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Making It Your Own: Developing and Administrating Graduate Writing Retreats

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Making It Your Own: Developing and Administrating Graduate Writing Retreats

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Purdue Writing Lab

Workshop for CGC Virtual Summer Institute, June 2021



Good afternoon. Thanks for joining us today.

I'm Mitch Hobza, an assistant director at the Purdue Writing Lab. I currently teach the staff education course for undergraduates who want to work in the writing lab. I'm currently working on my dissertation.

I'm Vicki Kennell, an associate director in the Purdue Writing Lab. My work there focuses primarily on support for graduate writers and for international students. My apologies for being a disembodied voice today. I'm currently in a cabin on Lake Superior, and the wifi can only handle audio for calls like this.

Our goal for today's workshop is for you to gain some first-hand experience developing a graduate writing retreat from the ground up. Most of what we talk about will also be relevant to other forms of programming for graduate students, including events related to oral communication, but today's program will be set in the context of a multi-day dissertation writing retreat, often called a "camp."

We'll start with a brief look at our context. The rest of the workshop will then be divided into 3 major sections, each with its own activity:

1. Identifying an Audience

1. Handling the Logistics
2. Conducting an Assessment

We'll have a time for Q&A at the end.

Each of our activities will involve small groups working with Jamboard frames, so before we begin, let me give you a quick overview of how to use Jamboard.

For a look at our context, let's start with program evaluations. When we survey our attendees, they comment on....

I started with zero
pages and now have
24 pages!

Progress

I started with zero pages and now have 24 pages!

Sometimes I don't know where to start because I get overwhelmed, so doing the goal planning before the session was super helpful.

Skills

I started with zero pages and now have 24 pages!

Sometimes I don't know where to start because I get overwhelmed, so doing the goal planning before the session was super helpful.

Hearing the other writers speak about their experiences was also helpful for emotional support.

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Relational support

I started with zero pages and now have 24 pages!

Sometimes I don't know where to start because I get overwhelmed, so doing the goal planning before the session was super helpful.

Hearing the other writers speak about their experiences was also helpful for emotional support.

IWE will be useful for all students who are struggling with writing or want to improve their writing skills and quality.

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And overall value.

If you are developing a program to support graduate writing, this is the sort of outcome you are aiming for--attendees who can clearly articulate the benefits they received by attending your program. Achieving this result requires that program content has value, but it also means that you'll want to try to avoid distractions caused by technological glitches, catering mishaps, or other aspects of the program not working as expected. Keep that in mind as we go along.

Context Matters: Our Programming

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If you've worked with graduate writers to any extent, you'll likely have had a similar experience to ours. Writers come along asking "what's the best way to do this?" and the answer (regardless of what "this" happens to be) is very often "it depends" (somewhat to their chagrin, I might add). The "best way" to do just about anything in graduate communications depends on audience; it depends on genre; it depends on context; it depends entirely on what the writer or speaker means, what they are trying to communicate.

This is true also of program development. If someone comes along asking us "what's the best way to run a dissertation writing retreat?" our answer is going to start with "it depends." Context matters. The audience at 2 different institutions will be different. Location choices and other logistics will vary depending on context. Even how and why you assess a program may vary.

For instance, one of our dissertation retreat weeks was populated almost entirely with chemical engineers. If I remember correctly, something like 18 out of 24 attendees were chemical engineers. For that particular week, the interpersonal aspects of the event (e.g., accountability buddies) went nowhere. People were there to write, and that's all they wanted to do, none of this social stuff. At the risk of stereotyping, I doubt

this would be a major problem at a primarily humanities event, one populated by philosophers, say.

So, throughout our workshop today, the first answer to “how do I?” will be “it depends.” As you go through the activities and discussions, always keep context in the forefront of your mind. Craft your ideas and comments to focus on how they might work within a certain context and make that context visible in the planning and discussion.

One note before we look more closely at our context: For this workshop, we will primarily use the term “audience” rather than “attendee” when talking about the graduate writers who attend our programs. This is not meant to indicate passivity on the part of those writers. Instead, we use the term in a rhetorical manner--as a way for us as program developers to think about the needs and expectations of those who attend our programs and to consider the effects our programming might have on them.

Our Programming

- Intensive Writing Experience for Dissertation Writers (IWE)

This is the fourth year that the Purdue Writing Lab has offered an Intensive Writing Experience for Dissertation Writers, what we commonly call an IWE. Each year we offer four separate weeks, with writers signing up for the week that fits their schedule.

On a side note, if you are just starting out with your program, I would advise prioritizing naming. We ended up with this rather cumbersome title because I refuse to call anything a bootcamp, and we realized shortly before our first session that we needed a name in order to advertise. And, of course, once you've called it something a few times, it becomes harder to change. So--start your naming early in the process.

The first two years of our program were entirely in-person; last year was entirely virtual, and suddenly so; this year is entirely virtual on purpose; and I fully expect future years to contain a mix of in-person weeks and virtual weeks because we've always had at least a small number of people either ask to Skype in or else do things like drive 2-3 hours each way just to attend.

General attendance is around 15-25 per week, so a maximum of about 100 per summer. Last year, when we had to suddenly switch to virtual, was the outlier, with only about 4-8 people per week. This summer we are back to our larger numbers, with an

expected 65 attendees spread across 4 weeks.

Our Programming

- Intensive Writing Experience for Dissertation Writers (IWE)
- Three consecutive days, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm
- Combination of interactive and independent work

Our general pattern for an IWE is to hold each session 3 consecutive days in the summer (usually T,W,Th) from about 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Each day is a mix of interaction with other attendees and staff and independent work on individual writing projects. On any given day, that might include workshops on writing-related topics, small group or pairs meetings to talk about goals for the day, and writing time.

The workshops are meant to offer a specific skill (for instance, reverse outlining or revising for sentence structure) that writers can apply during the independent writing time if they wish.

During the independent writing time, writers are allowed to consult with tutoring staff if necessary. We encourage them to spend the bulk of the time actually writing, but if someone gets stuck writing because they don't have a clear sense of what organization will work, for instance, then a consultation makes sense.

When we shifted to virtual, the workshops became vidcasts that the audience watched asynchronously, while the rest was synchronous video calls using various platforms at various times. We also housed all the materials and information for the virtual event on our learning management system. This year we had the ability to use Zoom for our first

two sessions, and that worked wonderfully for dividing people up into small groups and for having consulting take place away from the quiet writing space.

Our Programming

- Intensive Writing Experience for Dissertation Writers (IWE)
- Three consecutive days, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm
- Combination of interactive and independent work
- Administration--Associate Director
- Delivery--Graduate Tutors
- Professional Development

As permanent staff, I provide the continuity from year to year, planning the summer event, taking care of all the administrative aspects of the program, and mentoring the tutors. Our graduate tutors provide the actual program delivery. I want to take just a minute to emphasize the “mentoring the tutors” piece. The audience for the IWEs is graduate writers, yes, but the tutors are themselves graduate writers. So working with the IWE helps them with their own writing, and the mentoring they receive around delivering the program also helps them with overall professional development. They learn about teaching, interacting with advanced students, and writing within the disciplines, and they learn about themselves within those contexts. So as you plan events, think broadly about the audience--it might include your staff as well.

So, we’ve talked about our context, and I’ve told you that context matters. I want to give you an example of **how** context matters: Because of our context, I primarily choose only very experienced tutors who are further along in their own academic programs to work with the IWEs. At Purdue, a very large percentage of our audience will be STEM students, and the majority of our graduate tutors are English majors. For the program to be valuable to that particular audience, I need to staff it with tutors who have some experience reading and working with STEM papers, who understand that what the humanities value in writing may not apply to all writing, and who are not immediately

overwhelmed at the thought of working with this audience. So our particular context affects my staffing decisions.

And this brings us to the rationale for offering our workshop today. A program like our IWEs pays huge dividends for individual writers, as the earlier quotes demonstrate, and it contributes greatly to graduate tutor professional development, but it also is composed of a large number of moving parts. To carry it off successfully, you need to become adept at identifying those parts **and** at juggling them.

We'd like to share the benefit of our first-hand experience so that you get off to a great start with programming of your own.

And now I'll turn it over to Mitch to talk about who needs our support.

Who Needs Our Support?

Identifying an Audience

As Vicki has noted, context shapes how we create programming, and a key contextual detail is the audience attending your programming. The worksheets and guidelines we are providing today are intended to be flexible and adaptable to a number of contexts. Some of you may be interested in programming that is targeted at a broad audience of graduate students from the Humanities and STEM, and others may have a more focused vision for programming, such as a series of retreats targeted at graduate students in a specific program. Before we can figure out the content of our programming, we need to consider who is attending and benefitting from the programming. We'll want to account for both the educational needs of the audience and also their material needs.

Identifying an Audience

- Needs that are Apparent to You
- Supplemental Data
- Generalizable vs. Context-Specific Needs

There are different ways to identify your audience's needs. One is to reflect on your interactions with graduate students. What needs do you commonly see when you work with graduate writers? You then select exercises, materials and activities that cater to these **apparent needs**. **Apparent needs** should be supplemented by other data, such as scholarship on the teaching of graduate-level writing, requests from faculty and advisors, data from applications or intake forms, and data from interviews, surveys and focus groups. For example, we required writers to apply to our retreats, and that form collected information such as citation style and writing goals for the event. Those details help us make organizational decisions, such as placing writers into small groups.

When thinking about the **apparent needs** that you have identified for your audience, you'll want to consider which needs are **generalizable** and which needs are **context-specific**. For instance, sentence structure might be a generalizable need because most graduate writers struggle to convey complex, interrelated material clearly, but it might also be a context-specific need if the problem is one of language translation from an L1 to English.

In your own context, you'll want to think about the writers who stand to benefit from your programming. For instance, if you want to open it to graduate students from all disciplines, you will need programming that is more **generalizable** and non-specific in its breadth, and encourages writers to fit their specific context into the programming.

Identifying an Audience

- Needs that are Unapparent
 - Assumptions
 - Lack of Knowledge
- Needs Analysis is Ongoing

In addition to needs that are apparent, writers have needs that are not immediately apparent, either because we make assumptions that prove untrue or because we lack knowledge. Programming will be less than successful if it fails to meet important needs or if it wastes limited resources on something that is not truly a need. For example, we **assumed** that writers would appreciate readily-available water bottles during our first event, so we provided them. Instead, we found that most people brought their own water bottles to retreats and rarely used the bottled water we provided, so we cut down on future costs by buying less bottled water.

We often discover hidden needs when conducting the retreats themselves or in evaluations after a retreat is completed. Aside from small changes like the water bottles, there are larger issues that are often invisible when creating programming. A writer's material needs can be unapparent, and we may not fully appreciate the impact of certain material conditions because such issues rarely come up in conversations about writing. For example, after hosting several retreats, we noticed that the challenges of writing a dissertation while raising children came up again and again. This led us to start asking about childcare, and thinking about whether we could collaborate with the school of education's daycare.

The material conditions of writers' lives off campus can be invisible for us, but these details are very important when creating programming. The best ways to identify writers'

unapparent needs are conversations with your writers and paying attention to what happens at the retreats. Take the time to listen to your attendees and encourage your staff to interact informally with attendees. Additionally, make space to debrief and reflect with your staff so they can share their perceptions on writers' experiences as well. For example, the first year we conducted our programming, the staff debriefed for an hour every day, and took rigorous notes on what we were observing and hearing in our interactions with writers. We applied this information by refining future iterations of the programming.

We'll talk more about evaluations later, but evaluations are the core of ongoing needs' analysis, and changing future programming to meet these needs.

Now we will think about the support that graduate writers need. Go to the Jamboard frame entitled Audience Large Group Activity. Using the post-it note feature, write down various issues and concerns that graduate writers need support for.

Jamboard Activity: Audience

- Choose 1-2 of the categories.
- Brainstorm program formats to meet the needs listed in those categories.

REMEMBER: Add Jamboard frame(s) AFTER the Audience title slide.

- We talk through dividing sticky notes into categories in whatever way makes sense (time/space; education; relationship; topics, etc.)
 - Any one program/event may address more than one need but will likely not address ALL needs
 - How do you decide which are most important?
 - How do you decide which go together well?
 - This sort of visualization of how needs might group can be useful for long-range planning purposes—what are all the needs your unit might address
 - The next step would be figuring out format best fits the various topics
- Breakout rooms—formatting a program based on the identified need
 - Each room is given (or should choose?) 1-2 categories & should set up their own Jamboard slide
 - Brainstorm potential program formats for offering that kind of support F2F (we'll get to virtual later); what sort of program would best provide the identified need?
- Return to large group
 - We give brief overview of what people came up with?
 - Our IWE as an example? What was our need? How did it affect our

- format?

What Should We Worry About?

Handling the Logistics

I want to start off our discussion of logistics with a very brief activity. I'll give you three scenarios, one at a time, and I'd like you to type into the chat the first thing that comes to mind when you hear each scenario, maybe just a word or short phrase.

- Writing a book
- Writing a book in a basement]
- Writing a book in a basement while 100 excited freshmen arrive outside the door for a meeting in the next room.

I think you get a clear picture of why, when planning a program, we need to think about what we should worry about. If we aren't consciously handling the logistics of an event, thinking of potential problems or complications, then we may find ourselves in that third scenario--running a program for dissertation writers while excited freshmen are congregating right outside the door. This scenario is, indeed, drawn from our personal experience. You can imagine the effect on the dissertation writers' productivity that day. Hopefully, what you're learning in this workshop will help you avoid such problems in your own events.

Logistics

Actions to Take

- Choosing dates
- Deciding on a topic
- Arranging catering
- Picking a room

Logistics include **actions** like choosing particular dates and times for an event, deciding whether to serve food and what kind, and choosing a location. It's important to note that all of this will be context-dependent. For instance, at Purdue, any events held in the Union require the use of Union catering, so if you don't want that particular catering, you can't reserve a room in the Union and serve food. That may not be true at your institution.

But handling logistics goes beyond just an awareness of who is using rooms nearby or whether you are forced to use university catering. What happens if your room has too few outlets? Or, if the available outlets are inaccessible? We ran our IWE program one year in a room that had those outlets in the floor (advertised as "outlets at the tables"), but the majority of the little doors that covered the outlet wells **wouldn't open**, making the outlets essentially unusable. Or what happens if you order lunch to be catered and discover--after the delivery person has left--that they forgot to bring utensils with which to eat the salad? We had that problem--in fact, in the same year we were in the room with the unusable outlets.

Logistics

Actions to Take

- Choosing dates
- Deciding on a topic
- Arranging catering
- Picking a room

Questions to Ask

- What can go wrong?
- Can it be avoided entirely?
- If not, how can it be handled in the moment?
- What's the back-up plan?

So in addition to **taking actions**, you'll want to **ask questions**. Handling logistics well is a matter of thinking through an event from beginning to end, looking for places where things can go wrong, and developing an alternate plan for when, inevitably, some of those things **do** go wrong. It helps if you can learn from experience, of course, (and learn from our experience, as well) but it's even better if you can just circumvent the potential problem entirely by thinking and planning ahead. Think about what can possibly go wrong, whether or not it can be avoided, and, if not, what's the back-up plan in case it does, indeed, go wrong.

Jamboard Activity: Logistics

- List potential problems or constraints for in-person and virtual versions of programs
- Discuss options on your campus for how to address or avoid problems

REMEMBER: Add Jamboard frame(s) AFTER the Logistics title slide.

For our next activity, we'll have you go back to your breakout rooms and look at your original Jamboard slide where you brainstormed program formats. The goal of this activity is to give you some experience identifying constraints that might affect a program BEFORE you run the program for the first time.

- For each program format/topic that your group came up with, think through from beginning to end and list potential problems or constraints for a F2F version and a virtual version. These might have to do with audience, location, format, materials, staffing, etc. You might want a separate Jamboard slide for each of your programs so that you can make use of sticky-note color-coding if you wish. Put those new slides after the Logistics title slide.
- Once you've made your slides, discuss this: On your campus, are there ways to address or avoid these problems? Who do you need to collaborate with in order to do so? When would you need to start planning in order to enlist that support?

How Do We Sustain Our Program?

Conducting an Assessment

Assessment is not just a method to understand the effectiveness of programming, but assessment can also provide information about one's context. When I think of assessment, I always think of a motto I heard from one of my mentors here at Purdue: "Assess yourself or be assessed." Assessment is how we learn what works, what didn't work, and what could be refined in future iterations. The data we generate from assessment is also how we share our work with other audiences, such as stakeholders who have offered financial backing and staffing.

Assessment is often associated with final evaluations, but assessment can occur throughout programming. For example, applications or in-take forms can be a form of pre-assessment that collects data on needs, goals, progress in program, etc. Pre and post-surveys can help measure how much work writers completed during the retreat. Evaluation surveys can offer insights into what worked for writers, what could be changed or refined, and any needs that should be considered for future programming.

Assessment

Quantitative Data

Application (pre-retreat):

- Year
- Program

Evaluation: (post-retreat):

- Ratings of the program
- Ratings of instructors

Qualitative Data

Application (pre-retreat):

- Writer's goals
- Advisor's permission

Evaluation: (post-retreat):

- Completion of goals
- Suggestions for program changes

For our own assessment, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods. When attendees apply for our retreats, we collect demographic data, such as major, program, and year, and qualitative data such as their reasoning for attending and their advisor's written permission to attend. Based on this information, we select participants for the retreats.

After the retreat ends, attendees complete evaluations that offer both **quantitative** data such as ratings, but also **qualitative** data where they share their thoughts, suggestions, and successes, such as the statements from writers we shared with you earlier. These data points help us know more about the context we are operating in, and it also allows us to share the story of our work with our collaborators.

Evaluations are where expectations and reality meet. In pre-retreat assessment, writers can articulate what they would like to get out of programming, and evaluations after the retreat are an area where they can reflect on their experiences, and share how those experiences met, did not meet, or exceeded their expectations. Data from both stages help with planning the event to meet individual needs.

Additionally, this data help stakeholders know **who** is attending these events, **who** is

benefiting from the programming, and **what** they gain from the programming. Stakeholders will have certain expectations, and evaluations can be helpful for revisiting and tempering those expectations. For example, writers may have entered with specific expectations that your programming did not meet, which can help you reshape messaging and advertising. In our first year, we had a large number of attendees who were seeking help with thesis formatting, which is handled by another office on campus. We now clearly state in our applications that we do not provide guidance on formatting. It is worth adding here that we discovered this “unmet need” by asking attendees who did not complete the full-three days to still complete their evaluations and tell us why they did not finish.

Evaluations also provide space for you and your staff to pause and reflect on future programming, and discuss what is tenable and untenable as you move forward. Reviewing evaluations with your staff can be useful for intentional and structured mentorship. Seeing data that helps them know they conducted quality work can go so much further than just being told that they did a “good job.”

So, to get started thinking about the stakeholders that we need to pay attention to in an assessment, we are going to identify data that is useful to different stakeholders.

Go to the Jamboard frame for the first Assessment Activity and using the post-it note feature, add data that may be useful for these 5 stakeholders.

Jamboard Activity: Assessment

- Select 1-2 stakeholders, and brainstorm:
 - How and when to collect information they value
 - How and when to share that information
- Draft survey questions for an evaluation seeking to collect this information.

REMEMBER: Add Jamboard frame(s) AFTER the Assessment title slide.

- We will go to breakout rooms, and your group will select one or two types of stakeholder from the list to work with. Set up a separate Jamboard frame after the assessment title slide.
 - Brainstorm how/when best to collect that information that stakeholders value; how/when best to share it
 - Draft survey questions that might be useful for an eval
 - How does application, registration, signing up/in, etc. result in useful data for evaluating or reporting?

Questions?

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That wraps up the formal portion of our workshop. We'd like to open things up for some Q&A now. And, please, feel free to respond to one another as well. Mitch and I can speak from our experience and our context, but our context may not align with all of yours.

Thanks for your participation today. We wish you the best in your graduate writing support programming.