

The Writing Group: A Community of Practice and Collegiality

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Abstract

In a seminar room at LUX, one of the buildings of the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology, a group of PhD students and senior scholars are in deep concentration in front of their computers. It is pin-drop silent in the room until the alarm goes off and everyone starts moving and talking. This is the writing group, an informal and voluntary way of working together in time slots with 45 minutes of writing and a 15-minute break each hour. This collegial way of structuring the day and working together is gaining interest and the group is growing. This article describes the experiences of group participants and, with the aid of theoretical perspectives on collegiality and social learning, explains the benefits of this group for individual scholars as well as for their working environment.

Introduction

“When we are together in the room the writing energy just appears”.

At the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology at Lund University, a writing group is thriving. It is supported by a Messenger group, a Zoom link and repeated bookings of communal workspaces. It is an informal and voluntary community where PhD students and senior scholars get together to do their reading and writing. The quote above came up when the authors of this article, all of us frequently participating in the writing group, tried to put into words the benefits of the group and the reasons why we all consider ourselves in need of it. The writing group is for us an *academic microculture* (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015) based on collegiality, internal trust, fellowship and shared responsibility, providing access to competence and tacit knowledge in relaxed ways. It serves as a venue for exploring new insights, self-discipline and reinforcement of communal competence. In this article, the experiences of this group, and the various dimensions of learning within it, will first be presented and then discussed in relation to theories on communities of practice and collegial care.

Background: The Writing Group's Collegiality

The basic facts of the writing group can be summarized as such: We are around 40 people in a Facebook Messenger group, which we are using to coordinate 15–20 active people, mostly PhD students but also senior scholars, many from the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, but also from other departments at Lund University. We work according to an extended *pomodoro method* (Cirillo 2018), which means work for 45 minutes and then a 15-minute break starting at every full hour. During the breaks some join or leave the group, while others stay the whole day. There is thus some flexibility built in, but we stick to the structure fairly rigorously. The floating relationship between structure and flexibility is key for the group to work. We call it a writing group, but in that respect there is flexibility, too. Most people write, some read, and some use the hours for

administrative work. Yet, just being in the room is a benefit both for oneself and for the others. Moreover, most of us join in phases, we utilize the opportunity for a period, then disappear and come back again.

The writing group sprang from an initiative of Lund's Doctoral Student Union in 2019. It partly arose due to surveys showing how isolation and lack of community is one of the principal factors for PhD students struggling with their well-being (Holmström, 2016). As a matter of fact, PhD studies within Theology and the Humanities is for many an isolated experience, not being a part of a particular research group and without meeting fellow PhD students in courses. Departments and the joint faculties are aware of this and put efforts on creating spaces and opportunities for the PhD students to meet and get to know each other academically and socially, both within and between disciplines. Compared to such initiatives, the writing group is characterized by its determination to fend off any effort to "institutionalize" it. Even though it could have been possible to get catered coffee and other refreshments from the departments, standing reservations of rooms or chose someone to be in charge of communication etc., there is a strong communal feeling that this would disturb the dynamics of shared responsibility that characterizes the group and makes it informal in the way that is so appreciated. Further, we experience that the writing group also works against the egocentricity of the academic enterprise itself. In academia, researchers work as individuals towards an endless stream of achievements in order to stand out in the competition for scholarships, lectureships and professorships. This egocentric long-term goal does not harmonize well with factors that are important for all researchers and university teachers when it comes to both well-being and performance. In order to perform as efficiently as possible, and to become "the best you can be", continuous interaction with colleagues in terms of relaxed collegiality, without focusing on internal competition, is necessary. This is the kind of collegiality that the writing group provides for its participants.

The need for the writing group among our colleagues became especially evident during the Covid restrictions. At Lund University, employees were advised against going to their offices and, especially, to gather when not strictly necessary. We were afraid that could be the death of the writing

group. Luckily, the opposite turned out to be the case. During the pandemic, everyone needed to socialize and the writing group came in as a good resource here. Doing a full day on Zoom was too much for most, but we still met on Zoom every other day, sometimes just for some hours. Especially for some new PhD students, who began their studies during Covid times, this turned out to be a very important resource.

After the restrictions were lifted, academic life slowly has returned to almost “normal” and the writing group participation has increased both in numbers and frequency, as there is now ongoing writing group activity almost every weekday. The Zoom link is still in use, which enables the ones on travels and fieldwork as well as previous visiting colleagues from various countries, such as South Africa, Denmark and Switzerland, to continue to be a part of the writing community.

It is without doubt, though, that the physical presence is what really sustains the community. We use the TimeEdit system at Lund University to book rooms, and we log in either the day before or in the morning, to see what is available. Then we reserve a room, which would likely remain unused all day anyway.

A Central Characteristic of the Writing Group: Blend of Flexibility and Discipline

There are quite a few factors that coincide and make the working group environment so rewarding and mutually satisfactory for the scholars who are participating. An important aspect is that it provides a unique blend of flexibility and discipline that goes very well with the scholarly mind, that in fact needs both. Both are hard to achieve, regardless of whether you are a PhD student or a senior scholar. The regular workday for a typical scholar, regardless of position, is normally characterized by both fragmentation and multitasking. Still, there are long-term projects that need to be constantly worked on at a steady pace, in between short-term tasks such as lectures, supervision, grading or various kinds of administrative activities. Further, our communicational culture in which we communicate primarily via the computer, via emails, social media, Microsoft Teams,

educational and scholarly platforms and databases, makes the task of focusing on only one and the same matter for a relevant amount of time before shifting the focus very hard to achieve, be it a text that is to be written or a manual collation of material, reading articles or sorting data. Moreover, when we work in our offices, there would rather often be visitors, questions that are spontaneously asked, and short meetings that are indeed very nice and important for the work environment at large. Even so, this can also make the average workday even more fragmented for the academic. How is it then, that the unique blend of discipline and flexibility of the writing group came about, and how is it helpful for concentration and scholarly production?

The answer lies in two aspects of the working schedules in the writing group: the 45-minute units interfoliated with 15-minute breaks throughout the day, and an initial “round of the day /unit”, when each participant tells the others what they will be working on and their aims for the unit or for the day. The 45/15 schedule is a fixed system enforcing discipline but at the same time fully flexible since the participants are free to join or leave the writing group whenever they want during the day. What is always maintained is silence during the 45-minute unit. Once you are in the room and a working unit is in progress, you know that no one will disturb you with a question or a comment. The time is your own and you devote it to the task you have at hand. At the same time, the task in itself is your own choice. Therein lies this mix of flexibility and discipline. The “round of the day/unit” that rather often – but not always – takes place before the start of the day or of a unit is an important factor when it comes to the individual scholar’s determination to stick to the intended task for the day. When telling the other writing group participants just very briefly about your intention for the day or for the unit, your decision for the day becomes much firmer, and you are less prone to change what you decided to do even if you would feel “stuck” in the writing process or for some other reason that makes the intended work task for the day harder to perform. No one in the writing group would criticize you if you would change your mind, but regardless of that, you are much more determined to stay with the work planned for the day. This self-discipline based on the articulation

of intention and ambition is of valuable help against procrastination and “writer’s block”.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Writing Group

What is it, then, that motivates the participants in the writing group to work in a more concentrated and efficient way when gathered? In the following, we will describe the benefits of the writing group with the aid of complementary theoretical perspectives: *community of practice* and *collegiality and care*. We must mention, though, that we do not think about all these theoretical perspectives during our daily work; we are just motivated by the fact that it is more fun and more efficient to do things together.

The Writing Group as a Community of Practice

We approach the writing group as a community of practice with three relevant dimensions, as elaborated by educational theorist Etienne Wenger (1998): *Joint enterprise*, *mutual engagement* and *shared repertoire* (ibid:72–84). Participants of the writing group share the common goal of writing and being productive as academics. In other words, the *joint enterprise* of the community is academic productivity. The repeated practice of sharing the aims of the day or the writing unit fosters collegial and informal accountability in the group that enhances individual self-discipline. *Mutual engagement* manifests itself in the writing group as participants relate to each other. During breaks, conversations could revolve around personal struggles and issues. Collegiality is developing in a very permissive milieu across the spectrum of hierarchies and subjects. The open floor and safe environment build mutually supportive relationships and promote learning, identification and trust. For instance, a sense of inadequacy and inauthenticity connected to a conviction that one is deficient and one’s work substandard, labelled the *imposter syndrome* (Addison, Breeze and Taylor 2022), has been one such emergent topic, shared and discussed during unit-breaks, stories of how it manifested individually, how to

overcome it, as well as the reassurance for a PhD student to share similar experiences with senior colleagues.

Sharing insights on how to deal with such challenges, and as such creating and also challenging norms, is a vital example of the social learning outcomes of participating in the group. Furthermore, a *shared repertoire* in the writing group has emerged over time, as the group builds its own set of resources, such as the Messenger group and the unit-timer. Further, as Wenger highlights, practices and discourses related to the resources and the way that they are used promote both individual and group development.

Informal learning occurs through *joint enterprise*, *mutual engagement* and *shared repertoire*. You learn a lot, but it can be quite tacit, such as growing confidence and identity as a scholar. Further, collegiality across disciplines and departments is developing as a side-effect of the writing group, enlarging the academic and social networks of PhD students and senior scholars alike.

The Writing Group as a Caring Collegial Environment

Rationality and goal-oriented ideals often influence attitudes towards work. Research shows that a highly competitive work environment and excessive “rationalisation of organisational practices” have negative effects on working life (Pessi et al., 2022, p. 84). Instead of increasing efficiency, it has an opposite effect and degrades the workers’ health. Moreover, accentuating the focus on the employees as roles (or titles) instead of as people, “threatens the integrity of personhood and the possibility to grasp the existential meanings of one’s work” (Pessi et al., 2022, p. 92).

The writing group provides an environment which counteracts these tendencies in academia and enables colleagues to relate to each other as individuals in a caring and encouraging way. Spending a lot of time together makes it easier to share both professional and private joys and sorrows, and for others to relate to them. This positive and accepting climate plays an important role in allowing a good workflow and a consistent focus for the participants. Moreover, we would claim that this aspect of the writing group also makes it accessible to personalities who are not necessarily extroverts. The writing group is thus a work environment

which considers both the emotional and relational aspects of being a human. Pessi et al. (2022) argue that more attention should be given to emotions and responding to emotions at work to promote the well-being, integrity and meaningfulness of the employees. This is because emotions matter when we work, when we make decisions, teach and learn. Emotions influence learning through their impact on motivation and mechanisms of a socioemotional nature (Ambrose et al., 2010, 155-156). Human existence is also intersubjective and relating to others is one of our fundamental needs. As relational beings, sharing positive emotions and the positive recognition from others is essential for one's flourishing, which is reflected in one's effectivity and well-being at work (Pessi et al., 2022, p. 83).

Pessi et al. present two key concepts to discuss positive responses to others' emotions: The first is *compassion*, which means the empathetic response and concern for someone else's suffering and sorrow. The writing group fosters the creation of a safe space for sharing experiences of challenges and shortcomings, and to receive compassion, stories of similar feelings and situations, and valuable suggestions for how to move on. The second is *copassion*, the positive reaction to someone's joy, positive emotions and success. When someone in the writing group experiences a productive writing flow, makes new discoveries in their work, or achieves success in fundraising, other group members not only share in the joy and success of their colleague but also amplify the sense of happiness through their positive reactions and support. Both concepts imply that the emotions of the other are recognised, shared and responded to. Moreover, with positive emotions and copassion, one is motivated to sustain and increase the positive emotion of the others. The benefits of compassion and copassion between colleagues are multiple and include improved "well-being, innovation, entrepreneurship, transformation, empowerment, meaningfulness, innovativity and resilience" (Pessi et al., 2022, p. 85). Other researchers have also shown that fostering copassionate and compassionate working environments increases the well-being of the employees, decreases uncertainty and anxiety, and promotes the capacity for solving problems together. Further benefits of a copassionate culture

are the fostering of mutual trust and the experience of belonging, social connection and feeling of psychological safety (Pessi et al., 2022, p. 92).

Concluding Remarks

The writing group is an informal constellation of colleagues held together by a Messenger group, a Zoom link and repeated bookings of communal workspaces, as well as a mutual need for this special kind of work environment. We have in this article shown that practices like a 45/15 working schedule and the round of the day/unit have established an environment with a culture of trust and recognition, positive encouragement and the exchange of mutual academic experience-based advice. Theoretically, the writing group may be characterized as a community of practice, with shared repeated practices and a joint aim of scholarly productivity, mutual engagement in each other's work and personal concerns, as well as shared central resources in the form of the unit-timer and the Messenger group.

As academia is a highly competitive world, with strong and multiple hierarchies, individualized work and a high degree of rationalization of creative processes, we have also shown how the writing group creates a working environment that caters to human needs through compassion and copassion, and maybe for that very reason, is a productive academic environment for the participants.

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