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Review research paper

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING: THE EXPERIENCE OF A FACULTY READING GROUP

Tatiana Glushko[1], Polina G. Labzina[2], Olga S. Pavlova[3]

[1]Jackson State University, USA
[2]Samara State Technical University, Russia
[3]Saint-Petersburg State Institute of Technology, Russia

Abstract. *Professional development in academic writing in English can be challenging for university instructors in non-English speaking countries. These challenges may be caused by a lack of experts in the field to conduct professional development, budgeting issues, access to training, and motivating and meeting the needs of faculty who may already be overburdened by high teaching loads. In this article, the authors describe conducting a year-long reading group focused on professional development in the teaching of academic writing. The goal of the group was to advance participants' understanding of how to teach academic writing. To achieve the goal, the group was designed to increase awareness of writing pedagogy theories, construct a clearer understanding of the concept of academic writing, and critically examine current practices in teaching academic writing within the context of higher education in Russia. The authors describe the design, facilitation, and outcomes of the group. They also consider the benefits and limitations of engaging in this form of professional development. Finally, they offer implications for continuous professional development for university language instructors in a collaborative environment.*

Key words: *academic writing, writing pedagogy, professional development, higher education, collaborative learning, reading group*

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional development in academic writing in English can be challenging for university instructors in non-English speaking countries, particularly in those like Russia, where academia has been traditionally monolingual. These challenges have included a lack of experts in the field to conduct professional development, budgeting issues, access to training, and motivating faculty who may already be overburdened by high teaching loads (Tuzlukova and Hall 2016). In Russia, in particular, academic writing is rarely included in the standard university curricula and is often introduced only in the course of studying a foreign language, which limits the educational benefits that students and faculty

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Corresponding author: Tatiana Glushko, Jackson State University, USA
E-mail: tatiana.glushko@jsums.edu

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may gain from using writing to learn and writing across the curriculum. Furthermore, as one of the experts on academic writing in Russia has pointed out, the problem with professional development in this area lies in the contradiction between the demand for academic writing and the lack of understanding what it is (Korotkina 2023). Besides, writing pedagogies from abroad may not resonate or translate well in the Russian context and, therefore, may require further exploration, discussion, and reflection.

Although the Russian National Writing Centers Consortium has been offering professional conferences, seminars, and workshops for language instructors in academic writing, opportunities for professional development in this area outside of the consortium have not always kept pace with the increasing interest and continuous demand for it. Consequently, instructors who teach academic writing are faced with the challenges of finding motivation, resources, and instructional support necessary for their professional development.

Skills and competencies recognized as essential for professional development of university instructors both within and outside Russia include creative and critical thinking, communication, collaboration, emotional intelligence, self-development, and cross-cultural interaction (Titova 2022). Furthermore, professional development also involves collaboration with peers, whether in-person or online (Vidaković 2021, 391) and reflection, which may call for a less formal setting (Tuzlukova and Hall 2016, 606). While the most common types of professional development recognized in faculty annual evaluation or promotion include conferences, courses, seminars, and workshops, instructors may also seek informal opportunities for their professional development that include independent research, peer learning initiatives, or even regular communication with colleagues in their spare time. However, these informal forms of professional development may not always count towards faculty performance evaluation even though they may be as engaging and enlightening as the formal ones.

As the authors of the report "E2030: Education and Skills for the 21st Century" have emphasized, "lifelong learning required conceiving education beyond the formal system, including and recognizing informal and non-formal forms of learning and providing all these different learning modalities throughout life" (E2030: Education and Skills for the 21st Century 2017). In other words, an optimal professional development setting is accessible, flexible in time, and systematic, and it provides mutual enrichment of its participants.

We argue that a reading group meets the above requirements and may function as an effective mode of teachers' professional development. As we discovered through our own recent participation in a reading group on academic writing pedagogy, a reading group can fill in the gap in the increasing need for professional development, allow for building a support network among colleagues from different educational backgrounds, and create opportunities for further collaboration, for example, in writing for publication.

What follows is our collaborative reflection on the experience of participating in the group. As we describe how the group functioned, reflect on the content of the articles we have read and on our interaction during monthly meetings, we share the insights we have gained about academic writing, about writing pedagogy in higher education, and about the affordances of this type of professional meetings for sustained pedagogical development of language instructors and academic writing specialists.

2. Reading Group as a Form of Professional Development: Background

In our experience, professional development for higher education instructors has usually involved intensive workshops, short courses, or summer institutes that may last a week or two. They are usually fast-paced, often leaving its participants energized and inspired, but at times also overwhelmed, and they rarely allow time for processing information and for reflection. Yet professional development does not mean merely getting new information and collecting certificates. It also means cultivating intellectual life: engaging in reading, deep thought, and dialog with colleagues, things for which we rarely find time in a modern-day university, where academics work under the pressure of multiple responsibilities and increasing administrative demands. Slowing down and allowing oneself time for reading, thinking, and conversation have become a luxury for a university instructor, and the problem of slow scholarship has been recognized in publications in Russia and abroad (Abramov, Gruzdev and Terent'ev 2016; Birg and Seeber 2016).

Those academics who seek deep engagement with the subject, good conversation, and the opportunity to hear multiple perspectives on an issue may find participation in reading groups, like the one we describe in this article, not only intellectually satisfying but also professionally rewarding as they provide opportunities to keep abreast of disciplinary scholarship and build collaborative relationships with other professionals without placing too much demand on the participants' time.

Although reading groups have been used to discover new knowledge, discuss ideas, and develop networks, insufficient attention has been paid to them as a form of professional development and collaboration. Reading groups have been used as a tool for professional development in fields as different as medical and military (Castelli 2021). In teacher development, reading groups and book clubs have been considered one of the innovative forms of professional development (Van Veen, Zwart, and Meirink 2012). Using the critical public pedagogy lens, Grenier, Callahan, Kaeppel, and Elliott (2021) have extensively discussed how informal reading groups (or book clubs, as they refer to them) formed inside organizations facilitate social connections, collaborative learning, and cultural change among the participants. These authors argued, for example, that, as participants engage with texts that "stimulate critical reflection and dialogue" in the egalitarian environment of a non-formal learning space, like a reading group, they may "begin to question their

existing mental models and counter dominant systems and hegemonic practices in their organization and society" (Grenier et al. 2021,12-13). The values and practices that this argument seems to represent, such as a non-hierarchical place of learning, collaborative construction of meaning through conversation, critical reflection, and interrogation of dominant cultural, academic, or disciplinary perspectives, align with the purposes for the reading group that we discuss in this article and, more importantly, with the purposes of teaching academic literacy and writing at institutions of higher learning in the 21st century.

3. Designing and Facilitating a Reading Group on Academic Writing Pedagogy

The reading group on academic writing pedagogy was designed as a year-long project with monthly 90-minute meetings conducted virtually through Zoom. The purpose of the group was to create a space for instructors of English to engage in reading and discussion about theory and practice of teaching academic writing and to provide an opportunity for collaborative development of the concept of academic writing within the context of higher education in Russia.

The group facilitator developed a reading list of 24 titles published in peer-reviewed journals or edited collections, mostly in the U.S. The readings were organized by sections in a Google Drive folder and later shared with the group participants. The list included some foundational works in writing studies, such as David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" (2003) and Linda Flower and John R. Hayes's "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing" (2003) originally published in the 1980s as well as pieces representing a more recent scholarship in the field, for example, Suresh Canagarajah's "The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continues" (2009). The articles were chosen because of their focus on one of the three dimensions of writing, as discussed by Irina Korotkina (2015), namely: product, process, and practice. The issues raised by the authors of the articles included, among many others, providing feedback to students on their writing, for example, Nancy Sommers's "Responding to Student Writing" (2008), cognitive processes while composing in Sondra Perl's "Understanding Composing" (2008) and in Sommers's "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" (2003), and multilingual writing practices and their socio-political implications in Mary Louise Pratt's "The Arts of the Contact Zone (1991). The wide range of topics was intended to trace the development of thought in the field of rhetoric and composition and to increase the awareness of the group members about the variety of theoretical and practical issues that teachers of academic writing across cultures may examine.

In the fall of 2021, the group facilitator sent out an invitation to join a reading group to the National Consortium of Academic Writing Experts in Russia and to a group of colleagues from one of the universities in Russia. Twenty instructors

from different universities and regions of Russia responded to the call by filling out a contact form, where they shared why they were interested in joining the group and what issues in academic writing interested them.

The group met from December 2021 through November 2022. All participants were women. They all taught English (but not necessarily academic writing) to undergraduate and graduate students. As it often happens with groups like this, not all of the initial respondents actually participated in the group, and a few participants dropped out after a few sessions or attended intermittently. We reached the finishing line of this reading marathon with six participants, including the facilitator.

The meetings themselves were semi-structured. Participants received access to a Google folder that contained a list of suggested readings, their full-text PDF copies, and a document where we kept track of our meetings and questions and concepts discussed. In each meeting we discussed one or two articles that we had read prior to the meeting.

While the articles were in English and all participants spoke English, the language of discussion was Russian. Conducting discussion in Russian was an intentional choice because we wanted to find points of connection between composition theory developed in the U.S. and teaching practices developed by language instructors within Russia. In this context, it seemed important to construct our understanding of new theories and concepts about writing pedagogy in the Russian language. At times, we used code-meshing, switching between Russian and English, especially when we were discussing key concepts for which we could not immediately find equivalents in the Russian language.

At the first meeting, participants were presented with a list of questions that they could use as a reading guide for each article:

- What stood you? What seemed intriguing, confusing, or surprising?
- What resonated with your personal writing experience? Teaching practice? Research? Why?
- What questions did the article raise for you?
- What stood out to you about the way the article is written?
- What implications do the articles offer for your own teaching or research?
- What questions remain unanswered?

The questions were designed as open-ended and inclusive: They did not require that participants have prior expertise in the area of academic writing and instead invited them to share their response to the reading regardless of their level of familiarity with the concepts discussed in the articles. At the same time, the questions prompted a free-flowing conversation and encouraged participants to share ideas and perspectives.

In each discussion the participants were invited to connect what they were reading to their own writing and teaching practice. For example, when discussing “Understanding Composing” (Perl 2008) and “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers” (Sommers 2003), participants were prompted to think about their own writing process:

> Think of something you wrote recently (e.g., an email to a colleague, a memo, a conference proposal, an assignment for students). What was your process like? Did you write your text in one sitting? Did you have to go back to what you wrote? If so, why and at what points of your writing? What else can you recall?

They further engaged in conversation about linear vs. recursive writing process, revision, and implications for teaching, reflecting on their own writing and teaching context.

Discussion questions often prompted participants to consider their ability to use both English and Russian as linguistic resources for writing. To illustrate, one of the questions asked:

> Perl writes that writers always come back to what they wrote at different points of their writing process, and she traces the points to which writers return as they write. How might this recursive process be similar or different for those who write in a foreign language?

We were interested to know how the process of writing in a native language may be different from the one in a foreign language.

Many of our questions focused on re-examining our own teaching practices in the context of the readings. For example, we discussed the following questions:

- Sommers suggests that inexperienced writers understand revision as attending to vocabulary and sentence-level issues. What problem does she see with this understanding? How might her study inform the way we think about revision and teach revision to students?
- Sommers writes, "At the heart of revision is the process by which writers recognize and resolve the dissonance they sense in their writing." How can we recognize this dissonance as we revise? How can we teach students to do so?

To prompt a discussion on writing for publication, which participants identified as an issue of interest when they joined the group, we read an introduction to the edited collection *Writing for Scholarly Publication: Behind the Scenes in Language Education* by Christine Pearson Casanave and Stephanie Vandrick (2003). The authors raised the issue of writing for publication as disciplinary practice and a way to develop one's professional identity, and the participants reflected on the role that writing plays in their development as language professionals. Some of the questions discussed during the group meeting included the following:

- How do you participate in your community of practice? To what extent are you involved in this community? How would you describe your location in this community? Is it central? Peripheral? Other?
- How do you position yourself when you write for publication? What goals do you pursue in your self-representation? What linguistic and other resources do you use to construct your "discoursal self," your voice, and your identity?

Overall, as the questions above demonstrate, our discussion was drawing on the readings but grounding them in the participants' experiences. Our understanding of what we were reading was constructed in the process of group discussion and

complicated or refined by tensions that sometimes arose due to our different teaching contexts and approaches.

Besides discussing the content of the selected articles, participants were also invited to comment on the way those articles were written and on the way their structure, organization, and style align with the participants' experience with academic writing in general and the genre of a scholarly article in particular. This allowed us to increase awareness of how experts in the field of writing studies communicate with each other, how they build their argument, what conventions they follow, and how those conventions may be similar or different from our established expectations about academic writing in English.

4. Reading Group Outcomes, Benefits, and Perceived Limitations

The diversity of the group participants, who came from different teaching backgrounds and institutional contexts, had a positive impact on the group outcomes: We felt that we developed a greater awareness of a writing landscape in higher education and of the variety of approaches to teaching academic writing. As we talked about our specific teaching contexts, we were developing a greater understanding of what kinds of writing occurred in academic settings across universities in Russia and how those might be different from writing in academic settings outside of Russia. Participants taught students at different levels of education (bachelor's, master's, and postgraduate) and with different levels of language proficiency, from native to non-native speakers. The disciplines they taught did not always prioritize academic writing. Consequently, their interpretation of what academic writing meant was based on their own experience and observation of students' difficulties with writing and determined by the writing skills that they thought were important for their students.

The differences in understanding of what academic writing involved were evident, for example, in the choice of writing genres that the participants thought were important to teach. Some focused on professional writing genres, such as resume, cover letter, or business letter. Others focused on annotations, research papers, and conference papers. Those who taught undergraduate students focused mostly on preparing students to write an essay for international examinations, such as IELTS, as a way of teaching basic writing skills.

Besides broadening our understanding of genres that were taught in academia, we were also increasing our awareness of writing pedagogy. The discussion of readings on how to teach writing was an opportunity for participants to re-examine the effectiveness of methods, techniques, and tools for teaching academic writing in their local settings, considering a variety of students' majors, language proficiency levels, writing abilities, and study skills.

Participants grappled with concepts related to writing pedagogy, such as writing as collaborative learning, rhetorical situation and rhetorical analysis, response to

student writing vs. assessment, and the cognitive process of writing. For example, the article "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" by Kenneth Bruffee (2003) introduced the concept of writing as collaborative practice and conversation with potential readers. The discussion of this concept led the participants to consider the effectiveness of peer learning when it comes to learning to write. Some participants questioned the effectiveness of the collaborative approach advocated by Bruffee because they could not yet imagine how it might apply to their teaching context, where their experience had taught them to be in charge of the learning process and to play an authoritative role in providing feedback to students and assessing their work. They were also questioning, however, if the teacher's control at every step was necessary for learning or if students should have freedom in deciding what to write about and in expressing their creativity.

The concept of the writer's rhetorical awareness addressed in the article "Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem" by Linda Flower and John R. Hayes (1989) made participants talk about their own writing, specifically writing for publication and the importance of understanding the purpose and target audience for writing. Along with the authors of the article, they were wondering how they can "build a coherent network of ideas" (Flower and Hayes 1989, 28) as they write and how they might teach this process to their students.

Another article by the same authors titled "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing" (Flower and Hayes 2003) prompted the participants to think about teaching students the writing process and the cognitive skills associated with it. For example, commenting on her students' difficulties with summarizing, one participant observed that this difficulty was not necessarily related to the students' level of language proficiency but to cognitive operations, particularly a lack of practice in extracting information from a text, analyzing and synthesizing information, and generating their own ideas. She also observed a lack of knowledge in students on how to organize their own work and develop study skills. The participant shared that she had approached this problem by spending more time on teaching pre-writing steps.

Understanding of what academic writing involves would have been incomplete without a discussion of writing assessment. While reading the article "Responding to Student Writing" (Sommers 2008), participants talked about what they pay attention to when they read student writing (e.g., writer's language, text organization) and how they respond to it. Considering the overall lack of time on teaching writing, they pondered over the question of how to approach writing assessment and what criteria to use.

These readings and conversations enabled participants to expand their understanding of what academic writing meant beyond genres and grammatical correctness to include understanding of writing as a cognitive process, rhetorical awareness, and collaborative practice. Reflecting on their own teaching methods also allowed them to re-examine what teaching practices may best support learning to write in an academic setting.

By reading about composition theory, reflecting on their own experience with academic writing, and engaging in face-to-face conversation with colleagues, participants were generating ideas about academic writing and writing pedagogy that were grounded in their own experience rather than received from an authority. Furthermore, by engaging with texts on composition theory written by international scholars in a different educational context, participants had an opportunity to develop awareness of the issues in teaching academic writing that are relevant to higher education instructors in a larger, international context and thus, in the words of Suresh Canagarajah, they could “frame their experiences with relevance” to their counterparts teaching academic writing in other countries, as well as with relevance to the readership of English-language journals (Canagarajah 2012 , 117) on academic writing, where they might want to publish in the future.

While the reading group experience was positive overall, we realize that this format of professional development may not work well for someone who is accustomed to a more structured approach with predetermined learning outcomes. This reading group was facilitated through a free-flowing discussion, which allowed participants to bring up new issues, sometimes only tangentially related to the question at hand, thus changing the course of the initial conversation. While this may have enriched the discussion and elicited different perspectives on an issue, some participants may have preferred a more focused and guided conversation.

Also, the duration of the project, which took one year, may have made it difficult for some members of the group to participate in it from start to finish. The fact that we met once a month could have made the progress and outcomes feel less tangible than if we had met more frequently. Furthermore, unlike professional development offered through official institutional channels, the reading group organized through an informal professional network did not offer any certificate or credit that may count in departmental or institutional evaluations.

The focus of the reading group on writing pedagogy as a subject matter may have also been unusual. The group emphasized writing as a process and practice rather than writing as a product. In Russia, academic writing is usually discussed in relation to writing for publication, and professional development around academic writing is geared towards instruction on how to write research articles in English and navigate the publication process with the goal to increase the number of publications in English-speaking journals. Those with specific interest in this aspect of academic writing may prefer peer writing groups, rather than reading groups, that would allow them to receive feedback from their peers and develop or revise their own manuscripts. Additionally, they may benefit from structured courses or workshops that would allow them to learn tangible writing strategies in a shorter period of time.

Some of the limitations of the reading group discussed above can be mitigated if the expectations and outcomes for the group are clearly discussed upfront, at the point of recruiting participants. For example, a group leader may emphasize how this form of professional development may be different from a workshop or course, how meetings will be facilitated, and what participants may expect at the end of the course.

7. Conclusion

Overall, participation in the reading group met the requirements for professional development of university instructors: It engaged participants in creative and critical thinking, communication, collaboration, self-development, cross-cultural interaction, and development of emotional intelligence. Effective teaching in a constantly changing social, economic, and cultural environment requires engaging in systematic inquiry rather than attending a two-day conference or a six-hour seminar. Thus, a year-long participation in the reading group engaged the participants in continuous learning and fostered their professional and personal development.

Continuous professional development is a practice that requires expanding and deepening one's knowledge. In this group, participants sought to expand their knowledge by rethinking and re-evaluating their previous experiences with academic writing as they read a selection of articles both thought-provoking and challenging in style and content. Working with these articles became the way to discover new meaning of academic writing features, provided pivot points for enhancement of teaching skills, and contributed to changes in the pedagogical thinking and stimulation of professional and personal self-development.

One of the reasons why we engage in professional development is to overcome professional stereotypes and develop creativity and openness to new ideas. The unusual format of interaction as a reading group and a small number of participants encouraged lively discussion and welcomed exchange of opinions on the articles read. Moreover, the discussions were not limited to the topics raised in the articles but covered different concerns and interests of the reading group participants, such as (a) the lack of time for teaching academic writing due to the university curriculum requirements; (b) the effective tools or techniques to optimize the process of teaching writing; (c) facilitation of students' adoption of new approaches to the process of writing itself (considering the audience, the purpose of writing, the context for writing).

In Russia, academic writing is often discussed in relation to writing for publication. However, what writing as a disciplinary practice means exactly is rarely discussed. After reading and considering different authors' views, it has become quite clear that academic writing comprises much more than using appropriate grammar structures and vocabulary in an abstract or an article. It is an analytical activity that involves articulating the place and relevance of one's research among the previous studies, considering the target audience and self-representation, developing a greater awareness of academic genres and the process of writing. All of these are necessary for optimizing the presentation of one's research results to our own community of practice and to the broader audience.

Another important implication of this group is that participation in it did not offer rewards besides intrinsic, which may have influenced some participants' decision to drop out. We do not suggest, however, that groups like this need to be formalized through academic departments or professional organizations so that participants can

receive certificates of participation or credits. It seems important for academics to resist academic capitalism and commodification of knowledge, forces that tend to define our participation in the profession and the value of our professional development solely by administrative metrics. We want to encourage our readers to join informal learning communities, with reading groups being one of them, for the sake of maintaining and developing horizontal, non-hierarchical connections that strengthen our scholarly communities.

To conclude, participation in a professional community involves engaging in dialog, even as we write for publication or read others' works. In this group, regardless of the participants' background or years of teaching experience, each contributed to the dialog. Group discussions helped its participants to pay attention to how well they understood their own ideas and how clearly they could express their own thoughts. Responding to each other, for example, by asking questions for clarification prompted participants to elaborate on their position and articulate it more clearly for the group members as well as for themselves. It is remarkable how the articles written in a different cultural and educational context for a different audience, some of them decades ago, resonated with the group and engaged its participants in dialog with those authors and with each other as they discussed issues related to writing pedagogy in Russia. In these conversations, they were building and expanding a professional community of those interested in and committed to teaching academic writing.

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