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Disciplinary Differences, Rhetorical Resonances: Graduate Writing Groups Beyond the Humanities

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Models for Interdisciplinary Writing Groups at Ohio University.

Sherrie Gradin, Jennifer Pauley-Gose, and Candace Stewart

When we first established graduate student writing groups across the curriculum at Ohio University in the summer of 2003, we had several goals and outcomes in mind. Initially, we understood the usefulness of these groups as outreach projects to students and faculty in disciplines outside of English and the humanities–in other words, departments that are not always closely affiliated with **our writing center**. Second, we had a strong desire to help frustrated and often very lonely graduate research writers gain a greater sense of control and authority over their professional projects. Through our work with graduate students across the curriculum, each of us had noticed the gap in our current system of education where, as Carrie Shively describes, "expertise has been formally separated into domain knowledge and rhetorical knowledge. As a consequence, novices may have access to domain knowledge without access to rhetorical knowledge" (56). Given this separation between domain knowledge and rhetorical knowledge, we realized that graduate student writing groups could serve to bridge this gap between the conventions of discourse that are specific to each discipline and the conventions of writing that exist across different disciplines.

Additionally, we felt these writing groups would offer students a space to discuss the technical, rhetorical, cognitive, and psychological issues that surround the writing process. Students in disciplines outside the humanities, where issues of writing may not be fully explored or discussed, often feel unprepared for the writing task ahead of them as they start larger projects. Because productive writing does not happen in a vacuum, but is socially situated, we believed these groups could foster a significant sense of

community among graduate students who are writing in isolation. Specifically, we were interested in getting students to understand the process of writing and the rhetorical function of language in their disciplines as those components are articulated through conversation. In turn, we hoped that what might emerge through these conversations was a deeper and more practical awareness of what Spigelman terms "the value of group invention" (238). Below we describe and assess two different groups from two very different disciplines, organized and facilitated over the last three years, to illustrate how we negotiated disciplinary discourses and philosophies while maintaining our focus on the rhetorical resonances we believed we heard and read among the groups.

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Our first group's formation emerged from a conversation that Sherrie Gradin (director of the **Center for Writing Excellence and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum**) and Candace Stewart (at that time the coordinator of the Student Writing Center) had about piloting a graduate student writing group with Dr. Lonnie Welch, a very enthusiastic and willing faculty member in our university's Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) department. Lonnie had previously worked with Sherrie in several faculty writing workshops and had initiated in his own classes a version of the traditional writer's workshop (the writer is invisible and the participants discuss the writing without getting any input from the writer until after the discussion of the project is over) in order for his students to begin developing their own rhetorical and writing abilities. Lonnie's perception of the successful nature of these workshops for his graduate writers–in their developing abilities as rhetorical readers of disciplinary content and as rhetorical writers writing for their professional peers–led to his willingness to establish a slightly different version of the classroom-based groups that included all of the graduate students (between 15 and 18 students) in the EECS department and focused on professional writing genres: conference paper submissions, master's theses, dissertation proposals and chapters, and journal submissions.

Candace and Lonnie co-facilitated this group beginning in the summer of 2003. Candace's work consisted of surfacing for the students a meta-language of rhetorical reading and writing so that they had concrete ways to talk to each other about their writing beyond comments such as "You're making no sense in this opening paragraph," or "These two sections shouldn't be together." She modeled this language for the students by restating their initial comments and responses in other terms. For instance, to a reader who responded with claims such as "You're making no sense in the opening paragraph," Candace asked: "Are you saying that the first sentence in the introduction makes a very general claim for the experiment, while the following sentences describe specifically the method of the experiment? Do you want the writer to provide more information that helps the reader make the transition from the general claim to the specific methodology?" And to the reader who asserted definitively that "These two sections shouldn't be together," Candace might query in return: "Are you suggesting that the writer needs work on developing the ideas and then provide more transitional work in these two sections to show their relationship? Or do you want the writer to rethink the organizational structure of the content in these sections separately?" Restating the questions and comments in this way was a useful method to articulate the language we needed to use, and the

graduate student readers became quite adept at using this language to describe what they wanted the writer to do.

This initial writing group, which is still meeting weekly, but without Candace as co-facilitator, has definitely met our original goals in these ways: through cementing a relationship with the EECS department, through helping the graduate writers learn the language of writing and reading rhetorically and thus gaining control and authority over their own writing processes, and through helping both the graduate students and involved faculty members become more astute teachers of disciplinary writing. However, we have found that this particular model is not the only way to achieve success in a disciplinary writing group outside the humanities.

As the current coordinator of the Writing Center, Jennifer Pauley-Gose has been building on our prior experiences with the EECS group by facilitating a graduate writing group in the School of Telecommunications (TCOM). The formation and development of this group varied in several ways from the EECS group. Yet, this group is also highly successful in its own way, which Jennifer believes results from the high motivation of the graduate students involved as well as their relief at finding a community of interested colleagues similarly engaged in the often-lonely process of composing a large piece of original work. This kind of group–one operating without a faculty member present at the meetings–has created a different type of writing and invention space, one in which the relationship between Jennifer and the students has engendered the "building of intellectual relationships between emerging experts" and enabled Jennifer, as the Writing Center representative, to be "actively engaged in the production of experts poised to share new knowledge with the world" (Leverenz 60).

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Jennifer's TCOM group, made up of four female doctoral students, began when a graduate student approached Jennifer about receiving help with her dissertation. Jennifer suggested that the student help to initiate a telecommunications writing group, and asked her to gauge interest in such a group among her friends. Within a few weeks, three more willing participants had contacted Jennifer. All the members were just beginning the dissertation process, either working on proposals or drafting first chapters, and seemed highly motivated. This group decided to meetly weekly for an hour-long workshop where the participants discuss one writer's contribution. The group operates on a four-week rotation; everyone takes a turn and has her writing workshopped once a month.

Although writing process theory is a given in the world of writing centers, Jennifer's work with this group illustrates that process theory hasn't spilled over into disciplines outside the humanities or English departments. Because this theory seems non-existent outside of English, in her capacity as facilitator of this group, Jennifer sees herself as a coach, training students how to discuss one another's writing and giving them the terminology of process: brainstorming, clustering, outlining, drafting, and revising, as well as the language of rhetorical analysis that we outlined earlier in the EECS group sessions.

For instance, Jennifer's group might discuss the concept of literature reviews

and how they function, both in the project as a whole and for the expert readers on the writer's committee as disciplinary colleagues. Other questions addressed include: How is each individual source important to the student's dissertation project? Why are graphs and tables important, and how can the student use them to her greatest advantage in research and writing? Taking the time to think about the different sections of the dissertation and their function is critical to the writing process, because it helps students determine and implement a specific rhetorical purpose as they write.

[G]raduate writing groups across the curriculum make it possible for graduate writers to become rhetorically-savvy writers and readers both within and without their disciplinary discourses.

As in the EECS group, a substantial amount of time in the workshop focuses on clarifying, defining, and sharpening the rhetorical language of professional disciplinary projects such as a thesis or dissertation. In this way, the rhetorical resonances we hear and experience as writing center experts reverberate from discipline to discipline. Both Candace's and Jennifer's experiences with two different disciplines have enunciated the ways in which the rhetoric of a particular discipline must depend on explicit ways of communicating that discipline's content-rich discourse, but those experiences have also demonstrated that the rhetoric of a discipline reveals generic features across the different discourses.

These features or "historical conventions may be so thoroughly submerged in the day-to-day practices of [researchers] that the rationale underlying them becomes concealed. Experts tend to codify rhetorical conventions in their own discipline and treat them as merely formulaic so that they are often unaware of the role these conventions play in their own writing and are, therefore, unable to teach them to others" (Thomas, et. al. 83). These groups surface, de-codify, and de-naturalize such disciplinary conventions in order to reveal rhetorical resonances in the seemingly different discourses. One group member shared that she used to suffer from writer's block before joining the group due to a popularly-held theory of writing in her field: the idea that good writing equals clear thinking and, by contrast, that "bad" writing equals a poor thought process. Her belief in this theory led her to question her own intelligence, and to become discouraged when she couldn't produce perfect prose in a first draft.

Fortunately, the writing group has provided this student with a knowledge and vocabulary of the rhetorical process and the way writing often works, but it has also alleviated fears about her own capabilities in her profession because she sees her peers struggling with these same issues. Though there is no departmental faculty member involved in this group, and the group does not have the same level of professional expertise as the EECS group, that difference has not meant a lack of success; as the students' projects are approved, piece by piece, by their faculty advisors, the writers grow more confident that they are establishing themselves within their discipline, and can then enact this confidence in effective discursive ways.

Overall, we have found that these graduate writing groups help students discover and fulfill the most important and most difficult rhetorical purpose of their current academic project: becoming a colleague in one's field and entering into the discourse communities of the discipline with authority. Such confidence is built over time and through discussions of one's own research, and others' responses to that research. Often, students don't see themselves as entering a

conversation because they are too overwhelmed by the complicated movements of the research and writing process itself. We strongly believe that graduate writing groups across the curriculum make it possible for graduate writers to become rhetorically-savvy writers and readers both within and without their disciplinary discourses. Through the responses of rhetorically-informed colleagues and readers, students from disciplines outside the humanities are given a way out of isolation and a way into writing as process and community builder.

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Jennifer Pauley-Gose received her M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition from Western Illinois University, and will receive her doctorate in English Studies this spring from Ohio University. She has served as the Assistant Director of Composition in the English Department, and currently serves as the Coordinator of OU's **Student Writing Center**.

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