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# Writing Circle Feedback: Creating a Vibrant Community of Scholars

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An article previously published in this journal described Gray's twelve steps to help scholars write and publish (1999). One of the elements of Gray's process is to share writing drafts and receive feedback from peers. Writing circles provide writers with peer support and reactions to their writing throughout the writing process. Participation in a writing circle can assist junior library faculty in overcoming such factors as fear, lack of confidence, and procrastination. This paper describes the establishment and workings of a writing circle at the Harold B. Lee Library (HBLL) at BYU that attempted to assist junior faculty librarians to begin and to continue publishing scholarly papers. It reports their feelings about overcoming fear, lack of confidence and procrastination; reports their productivity both before and after participation in a writing circle; and describes how their participation in a writing circle has informed their work with faculty colleagues. Receiving feedback in writing circles, when it's given and received positively, helps create the conditions for a vibrant and sustainable community of scholars

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## Faculty Writing Context

As Saunders, et.al (1998) notes

In the university context, which is often a highly individualised [sic] workplace, the notion of writing and publication seems to be taken for granted by those who write. It is usually done in private and the product only seen when it is published. This often makes writing seem a secret process and an innate ability – especially the case for those people who have extensive publication lists who seem to be able to achieve quite a number of publications each year (p. 705).

In order to achieve rank advancement and, in some cases, tenure, many librarians employed in academic libraries, are expected to publish (Foote, 2001, p. 22). In this context, however, writing for publication can trigger fear or anxiety in junior faculty members who have not previously published an article. Some may have written a thesis or dissertation for their library degree or for another degree,

but writing for publication is not the same. Boise (2000) found that new faculty “...did not learn how to write with fluency and constancy in graduate school. Instead, most worked on proposals and dissertations erratically...” (p. 103). Regardless of whether a junior library faculty member has written previously or not, for those who are facing the challenge of publishing to meet rank and tenure requirements, writing can be a daunting task.

Several fears about writing are commonly expressed by faculty. Two of those fears are one, that being new to the profession equates to having nothing to say and two, that that writing will not be good enough to get published (Moore, 2003, p. 337). Boice’s (1996) classic observation by novice writers that “My writing will probably be criticized and I may feel humiliated” (p. 30) coupled with wondering how time to write will be worked into an already busy schedule (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 275) further exacerbates the problem. In order to become a part of the community of scholars both within the library and the university, faculty need a way to overcome these fears and to begin the process of writing and publishing scholarly articles. Participating in a writing circle where feedback is both given and received, is a way to begin addressing and overcoming fears.

### **Launching and Maintaining a Library Writing Circle**

Each year during winter semester, the Brigham Young University Faculty Center sponsors the “Publish and Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar” workshop presented by Tara Gray of New Mexico State University. In the sessions, participants are taught Gray’s twelve-step method for successful writing. First-time participants attend two sessions of two and one-half hours each on consecutive days. Returning participants attend one session that averages two to two and one-half hours in which the twelve steps are reviewed and strategies are discussed

among the participants for making the steps work for them. Some of the steps most useful in sustaining the writing habit are: First, set aside time and write consistently for fifteen to thirty minutes a day. Second, keep records of the time spent writing and be accountable to someone, a writing buddy or members of a writing circle, for writing daily. Third, organize each paragraph around a key or topic sentence and organize paragraph sections or papers around topic sentences. Fourth, and the focus of this paper, is to regularly seek quality feedback throughout the writing process (Gray, 2005).

Writing circles, used for the purposes of receiving feedback since the late 1700s, are described as “...peers working in...small groups which enable learners to trial and share ideas in a non-competitive environment” (Saunders, et al, p.705 & 711). Between 2002 and 2006, twelve library faculty and one staff member attended Gray’s workshops based on her program. Previous to and during the workshop, the idea of forming a writing circle to obtain feedback from peers was advocated and supported by BYU’s Faculty Center. As participants register for the workshop, they indicate if they would like to form their own circle or be assigned to a circle of peers by the Faculty Center. During the workshop, participants gather at tables and the feedback process is modeled and practiced.

Until 2003, when the author attended the beginner’s workshop, no writing circle was established in the library. The decision to begin a writing circle was based on the author’s desire to implement Gray’s system of receiving feedback from peers and to assist others in the library who, like the author, were just beginning to write for publication and needed support and assistance. A circle would provide a consistently scheduled method of receiving feedback on writing projects from colleagues in the discipline. At BYU faculty librarians are encouraged to engage in research that results in creative works such as publications. However, librarians, like

professorial faculty, also have specific day to day job related tasks and committee work that consumes a great deal of their time. Therefore, the author felt that administrative approval for the circle should be obtained. Administrative approval signals the junior faculty that participation in the writing circle is an acceptable workday activity and “gives credibility to the group’s importance as part of professional development” (Level & Mach, 2005, p. 307). The author sought approval from the library’s Associate Director who not only approved the formation of a circle, but continues to promote it and recommend that new faculty consider joining the circle. Additionally, time was provided in a library-wide Town Meeting for the Faculty Center Assistant Director to make a presentation about the upcoming workshop. Attendance was encouraged and the library writing circle was promoted.

Individual writing circle participants commit to write for fifteen to thirty minutes each day and to be accountable to someone for their writing. Several activities are acceptable during the writing time, including writing, reviewing the thesis of the paper, isolating and studying key sentences, reading a rough draft aloud, or even just thinking about what to write. Writing logs provided by the Faculty Center assist participants in tracking their daily writing time (See Appendix A). Aitchison & Lee (2006) affirm that “Group members monitor their own and others’ writing productivity against this schedule and thus, sometimes for the first time, participants begin to address personal issues of avoidance and ‘block’ as well as structural impediments to productivity” (p.275) Participants also have the option of choosing a writing buddy to whom they report their writing every day whether the writing circle is active or not at the time. Professional literature amply documents the effectiveness of being accountable for writing daily (Boice, 1989; Lamott, 1994; Aitchison & Lee, 2006).

A cover sheet that authors complete for each writing sample they bring to the circle was a new addition introduced in 2006 (See Appendix B). The cover sheet includes the thesis, audience, and abstract of the paper. Prior to the introduction of the cover sheet, it was common for participants to spend several minutes explaining the context their writing sample in order to aid understanding of what they had written. Because the circle is designed to last only one hour, this consumed valuable time that could have been focused on the writing itself. Knowing the thesis of the paper as you read, also helped to determine how the paragraphs support the thesis.

The writing circle at the Lee Library has been functioning for three years. The circle meets twice a month to share writing drafts and provide feedback on one another's writing drafts. Using Gray's method of focusing on key sentences, each participant brings copies of a three- to four-page writing sample from something he or she is currently working on. A total of fifteen minutes is allotted for each person in the circle. The time is divided into three five-minute segments: reading the sample and identifying key sentences, talking about key sentences, and giving and receiving feedback on any other aspect of the paper. During the first five minutes, each participant, including the author, reads the writing sample and identifies what he or she believes is the key sentence in each paragraph. After the reading, the author takes the next five minutes to query participants regarding their choice of a key sentence for each paragraph. If all participants identify the sentence that the author intended to be key, the author is fairly certain that the paragraph has a clear purpose and that it is focused on one idea. If different key sentences are identified by the participants, each gives his or her reasoning, and the author knows the paragraph needs to be reworked. The last five minutes are used to solicit any other input on the paragraphs or on the piece as a whole.

### **Writing Circle Assessment**

Writing circles provide a number of benefits for participants foremost among which is the giving and receiving of feedback from colleagues. Just as in other academic communities of scholars who exchange and discuss ideas, the writing circle fosters the exchange and discussion of feedback on writing drafts. After three years of chairing the writing circle, the author wanted to determine if the outcomes of the circle justified the effort entailed to continue it. An email survey was used, it being the most efficient way to solicit feedback from participants. The survey was distributed to eight former participants to validate the benefits of participation in the writing circle and to gauge productivity (See Appendix C). Responses were received from seven participants, including the author, and were then collated and analyzed. Analysis of the survey results revealed the following benefits to the respondents (See Appendix D).

#### *Giving and receiving feedback*

Three responses from the survey explained the benefits of receiving feedback on writing drafts. One participant felt that it was beneficial to have feedback from colleagues before being exposed to critiques from external reviewers. The feedback given in writing circles using Gray's (1999) method focuses principally on smaller writing drafts and on organization of paragraphs around a key sentence (p. 135). If participants do not unanimously identify a key sentence this signals the author that the paragraph needs additional work. Feedback of this nature from supportive colleagues is usually easier to accept. "The peer audience... [provides] important feedback that [is] less 'fussy' and more real-world oriented..." (Schneider, 1989, p.63). Formal critiques from reviewers are more specific and thorough, typically addressing all aspects of the article including thesis, methodology, findings, conclusions, organization, style and formatting, etc. and can be intimidating or discouraging.

Receiving feedback from others during the writing process—not just when an article is completed—was another benefit reported by three respondents. One participant preferred receiving suggestions in these smaller doses throughout the writing process because doing so identified problem areas, helped perfect the focus of the paper, and caught small mistakes. Receiving feedback in smaller doses enabled another respondent to make “smaller course corrections along the way”.

Feedback from members of the circle outside her own particular area of responsibility in the library helped another participant to see other possibilities for writing. Similarly, another participant reported that “Others have ideas that spark further writing”. Schneider (1989) notes that a “...significant advantage in using writing groups is that there are multiple responses to and multiple perspectives on a member’s work. This is...beneficial in the diversity of ideas that are generated” (p. 63).

The giving and receiving of feedback establishes the foundation for an engaging, sustainable community of scholars. However, three other benefits of participation which were identified in the survey, also contribute to the sustainability of the community: (1) a noncompetitive atmosphere (Saunders et. al, 1998 p. 709); (2) a support group that lessens the inevitable feelings of loneliness new faculty experience (Quinlan, 1999, p. 35) and (3) accountability and motivation to write on a regular basis (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 275). In addition to the benefits of receiving feedback in the writing circle, the safety, collegiality and stimulus to write are all crucial factors in sustaining a active community of scholars.

#### *Non competitive atmosphere*

Saunders, et. al (1998) states “The positive atmosphere of the group enabled us to speak about our personal writing difficulties, and to give each other suggestions...” (p. 709) A non-

threatening atmosphere in which to receive feedback and constructive suggestions was cited as a benefit by three of the seven respondents. Writing circle participants were mutually respectful and shared the common goal of both giving and receiving help with their writing. Kram and Isabella (1985) note that “Peer relationships offer a degree of mutuality that enables...individuals to experience being the giver as well as the receiver...” (p. 118). Without the non-competitive atmosphere, recruiting and retaining writing circle members would be problematic.

### *Support group*

“I felt part of an academic network, instead of a tired teacher working on her research in isolation!” (Grant & Knowles, 2000, p. 14).“ A group of supportive colleagues is another condition, without which, it would be difficult to create and sustain a community of scholars. The writing circle functioned as a support group for three of the participants. One commented that participating in the writing circle engendered the feeling of being part of a larger academic community. Another respondent reported the feeling of having a support system of people who were all working on the same thing. Shaprio et.al. (1978) notes that “..the reciprocity ...can provide a powerful boost towards success for each of the participants. Through sharing information and strategies and providing sounding boards and advice for one another, peer pals help each other while helping themselves” (p. 56). The fostering friendships within the library was reported by another participant. The importance of collegial support is further corroborated by Palmer and Matz (2006), who assert that

Other junior faculty members are in the same boat...It’s sensible for them to share their experiences, even casually. This can lead to formal collaborative writing efforts<sup>2</sup> or simply provide a way to build collegiality between librarians who would rarely meet otherwise (p. 373).

### *Accountability and Motivation*

Aitchison & Lee (2006) posit that writing circles are beneficial in "...helping participants to create personal writing schedules reflecting real, competing life and work pressures that militate against writing becoming 'normal business'" (p. 275). The two themes of accountability and motivation appeared in responses from all seven participants ( See Table 1). Without the motivation to write and the accountability for doing it, neither a writing circle nor a community of scholars could exist.

Insert Table 1

*Additional Sustainability Benefits*

*Productivity*

The survey indicated that during participation in the writing circle, the seven respondents wrote sixteen articles, of which thirteen have been published or accepted for publication. When asked how many articles they had written, the responses ranged from one to four, with five of the seven participants or seventy-one percent writing at least two articles. Four respondents, or fifty-seven percent, had published all articles they'd written. The following table shows the number of articles written and published both before and during participation in the writing circle (See Table 2).

Insert Table 2

*More "press" about writing*

Although not explicitly mentioned by the participants, more "press" about librarian's work was also observed. The university recently began a faculty profiling system for recording teaching, scholarship, citizenship and other professional activities. Librarians who publish add those publications to their personal profile. The library sends a scholarly activity report to the university each year, based on what is in the faculty profiling system. This file can also be reviewed by rank and tenure committees, deans, academic vice-presidents, etc. Having

publications in this file helps teaching faculty to see that librarians are also involved in the work of research, writing and publication. Research publications are often featured in *Y News*, an internal newsletter for university faculty and staff. This provides greater visibility for librarians and their work. One participant commented that professorial faculty approach librarians as colleagues rather than “resources” when they are aware a librarian has published something.

### *Improved Service to Professorial Colleagues*

Furthermore, one of the most important benefits of participation reported by survey respondents was that being involved in the writing circle and thus writing and publishing assisted them in providing better service to their professorial colleagues. Two themes were evident in the responses. The first, that increased understanding of the scholarly writing and publishing process helps librarians provide better service in several ways—literature searching, acquisition of research materials, and awareness of particular resources that might be of benefit to the faculty member’s research and publication needs. The second, that understanding this process results in a level of mutual respect and trust that translates into seeing the librarian as a part of the scholarly dialog and as a potential partner or collaborator in future efforts. Currently, two members of the writing circle are collaborating on an article with a colleague in another campus department. Another was asked by professorial faculty member to assist in the creation of a library tutorial for online courses and to revise the library chapter in a book used for writing courses on campus.

### **Challenge of Sustainability**

Keeping the writing circle active year round is a major challenge. The circle meets regularly from January through April, our winter semester. Because of job responsibilities and other commitments, attendance is sometimes spotty. It is especially difficult to hold meetings

during fall semester, when most participants have heavy library instruction commitments. Faculty are also often away at conferences at various times during the year. One year, in an effort to keep up the momentum, meetings were scheduled during spring and summer terms (April – August), but that is the time most faculty take vacation leave, so it was discontinued the next year. In spite of these challenges, the circle has continued to reconvene each January. Between times the community has been sustained by some participants who continue to write and have privately asked members of the circle to read and review papers they are working on. The circle reconvened and functioned effectively during winter semester of 2007. In order to share the burden of keeping the circle active, writing groups might consider Level & Mach's (2005) suggestions to rotate chairing duties monthly and to use the final meeting of the semester to assess their meetings and discuss plans for the coming year. (p.307)

## **Conclusion**

Without the safety, collegiality and respect engendered in writing circles and the accountability and motivation to write, it would be difficult to sustain an active community of scholars. Eodice & Cramer (2001) summarize the effects of a support group such as a writing circle in creating a community of scholars.

Support group influence and related results—i.e., better products, increased frequency of completion of writing projects, an increase in accepted publications, and significant progress on a larger work—have the power to transform the potential scholars or the poorly prepared scholars into life-long scholars (p. 119).

The Lee Library writing circle has been successful in creating a community of scholars as evidenced by the following. Members of the circle have been able to make time for writing in their busy schedules. Every member of the circle has published at least one article. Librarians who had not published before are now writing and getting published. The library writing circle

successfully fostered a vibrant community of scholars within library, has continued to function in spite of challenges, and has resulted in improved service to and collaborations with professorial colleagues. Although this paper reports the experience of library faculty, the process could be applied to any department in a university interested in assisting faculty to begin the process of writing for publication.

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Table 1

*Accountability and Motivation Responses*

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<b>Accountability</b>	<b>Worked harder; set biweekly deadlines</b>	<b>Helped meet externally imposed deadlines without a frantic rush at the end</b>	<b>Wrote everyday; thought about and produced more than previously</b>	<b>Provided accountability and the nudge to write more regularly</b>
<b>Motivation</b>	Provided motivation to keep writing even when experiencing writer's block	Provided external motivation to write consistently (2)		

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Table 2.

*Writing Circle Productivity*

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<b>Respondent</b>	<i>Written</i>		<i>Published</i>	
	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
<b>A</b>	0	2	0	1
<b>B</b>	2	1	1	1
<b>C</b>	0	1	0	1 (in press)
<b>D</b>	3	4	2	4
<b>E</b>	0	2	0	2
<b>F</b>	1	2	0	1
<b>G</b>	0	4	0	4
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>

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