## 2.1.3 The value of student writing groups

There is plentiful research evidence that being a member of a student writing group supports writing productivity and can also reduce feelings of isolation. Individuals in our research who participated in writing groups commented on both these aspects as you can see below.

> We did writing groups [meeting every 3 weeks], especially in the first and second year – they were really helpful – and we'd just, even if it was just to look at a chapter in a book and just do a review on it, it just helps think about being critical, how we're going to use the literature, what our arguments were, you know, how to position ourselves really. So we did have that sort of crossover …we were writing about totally different things …and that was quite helpful …you're talking to somebody who's maybe struggling as well, and you can maybe be a bit more honest about it. Whereas, if you're talking to your supervisor, you've always got to…[be] on top of it …but …we're quite honest about things, and it's quite nice just to have an open discussion.
> [Elizabeth]

> I belong to a PhD study group that meets infrequently but it is semi-structured because the person who is sort of in charge for organizing it, she usually comes with a topic and some things she has photocopied.  Sort of a way for us—a starting point for our meetings …It is a pretty informal group *across the entire faculty*, and we have a list serve and it was basically put together with the idea that it could be a writing group so we could exchange writing. But that we could also …meet in person every few weeks …not just about writing but sort of feeling like you are part of a cohort. So you could profit from other people's experience, you could take turns sort of leading a group discussion on a certain topic like presenting on conferences …a lot of the stages that we all have to go through …[so] moral support was in there too. [Barbara]

> In terms of like with my writing group …there were conversations—where I was talking about somebody else's research but where I suddenly realized how I could use ideas or even structures or whatever that would help me in my work. [Ginger]

As you can see in Barbara's and Elizabeth's comment, finding people working in the same area of research is not a pre-cursor to setting up a writing group. Both also emphasize the freedom to explore ideas openly, with Barbara, in addition noting that the group can provide broader support. Ginger's comment highlights that the process of giving others feedback can result in new insights about your own work.

If you would like to start a writing group – it might be only 3 people – below are some ideas that have proven useful to others.

**Running a writing group: Principles developed by PhD students for others to use**

**Getting started**

1. *Get to know each other if you don't already.* You might want to exchange short bios, your present writing goals, etc. (You may do this more thoroughly at your first meeting.)
2. *Agree on the purposes/goals of meeting*
   - Possibilities include feedback only, having time to write together, both
3. *Agree on frequency/ dates of each meeting*
   - What days and dates work best for the members?
4. *Agree on structure of each meeting*
   - Process, time, etc.
     - How many documents will you discuss at a meeting?
     - How long will there be for each person to give feedback?
     - How will rotation of work be conducted?
     - What maximum page limit will you set?
5. *Agree on roles and responsibilities.*
   - Who will, for instance, be responsible for:
     - Arranging logistics, e.g., arranging meeting place and time, notifying others
     - Facilitating the meeting, e.g., ensuring an 'agenda' for meeting and that documents have been circulated
     - Note-taking
   - How frequently, if at all, will roles change?
6. *Agree on preparation for giving effective feedback at each meeting*
   - How will work be exchanged?
   - What guidelines can you agree for seeking and providing effective feedback?
     - The author will be seeking advice: What should the author/ submitter do to help the readers (see 7 below for suggestions).
     - Readers will be giving feedback orally in the meetings; what should they do to help the author (see 8 below for suggestions)?
     - You may agree on giving feedback in written form. Preparing written feedback can be helpful for the reader in organizing ideas, and it also means that the writer does not have to focus on note taking during the discussion. If you agree to give written feedback, questions you might discuss include: How will you make comments (Comment boxes? Track changes feature in Word?)
7. *Agree on author responsibility*:
   - *Think about your personal goals.* What do you want to achieve from this writing group and the writing experience? Re-visit your goal each time you have the opportunity to receive feedback. Perhaps you will submit something new each time or continue to revise the same piece for a while. This is up to you.

- *Submit something important to you.* Choose a piece of work that you are thoroughly interested in – remembering to keep it within the agreed maximum length.
- *When you send the document to the others*, tell them a) the goal of the writing, b) the potential readers, c) why you would like to re-visit this work and where you see it going (e.g., for publication, for your thesis committee to read, for a course etc.), d)the kind of feedback you are particularly looking for; and e) if you provide a section of work, make sure to contextualize it by providing some background information on the topic so that it is easier for the reader to enter into the text.

8. *Agree on reader responsibility*:

- *Critique the writing not the writer.* The focus of the feedback should be directed at elements of the paper to be improved based on your experience as a reader (rather than what the writer did or didn't do). For instance, "I really liked this section but had difficulty understanding the concluding paragraph; what role did you see it playing?" In other words, begin your sentences with 'I' not 'you'.
- *Say something positive and if the author has asked for specific feedback, focus principally on that.* It's important to respond to others' work by commenting on the good parts of the writing as well as parts to improve. Be explicit about what is successful.
- *Be specific* when giving feedback. Provide examples of how the individual can improve a point and give your idea of how it can be changed.
- *Carry out your responsibility to the author and group:* If you cannot complete your feedback before the meeting, attend anyway and let the person know when you will have feedback completed.

**Starting the meeting**
- *Role of author:* It can be useful for the <u>author to introduce the work briefly (e.g., history, journal, concerns) and then to listen only</u>, with no need to respond – in other words, to eavesdrop on a conversation about the work. The group may agree that after a while the author may join the conversation.

**Overall principles**
9. *Take advantage of the fact that group members are unlikely to be knowledgeable about each of the particular fields represented in the group.* Areas of work will be different, but the disciplinary cluster provides some common ground. While it can be challenging sometimes to not know the field, it can also be useful in being positioned as a more novice reader since you will notice things an expert won't, e.g., an unstated assumption.

10. *Enjoy the process!* The writing group should be a mutual give-and-take. Improving your writing is facilitated by *getting* feedback but also by *giving* feedback. Through this process, you will develop a better understanding of how well you are able to communicate your ideas. The experience should provide you with the tools to improve

your own writing technique and the ability to critique other scholarly work. Knowing how to respond to others work is an essential skill and useful in academia.

Researcher Identity Development
www.researcher-identity.com
researcher-development@blanquerna.url.edu