

GRADUATE WRITING GROUPS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO WRITING PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract. *Graduate students often delay writing tasks and binge write because of the complex nature of their projects. This can lead to poor work, frustration, and feelings of writing anxiety and isolation. We therefore suggest that writing centers facilitate an interdisciplinary, peer-exchange writing model called graduate writing groups. Such groups consist of four graduate students who commit to write daily and provide weekly feedback on each other's writing. By using a writing group, we increased our writing consistency, minutes of writing per week, and pages per quarter. We also increased our amount and quality of feedback to one another. We explain how graduate writing groups function, report on our writing gains, and show that writing groups can help graduate students and the writing center.*

Key words: *graduate writing, peer exchange, writing groups, writing center*

1. INTRODUCTION

Graduate students are not bound by the academic aphorism to Publish or Perish—a notion that employment, advancement, and professional opportunities at a research institution are influenced by scholarly productivity. However, graduate students do live by the Dissertation or Drop-out scenario in which they must produce complex and high-stakes written work such as a thesis or a dissertation in order to graduate and start a career. Yet, the reality is that on average just 56% of students finish their PhD dissertations by their 10th year or never finish their required writing tasks (Council of Graduate Schools 2012). Even when these writers do successfully put pen to paper, it is not uncommon for them to procrastinate and then binge write, a practice which can sabotage a writer's efficiency. In trying to understand what makes the writing process so difficult for graduate students from all disciplines, the University of Pennsylvania found that the three main reasons graduate students fail to write are feelings of isolation in the writing process, a lack of motivation, and a lack of discipline (Mastroieni and Cheung 2011).

Even as graduate students sometimes languish under writing pressures, graduate programs are usually interested in advancing their students through graduate school as quickly as possible because of budget concerns and space limitations. Ostensibly, helping students to effectively compose a thesis or dissertation should be a top priority to a department or university, but often disciplinary graduate programs are unaware of scholarship that can facilitate productive writing or unaware that graduate students often need such support. The purpose of this paper is to bring together the strengths from a number of disciplinary fields to help graduate student writers complete their complex writing tasks with more support, motivation, and discipline. With an interdisciplinary approach, graduate students can obtain frequent, manageable, and expert feedback without draining the resources of their advisors and other institutional programs. The interdisciplinary approach we propose uses graduate writing groups, which are situated in the ideological convergence of research from the fields of scholarly productivity, composition studies, graduate education, and writing center praxis. Our paper will explain how these groups function, how they have helped four graduate students exceed their writing expectations, how the success of graduate writing groups reflects an effective interdisciplinary collaboration, and how these groups may be implemented within a program or university.

2. DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON WRITING

2.1. Scholarly productivity research

Graduate writing groups can help graduate students tackle major writing tasks by providing community support, motivation, and discipline by drawing on research from four distinct fields of study. First, the field of scholarly productivity, though focused primarily on the writing efforts of faculty, can help graduate students develop discipline and motivation for writing by adopting writing behaviors that lead to increased writing and scholarly activity. Robert Boice has published widely on how writers allocate time to the writing endeavor. He found that scholars tend to write in binges, believing that they can put off most writing until they find a large block of time (Boice 1989). While this practice may work for some, Boice (1984) reported that binge writing is inferior to systematic writing approaches. For instance, he studied three groups of 9 scholarly writers each for 15 weeks with directions to one group to not write at all if possible, one group to write only when in the mood, and one group to write daily for a financial reward. He found that the first group produced an average of 0.2 pages of written work per week over the course of 15 weeks, the second group produced 0.9 pages, and the third group produced 3.2 pages. Furthermore, the second and third groups found that they rarely went a day without a creative idea. Gray and Birch (2000) found similar results among writers who pledged to write for 15-30 minutes per day in that they produced an average of 1.5 pages per week.

The scholarly productivity research of Boice underscores the importance of not only writing regularly, but also writing with accountability and for a scheduled period of time. For instance, in another study, Boice (1989) found that faculty who set aside 30 minutes to write each day, and accepted random visits from him during their scheduled writing time, wrote or revised 157 pages per year. This was more than double the 64 pages a second group wrote or revised who had scheduled 30 minutes a day but lacked accountability, and nine times more than the 17 pages produced by a control group with no scheduled writing time and no accountability.

The combination of writing regularly and remaining accountable for that writing has proven effective for faculty writers in tenure-track positions, but studies have not extended to the scholarly productivity of graduate students who engage in large, time-consuming writing tasks, such as theses and dissertations, that prepare them for future academic work. Perhaps the lack of studies regarding this group is because graduate writers sometimes lack the motivation or discipline to engage in consistent, scheduled writing, or they may require more feedback and direction than faculty researchers. However, it is not unreasonable to expect that the application of regularly scheduled writing periods and imposed accountability from scholarly productivity research to have a similar effect on graduate writers as their more advanced academic counterparts. In fact, many graduate writers, who seek to eventually become faculty themselves, may benefit from implementing and practicing the very behaviors of discipline and motivation that aid the professionals they seek to become. However, developing these skills while facing the third barrier to graduate student writing, feelings of isolation, can be daunting.

2.2. Composition studies research

While scholarly productivity research addresses the difficulties of motivation and lack of discipline that graduate students encounter while writing, composition studies research on peer response groups can help graduate students overcome the feelings of isolation in the writing process. Peer response groups are small, student-managed groups that meet to review and discuss one another's writing. These groups capitalize on the social nature of learning and writing (Vygotsky 1978) by promoting peer interaction and the negotiation of meaning (Bruffee 1984). They can be especially useful in helping students become better writers overall, not just in improving a single piece of writing (North 1984). For instance, Zhu (1995) points out that peer response groups can help members develop audience awareness, develop motivation for revision, and clarify their own perceptions of their writing through multiple perspectives; all of which are skills that can transfer across writing tasks. More recent research has even shown that in peer response groups, those who provide feedback learn as much or more as those who receive it (Lundstrom and Baker 2009), meaning that the interactional exchanges in peer response help both the feedback receiver and giver. Furthermore, peer response groups can provide a support system in which writers can hold each other accountable for consistent writing and motivate each other to write more, a method espoused in the Publish & Flourish program that helps faculty members hold themselves accountable for writing by recording their daily writing time and meeting weekly for a one hour feedback session (Gray 2010). Gray's research and program have found popularity and success among faculty, though it has not been extended to graduate students. Such a system of forming peer groups to engage in consistent writing and feedback provides the community support graduate writers need to overcome their feelings of isolation and helps provide the accountability and discipline called for by the field of scholarly productivity.

However, one drawback of peer groups, especially for disciplinary writers, is that graduate writers are not yet content experts in their field. Therefore the feedback they give may be insufficient or unhelpful. However, the non-expert problem illustrated here has been investigated in additional composition scholarship on genre theory. Composition researchers such as Ken Hyland (2003) argue that students can become socialized into disciplinary discourse by focusing on genre—or the ways a particular type of writing is

constructed by experts in the field. As students gain an awareness of disciplinary writing forms, functions, and social contexts, they increase their disciplinary expertise. Usually a genre approach is used in classroom-based instruction so that the teacher can guide students to notice disciplinary conventions, but Tardy (2006) suggests that genre learning can occur in either instructional or practice-based settings. Peer response groups span these two contexts. This is because graduate students are emerging specialists in their field with a developing awareness of the generic expectations of their discipline. By sharing their available expertise with other members of a writing group, they raise their own awareness of specific genre forms, functions, and social contexts while reinforcing or negotiating the genre knowledge of others. They are a group in-between practice and instruction that immediately applies instruction and self-study of genre forms to the practice of disciplinary writing. In order to transition from student to professional, all graduate students must balance their disciplinary knowledge with the thesis or dissertation genre, a task which can cause graduate writers to struggle (Gillespie 2007), but community support, motivation, accountability from peers, and personal discipline can facilitate this process.

2.3. Graduate education research & writing center praxis

Peer response groups, regular writing practices, and accountability can benefit graduate students' productivity by helping them overcome feelings of isolation in the writing process, a lack of motivation, and a lack of discipline. However, graduate students may find it difficult to implement graduate writing groups on their own and could benefit from formalized institutional support to harness their writing potential. Graduate education practitioners and writing praxis scholars recognize their institutional role in supporting graduate student writers by implementing programs for graduate student writing development (Marin 2009). One major example is that of dissertation boot camps, which first appeared in 2005 through the University of Pennsylvania graduate center (Mastroieni and Cheung 2011) and has since spread to major universities across the country. These boot camps are designed to provide motivation, self-discipline, and a sense of community to thesis and dissertation writers, and "institutions report that their students flock to Dissertation Boot Camp" (Mastroieni and Cheung 2011). The proliferation and popularity of these events highlights the need and desire among graduate students for support in their writing efforts. Other graduate writing support comes in the form of writing centers that have proliferated in U.S. universities and often attract committed graduate students who wish to work one-on-one with a writing professional to develop their writing or research skills.

Although efforts from these fields of scholarship do address the feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and lack of discipline faced by graduate student writers and succeed in helping some graduate students, the solutions offered seem to be one-time, quick fixes instead of an on-going, structured system. For example, most dissertation boot camps and graduate writing center programs are held just once or only occasionally during a semester, which may encourage binge writing instead of developing daily consistency. Additionally, they are not peer-driven, meaning that students are not in control of the timing and manageability of feedback, nor are students necessarily able to both give and receive feedback within a supportive response group, even in progressive "Writing Process" dissertation camps (Lee and Golde 2013). Furthermore, many of these programs require students to be in the final stages of their graduate programs and to only attend if they have dissertation material to work on. This is problematic for newer graduate students

who could benefit from developing writing habits consistent with scholarly productivity research from the first day of their graduate programs. Suggestions for linking institutional support with the interdisciplinary research discussed above will be discussed later.

The purpose of this review has been to articulate the strengths of several disciplinary fields that complement each other and combine in a powerful way to address the feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and lack of discipline graduate students face. For instance, scholarly productivity research has identified writing strategies that lead to increased writing by addressing motivation and discipline, while composition theories explain how peer response creates community support that can lead to improved writing. Meanwhile, graduate education and writing center administrators have insights into harnessing institutional power and implementing programs for graduate student development. While these various disciplines have worked alone and sometimes in concert to increase writing productivity or quality, we propose an interdisciplinary approach to helping graduate student writers accomplish their writing tasks through graduate writing groups that can imbue graduate students with more motivation, discipline, and community by obtaining frequent, manageable, and expert feedback and accountability without draining the resources of their advisors and other institutional programs.

3. OUR GRADUATE WRITING GROUP

Among professional academics, the use of writing groups to increase scholarly activity has been codified by Tara Gray in her program Publish & Flourish. Such a program, however, has not been extended to graduate students despite the potential for successful implementation until now. We formed a graduate writing group with 4 MA and PhD Linguistics students based largely on the Publish & Flourish program to address our own feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and lack of discipline. We committed to writing for a minimum of 15 minutes a day, 5 days a week, recording our time in a shared document for interpersonal accountability, meeting for an hour once a week to share writing samples, and providing peer feedback.

In recording our writing time, we chose to include any time dedicated to the academic writing process including doing critical reading for a literature review, collecting and analyzing data, brainstorming for a project, drafting an essay, or polishing a paper. Including these extra activities kept us motivated on our scholarly projects regardless of what stage of the writing process we were in. We then presented the equivalent of 2 pages of writing at our weekly peer group meetings. In reviewing the samples, each person received exactly 15 minutes as timed by a visible timer: 5 minutes for the group (including the author) to read the sample silently and 10 minutes for all of the reviewers to give oral comments.

Because of our flexible definition of what constituted writing, the writing samples reviewed during the weekly meeting sometimes varied greatly. In one meeting, for example, a group member sought feedback on points of possible confusion and the logical order of the interview questions she would use to collect data for her master's thesis. The next group member sought final polishing on an abstract for an article submission to an academic journal. Both members were at very different stages of the writing process, but our graduate writing group provided support for both members' goals. Letting others into such an isolated and personal process was both intimidating and incredibly encouraging, but journeying through the writing process as a team made the road to academic scholarship a much more manageable path.

4. REFLECTING ON THE GRADUATE WRITING GROUP MODEL

The graduate writing group model we adopted addressed many of the anxieties that accompany writing for graduate students, such as feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and lack of discipline. This is because our writing group provided a peer support system, commitment to consistent personal writing, and group accountability. Such a system of support rejects the widely accepted view that writing is an isolated activity and that a writer is only accountable to him or herself and perhaps to a professor or academic advisor. The benefit of the group model is that the members are accountable to each other in a horizontal, non-hierarchical manner, which offsets many of the barriers of writing. However, as researchers, we wanted to examine how membership in our writing group affected our scholarly productivity and transformed our experiences with isolation, motivation, and discipline in the writing endeavor.

We investigated our writing experiences by using a methodology of participatory action research (PAR). Contrary to a positivist research paradigm which favors scientific inquiry into objective reality, a PAR methodology assumes a subjectively, socially-constructed reality (O'Brian 2001) where the participants are the researchers. Also, in PAR the research agenda is more than just research for research sake; PAR should have a positive, real-world effect to better the research community (Walter 2009). Traditionally PAR uses a cyclical methodology of investigation by identifying a problem, moving to collaboration and planning an initial solution, enacting and observing the solution, reflecting on the solution outcomes, and finally building on initial successes or redesigning the solution (Walter 2009).

In our work as graduate writers, the problem we wanted to solve was what we perceived as our own deficient writing habits, which included procrastination and fear of writing. The founding member of our group introduced the Publish & Flourish program, which we decided to modify and enact. We observed this solution by way of monitoring our own writing progress. At the end of twenty weeks, we created reflection questions and independently wrote our observations of the effectiveness of our graduate writing group. Obviously our methodology was strongly biased since we knew that we wanted the graduate writing group to be successful. However, this bias is unproblematic in PAR because the objective is for participant researchers to engineer their own solutions and improvements to enact positive social change. If the initial solution is unsuccessful, participant researchers are expected to continue to improve the solution until it is successful, not merely reject it. It may subsequently be possible to construct a positivist research study to externally validate the effectiveness of the solution.

Our initial observations immediately showed that membership in our graduate writing group was beneficial to our writing productivity. All four members of the group recorded their daily writing time for 20 weeks, which was two quarters of academic study. Table 1 shows the time spent by our third-most productive group member during spring quarter 2012. In a single 10-week quarter, this writer averaged 51 minutes of writing per day over 60 days, totaling nearly 50 hours of writing. Even more impressive is the fact that, on average, all writers in the group increased the number of hours they spent writing by 50% from the first to the second quarter of the study. In 20 weeks, the four of us collectively wrote for 292 hours. Additionally, we separately wrote or finished three full-length journal articles, started an MA thesis, finished two others, and wrote a number of

other term papers for a total of more than 120 pages of polished writing. All of this was on top of taking 2 or 3 classes and teaching one class each.

Table 1 In 10 weeks, one author spent nearly 50 hours writing.

	M	T	W	TH	F	S	Week Totals	
							Min	Hours
W1	15	15	15	75	60	45	225	3.8
W2	15	30	40	10	20	150	265	4.4
W3	50	45	15	30	15		155	2.6
W4	15	30	25	120	30		220	3.7
W5	30	35	25	90	15	60	255	4.3
W6	30	30	20	45	30		155	2.6
W7	15	30	20	25	0	55	145	2.4
W8	15	15	30	30	0		90	1.5
W9	150	15	0	300	180	250	895	14.9
W10	120	270	15	15	15		435	7.3
DayTotals	455	515	205	740	365	560		
Hours	7.6	8.6	3.4	12.3	6.1	9.3		
Total Minutes	2840		Average min/day			51.6		
Total Hours	47.3		Average hours/week			7.9		

This list of accomplishments signaled that our solution to productive writing was successful. However, we also wanted to determine if our writing group mitigated feelings of isolation as well as a lack of motivation and discipline for writing. To investigate this, we constructed a 7-item self-reflection questionnaire asking about the effects of the graduate writing group on time management, productivity, accountability, writing consistency, attitude toward writing, awareness of genre, and group dynamics. We each completed our questionnaire individually at home and then compared responses. A member of the research team summarized our findings. In the graduate writing group model, writing on a daily basis remained an isolated experience, but the weekly peer meeting provided a safe space to share and give each other feedback and see other members' progress. Members reported this to be an integral part of the model since the built-in support system created a feeling of being on a team. One researcher reported that "a graduate student writing group creates a safe space where ideas can be shared and exchanged without consequence." The group also gave an opportunity to share projects in any stage of development instead of waiting until the project was mostly done to share it with a professor, which can be a high-stakes situation.

Along with making the writing process less isolating and more group-oriented, the writing group model counteracted a lack of motivation. In fact, writing group members reported having more ideas and generating fresh ideas, leading to an increased motivation to write and a more fluid writing process. The strategy of slow and steady was more effective than binge writing, and the achievable daily goal both lessened pressure and gave members a feeling of accomplishment. Another researcher commented that "sharing my writing in the group often left me excited and optimistic about revising a text." Having peers or colleagues review, comment, and give feedback on a paper created new ways of thinking that made the writing process more enjoyable than dreadful and, by extension, engendered more personal motivation.

In terms of improving writing discipline, one group member reported that, “At the start of our group, the accountability to the group was really the driving force that kept me on track. Now it is more the productivity benefits that motivate me to do my 15 minutes a day.” In essence, writing became a priority and a part of each group member’s daily routine. Writing group members reported a feeling of using their time more effectively, which resulted in a higher quality of writing. Additionally, accountability created a structure that members could incorporate into their routines which resulted in more disciplined writing.

Not only was there a decrease in feelings of isolation and increases in motivation and discipline, but there was also a reported increase of knowledge of genre conventions and expectations. For example, another group member wrote, “through reading my colleagues’ papers at all points of the process in their writing, I was able to see different styles emerge, as well as discuss the audience the paper was created for.” It was beneficial for each member to be in both positions: having their work reviewed and reviewing others’ work. When others were reviewing our work, the feedback helped shape future revisions, and reading others’ work provided the opportunity to see how other people wrote and structured their papers and research.

Our PAR results indicate that graduate student writers can achieve high levels of individual productivity by implementing a structured, interdisciplinary approach to writing that draws on research from the fields of scholarly productivity, composition studies, graduate education, and writing center praxis. These graduate writing groups can provide the community support, motivation, and discipline that graduate students need in order to become more prolific and confident scholars without draining the resources of their advisors or institutional programs.

5. IMPLEMENTING A GRADUATE WRITING GROUP PROGRAM

We were able to establish our graduate writing group independent of institutional support only because a group member had previously attended a Publish & Flourish workshop that trained him on the process. Sadly, other graduate students who could tackle their own struggles of writing isolation, motivation, and discipline may not benefit from this interdisciplinary approach without institutional support to help organize the groups and teach members about effective writing processes. As such, a final purpose of this paper is to recommend ways that graduate education units or writing centers could employ their institutional power and experience to give graduate students from all disciplines access to a graduate writing group.

To find out how a graduate unit could create an infrastructure for providing writing groups, we compiled a collection of considerations based on the practices of the peer group programs at four U.S. universities: the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Kansas University; Michigan State University; and our own group. We examined the services these programs offered to writing groups, how groups are formed, and the commitment requirements of the group participants.

First, graduate studies programs or writing centers function as a resource of information and could assist with the logistics of organizing graduate writing groups. Several programs provided relevant information about writing groups through websites, handouts, workshops, orientations, start-up kits, and other literature or materials. Such information may include an overview of the expectations of group participation and tips on conducting peer review

during the weekly meetings. Graduate units may also provide assistance with organizing logistics such as providing a signup system for interested students, facilitating group formations, providing additional accountability by managing time sheets, or providing a meeting place.

Second, if graduate writing groups are supported at the institutional level, we determined five important factors to consider in forming groups: (1) the composition of the group, i.e. disciplinary-specific or interdisciplinary; (2) the size of the group; (3) the type of group, i.e. meeting in-person or on-line; (4) how the group is formed, i.e. self-organized or institutionally assigned; and (5) organizing entity's role in those groups, i.e. facilitated or independent.

Although these considerations are straightforward, the first and last warrant further discussion. Whether the overall composition of the group is disciplinary or interdisciplinary could affect the group's efficacy in different ways. If all members are from the same department or at least related disciplines, all group members would be conversant in the discipline and could offer on-point content feedback and suggest relevant readings. However, an interdisciplinary group could provide more focus on clarity rather than specific comments on content that a graduate advisor could (and generally does) provide. The role that the organizing entity could play in the groups is also an important consideration as some universities offer or even required a writing center tutor be part of the group. Our group did not have a writing center tutor, but an obvious benefit of involving one would be access to specialized writing feedback and instruction on writing processes. However, a potential drawback of this is that having a writing expert might disrupt the horizontal organization of the group.

Last, an additional factor to consider is the commitment requirements of group members such as when a graduate student should join a group, what is considered productive output, what each writer must complete on a daily basis, and what will happen during the weekly group meetings. Most university writing centers require participants to be in the writing stage of their thesis or dissertation, though our group members were all at different stages of the writing process. Though forming groups according to writing stage is logical, we believe that the benefits of a graduate writing group would aid graduate students at any stage of the process. The definition of production could include time-on-task, as our group did, or a specific page quota as other universities do. Finally, weekly group meetings could be spent as described above with each member's work being reviewed or have more in depth discussions on the work of just one or two members per meeting.

Each of these factors should be considered as they may influence who can participate in writing groups and at what time, and they may also influence the overall atmosphere of the group. In some cases a graduate unit may wish to establish norms of conduct or provide loose structure and allow the group to decide the specifics. Such decisions of course should be made within the context of available resources and the needs of their student populations.

Generally, it would make sense for an educational institution to house a graduate writing group program in an interdisciplinary entity such as a graduate studies office, student academic success center, or writing center. However, graduate writing groups could also be implemented within individual colleges or silos or even at the departmental or graduate program level. Establishing such groups will not only benefit students as demonstrated in this paper, but also the coordinating entity. Some institutional benefits include increased graduate student productivity, increased completion rates as students successfully tackle their theses or dissertations, increased speed of program completion,

improved research abilities and products, fulfilled mission statements, improved visibility on campus and within the field, and stronger candidates for professional academic positions. Clearly graduate programs have as much to gain from graduate writing groups as individual students do.

6. CONCLUSION

The Dissertation or Drop-out scenario is detrimental to both graduate students and disciplinary graduate programs and institutions, though it is not always clear to students or university personnel how to overcome this problem. Graduate students must complete complex writing tasks to graduate but it can be difficult for students to feel supported in this endeavor let alone motivated or disciplined to go at it alone. Additionally, advisors, chairs, and deans may have limited resources or expertise to help struggling graduate writers. This paper has sought to solve these problems through a solution that our participant action research suggests effectively increases productivity and breaks down barriers of isolation, weak motivation, and poor writing discipline without draining the resources of graduate advisors. Graduate writing groups are an interdisciplinary solution that leverages insights from the fields of scholarly productivity, composition, graduate education, and writing center praxis, and they have interdisciplinary appeal as they can be useful for writers in and across any discipline. In an educational setting where students and institutions value an efficient path to graduation, an approach to productive writing that crosses disciplinary boundaries is an elegant solution.

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