Out of the Classroom and Away from One-to-One Sessions: The Efficacy of Writing Groups for High-Achieving Students

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Out of the Classroom and Away from One-to-One Sessions: 
The Efficacy of Writing Groups for High-Achieving Students

Vicki Kennell, Amy Elliot, & Tammy Conard-Salvo
Purdue University

ECWCA Conference 2016
Panel Overview

• How we used writing groups to meet needs of underserved populations
• Two IRB-approved case studies:
  – Graduate students working in a research institute
  – Undergraduate honors students
• What survey responses reveal
• Sustainability of the writing groups
• Discussion and Q&A
Graduate Writing Groups
## Program Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College of Agriculture</th>
<th>College of Health &amp; Human Sciences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2013 &amp; Fall 2013</td>
<td>Spring 2014 to the Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor-Initiated</td>
<td>Research Director-Initiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Lab Pilot Program</td>
<td>Research Institute Funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory</td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab Group</td>
<td>Research Institute Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All International Students</td>
<td>International/Domestic → All Domestic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Program Method

• Up to 6 writers
• 2 Writing Lab facilitators
• Advance reading and commenting
• Writer-chosen discussion focus
• Document-based practical writing activity
Impetus for the Study

Graduate writers are:

• Able to identify many/most problems in field-specific documents.

• Good at give-and-take discussions of the problems.

• Able to identify some of their own sentence-level problems (e.g., semi-colons).

• Often **UNABLE** to suggest solutions to the problems.

• Often **UNABLE** to apply their knowledge to their own writing.
## Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Aliases</th>
<th>Semesters in Writing Group</th>
<th>Semesters in Current Graduate Program</th>
<th>Semesters in Research Institute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0 (staff)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Methods: Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sample Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Writing Group has made me more confident in my writing abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Recognize Problems</td>
<td>Writing Group has helped me to diagnose problems in my own writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Articulate Problems</td>
<td>Writing Group has helped me to improve my writing-related vocabulary so I can articulate the problems in my own and others’ writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of the Writing Group</td>
<td>Writing Group has given me transferable skills that I can use in future writing projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of Feedback</td>
<td>Writing Group has made me more likely to seek feedback on my writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Methods: Coding

## Method 1: Style of Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrective</td>
<td>Makes insertions or deletions in the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>Tells the writer what to correct but makes no actual changes to the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Talks to the writer about the text; offers commentary; asks questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>Makes a judgment call; labels something good or bad.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Methods: Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method 2: Type of Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deletions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words, phrases, and/or punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insertions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words, phrases, and/or punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline-Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data handling, measures, models vs. text, citations, general content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within paragraphs, within sections, between sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, sentence clarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey Results: Overall Confidence

100% of writers “agreed” that writing group has increased their confidence in their own writing abilities.

80% (4 of 5) of writers “agreed” that writing group has increased their confidence in their own editing abilities.
Confidence in Skills Compared to Peers

Better Than

About the Same

Worse Than

Editing
Writing-Related
Content-Related
Survey Results: Recognizing Problems

100% of writers said they can more easily diagnose problems in their own writing.

80% of writers said they can more easily diagnose problems in others’ writing.
Usefulness of Seeing Errors and Strategies of Other Writers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Level</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree nor Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey Results: Value of the Writing Group

100% of writers said that Writing Group has given them transferable skills.

100% of writers said that Writing Group has given them writing-related help they would not normally receive in a classroom setting.

100% of writers said that Writing Group has given them writing-related help that they would not normally receive in their academic program.
Survey Results: Value of Feedback

100% of writers said they are more likely to **seek feedback** on their work because of Writing Group.

80% of writers said they **would participate** in writing group if members of the **Writing Center were not present**.
Value of Feedback

Neither Agree nor Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree

Peer Feedback as Valuable
Writing Center Staff Feedback as Valuable
Coding Method 1 Over Time

- Corrective
- Directive
- Interactive
- Evaluative

Time Periods:
- Fall 2014
- Spring 2015
- Fall 2015
- Spring 2016
Coding Method 2: Change Across Papers (All Categories)
Coding Method 2:  Pairs
Coding Method 2: Change Across Papers (3 Categories)
Coding Method 2: Change Across Papers: (F’s Papers)

Coding Method 2: Parallels and Oppositions

Coding Method 2: Change Across Papers (G’s Papers)
Implications

• Importance of participation over time
• Importance of modeling
• Importance of discussing all elements of writing
• Value of Writing Group within an academic program
Questions for Future Research

• What types of comments mean better writing?
• To what extent are writers aware of the types of comments they write?
• Homogeneous vs. heterogeneous groups: What type works better and for whom?
• Will the improvements in writing continue without the Writing Group?
• Do the improvements in writing transfer to papers in other fields?
Undergraduate Writing Groups
Pilot Group Background

- Pilot emerging from collaboration with liberal arts honors classes
  - Cohort of 50 first year students each year
  - Enroll in one or more courses in English, history, political science, or communication
- Two semesters of voluntary participation
- Groups not unsustainable but revealed interesting information
General Profile of Participants

• High achieving students
• Liberal arts majors
• Large percentage of women
• Part of a cohort that takes the same classes and lives in the same dormitory
• Like other students on campus, expected to graduate in 4 years
Survey Context

• Spring 2015
  – Survey was administered at the end.
  – Questions focused on efficacy of groups.

• Fall 2015
  – A pre- and post-participation survey was administered.
  – Questions focused on students’ self-identified writing processes, where students sought feedback, and writing group efficacy.
Results: Writing Practices

• Brainstorming and planning
• Writing entire draft in one sitting
• Making significant changes while working on the first draft
• Including reminders to self during drafting
• Skipping over places when stuck and returning later
Results: Revision Strategies

• Writing on printed copies
• Reading aloud
• Changing word choices
• Rewriting whole sentences
Results: Sources of Feedback

• Comments from another person (usually professors, tutors, or friends)
• Comments from previous writing assignments
• Appearance of the draft
• Grammar and spell check in the word processor
Results: Writing Abilities/Confidence

• Participants are generally confident in their abilities as writers.
• They are comfortable with both HOCs and LOCs, such as
  – Organization
  – Writing clear thesis and topic sentences
  – Using tables, charts, or graphs
  – Word choice and grammar
Results: Efficacy of Groups

• Some groups never met due to students’ availability.
• Groups that did meet were helpful.
• Some participants had unrealistic or inaccurate expectations for the group.
  – Meet during class or offer incentive.
  – Discipline-specific expertise necessary for tutor.
  – More editorial intervention by tutors.
Group Participation Effects

• Friends and family members still ranked highest as sources of feedback.

• Revision practices stayed the same, and participants remained confident in their writing.

• Participants were not more likely to visit the Writing Lab.
Overall Takeaways

• Students were generally confident about their writing abilities and reported variety of writing processes.
• Participants find writing feedback valuable, but the source of feedback varies.
• Writing groups add one more obligation, even when participation is voluntary.
From Groups to Writing Fellows

• Honors college faculty still valued collaboration and Writing Lab involvement.
• One or more tutors visited the class early with plans to return for later peer review sessions.
• Students made early Writing Lab appointments with tutors.
Discussion/Q&A

• Have you offered writing groups? How do they operate?
• Why and how did you start writing groups?
• How do you measure success? What factors contribute to success?
• How do you sustain your groups?
• If you’re considering starting writing groups, why?