

How Does a Writing Circle Help Faculty Members?

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Abstract

The Writing Circle project at Western Carolina University provides a supportive forum for faculty members to get feedback about their writing. Whether it's a first draft or a manuscript almost ready for publication, the feedback from other group members provides additional viewpoints that help a writer decide where writing time and effort can be most effectively spent.

Writing circles, in some form, have helped individuals become successful writers for many years. Writing circles are groups of people who gather together to help one another write about significant experiences in their lives, or ideas that intrigue them. The Coulter Faculty Center (CFC) at Western Carolina University introduced this process in 1988 and titled the activity *Helping Circles*. The purpose was to provide a supportive forum for faculty to get feedback about their writing in order to develop high quality writing from early drafts. One of the most important parts of knowing how to write well is to feel comfortable doing it. The group serves as a sympathetic, supportive, first audience to help the writer see the paper from the reader's viewpoint.

Jane Hall's Experience

I participated in the first group developed by the Faculty Center. The "publish or perish" tales were topics of conversation passed forward to young faculty. At the first meeting seven faculty were present. The Faculty Center director, Ben Ward, served as the facilitator and assisted the group in developing these norms:

1. Writer distributes copies *without comment*. It is especially important to resist the urge to offer disclaimers or explain the status of the paper. The paper must be allowed to speak for itself, regardless of whether it is a very rough draft or a nearly finished piece.
2. Each group member skims the piece quickly to get a general sense of what it is about. Give the writer a signal (for example, a nod or eye contact) when finished skimming.
3. Writer reads aloud while the group members monitor their natural reactions and mark places where they experience a notable response (either positive or negative).

4. During a brief period of silence (e.g., one minute), each reader re-examines places marked and selects something positive to point out. This could be anything from a striking word or expression to a vivid image or a meaningful concept. Then each group member tells the writer what he/she thinks is one strong feature of the paper.

5. Next, each group member takes a turn at thoroughly describing all of his or her reactions to the paper. Do not evaluate or suggest corrections at this point. Simply describe, as objectively as possible, the spontaneous reactions that were experienced during the reading.

6. Finally, the writer becomes the discussion leader and asks questions to get a full understanding of each reader's reactions. Once the writer sees clearly how the paper came across to different individuals, often he or she will recognize areas that need revision without anyone ever calling direct attention to errors or weaknesses. If the writer is uncertain about how to "strengthen" or revise certain sections, it is appropriate at this time to ask advice from the group. Discussion should continue until the writer sees the paper "through the reader's eyes."

The first group meeting was a lot of fun. Many of us didn't know one another—we were faculty from various disciplines. Developing group norms seemed a good thing because that helped us "own" the process. I went away from the first meeting energized with strong motivation to begin writing a paper I was to present at the Board of Governors' meeting the following month. I had two weeks to write a draft copy. Comments made in the meeting were, "the magic in writing comes from the ideas you have about your teaching," and "write as if you were just talking." However, every time I would try to write I found myself looking at a blank pad.

By the end of the first week I felt panicky—I didn't have the first sentence written. By the next meeting date I had only the introduction written and it sounded terrible to me. When it came my turn to share, I was in trouble from the beginning with group norm 1—not being able to disclaim my writing. I had to read my terrible introduction and was asked to go through the rest of the group norms as well. I dreaded hearing what other faculty would say or "think" about my work. I was amazed at the honest comments framed in a way that helped me begin to consider a different direction for my presentation. That meeting helped move my thinking "out of the box" and to new ideas for a different introduction. But perhaps more importantly, it allowed me see that few people write first drafts really well. In addition, I learned that getting to another level means you have to open yourself and your ideas to others with the

knowledge that the feedback given is about your writing, not about you personally.

My participation in the helping circle was a great benefit both professionally and personally. Today when I work with students and their writing I hear myself conceptualizing the procedure very similarly to those insightful processes learned in the helping circle meetings many years ago.

Recently, at a CFC session to identify activities for faculty development, I described the helping circle project for developing writing skills and wondered about revitalizing the activity. I wanted to bring back a tradition that was so helpful to me and volunteered to be the group facilitator. The title, *Writing Circle*, was designated and the first meeting was held fall semester, 2002. I was disappointed that only a few faculty were present. Never-the-less, in our second session, Irene Mueller framed an entire article structure from the group conversations.

Irene Mueller's Experience

As a new faculty member without any previous experience in writing publications, I was very interested in joining the Writing Circle when I saw it listed on the CFC sponsored activities. I hoped belonging would provide a supportive structure that would help me stay focused in meeting this important goal in my progress to achieving tenured status.

One of the most powerful benefits of belonging to the Writing Circle for me is having a "sounding board" for tentative ideas. The feedback from other faculty members provides additional viewpoints that help a writer decide where writing time and effort can be most effectively spent. Also, just talking with other people who have been through the same process helps build a belief that "I can do this." Another benefit is the timeframe set by the scheduled meetings. Knowing that you will be expected to share some writing (at whatever stage) can provide the impetus to stay on track and write on a regular basis instead of constantly postponing this task because of the many other responsibilities of non-tenure track faculty members.

Summary

The Writing Circle is a safe and enjoyable way to get assistance with the difficult task of putting ideas on paper. Members of the Writing Circle are all facing the same challenges and are genuinely interested in each other's success. Beyond just helping faculty to be better writers, the Writing Circle

helps participants hone their ability to look at their ideas from the “outside.” This ability is critical not only for writing, but for teaching and critical thinking. And Writing Circles are a great way to meet faculty colleagues and get to know better the ones you already know!