  - writing isn't merely a transcription of fully formed thoughts
  - we produce ideas through writing
- technical advice on writing (how to write) is necessary but not sufficient for establishing productive writing patterns among academics--Sarah Moore
- Boice: research on writers' block (1983)
  - "No doubt, the greatest force against writing for publication is lack of momentum"--Robert Boice
  - forcing yourself to write habitually not only makes you generate more output, but more creative ideas
  - study repeated in 2002 by Krashen confirmed those who were asked to write regularly, record their output, and report it to someone else produced more ideas
- Writers must physically, socially, and cognitively disengage with other tasks to write--Rowena Murray
  - Physical: clear time in schedule, clear desk, find a new place
  - Social: separated from other people's demands
  - Cognitive: push aside one set of concerns to prepare to concentrate on writing
  - this disengagement should be replaced by engagement with others
- Various studies show participation in a writing group can yield:
  - increased output
  - better writing, resulting from getting and giving feedback
  - increased motivation to write
  - increased confidence as a writing

Types of Writing Groups
- What do you want from a writing group?
  - Accountability?
    - members look just for generating pages, promised amount
      - general pattern for meetings:

- - - ○ group establish set length of time for meetings (all semester, etc.)
      - ○ selects day/time for weekly one hour meetings
      - ○ at meeting, spend 15-20 min discussing progress on stated goal; about 20-30 min spent writing individually; about 10 min sharing goals for next week
    - loose affiliation
    - 5-10 people
    - create email/listserv for communication, mid-week checkins
    - GS Writing Center can help put out call for groups, find space, provide an "authority" to help for accountability
  - can also be done virtually
    - some available online (i.e. academicwritingclub.com)
- Shared disengagement?
  - time-to write groups, being physically present
    - physical and social disengagement
    - meet once a week at mutually agreed on times
    - can work for people with some affiliation if independently run
    - GSWC offers weekly "write-in" Fridays 1-4 PM, can help organize "time to write" groups
- Feedback to develop content?
  - Peer Writing Group, Content focus
    - department/specialty: need to talk to people who know what you're talking about
    - can work many ways, but generally meet once a week at a regular time, each week focusing on work of 1-2 members for discussion, workshop fashion
    - works best for small groups 4-6 so everyone's work is addressed regularly
    - best if people have some investment in one another
    - good way to develop writing-related skills like editing, critiquing, responding, explaining what good writing is in your field
    - peer groups can be more critical than faculty!
    - set ground rules
    - [UNC Chapel Hill](#) resource, [Stanford's Hume Writing Center](#) resource
    - GSWC can offer feedback, support/space
- Feedback to develop writing?
  - Peer Writing Group, writing focus
    - cross-disciplinary groups can focus on *writing* vs. content (i.e. clarity of articulation)
      - ○ can be in same college vs. across campus

- General set-up: small groups of 4-6, meet weekly, exchange work, offer commentary
- GSWC can help coordinate, get group started, participate as "lead peer"

Andrea Wiggins:
- writing group was suggested as a way to support student research skills
- discussed format
  - initially, a write-in--make time and space for writing
    - social accountability helps establish that time--on calendar first
  - 3 hour block
    - critical for new faculty to set aside, otherwise writing won't happen
    - feels rewarding when you don't get as much time as you want to write
  - open-door, advertised to all members of the college
    - feels like permission to take the time you need
  - emphasis that writing is a process, and the social aspect is one way of moving forward with it
- college writing group started organically
  - 3 is a great number
    - more than that can cause a feeling of being ganged up on
    - okay for people not in your field--allows you to think in different ways, generate new strategies to meet your needs
  - different timing on completion helps balance the reading load
    - i.e. 1 dissertation at a time
  - all members got hired into top-ranking positions at prestigious colleges, so worked out well

Alexis Williams
- felt like she didn't know what she was doing or where to begin--big time imposter syndrome!
- writing group introduced through a program: Promise
  - yearly writing retreat in cabins in the woods as a way of reenergizing students
  - dissertation house: students would just spend the retreat writing
    - dissertation coach
    - set goals
    - commit to finishing: sign contract with yourself that you will finish in x day in the future
- essence of program continued on campus when program didn't have the money for retreats away
  - once a semester
  - 1 protected week
    - show up
    - get fed

- - ■ put goals on wall so everyone could see
    - ■ coach would challenge goals for realism
    - ■ individual meetings to talk about struggles and suggest resources
    - ■ online blog for accountability within group but also to outside advisors
        - ● parking downhill: when you finish task, you know where you left off, but forget even next day--these notes help you jump right back where you left off
        - ● kept posting to blog even after event, support through the rest of the year
- ● helps to have sponsorship and faculty on board to help protect the structure of the group

Christine Maffuccio
- ● didn't have same structure as other two, has been trying to find a structure that works for her
    - ○ dissertation seminar: people discussed various professional challenges for discussion
        - ■ writing group emerged from that group, though writing wasn't the focus
        - ■ met once a week in a peer review format
            - ● draft emailed Wednesday, met Friday to give feedback
        - ■ didn't work for her because of the desire to only present the most polished work--only 3-4 pages given each month
            - ● holding on to your work, not wanting to expose your process to other people is detrimental; you have to trust them and have the humility to let them in
            - ● good to remember that everyone's first draft sucks!
        - ■ learned what kind of feedback works best for you
            - ● for Christine, when people just told her back what she was saying (so you can see it clearly--the saying of the idea is the making of it)
- ● has had three great writing partners in dissertation so far
    - ○ moved to NY, met a grad student from NYU, made appointments to meet at a coffee shop and just write (with breaks for lunch/coffee)
        - ■ helped reduce the isolation, since writing is a lonely process
        - ■ pressure to write the whole time (when you're on your computer, can easily distract yourself from actually writing!)
    - ○ commit to a number of hours you're going to (actively) work that week, vs. a number of pages you will produce
        - ■ writing group helps you meet those goals
    - ○ Folger Shakespeare Library course writing partner
        - ■ Skype and email meetings--peer review model
            - ● again, struggled to send best
            - ● got over by sending a bad first draft early and gave permission to read if not sent something else by date

- identify what kind of feedback you need and ask partners for it
  - English grad student in field
    - cowriting, but also discussion of ideas--full sharing of writing process & thought process
      - sharing articles
      - looking for a word
      - read a small chunk (3 sentences)
- still trying to figure this out!

Q & A/Discussion
- asking for targeted/specific feedback helps you get what you know you need
  - also allows you to be more open to sharing: "allow yourself to get comfortable with discomfort"
- C.S. Lewis & J.R.R. Tolkein were in a writing group together, and Tolkein thought Lewis' writing was crap (but he went and published anyway)
- don't worry about doing full draft for collaborative writing--send the roughest draft fastest
  - get much more comfortable with being vulnerable and open to writing
  - collaborative writing means that there's more help in fixing/better expressing ideas
    - establish ground rules/process first
    - start with an outline and word budgets
    - set schedule for who is working on what section when
    - helps for focus on goal
- remember that the degree/dissertation/thesis is not the end goal! Using your skills through the rest of your life is the end goal.
  - writing to think/writing to learn is what people in the profession do
  - Caroline Sargeant--speaking about publishing from perspective of editors, suggests you find someone to give you feedback on abstract before you finish writing article so you know if you are on the right track
  - Peter Elbow, *Writing With Power*: you cannot write and edit at the same time! allow yourself to write and clean it up later
    - write long and allow yourself to edit and trim to the best parts, the parts you need
  - Silvia, *How to Write a Lot*
- composition of writing group?
  - depends on the goal of your group
    - if you want critical feedback, you need someone familiar with the genre of your writing (if not necessarily in your field)
      - role of disciplinary methodology as a focus for analysis
      - immerse yourself in examples of the kind of argument that does what you need
        - diagram structure of argument

- ○ hearing things from your peers can feel much more low-stakes than hearing it from your advisor!
- you need to find out what is motivating your avoidance of writing to know what kind of writing group you need
  - ○ you might need different groups at different points in time
  - ○ give yourself reminders of your motivation
    - ■ reflection can be key to identifying your motivation
      - ● "what am i doing this for? why is this important?"
    - ■ have a notebook with you to generate ideas at any time
    - ■ thinking about who will benefit from your work
  - ○ push yourself out of the gathering-information mode and just start producing
    - ■ "what would i actually want to read about this topic?"
    - ■ put an audience in your mind
- is it more helpful to write on paper vs. the computer?
  - ○ writing on paper helps you avoid the distractions of the computer
  - ○ process of writing longhand means that your thought process and your writing speed correlate (vs. typing going faster than your thinking), so it helps keep you from writing and editing at the same time
  - ○ helpful to have both on hand so you can switch as needed
  - ○ may also help to leave you more space to work with and adjust your thinking
  - ○ notebook/journal can also feel like a safer space to draft--more informal, vs. formal/polished space of computer
  - ○ another approach is to use voice
    - ■ record using phone app, then transcribe
    - ■ can identify themes/important points
  - ○ can keep separate notebook for dissertation itself as a way of focusing ideas
- computer also has tools to help you block distractions
  - ○ Rescue Time--an app that tracks what you're spending your time on the computer on--accountability
  - ○ apps that allow you to be on "distracting" sites for a certain amount of time, then shut down/redirect you