WRITING GROUPS FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE

FACULTY WRITING GROUP LEADERS
SHARE THEIR STORIES

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Faculty writing groups can promote both the work-life balance and productivity of members of the professoriate. The benefits of such development initiatives expand beyond productivity to include retention, promotion, and improved teaching. Through the development of writing groups, faculty developers can empower faculty to meet research obligations, establish equilibrium in their work practices, and maintain work-life balance.

With scholarship being one of the three pillars of faculty tenure and promotion, faculty and administrators have an impetus to publish scholarship and support such efforts, respectively. Yet writing and publication compete for attention with more immediate academic work obligations: teaching and service. Some faculty, especially those early in their careers, lack the experience and motivation needed to become prolific writers. Writing groups can remove such barriers to publication.

Writing groups vary from collaborative writing groups to circles of writers who individually author their own pieces. These groups may have interdisciplinary, discipline-specific, or interprofessional focus. The size can range from two to multiple members, and a university may have one group

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or many. Groups form for different reasons under a range of conditions, with their main focus or purpose changing with the needs of the group. Nevertheless, one purpose remains clear: to engage in scholarly writing.

The reflections of four faculty members about their writing group experiences were captured by Pasternak, Longwell-Grice, Shea, and Hanson (2009). These faculty decided to participate in writing groups because they sought social structure to help them make meaning of their writing. They identified revising support, inquiry-based learning, and a forum for learning through writing as benefits of their participation. Their departments supported writing groups by providing approval, financial and logistical support, facilitation, and mentoring.

On a large scale, about two-thirds of the faculty at a large state institution participated in interdisciplinary research writing circles, each composed of three to four faculty (Gillespie et al., 2005). These research circles were specifically designed to facilitate junior faculty members' adjustment to tenure-track positions. A senior faculty member organized the circles and coordinated group membership. Each member received thirty minutes of the group's time. Sessions began with the writer explaining the type of feedback she or he wanted, followed by the group reading three pages of the work and giving noncritical oral feedback. Member self-reflections and evaluations by research circle participants revealed that reader interest and feedback promoted productivity and motivated improvements in writing perspective and style. Furthermore, participation facilitated acculturation of junior faculty to the research process and helped them see the link between scholarly practices and teaching. Overall, the research circles facilitated faculty writing and an interdisciplinary community that resulted in increased creativity and professional development.

Administrators at an Australian university allocated part of the research budget to establish writing groups as a professional development strategy to meet policy objectives (Lee & Boud, 2003). The writing groups were organized by faculty members' level of experience; for example, one group consisted of new researchers and another of those who had published. Faculty from multiple disciplines took turns fulfilling each role in their respective groups. From detailed records of the groups' activities, reflections, and evaluations, it became clear that in addition to the normal business of developing research skills and writing to meet objectives, the groups all addressed emotional dimensions of development and change, identity formation, and knowledge of the research process.

Another study featured a multidisciplinary collaboration among an associate dean as coordinator and seven tenure-track faculty members

who met each month to group-edit draft manuscripts (O'Malley et al., 2006). Over a two-year period, the format evolved to accommodate group needs. Instead of group editing, the group paired colleagues for co-mentoring feedback on writing with different dyads for each group meeting. By the end of the two-year period, the group had reviewed eighteen manuscripts. Group members identified beneficial outcomes that included publications, improved scholarship, empathy for other writers, collaboration opportunities, professional accountability, and development of meaningful personal research agendas. Participants further reported that the group strengthened their ability to balance scholarship demands with other demands of academic life.

Faculty members seek ways to balance their personal lives with the work requirement of publishing, which is sometimes perceived as an extraneous activity to complete during off-hours (Hochschild, 1997). Writing communities have the potential to foster more efficient and focused writing efforts than individual writing, thereby providing faculty more time to focus on other work or life obligations. For instance, faculty participating in group writing activities at a writing retreat reported more motivating, enjoyable, and productive experiences than they normally encountered at work (Davis, Chaney, Edwards, Rodgers, & Gines, 2011), abating the usual stress around professional writing that has the potential to spill over into life negatively or contribute to work-life conflict (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006). A positive writing experience stems from the establishment of a collaborative community of writers, the space and time for writing (Johnson & Mullen, 2007), and a safe physical and psychological work environment. Satisfaction gained from participating in writing groups serves as a reward for engaging in writing activities, thereby improving the chances that participants collaborate or write again while easing the stress of work and life in general.

The need to balance work and life prompts faculty to find creative ways to accomplish required writing. Specifically addressing the barriers to writing that female medical doctors experienced, Candib (2006) states that the "problems of women's writing have a gendered past as well as a gendered present" (p. 2). For women, a host of related factors impede writing, including a lack of self-confidence, family responsibilities, and high levels of professional service. Candib (2006) explains that women are challenged to turn their "susceptibility to relatedness, usually construed as a weakness, into a strength" (p. 14). She goes on to say that writing-in-relation (by writing to a partner, group, class, or another) allows women a way to both nurture a relationship and complete writing. Writing communities offer faculty an outlet to uphold their

relationships in and out of work and write at the same time, thereby balancing their work-life obligations.

Although writing groups differ in composition, size, scale, purpose, and outcomes, they have commonalities as well. Members participate in scholarly learning through writing, a skill set that has the potential to transfer from the faculty-writing community member to the students whom the faculty instruct. Writing communities offer collegiality, tenure and promotion support, development of independent research skills, and enjoyment.

The journey toward work-life balance in today's academic culture often feels like swimming upstream. Many faculty face challenges in balancing teaching, research, and service responsibilities with their personal lives. We describe the writing group leadership experiences of the first two authors, an African American female academic from a historically black institution (HBCU) and a Caucasian female from a predominantly white institution (PWI). Both authors are Generation Xers, born between 1965 and 1980. Their interest in work-life balance and the use of writing groups to promote that balance are informed by their generational outlook.

An HBCU Faculty Member's Story

Interest in forming my first writing group as a postdoctoral fellow stemmed from my need to recreate the structure and accountability I experienced while writing my dissertation. I started by inviting collaborators on a grant proposal to join me as group members. We met weekly for the primary purpose of completing the proposal. Following submission of the proposal, we continued to meet regularly for both collaborative and individual academic writing. Facilitating and participating in the group promoted both strong collegial relationships and productivity in the form of submissions of manuscripts and proposals. The participants in this first writing group were six black female faculty, representing the fields of education and engineering, at a predominantly white institution. All except one were junior tenure-track faculty. We met weekly for two hours at a time. While our initial collaboration involved review of written materials, ultimately the group evolved into a write-on-site group. Although we made no written purpose statements or agreements, we all vowed to attend each weekly writing session and encourage others toward their goals.

My subsequent organization of and participation in writing groups as a tenure-track faculty member helped my continued productivity.

Specifically, the formal and informal accountability prompted by the writing groups helped me maintain productivity while experiencing major life issues. During one pretenure year, I became pregnant, and my father and father-in-law both passed away. Any one of these constitutes a major life event. Yet despite these personal challenges, my writing goals continued to be met and my publication record remained competitive, consistent with my prior output of at least two publications per year.

In addition to my increased writing output, an unanticipated benefit of the writing groups was the professional networking and peer mentoring I experienced. Meeting regularly with faculty within and across disciplines offered new ways of viewing my own work and opened opportunities for collaboration regarding writing, publishing, and teaching. Because participants were at various stages of their careers, intergenerational mentoring occurred.

As faculty, we all reflect our individual life experiences and training. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, my alma mater, had a strong social justice orientation. For many years I have been active in Sisters of the Academy, an international organization of black female academics and administrators. These professional experiences, as well as my own personal experiences of immersion in African cultures, shape the way I view academic life. While Western culture largely mirrors an individualistic meritocracy, I am very community minded. My orientation toward the collective is an important element of my long-term interest in and work with writing groups.

I know from years of interactions with other academics that some lack confidence in their writing abilities, resulting in reluctance to publish. However, nonacademic experiences have developed my intellectual tough skin and confidence that I have transferred into my life as a writer. For instance, as a graduate student, I studied dance at the University of Ghana at Legon in West Africa for six months and spent weeks studying dance with natives in Senegalese villages. My Senegalese teachers changed my life, in that they literally forced me to acknowledge my talents and to confidently share them within the community "circle." They would not allow the band of drummers (all standing in a circle) to stop drumming until I demonstrated mastery of what I had learned to the entire village—solo. It was intimidating, but it worked. I still remember the wonderful feeling of validation upon successfully mastering what I learned, coupled with applause, cheers, and hugs from proud teachers and members of the local community. This experience continues to permeate my life as an academic writer through its influence on the development of my persistence and ability to weather the ups and downs of the publishing process.

This tenacity complements my worldview, which is informed by my generational outlook. Some scholars suggest that a generational shift is occurring in academe, with senior faculty holding on to former ways of work and new faculty looking for more balanced work lives while adhering to excellence in their fields (Davis, Green-Derry, & Wells, 2009). I remember going to a conference for academics where I learned of another academic who reconsidered her work habits upon seeing a picture of herself that her child drew at school. The drawing was of a woman working on a computer, and only the back of her head was shown. She reflected that if this is how her child saw her, she needed to make changes to promote balance between her work and home lives. This story stays with me, a new academic mom, particularly when I am working on a deadline in my son's presence. What picture will he draw of me in the future? Fortunately, writing groups have resulted in my writing during typical work hours (between 9:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M.) and engaging in less binge writing, a practice that leads to less output in the long run (Boice, 2000).

Informally coaching other writing group members has prompted me to practice what I preach and sparked my interest in learning more about writing strategies. Now I waste far less time on procrastinating, worrying, and writer's blocks, which leaves more time for nurturing family relationships and doing community service. This interest in promoting balance reflects Trower's (2010) findings of Gen X faculty members' commitment to working toward full professional and personal lives. She writes, "Gen Xers . . . have been vocal about wanting increased flexibility, greater integration of their work and home lives, more transparency of tenure and promotion processes, a more welcoming, diverse, and supportive workplace/department, and more frequent and helpful feedback about progress" (para. 6). Lancaster and Stillman (2002) also note generational workplace differences. They associate with Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1980) a high value placed on collaboration, autonomy, the desire for clear feedback, the expectation that the workplace should be flexible to accommodate the balancing of occupational and personal goals, and a willingness to change jobs. Collaboration and clear feedback are major components of writing groups. In essence, writing groups support the generational outlook of Gen X members by offering a supportive community of authors. The following poem, which I wrote as a journal entry, reflects this generational stance:

On Being a Generation Xer and Black in Academe

The symbol: X,
That of anonymity,

Or critique of the status quo,
 We work against eXploitation.
 As our X illustrates civic partnership,
 Pursuing eXcellence of the mind and spirit.
 X . . .
 The neXus of eXactly two lines,
 The yoga of a generation's intellectual thoughts, academic words and
 political deeds.
 Critical, engaging, eXtraordinary scholars and family women,
 EXceeding limits guided by eXemplars.
 Yes we can,
 Yes we will,
 Forever be. . .
 Gen X.

A PWI Faculty Member's Story

I wear many hats inside and outside my professional role as a faculty member. I am a teacher; a scholar of pedagogy; a poet who regularly publishes and gives readings; a visiting poet-in-the-schools; a creative writing teacher in the community; a leader and member of two active writing groups (one inside and one outside the college); a parent; and a runner. Although I do not attempt to be my students' friend or mother, I think allowing them to glimpse areas of my life beyond the classroom such as through reading and discussing a poem I recently published, having them see my children's artwork when they come to an advising appointment in my office, or exchanging suggestions for good jogging routes nearby can help them negotiate their growth into adulthood. What we do in the classroom is vital, but experiences outside class are critical to my own and our community's authenticity, growth, and well-being. Initiating a faculty creative writing group at Curry College is both an outgrowth of this philosophy and a way I maintain work-life balance and coherence.

When I left a full-time faculty position and began a multifaceted position at a new institution, I knew I would have to develop additional strategies to carve out time for writing, reading, publishing, and performing poetry. I saw starting a writing group at my new institution as a way to nurture my connection to creative writing and maintain my balance as I took on a new job with both administrative and teaching responsibilities and negotiated my family roles as a spouse and parent. Being new to campus, I felt a creative writing group would provide a good venue to build a community with like-minded individuals.

Soon after coming to Curry, I met several faculty who were also creative writers. I asked them and my department chair about others who wrote and invited a group of faculty to join a creative writing group to support each other's efforts and provide feedback on work in progress. Although no such writing group existed on campus at the time, the institution promoted peer mentoring in general through a faculty peer support program, which encouraged faculty to form mentoring relationships and rewarded participation by allowing us to include peer mentoring as an aspect of service in our promotion files. Now in its fourth year, our creative writing group has grown from five to eight members and has increased meeting frequency from monthly to biweekly. Before we invited new members, we agreed on and circulated expectations for participation in the group. I established a rotation so individuals would know when to submit work, ensuring that everyone had equal opportunities for feedback. A few days before we meet, participants generally distribute via e-mail several poems or a prose piece so members can read submissions ahead of time. During meetings, the writer often reads the poem or an excerpt from a prose piece, followed by comments and discussion of the work. Sometimes the writer also receives written feedback from group members.

A wonderful attribute of the group is its diverse membership. Our eight members represent gay, straight, black, white, married, single, parents, full- and part-time academics, faculty new to Curry and those with many years at the institution. The two men include one librarian and an editor of the college's arts and literary magazine. Our disciplines include education, English, women's and gender studies, developmental composition, history, African American studies, and honors studies. Some of us write poetry, some of us fiction, some memoir or hybrid forms that blend personal, creative, and scholarly writing in various genres.

The group has been professionally and personally beneficial in more ways than I had initially imagined. One of the primary benefits has clearly been supporting work-life balance: the group provided all of us with impetus to carve out writing time and affirmed the value of the creative, social, and emotional aspects of our being. The group has been a positive force in other ways as well, including acting as a testing ground for work that has gone on to be published or presented at conferences; helping us solve teaching dilemmas within a supportive community of fellow educators; building collegiality; and strengthening our knowledge of other programs and departments at the college—all while being highly pleasurable, even fun!

The members of the creative writers' group have elaborated on the group's value in their own words. Melanie Long, an associate professor

in politics and history and coordinator of African American studies, eloquently testified to how the group contributes to work-life balance by providing members with creative, professional, social, and emotional support. She says the writers' group offers

a place where colleagues can "feed their souls" through creative writing. I cannot express how much this group means to me as someone who generally feels overwhelmed by the amount of nonteaching work required. . . . This group provides a place where you can breathe and share your creative work with your peers and discuss it in supportive and substantive ways that are often impossible in the classroom. The group continues to provide support, boost self-confidence and offer a sense of collegiality that is vital to helping faculty reach their full potential as scholars.

Similarly, Karen Mato, a senior lecturer in English, describes the writers' group as being "a great gift to me personally," noting that it provides "a way to keep my writing current while teaching," as well as opportunities "to learn from my colleagues' teaching in action" as we engage in thoughtful conversation about one another's work.

Daniel Mills, acting director of the library, describes the group's contribution to community building, stating that it fosters our "continuing, developing self-awareness as a community with an active literary life." Mills also testifies to how the group supports faculty development by furthering intellectual and creative growth, sometimes leading to concrete outcomes such as publications, presentations, or readings. He comments that the writing group

has been absolutely invaluable to me, in terms of my developing work as a poet. It's no exaggeration to say that without this group . . . I would not have found a forum enabling me to make the kind of progress I have made or achieve the confidence to do so. This includes developing the ability to witness and comment on other people's work. The work of the writers' group has also been brought forward to other members of the campus through several presentations.

Gabe Regal, a full-time faculty member who teaches in both English and women's and gender studies, sums up the pleasure and renewal all of us experienced as a benefit of participating in the creative writing group when she comments that it has been "one of my most rewarding and enjoyable experiences at Curry. . . . It inspires me and teaches me on many levels."

Discussion

The featured writing groups were prompted by an interest with connecting with other faculty. They transformed potentially isolating experiences of writing into collegial, enjoyable experiences. These experiences contributed to the engagement of participants within their academic fields as a whole through increased publications and presentations.

Writing groups played a role in promoting productivity and work-life balance for the faculty featured in this work. In addition, they offered group members an opportunity to strengthen or establish professional relationships. Our experiences suggest that ongoing faculty writing groups can have significant benefits in the form of increased publications, presentations, and grant applications; providing a safe space for pedagogical problem solving; building collegiality; and contributing to overall work-life balance for faculty.

Both writing group leaders are members of Generation X. Differences between the silent generation (born 1925–1944), baby boomers (born 1945–1962), Generation X (born 1963–1980), and millennials (born 1981–2001) hold potential to have a positive or negative influence on collegiality among faculty and staff in university settings. Differences in perception are most evident between the silent generation, who married at younger ages and respected authority or hierarchies, versus Gen Xers, who question authority and have either remained single or married later in life (Bickel & Brown, 2005) and value work-life balance. The development of writing groups and interest in promoting healthy balance in their careers and personal lives reflect the featured authors' generational group.

The diversity of the Curry College group in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, and rank brought to the discussion different perspectives on work. Preliminary feedback from a diverse array of individuals is particularly important when seeking publication and making effective presentations at conferences.

Recommendations for Faculty Developers

Regardless of institutional type, faculty developers may want to implement similar writing groups to promote academic productivity, work-life balance, and occupational satisfaction among faculty, thereby retaining faculty members and promoting their professional development. We offer our specific recommendations for faculty developers:

- *Build motivation.* Regularly offering workshops on writing productivity and publication strategies suggests the importance of

scholarship at an institution. Faculty developers can also share with faculty research on the benefits of accountability and writing groups.

- *Lay the groundwork.* Faculty developers and administrative leaders must assess faculty concerns regarding writing and publication and use this information to inform programming. Institutions can facilitate the formation of such groups by providing networking opportunities, valuing peer mentoring in promotion and tenure decisions, and offering resources such as space and funding for writing group meetings and for events where faculty can present work developed through the group.
- *Build an infrastructure.* Leaders' support of work-life balance strengthens the likelihood of faculty participation. Academics with heavy teaching loads and who are overwhelmed with long meetings receive the unconscious message that research and writing are not institutional priorities. Differentiated teaching loads, teaching releases for the purpose of scholarship development, and a one-hour limitation on meetings create work cultures that provide space for innovation and subsequent scholarship.
- *Support the process, but only as much as it needs.* For faculty writing groups to be successful, they should be voluntary and driven by goals that all members agree on, formally or informally. Some groups may find it helpful to set out written expectations or objectives; such statements may evolve with the needs of the group. Faculty developers may act as facilitators or provide guidance to faculty interested in serving this role. Ideally the facilitator, whether a faculty developer or faculty member, should have experience in the publishing process.

Faculty writing groups create a safe space for members to take creative and intellectual risks and to be their authentic, full selves. Such initiatives yield the institutional benefits of scholarly productivity, informed pedagogy, and faculty who feel in control of the multiple demands on their time.

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