Scholarly Writing Groups: A Source of Support for Early Career Counseling Faculty and Doctoral Students

Paper based on a program to be presented at the 2016 Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES) Conference, October 7, 2016, New Orleans, LA.

Rodney E. Pennamon, Lauren J. Moss, and Sarah I. Springer

Pennamon, Rodney E., is an instructor at Webster University. His areas of interest include group work, disability advocacy, and clinical mental health.

Moss, Lauren J., is an assistant professor at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Her areas of interest include school counseling, group work, bullying prevention, and social justice.

Springer, Sarah I., is an assistant professor at Monmouth University. Her areas of interest include school counseling, group work, and supervision.

Abstract

The unstructured nature of the academic environment necessitates individuals to organize and prioritize their time in productive ways. With writing productivity as a primary desired outcome for many early career counseling faculty and doctoral students, many academics look for sources of support to help facilitate the writing process. Writing groups are one strategy used by many academics to structure their time and construct a source of accountability. While these scholars might indicate that they have experienced some levels of success working with others during a writing process, they may not be able to articulate what it was, exactly, that the writing group provided to create a productive and supportive writing process. This article explores a variety of scholarly writing group types, options for application of writing groups in the counselor education field, and suggests further areas of research that may help scholars to better understand the intricacies and impact of scholarly writing groups.

Keywords: writing groups, scholarship, collaboration

Writing groups provide a wide range of supports to academics who wish to increase scholarship productivity. According to Page, Edwards, and Wilson (2012), these groups have the potential to offer participants initial motivation to start writing projects, a structured schedule, and timely progress towards the publication process. Whether the task involves simply organizing a literature review or includes a more creative and substantive product like organizing a manuscript, book, or grant proposal, the creation of
scholarly writing groups provides members a structure for encouragement and routine. The added potential for increased collaboration, both within-group and across disciplines, creates opportunities to fuel passion and maintain motivation and accountability. Writing groups have elements of group work found in counseling.

**Group Dynamics/Therapeutic Factors**

The success of scholarly writing groups is likely determined by the motivation of its members and their management of group dynamics. The therapeutic factors inherent in group work (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) can be applied to writing groups and may be especially relevant to the individual progress and overall productivity of each member. For example, core factors such as group cohesion and universality can help writing group members feel connected to a purpose in a unique and meaningful way; these factors can also increase trust in the process. For instance, when inevitable writing blocks occur, in a trusting environment, members can experience catharsis while sharing their experiences and instillation of hope with support, idea sharing, and consultation. Furthermore, scholarly writing groups have the potential to support goal setting and skill acquisition through feedback and modeling. For instance, goal setting allows for group members to formulate ideas aloud and be held accountable to one another for productivity and deadlines. Through openness to feedback exchanges, individual writing group members and the group collectively generate positive receptivity and subsequently build upon the relationships created to provide an appropriate balance of challenge and support for each other. Thus, the very nature of receiving and imparting information can increase social connectedness and foster a nurturing “think tank.” Moreover, counseling professionals need support with the writing process.

**Need for Scholarly Writing Groups in the Counseling Field**

In the counseling field, writing and publication are a vital function for academics as a professional expectation and tradition and also for the practical purpose of disseminating important bodies of knowledge throughout the field (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). Unfortunately, without support, motivation, and a plan of action, the chance of successfully producing written work is greatly reduced. This is true for counselor educators and seasoned researchers, as well as for doctoral students in the counseling field. Feelings of being overwhelmed and secluded may be especially true for new faculty who must balance the demands of teaching, service, and scholarship, since identifying effective collaboration and mentorship is not always easy within the academic community (Page et al., 2012) and doctoral students writing the dissertation as their first major writing project outside of comprehensive exams. Accordingly, participating in scholarly writing groups may help to improve the writing self-efficacy of early professionals and doctoral students in the counseling field.

**Scholarly Writing Groups for Early Career Faculty**

After successfully defending a dissertation and graduating from a doctoral program, many emerging scholars feel as though they have ‘made it.’ While this sense of accomplishment is well deserved, outside of their dissertations, junior faculty coming
into the academy oftentimes have very little exposure to academic writing (Boice, 2000). Although many new faculty members enter higher education because of their desire to write and produce scholarly work, they may underestimate the time commitment necessary to produce written work of the substance and quantity required by their employing institutions (Page et al., 2012).

Campuses increasingly emphasize research in the form of reappointment, tenure, and promotion tied to the production of scholarly work and funded grants (Mikhailova & Nilson, 2007). Writing is viewed as a continuation of the research process, and publication in peer-reviewed journals is an important part of developing and maintaining an academic identity (Lee & Boud, 2003). This trend sets unprecedented stakes for new career faculty to write efficiently and productively. However, acclimating to the new ‘faculty’ identity is already time consuming and overwhelming, making it challenging for new career faculty to carve out precious time to write (Baldi, Sorcinelli, & Yun, 2013). Writing groups offer a structure for junior faculty to work productively within the ‘publish or perish’ culture of academia. The following offers several suggestions for early career counseling faculty to make the most of their institutions, colleagues, and writing groups:

- Identify faculty in the counseling field at the university who may be interested in collaborating on a grant writing project, preparing a conceptual manuscript, or conducting and writing up a research study.
- Identify interdisciplinary faculty at the university who may be interested in collaborating on a grant writing project, preparing a conceptual manuscript, or conducting and writing up a research study.
- Work collaboratively with tenured faculty members to establish writing groups in a way that provides motivation to all members (Page et al., 2012).
- Develop relationships with other early career professionals in the counseling field (outside of your university) who may wish to collaborate on a writing project.
- Develop interdisciplinary relationships with other early career professionals (outside of your university) who may wish to collaborate on a writing project.
- Engage in conversation with colleagues in the same and other institutions around their interest in joining a writing group and/or starting a collaborative writing project.
- Identify spaces at the university that would facilitate writing group meetings.
- Invite others with like interests to join a scholarly writing group.
- Embrace technology (e.g., Drop Box, Google Docs, Google Hangouts, Doodle Poll, etc.) when organizing geographically distant groups.
- Take a leadership role when organizing and facilitating scholarly writing groups.
- Identify resources that may already be available on campus (e.g., faculty mentorship programs, programming through the grants/sponsored projects office, initiatives from the office of professional development, etc.).

Several institutions have implemented a structured support for writing to address the needs of early career faculty. Notably, the University of Massachusetts Amherst maintains a stellar program through their Center for Teaching and Faculty Development (CTFD; Baldi et al., 2013). The CTFD supports a quiet and relaxing faculty writing space, which dispels the notion that writing must be done alone. The center also offers mini writing retreats with scheduled writing sessions and an annual faculty writing retreat.
that encourages faculty to jump start their summer writing. Furthermore, the center offers professional development workshops that focus on academic publishing and productivity, including a summer online writing fellowship focused on daily writing sessions. Additionally, the center provides a list of professional editors who offer editorial support and coaching through the writing process (Baldi et al., 2013).

While the needs of universities are as diverse as each early career faculty member, it is important for faculty to receive writing mentorship consistent with their individual career identity development, university priorities, and trends evolving within the counseling field. Although this ideology sounds direct and simplistic, it can cause challenges for many early career faculty in the field of counseling.

**Scholarly Writing Groups for Doctoral Students**

According to the Council of Graduate Schools’ Ph.D. Completion Project, at least 25% of graduate students who start a doctoral degree fail to finish their dissertation (Brady & Singh-Corcoran, 2016). Burnett (1999) named a host of reasons for this phenomenon. The explanations encompass differences in temperament and personality between students and faculty, a lack of motivation and persistence, isolation from their peers and faculty, and both financial and family circumstances (Burnett, 1999). Leder (1995) found that in order to be successful throughout the dissertation process, doctoral students need assistance with identifying and defining their topic, designing and planning their research project, finding and collecting material, constructing and writing multiple drafts, and getting their work out for others to review and read. While doctoral advisors support students through many of these tasks with wide variation among faculty mentors, many of these goals and tasks can be likewise supported through scholarly writing groups. Having a consistent physical space and time to write are critical in the success of doctoral students working to complete their dissertation (Hixson et al., 2016). As such, at increasing rates, many institutions encourage doctoral students to form writing groups to support them through the dissertation process. While the structure of doctoral writing groups vary, the following are several suggested practices for doctoral writing groups:

- Consider pairing new students with second- or third-year doctoral students to discuss the academic/dissertation writing process.
- Start an academic writing support group where students can express their concerns, challenges, and successes.
- Establish a convenient meeting location for a writing support group – empty classrooms, coffee shops, college libraries, and study rooms will do.
- Identify a core group of individuals from the writing support group who are equally committed and determined to “get the job done” and who will commit to a specific type of scholarly writing group.
- Determine the best location for a scholarly writing group meeting (may or may not be the same as the support group).
- Invite like-minded individuals to join a scholarly writing group.
- Embrace technology (e.g., Drop Box, Google Docs, Google Hangouts, Doodle Poll, etc.) when organizing geographically distant groups.
- Take a leadership role when organizing and facilitating scholarly writing groups.
- Honor the group process; establish norms and celebrate successes.
- Advocate for writing support from the university.
The University of Texas is just one of many university campuses that offers a comprehensive approach to assisting and supporting graduate students in the writing process. The exemplary services provided to students include a dissertation writing boot camp held during the summer, an interdisciplinary writing group, an all-inclusive writing service provided by trained writing consultants, a ‘scholars common’ within the library that provides dedicated space for graduate students (complete with a kitchenette), a writing center with 1 hour one-on-one consultation, and a MindBody Lab within the mental health center that offers students opportunities to explore a variety of resources for improving their overall wellbeing.

Not every institution is able to offer the boutique-like services available at The University of Texas; however, identifying the dedicated writing personnel and a writing-friendly space at any given institution can provide a starting place for doctoral students and academic writing groups who seek assistance as they advance through their doctoral journey. As doctoral students complete their dissertations and graduate, many of them will soon move into the role of faculty themselves. Providing writing support for these new academics as they enter campuses as junior faculty is likely to be crucial to their success and movement toward the tenure process.

**Desired Outcomes**

By starting with desired professional outcomes, academics in the counseling field can manage their professional writing efforts in a systematic and organized fashion. In this way, the dissemination of information via scholarly writing groups becomes a clear means (e.g., compiled research studies, conceptual manuscripts, and grant proposals) to an end goal (e.g., dissemination of current, useful information to the field of counseling). Ultimately, most scholars in the counseling field would likely agree that their end goal is to create and disseminate research and novel approaches to the field.

**Research**

Although emerging academics in the counseling field may find the research process a sizeable task to master in its own right, writing is a large part of conducting and disseminating research. For example, a researcher typically prepares a research proposal prior to executing a research study in order to ensure that the research methods and procedures are implemented properly. Then, after research has been conducted, the researcher must compile a research report in order to organize, summarize, and disseminate findings so that others in the field can learn from research outcomes and integrate findings into practice. By working within scholarly writing groups to construct research proposals and reports, scholars in the counseling field may find the process to be more efficient and less intimidating.

**Conceptual Ideas**

In addition to writing up the results from empirical studies, academics in the counseling field also value exchanging information around counseling theory and practice. Sharing, consuming, and applying conceptual information helps scholars and practitioners alike to analyze approaches to counseling in novel ways and consider new approaches for complex clients and issues. Therefore, scholarly writing groups serve as a
practical, constructive way for groups of counseling scholars to consider and deconstruct complex issues consumable by others in the field.

Grants

Grant writing is another primary writing goal for scholars in the counseling field. Simply put, grants help to fund many types of research and programs that benefit the field of counseling and, ultimately, consumers of the counseling process (e.g., clients). Punctuated by brevity and often complicated application requirements, grant writing sometimes seems foreign and confusing for scholars who typically focus on academic (e.g., research and conceptual) writing. However, once the grant writing style and process is mastered, grants can provide significant support for a scholar’s career development in addition to offering excellent recognition to institutions with which the scholar is affiliated. Ultimately, grants serve a wonderful role in funding a better understanding of the field of counseling. Therefore, scholars in the field of counseling serve themselves, their institutions, and the profession by creating scholarly writing groups targeted at compiling quality grant proposals.

Scholarly Writing Groups

Researchers have identified writing groups as a critical component of successful, productive writing (LaFrance, n.d.). A primary reason writing groups are so helpful is due to the way in which they work to demystify the writing process (Moore, 2003). This is especially important, as “writing anxiety, a condition that affects writers and causes heightened stress and anxiety during the writing process” can impact persistence and productivity (Wynne, Guo, & Wang, 2014, p. 366). By leaning on strategies to help facilitate a productive group process, scholars who implement writing groups may find they have a more productive and rewarding experience. There are many elements scholars can utilize to help propagate positive group dynamics and therapeutic processes within a scholarly writing group. For example, the use of calendars for scheduling, goal-setting mechanisms, progress-monitoring strategies, skillful processing of feelings specific to the writing process, and the use of a rewards/reinforcement schedule may all prove helpful for facilitating a productive scholarly writing group (Grant & Knowles, 2000; Silva, 2007).

Scheduling

As in most pursuits of production, writing tasks that remain unscheduled often go unfinished. Accordingly, Silva (2007) recommended making scheduling a priority when implementing writing groups. Working backward from a deadline can help scholars and writing groups set realistic deadlines, check-ins, and meetings in order to most effectively meet the desired outcome. Low-tech options for scheduling certainly exist with the traditional phone call scheduling and/or using a paper calendar to plot out meeting dates and deadlines. However, more advanced technology may also serve as a huge support for scholarly writing groups. For example, Doodle® Polls provide an excellent way to quickly survey all members of a writing group in order to establish meeting times that work best for all group members. Additionally, Google Calendars© can also be used so that all group members have access to the same, Web-based calendar to record, copy, and
add writing group meetings, deadlines, events, etc. Like Doodle®, Google is free of charge and fairly simple to use. Web-based scheduling tools and calendars are numerous and particularly helpful for writing groups with members who are geographically separated.

**Goal Setting**

Once a deadline for the final written product is established, goal setting serves as an important aspect of scholarly writing groups (Silva, 2007). Groups should work collectively and/or in support of individual end goals in order to create realistic, measurable objectives that will help them take steps toward writing at a pace that will ultimately support construction of the final piece. These goals and objectives should be recorded (on the groups’ calendar and/or schedule) to remind each group member of their group and individual roles and responsibilities. Creating and monitoring S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely) goals may help to track progress most effectively.

**Progress Monitoring**

When considering how goals will ultimately be met, personal accountability plays a large role. Gray (2010) found that the success of faculty writers who maintained schedules and reported to peers on their progress in small groups were seen as more effective than those who did not have this system in place. Therefore, it is important for writing groups to openly and transparently monitor their individual and collective progress. Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke (2009) reported that feedback from peers played heavily in the success of writers and was viewed as having a positive influence, underscoring the importance of regular check-ins with writing group members as a way to maintain writing project production schedules. Progress monitoring can take many forms. A scheduled phone/conference call can do the trick as far as keeping scholars accountable to the progress they intend to make. Some academics prefer using e-mail as a method of communication around progress monitoring. E-mail allows individuals to share their work via attachment. Additionally, one of the authors uses group “text-checks” as another way to encourage progress monitoring as members agree to start at a given time, state their goals in two lines or less, and check-in with each other via text message in a defined period of time (e.g., 45 minutes). If working collaboratively on a project, other free resources like Google Docs© allow group members to follow each other’s progress in real time.

**Processing Emotions**

Academics have their own sets of feelings, strengths, anxieties, and growing-edges around the writing process. When working with a writing group, those dispositions inevitably bubble up and affect the writing process. After cultivating safety, scholars can lean on writing groups as an introspective mechanism to process these feelings and to ultimately work more effectively towards their respective writing goals (Grant & Knowles, 2000). Feelings can be processed through journal sharing, whereby members log their emotional reactions to the writing process and take time as a group to discuss strengths and growing-edges or through in-vivo video conferencing, using platforms like Zoom© and Google Hangouts©, to process immediate reactions and struggles. These
outlets can provide space and support for members to normalize each other’s experiences, mitigate member anxiety, and through the management of these emotional responses, even foster self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Rewards
Since the writing process can prove daunting and rigorous, it is important for writing groups to build in incentives for both individuals and the group collectively in order to keep hopes and productivity high (Silva, 2007). For example, once individuals in the group have achieved a benchmark objective or goal, intentionally allotting time to celebrate these successes can provide encouragement and motivation for each member of the group; acknowledgement may come in small forms such as weekly success reports or, on a larger scale, through organization of a retreat to celebrate the completion of a larger goal (e.g., dissertation).

Incentivizing the process both reinforces productive behavior for the individual to continue on a productive path and helps to create a culture of accomplishment in the group as a whole. Modeling and celebrating productive behaviors and outcomes can also motivate others in the group to keep a similar schedule and likewise promote individual self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Types of Writing Groups

Generally speaking, scholarly writing groups can support a variety of academic interests, orientations, and goals. Specifically, if members of an academic writing group are able to clearly articulate the intention and nature of the group, they will likely attract members who actively support these goals. Therefore, upon formation of an academic writing group, it may prove proactive and helpful for the group to be defined by type. This identification can be determined by an individual looking to start a group who would subsequently add members with a similar goal and orientation, or it can be articulated collectively by a group of people who have decided to form an academic writing group, determining the specific scope and norms of their process together. Overall, academic writing groups can be organized just as any other type of writing group. For instance Rockquemore (2015) described five various types of writing groups: traditional writing groups, writing accountability groups, write-on-site groups, online writing groups, or writing ‘boot camps.’

Traditional Writing Groups
When referring to writing groups, most people think about a cluster of people with a shared interest in writing. In essence, this traditional type of writing group can easily be applied to academic writing groups, which are simply a small group of scholars committed to spending a specific period of time together engaging in a writing task. In this type of writing group there is less emphasis on productivity, with the focus more on the process and action of writing.

Writing Accountability Groups
As the name suggests, writing accountability groups place an emphasis on writing objectives and, ultimately, end goals. Scholars who participate in writing accountability
groups are committed and accountable to each other around progress. Regular (typically weekly) meetings help to keep productivity high as group members aim to meet specific, articulated goals on a routine basis. Group members attend sessions prepared to ‘share out’ their progress with writing to the group and adjust existing goals and/or set new goals accordingly.

**Write-on-Site Groups**

Long-term deadlines simply do not motivate all academics to plan regular steps to get the job done. In these instances, write-on-site groups can be the perfect ‘fix’ to breaking down productivity barriers. This type of structure provides face-to-face meetup groups where scholars avoid isolation as an intervention to increase productivity. This may be especially effective for doctoral students who have completed course work in a group setting and then find themselves working almost exclusively independently on their dissertations. While there is the risk of increased socialization, with the right group dynamics, which includes the establishment of group rules and norms write-on-site groups can provide immediate feedback to group members and create space for real-time collaboration.

**Online Writing Groups**

Online writing groups encourage diligence by tracking progress and increasing personal ownership and responsibility of participants separated by distance. Platforms such as Drop Box™ and Google Docs© offer options for real-time monitoring and collaboration that support cooperation between group members despite the inability to meet face-to-face. Groups may share resources on the spot and supplement discussion through video conferencing or designate a certain period of time to share resources, drafts, and end products and meet virtually to discuss the process.

**Writing ‘Boot Camps’**

Often selected as a writing group option for academics who have a specific time-sensitive deadline or goal in mind, writing ‘boot camps’ may form in different ways. For example, writing ‘boot camps’ may be accessed in a retreat style where participants converge at a specific location for a set amount of time with limited distraction. Generally speaking, this type of writing group is professionally facilitated, offering a high structure, and often provides continuous support and/or directed feedback for participants. The need to attend to group dynamics (e.g., group rules and norms) is especially important in designing and achieving a shared goal in this format.

**Future Research**

When preparing research proposals or reports, conceptual manuscripts, and/or grant proposals, many scholars in the counseling field have likely experienced the benefits of scholarly writing groups. However, the published research around scholarly writing groups is limited. Further, research is limited on the impact of scholarly writing groups specific to the field of counseling doctoral student and early career academics. Therefore, there are a variety of research questions that must be studied to determine how to best implement writing groups for the aforementioned populations. For example,
researchers might explore the research question, Does participating in a writing group increase self-efficacy around scholarly writing for academics in the counseling field? It would benefit the field for this question to be explored for a variety of writing group types for both doctoral and early career faculty in the field of counseling. Another research question might focus on the connection between doctoral student process and early career faculty identity by asking, Does participating in a writing group during doctoral work impact the career identity development of junior faculty? Each of these questions may help to further identify aspects of doctoral training and junior faculty transition (e.g., mentorship) in need of further exploration.

Additionally, at this point, while anecdotal feedback has highlighted this topic, little to no research in the field of counseling and counselor education investigates people’s experiences participating in writing groups themselves. To gain insight into this topic, qualitative inquiries exploring the lived experiences of early career counseling faculty or doctoral students who participate in scholarly writing groups would likewise help to inform future practices for scholars in the counseling field.

**Conclusion**

Many early career faculty and doctoral students experience anxiety around the academic writing process. Writing groups represent a unique way to address this anxiety by cultivating motivation and productivity through peer support and consultation. When intentionally and explicitly discussed, dynamics inherent in group process (studied throughout the counseling curriculum) can serve to promote goal setting, accountability, confidence, and collaboration, which may ultimately result in greater contributions to the counseling field.

**References**


*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas*