

CREATING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS: AFFINITY GROUPS AND INFORMAL GRADUATE WRITING SUPPORT

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Graduate school, especially for students like us who are pursuing Ph.D.s, can be a tough and lonely place made more difficult by criticism and self-doubt. Without an adequate community or supportive network, graduate students attempting to access the realms of academia, especially those who constitute the first generation and are pursuing advanced degrees, may be at greater risk of failure and attrition. Failure to complete the dissertation, and the program itself, can be damaging for both the individual and the institution, particularly for those students who are capable of completing extended and involved research projects but need guidance through the terrain of higher education. Graduate students may lack understanding of institutional expectations, which can compound inequities in terms of access to resources, mentoring, or support. According to David Litalien and Frédéric Guay's study of dropout intentions among doctoral students, those who don't finish their degree risk a lack of employment opportunities and decreased self-esteem, largely because their efforts could have been redirected in other ways. Additionally, "doctoral attrition reduces resources and at the same time incurs costs for faculty members who have invested considerable time in research projects that will never be completed" (Litalien and Guay 218). Affinity groups and writing support networks like the one we formed (and which we discuss in this essay) may help to not only decrease attrition rates, but foster collaboration and professionalism well beyond the dissertation.

As we looked towards both writing center and other theory in our research, we began implementing collaborative learning structures, unknowingly forming an affinity group. Affinity groups are described as "collegial association[s] of peers that meet[] on a regular basis to share information, capture opportunities, and solve problems that affect the group" (Van Aken, Monetta, and Sink 41). Within a business model, affinity groups consist of members with similar positions that meet regularly and frequently to self-manage their processes and output (Van Aken, Monetta, and Sink 41). Eileen M. Van Aken, Dominic Monetta, and D. Scott Sink point out that, unlike a community of practice where members interact with one another through their daily work,

affinity group members may not cross paths aside from affinity group interactions, and this lack of regular interaction means that each member can contribute different knowledge and experiences (42). While we originally began as part of the same communities of practice—those of the classroom and writing center—we eventually moved from those communities but still worked in similar capacities and with the same goals, namely to complete our doctoral degrees. To help conquer the seemingly insurmountable tasks that comprise writing a dissertation, we formed a peer writing group which met off campus, outside of class or work hours, and was open to anyone working on a project in either of the graduate programs offered by our institution. While we come from different backgrounds, we found kinship and community in our graduate program, and like Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, "our research on collaborative writing [. . .] grew out of our experiences as friends and co-authors" ("Why" 324). Our experiences as classmates and coworkers eventually led to us becoming coauthors, focusing on graduate work in writing centers and writing program administration. Through friendly collaboration in a self-directed and informal writing group, we fostered professionalism, persistence in our degree programs, and, unknowingly, careers in writing center and writing program administration.

While our stories of forming peer writing groups are personal, they speak to the larger institutional issues graduate students face when they accept the invitation to become a scholar. Margaret King's report on the Ph.D. Completion Project presents a study of ten-year completion rates supported by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), and estimates that the attrition rate for humanities is around 48%, with only 52% of women completing Ph.D.s in those fields (2). The study also acknowledges that for around 20% of students, completion of the Ph.D. does not happen until after year seven (2). More recent data by Susan Gardner shows that there is a 57% attrition rate for doctoral students in the United States, with rates as high as 67% for the humanities (97). In even the most generous programs, funding rarely persists beyond year five, leaving those who don't finish within that window balancing employment with the demands of the

dissertation, including cost and time, while potentially removed geographically from their committee members. But why are students leaving programs?

Leonard Cassuto asserts in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that there are two categories of students who fail to complete the degree. First there are “[t]hose who can’t get it done” due to a lack of individual motivation or ability to work independently, or even because they don’t have the intellectual fortitude to meet the demands of a doctoral program. Then, there are “[t]hose who have the ability to finish but choose not to. [. . .] We may reasonably expect that in these straitened times, a certain number of people who initially aspire to become academics may choose other courses in life” (Cassuto). Golde’s well-known research on the relationship between doctoral student attrition rates and the role of the department illuminates more specific reasons for leaving a program than Cassuto does. Golde, while recognizing that there are mismatches between student and department, field, and graduate school and that some students feel and may be unprepared for academia as a career, also addresses the issues of isolation within a graduate program, which affinity groups may help to counter (681–692). Yet, Rebecca Shuman, a former doctoral student, proposes that there are a few other reasons, addressing the issue of non-supportive advisers who “run the gamut between absentee, excoriating, and micromanage[r] [. . .] advisers who retire, leave, or even die,” and the overall lack of preparation for extended research like the dissertation project. Some of these issues may stem from increasing workloads and decreasing budgets that faculty may face in light of state defunding measures, but that doesn’t make them any less frustrating for the doctoral students who are still learning how to navigate academia without the insider knowledge that faculty possess and are still struggling to access the scholarly world where they have less agency. But beyond the issues of advisers and prerequisite studies, “there are the inner hindrances, the ones that cause procrastination, and then shame, and then paralysis,” including over-researching and insisting on perfection before submitting any writing (Shuman). Because they are developing their ethos as academics, graduate students may lack a solid sense of their place within academia as a whole. Beth Burmester, although engaged with the topic of policy and writing center directing, asserts, “Agency comes from having a strong sense of self and self-determined identity” (33). Graduate students transitioning to becoming scholars may lack a strong sense of self or their identities as scholars, creating challenges to writing impacted by shifting agency in a liminal place in academia.

Despite an overall lack of scholarship on attrition and graduate students, there is some research on how graduate programs can help students through some of the challenges that contribute to attrition. The CGS outlines “Four Conditions for Optimal Doctoral Completion,” the first two being related to the right people applying and being admitted to a doctoral program. Assuming those two conditions are met for individual programs, graduate program faculty and students must focus on the second two, which deal with what happens once a student is admitted. The CGS proposes that first, faculty and doctoral students must establish productive working relationships that are both respectful and task-oriented, and that second, students need support from their peers, so that they “recognize themselves as members of a community of learners facing common challenges and opportunities” (Grasso, Berry, and Valentine). Similarly, in their research on doctoral students’ development of identity, Karie Coffman, Paul Putman, Anthony Adkisson, Bridget Kriner, and Catherine Monaghan suggest that the process of becoming a scholar and researcher is transformative, but that achieving that identity in the liminal space of graduate school can be made easier through utilizing a community of practice model (30). Some graduate schools use a cohort model to increase a sense of community, using “the power of the interpersonal relationships to enhance the learning process and provide additional support to the cohort members as they move toward program completion,” but those models may not be feasible for some programs, or as members reach the dissertation stage (Rausch and Crawford 79). Emma M. Flores-Scott and Maresi Nerad’s research supports the use of peer pedagogies, including those that are formal (cohort programs, dissertation writing groups, and peer mentoring), as well as informal in nature (common spaces, labs, and using peer reviewers), emphasizing the benefits of reciprocity within peer relationships in graduate programs. Within their article, they cite Boud and Lee, who “note that peers learn from one another in a reciprocal manner and that peers can teach each other what it means to be a student, a researcher, and an academic” (Flores-Scott and Nerad 77). However, the sentiment of cohort learning, where members create a learning community in which individuals are held accountable for their progress, functions as an institutionalized version of an affinity group or voluntary community of practice. A combination of formal and informal groups may help students to find the community of writers that works best to move them towards completion.

In their article on undergraduate research groups, Ann Gates, Patricia Teller, Andrew Bernat, Nelly

Delgado, and Connie Kubo Della-Piana claim that students not only increased their understanding of research, but students working in groups felt better able to “resolve conflict, give constructive criticism, brainstorm problem solutions, ask questions, and communicate with team members” (413). Although Gates and coauthors propose research groups for undergraduate students, it is possible that peer mentoring models may be one way to achieve graduate students’ need to develop as scholars with a community of support and mirror the values of writing center peer tutoring.

Kat

I’ve spent years collaborating with other teachers to create curriculum and with students to help them survive both high school and undergraduate programs, yet felt powerless to take on my own looming dissertation as a doctoral student. As I entered the Ph.D. program without having completed an MA thesis, imposter syndrome, driven by the perceived lack of competence discussed by Litalien and Guay, hit me hard as I attempted to understand the process and negotiate the spoken and unspoken practices and expectations of becoming a scholar and a professional in the field. Like the students who fall into Cassuto’s second category, I am capable of finishing, but frequently question if finishing is worth the time, anxiety, and isolation that has plagued my journey thus far, if I’ll join the CGS statistics, or if I’ll become another embittered, debt-laden, struggling teacher. As a first-generation immigrant from a working class family, these fears are often compounded by a lack of understanding of my career and education choices in my family and peer groups. According to Marissa Lopez, while the transition to graduate scholarship is challenging for everyone, “students of color and those from poor or working class backgrounds often face additional pressures as they seek to articulate the value (conceptual and monetary) of their work to themselves, their families, and their home communities, especially in the humanities where the use value is not necessarily self-evident” (par. 9). Working in an affinity group with Jenni consistently helps me come to terms with my choices and articulate them to my family and peer groups, which reinforces my ability to write the dissertation, complete the program, and transition into my identity as a scholar. Where I would react with shame and self-loathing to some of the feedback offered by faculty advisors on my writing, with Jenni, I could better process those comments and move past my own self-doubt and lack of confidence in my competence. Litalien and Guay have found that

“perceiving higher support by advisors helped currently enrolled PhD students feel more effective in their studies, both directly and indirectly by reducing the amount of motivation driven by external rewards or internal impetuses such as guilt or shame. By enhancing feelings of competence, this specific support also reduces the likelihood that students develop the intention to quit their program” (229). While the authors are primarily discussing the roles of faculty advisers, for me, peer-to-peer advising helped me to access the support offered both inside and outside of my program, particularly in making my competence seem relevant through social interactions and collaborative writing.

Jenni

As someone who tutored in a variety of disciplines for years, I knew that working with others provided social motivation and writing accountability. While completing my master's thesis, I applied this understanding and belief in peer feedback to completing my thesis. I called upon other graduate students who were working on similar projects to meet each Saturday afternoon at a local café, and two of those students regularly attended, with other graduate students occasionally dropping by. The objective of these meetings was to sit and work on our writing, stopping to ask for feedback, assistance, thoughts, or just to chat. Though others’ interest wavered and at times I sat alone in the cafe each Saturday, the commitment to showing up paid off and I completed my thesis on schedule and with what seemed like minimal work because it was spread out over a long period of time. More importantly, I learned that my writing motivation and, it seemed, the writing itself improved when there was time dedicated to the process. However, the peer feedback proved invaluable and, as Michele Eodice writes, I found myself looking for a collaborator, someone to hear me out and act as a sounding board (114). My experience as a writing tutor taught me that conversation with another person was invaluable to developing ideas and writing, and when I sat alone, though I was productive, that developmental aspect of my writing and thinking was lacking. In an interview, Lunsford and Ede say of having a writing partner: “There are things you can do together that you might not be able to do alone, and often that allows you to have a kind of scope and significance that you’re simply unable to have by yourself” (Interview 43). While some may say that collaborative writing and collaboration itself is subversive to the structure of academia, I believe, and my experiences indicate, that it

is necessary for academic success and progress (Calderonello, Nelson, and Simmons 49).

Community of Practice to Affinity Group

In *The Everyday Writing Center*, Anne E. Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth H. Boquet establish the writing center as a community of practice in which each person is engaged with one another through their daily work in the same space (5–6). Our collaboration extended from overlapping communities of practice, that of writing center practice and the work of graduate student coursework, to that of an affinity group, albeit a small one. We worked with one another in the writing center and took courses with one another, engaged in the same communities of practice, but over time we began working in separate spheres; Kat was moved institutionally to work with a program for students with learning difficulties, and Jenni remained located within the English Department and the Writing Center. At that time, we were no longer taking courses together but instead found a time to meet with one another once a week. Throughout the week, we emailed and texted to discuss projects and ideas. Despite moving to different states, we continued to work together by meeting up through video conferencing, texting, and phone calls for the purposes of better understanding the work we were doing, both in the sense of our teaching practice and in the sense of our graduate work. We still operated as members of the same communities of practice, but we began learning and working with one another of our own volition toward common goals that extended beyond work and school dictates, providing feedback, co-writing, presenting, and researching together. James Paul Gee defines this as an affinity group: a space where people interact whether in person or otherwise for the purpose of achieving a common goal (98). Affinity groups “afford members opportunities to share information, provide feedback on strategic initiatives from different perspectives, solve problems and capture emerging opportunities” (McGrath and Sparks 47). This commitment to writing partnerships through our affinity group moved us beyond the work we had done as newly admitted graduate students and colleagues and helped us to focus on strategies to address our specific and individual needs in a program serving more than one hundred graduate students, countering the anonymity and isolation that can occur in large programs without formal cohorts. Though only in the business of trying to work our way through academia, we experienced all of the features Roger McGrath and William Sparks cite, such as sharing

information, providing feedback, solving problems, and capturing emerging opportunities, plus we found our collaboration led to each of us bringing things to the conversation that the other person may not have experienced or may have missed. Since we approach academia from different perspectives, Jenni as a first generation college student and Kat as a first-generation immigrant and both with distinctive educational and career backgrounds, the difference in experience and the unique lens each of us brought to our study sessions was appreciated. According to Gee, the exchange of different experiences that occurs in collaborative groups is necessary to success in the era of new capitalism where information is fast-changing (97).

Recommendations for Building Graduate Student Communities

It’s no secret that many colleges and universities are facing budget crises, and our school has not been immune to this. For many years, budget deficits have impacted students through increased tuition and reduced services. In a time of defunding and heavier workloads, adding services for graduate students may not be feasible. Regardless of whether writing services are available, graduate programs and writing centers can encourage students to form collaborative relationships with peers both within and outside of their fields.

Writing center scholarship demonstrates the value of peer writing relationships, yet the writing center may not be the ideal place to meet the intensive writing needs of graduate students, in that “traditional tutoring can’t provide the long-term extensive support that graduate writers need as they spend years working on theses and dissertations” (Phillips). The use of affinity groups as a supplement to writing center practice can offer students an additional form of the long-term support they need as they work through theses and dissertations. To promote informal collaborative pedagogies, writing centers can offer space and model peer interaction for affinity groups to form, or can offer regular writing groups led by faculty, writing center directors, or even other graduate students, adapted for any size institution or budget. Writing centers can work to encourage collaboration outside of the writing center itself so that graduate students can come to experience collaboration in their daily practice. One possible route to encouragement includes offering faculty and program workshops on peer collaboration and writing groups that can be incorporated in departments and classrooms. However, the beauty of affinity groups lies partly in the autonomy such groups

can provide; graduate students need not wait for those groups to be formally sanctioned by departments. Rather, they can simply begin to meet at coffee shops, in between courses, or within graduate student offices.

Across graduate programs, administrators and professors can build in collaborative time and assignments as well as peer tutoring into the curriculum as a means of modeling what the peer writing and support groups. Phillips asserts that these groups, this collaboration, can lead to “an alleviation of members’ isolation and an increase in their rhetorical awareness and competence” (par. 3). This rhetorical awareness and increased competence leads to the formation of a community of practice, working to “shape their members from students operating on the periphery into established scholars,” and contributing to the chances of graduate degree completion (Phillips par. 3). Martin and Ko, reflecting on their experiences with a graduate writing group, suggest several ways to establish and maintain a peer working group (PWG), a concept analogous to a community of practice, and which are found to be most successful when composed of discipline-based affinity groups. Martin and Ko recommend the following guidelines for developing a PWG:

1. Establish a purpose and guidelines for the PWG
2. Engage in constructive review and critique of materials
3. Hone writing
4. Encourage career development
5. Set personal goals, timelines, and accountability
6. Navigate relationships and networking
7. Develop ownership and expertise
8. Share knowledge
9. Offer moral and emotional encouragement to members of the group.

Though we were unaware of Martin and Ko’s research at the time we began our group, we found ourselves following these guidelines. Our purpose was simple: get through the dissertation and job market by supporting each other at our Monday meetings. We focused our commentary on what each of us were learning on our own, sharing sources and providing each other with theoretical constructs that helped us develop our prospectuses, drafts, and research tools, and we provided constructive feedback based on our individual experiences and what we knew the other person was trying to achieve based on their goals and timeline. We were able to talk through some of the

nuances of writing in rhetoric and composition, not only in terms of the dissertation drafts, but also in terms of the necessary documents for the job market. We critiqued each other’s job packets, emailed job opportunities, and prepped each other for interviews, all while collaborating on conference presentations. More than anything, we provided motivation to encourage one another toward a particular goal, chapter, source, or job interview. We shared our networks as much as we shared our resources, chatting frequently about the ways “to best work with committee members and mentors” and seeking out others with similar interests at conferences (Martin and Ko 14). Together, we were able to transition into being professional graduate student peers, discussing the balance of graduate work, to full-time professorial positions.

Despite distant locations, we continue to work together, problem-solving difficulties and discussing successes. We regularly share our knowledge of teaching, writing, researching, writing centers, and writing program administration, providing encouragement through those interactions, and reducing the loneliness of academia by introducing one another to other professionals in the field and establishing a network of other graduate students or recently graduated scholars. This practice of forming a community has helped us move toward the completion of our degree and helped us to establish similar affinity groups in our new locations. More importantly it has established our identities as scholars within our institutions and the larger field.

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