Faculty Writing Groups: An Approach to Increasing Published Scholarship

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RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Higher education faculty, who hope to be considered for advancement, promotions, and salary increases, are expected to frequently produce publishable original research (McGraw, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). However, what often prevents junior and senior faculty from pursuing more scholarly work are the ongoing challenges in meeting the expectations of their expanded roles amid teaching, service, and personal obligations. In dynamic college and university environments, where time is a precious commodity, such factors often hinder academics from finding time and space to write for publication (MacLeod, I., Slackley, L., & Murray, R., 2012).

This research is focused on how some faculty writing groups, which meet regularly in small teams to write, discuss research or share publishing goals and ideas, are addressing these challenges. This project also draws on perspectives of a faculty writing group facilitator, who provides support to the teams of academic researchers. The purpose of this study is to use insights gained through observed and expressed experiences of faculty writing group participants to improve the frequency of their published scholarship.

Research Questions:
• What types of scholarly work do faculty generally wish to pursue or complete?
• How do faculty writing groups work to influence the frequency of academic scholarship?

FRAMEWORK

Self-Authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Werder, 2013)
• Empowering faculty writers to consider their own writing voices, audiences, and compositional meaning, as opposed to solely focusing on urgent writing and research projects.

Constructivist Epistemology (Boscolo & Mason, 2001; Pastemak, Longwell-Grice, & Hanson, 2009)
• Emphasizes meaningful learning as an active and continuous process of knowledge building, as the knower interprets new information and evolves, aided by prior conceptions and beliefs.

Situated Learning (Steinert, 2012)
• A concept that imagines faculty researchers as apprentices; their knowledge is influenced by the activities, contexts, and cultures in which it is used, helping to understand how faculty members develop.

METHOD

This study examines survey responses collected in 2016 (n=15). The post-survey focused on an analysis of the subjective experiences of participants of 4 faculty writing groups, of which 2 were discipline-focused, and 2 were multidisciplinary. Facilitator observations also were assessed. The pre-survey focused on participant expectations and goals.

Participants: junior and senior faculty members of various disciplines and levels of published scholarly work
Setting: 4 separate faculty writing groups, each composed of 3-5 participants, met twice a month for one semester.
Pre- and Post-Surveys:
Participants responded to online surveys at the beginning and end of the semester. Among the questions participants responded to are the following:
• (1) What is your current academic status?
• (2) What type of project are you working on or hope to work on?
• (3) How would you rate your overall experience in the faculty writing group?
• (4) Do you have any additional feedback?

RESULTS

Responses to Question 1: What is your current academic status?

Responses to Question 2: What type of project are you working on or hope to work on?

Responses to Question 3: How would you rate your overall experience in the faculty writing group?

Responses to Question 4: Do you have any additional feedback?

“I liked the setup, one hour discussing everybody’s work and one hour focusing on one person’s work . . .”

“I think what was less helpful for me was that our writing focuses were different in the group. I was hoping to be challenged by others who were writing in a similar context. I think a group with people with similar disciplines and similar writing goals and schedules could be a better fit for me.”

“The groups were a positive experience for me. The communication was excellent. I like that we received encouragement and support via emails in between our scheduled meetings.”

Participants met to discuss progress and challenges with meeting academic research and writing goals, to engage in critique sessions of each other’s work, and to inherently hold each other accountable for articulated objectives.

CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary findings indicated robust interest among higher education faculty to engage in a collaborative faculty development initiative aimed at furthering their scholarly publishing goals; the project illustrates mutuality, not only within the boundaries of the faculty writing groups, but also among the diverse campus departments that collaborated to support the program’s inception. Within the small groups, participants shared their satisfaction at having completed edited book volumes, published articles in peer-reviewed journals, and presented original scholarship at academic conferences; still, others expressed being stymied by daily teaching, service, and other demands that prevented them from making further progress on their academic scholarship.

As an approach to motivating faculty to increase their frequency of published academic research, faculty writing groups have a role to play. Universities often neglect faculty academic development for research as policy (Lee & Bouz, 2003). This study’s results indicate most participants were very satisfied with the faculty writing groups and would return to meet with their peers the following semester.

This study has implications for practice and research. Also, among the findings was some frustration with the group composition; some participants preferred to use the time to write, while others preferred to benefit from group discussions. Some participants expressed feeling a lack of affinity with some of their colleagues, whose research foci were markedly different from their own. Further study of these groups in 2017 will examine their impacts on increasing faculty scholarship output. Although empirical research shows such faculty writing group participation correlates with improved rates of published scholarly writing, fewer writing blocks, and enhanced academic professional and personal development, research has not sufficiently explored the contrast between discipline-focused and multidisciplinary faculty writing groups, which could help struggling professors—and, possibly their chairpersons—better respond to the real challenges that “publish or perish” directives present to participating faculty.

REFERENCES


