ABSTRACT
        This paper presents the individual narratives of five
participants in a writer's support group in the Department of Teacher
Education at the University of Dayton (Ohio). Participants were new faculty
in tenure track positions. Each participant's narrative describes her reasons
for joining the group and the ways in which the group has helped her
professional and personal development. Some aspects of the group highlighted
in the narratives include the "conversation rule," which required that
decisions, which in the past had been made fairly informally, now had to be
discussed in the support group; professional collaboration; working through
"mental blocks"; dealing with rejection of a paper; and adjusting to the
culture of academia. (DB)

Writer's Support Group:
An Avenue to Seeking Promotion and Tenure

Presenters from The University of Dayton

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Midwestern Education Research Association

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Individual Narratives

Note: While compiling these stories, it was noted that some members referred to the group as "the Writing Support Group" while others used the name "the Writer's Support Group". For the sake of consistency, the name "Writer's Support Group" has been utilized for this document. The notion of whether "writer's" or "writing" is being supported is yet to be fully addressed.

The Dance of Higher Education: Not a Solo Performance

Shauna M. Adams, Ed. D.

My first and second years in a tenure track position were anything but typical. A new dean, a new chair, new state teacher licensure standards and the responsibility for developing a new program. The paradigm went beyond "shifting", it was breaking apart. Like a melting iceberg, the faculty in the School of Education was floating in separate directions. Like deer in headlights, they were unable to act, disabled by the wave of change that flooded the School of Education. As with any new job, it was important to develop an understanding of the culture. However, the change process had created such upheaval that the culture was disrupted.

In an environment with great disequilibrium, I set out to make sense of the world of higher education. While the faculty was busy sorting through the major changes that they faced, I was creating a new program and a place in academia. When the dust settled, I felt confident in what I had built. I had been given power and the freedom to create my own version of higher education. All was right with the world. Then came the Writer's Support Group.

The "Supposed-to-Be's"

Higher education is saturated in tradition and bound by the rules of those who have gone before. There are rules of order, of process, of seniority, of regal dress, and most importantly of office size and parking lots. Being one who enjoys stretching the boundaries, I stretched. When I found no resistance, I pushed the limits even further. I started by developing a graduate program in Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education. I was the only full-time faculty associated with the new program, so I had only myself to convince. I studied the best practice literature and got input from adjunct instructors and

practitioners and designed a program that was easily approved by the faculty. In the end, I

designed it and I owned it. Good or bad, it was mine. The true implications of this

"ownership" did not hit me until my third year. A year that saw the formation of the "Writer's

Support Group". It was during this year that I learned that there are some valid "supposed-to-

be's" buried in the traditions of higher education?

A Team Emerges

We started with an open invitation to all non-tenured faculty in our department, but

solidified into a group of five women, four who were new to the University and myself. We

came together with a need to support and be supported. We thought at first that our sole

purpose was to support scholarship. We quickly learned that the bond became both personal

and professional and transcended teaching, service and scholarship.

During our first two meetings we established a set of norms or limits that would guide

us throughout the year. The rules were well thought-out and provided a framework for the

relationships that ensued. In the past, I found rules to be cumbersome. These rules, however,

created a freedom to express opinions, offer constructive criticism, and set clear expectations

for professional behavior. The entire team participated in establishing the rules and in turn

demonstrated a sense of ownership for the support group.

The rule that most impacted my world was the "conversation rule". This rule stated

that the decisions that were made in the past without much fuss, now had to be discussed.

This support group had created a cocoon of trust where first year faculty could ask the tough

questions: What are the criteria for being graduate faculty? How are student teachers placed?

Who decided that this research course sequence made sense? Merit pay is determined how?!

Questions that many new faculty members would leave unanswered, were free game with this

group. These questions and conversations were not limited to departmental procedures. They

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quickly moved to my domain. They started questioning the Graduate Early Childhood Program as well as the developing undergraduate program. They wanted to have *conversations* about courses, and field placements; mentor teachers and portfolio assessments. "What do we believe in?", they asked. I found myself asking these questions too. "What are our core beliefs and values?" "What are the faculty's core beliefs and values?" We let nothing slide.

Then the rest of the faculty started chiming in. Why do you have room for this course and not this one? Who is going to teach all these new courses? What do you mean children are going to "play" in the primary grades? The process was changing. My ideas were challenged and stretched. New ideas entered into the mix until the end product was different. Actually, it was better. Some faculty now expressed an interest in early childhood, (others still could care less). There was an emerging sense of ownership for the new programs that had not existed before. The faculty caught up with the change process or at least were more comfortable with the changes that they faced. The culture of this School of Education reemerged, a little worse for wear, but still intact.

Now, in my fourth year, my task is to understand the culture of the Department of Teacher Education, the School of Education, the University and of higher education in general. At first glance one might think I haven't come very far, as my goal in years one and two was to "understand the culture". I would argue, however, that I have learned much. I have learned that the *process*, the *give- and-take*, the *conversation* is the culture. I am learning to do the dance of higher education and now realize that it is not a solo performance.

My Journey from the Desert to the Oasis

Connie Bowman, Ph.D.

My purpose for joining the Writer's Support Group was two fold: accountability to publish and movement toward tenure; but this group turned out to be more than that for me. It opened the doors to true collaboration and the process of beginnings.

As a junior faculty member, I had the same problems that entry-year teachers have: I kept taking on more responsibilities, I wanted to prove I could do this, and I found myself overwhelmed, because I had not learned how to say "no". I found myself on numerous committees, co-coordinating a preservice program, writing a new Integrated Language Arts program as proposed by the state, attending numerous meetings about the new proposals, consulting with five other program chairs and departments on their respective state proposals, being a liaison with one of our partner districts, supervising student teachers (6), supervising preservice students (22), and teaching two new courses all during first semester. At a faculty meeting in October, I chuckled to myself when the Department Chair mentioned that our new faculty members had lighter loads, but next year they would be on full loads. I could not imagine what a full load would be and where I would find the time to do one.

Our writing support group began in late November. We established ground rules, talked about philosophies, core beliefs, values, and visions. This became my oasis, my hiding place away from everything else that seemed to be stealing my joy and purpose for being at the University. I now carved time into my overburdened schedule to meet with others once a month who shared similar beliefs and to begin to establish an *esprit de corps* with colleagues, friends and confidants.

It was during this time that I discovered the massive amount of driving I had engaged in during the first semester. I had clocked over one thousand miles to submit for supervision.

The distance from the University to the school district was twenty-five miles. This revelation cried for change. The writing group assisted me in clarifying my role as liaison and the roles and responsibilities according to the university's standards. I realized that I could not maintain this pace if I was going to survive physically or in academia.

It was through the Writer's Support Group that I was able to get acquainted with individuals who were tired of standing on the sidelines and watching me sink. They, too, were junior faculty, but were in programs that were more collaborative and supportive. Prior to the Writer's Support Group, these individuals would inquire as to how classes were going, and I would respond "fine". At this point in time, I was not ready to admit that I needed help, especially from junior faculty who seemed to have it together. I began to think that I was the only one having problems and perhaps I was not cut out for this position.

The writing group presented me the opportunity to vent my frustrations, express needs, and brainstorm for solutions. We discussed my second semester schedule and brainstormed on possibilities for survival. One solution was the opportunity to try a team approach to supervision. This process allowed the school district and the student teachers to receive a better model and was an excellent empowering technique for teachers. This approach shifted paradigms and put the teacher in the driver's seat. It allowed a closer collaborative style for university and teachers. This was the same model we were using in the writer's group: empowerment. From this new model, a true partnership was beginning to emerge.

As can be seen, what started out as a writing accountability group for me turned out to be my lifeline. The Writer's Support Group gave me the opportunity to build friendships, to develop trust bonds, and give/receive support in numerous ways. I not only received feedback for publications that were submitted and published, but I also learned the process of going beyond survival to living and enjoying academia.

Struggling to Maximize Productivity in a Writer's Support Group Context:

My Personal Reflections on the Process

Laurice M. Joseph, Ph.D

Working in a collaborative way with others is more challenging at times than working alone. It is more challenging with respect to producing outcomes in a timely manner due to varying perspectives about what those outcomes should be. My personal/professional goal for the Writer's Support Group was to work vigorously at seeking and providing feedback on written manuscripts that were produced by all group members. My way of maximizing productivity in a time saver manner consisted of providing the group with sections from drafts of my manuscripts which I experienced "mental blocks." I can remember eliciting feedback from the group about some ideas for how a specific emergent literacy instructional approach typically used with small groups of children could be used with large groups of children in a general education classroom setting. The Writer's Support Group generated some great ideas, and I was able to reflect upon those ideas and generate further ones. My thought processes needed a boost, and the Writer's Support Group members' ideas provided that supportive structure. The members in a sense were scaffolding my thinking on the subject matter. I was comfortable with other sections of my draft that I revised considerably over time. I had hoped that the majority of our group meetings would consist of members bringing forth sections of their writing which were most troublesome.

The group gradually took on a different focus. Many members of the group used the time to discuss other issues that were concerning them as junior faculty members. While these issues were certainly critical ones, the discussion surrounding them left me feeling frustrated about what I had perceived our mission should be about (i.e., feedback on our scholarly endeavors). I felt the group at times was becoming reactive toward our present

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condition as junior faculty rather than proactive. At times, it reminded me of being in the teacher's lounge in a public school setting venting about structural obstacles and interprofessional relationships. Despite these moments of frustration, the feedback I received and provided on individual's writing has been very beneficial. Many of us have landed a publication or two. I still ponder on the level of productivity----could we have achieved greater outcomes in producing published work if we remained completely focussed on that endeavor..

I have not shared my concern explicitly with the entire group. However, I have shared my concern with Katie, one member of the group. My discussions with her have encouraged me to reflect on other members' professional needs and their perspectives about the mission of the group. I am currently engaging in introspective thought about why I believe the group should be about supporting each other in "traditional" products of scholarship (peer-reviewed journal articles). I have learned that my perspective of what the group should be about comes from the academic culture I was "raised" in.

I stepped into the life of an assistant professor immediately following completion of my doctorate degree. I was a traditional doctoral student meaning that I was in full-time residence for three years aside from graduate research and teaching assistantships. The university from which I obtained my doctorate degree is known for being one of the top research universities in the country. My mentors at that university were mainly rewarded and or respected for their scholarly productivity. Their roles as service providers and teachers were especially respected if they were scholars first. My mentors at my doctoral degree granting institution instilled in me the notion of making scholarship my number one priority. It is difficult, if not impossible, to "shake off" my former academic culture that shaped my beliefs and actions about what it meant to be called "professor".

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I am discovering that there is a broader picture of what it means to be a respected professor at a mid-size institution that values individual student attention, service, and teaching in ways that are somewhat different than the academic culture I "grew up" in. I am also discovering that scholarship is broader than producing published manuscripts. My conflicting thoughts have lead me to ponder that perhaps the mission of the group should not be solely about products after all. Instead, it may be about a more complex professional endeavor that is actively being involved in the process of helping each other grow more fully in an academic community. I plan to entertain this discussion with the group and learn about their previous academic cultures in subsequent meetings and see where it leads us

Rejection Hurts: The Role of A Critical Friend

Kathryn Kinnucan-Welsch. Ed.D.

At long last, the reviews and the letter from the editor from the journal to which I had sent my article months before arrived. I was in Michigan teaching summer school for Western Michigan University, but I had asked Mary Ellen to watch for the letter and call me as soon as it arrived. Well, it did. I remember feeling the first sharp pang of disappointment as Mary Ellen read from the letter:

We regret to inform you that we will not be able to accept your article for publication. . . The decision is based upon reviewer's evaluations (enclosed) and our own editorial considerations.

I asked Mary Ellen to read the reviews, but after the first few sentences, asked her to stop. It really was more than I could handle. I went back to Dayton that weekend, picked up the letter and reviews, but it was six weeks before I was able to read them.

How was I going to tell Dodie and Marie, my co-authors? We had been so confident, so sure, that the manuscript portrayed clearly the literacy program we had developed as well as the research addressing its impact. We felt that teachers reading the article would find new ways to think about helping young readers struggling with those early attempts at reading and writing. How was I going to tell Laurice, colleague and fellow Writer's Support Group member, knowing that her article submitted to the same journal had been accepted just before we both departed the university for the summer? What should I have done to make sure that the article was ready for review? How could the reviewers have questioned the authenticity of our data? The responses of doubt regarding our findings are what frustrated me most.

These questions haunted me for much of the summer. It's not because this was my first rejection. I have submitted articles before that were rejected. It was just that I was so

confident about this article. I finally called Dodie, my colleague, co-author, and teacher in an elementary school in Georgia. She, of course, was disappointed; but her disappointment was secondary to her anger that the reviewers had questioned the data. We talked about that issue for some time, and made plans for revising the article to send to another journal. We also decided to respond to the editors and voice our concerns about some of the comments. I was also reluctant to call Laurice. She had reviewed the article before I sent it out to the journal, had made comments, and I had revised based on her suggestions. We had shared so many successes our first year together as new faculty at the University of Dayton, it was difficult to share this rejection.

I wrote about my communications with both Dodie and Laurice in my journal dated 8/13, a few days after I had talked to both of them.

> About the Writer's Support Group. It struck me when I finally had the courage to talk to Laurice about the rejection from [the journal], how much responsibility we are feeling for one another's writing. I was devastated by the rejection letter. . . . First, I was so sure that it was just the right article . . . . Second, they questioned the validity and accuracy of our statistics and findings. That infuriated Dodie. Third, the very premises upon which we based our grounding for Reading Express was questioned in a most closed-minded way. Gosh, how disheartening.

As I reflected on that entry, it occurred to me that I was pondering an element of our writing support group that I hadn't thought of before; that is, a sense of responsibility we have to one another. Our group members have often been the last people to see a manuscript or a proposal before it goes out for review. Laurice shared with me that she felt she should have seen some of those points about which the reviewers were so critical. It was during that conversation, and in my ensuing reflections, that I began to think differently about the role that the members of the Writer's Support Group must play for one another as critical friends.

During this same period, I spent some time with Mary Ellen, a fellow Writer's

Support Group member, in August. We talked about the article, and I was able to share with

her that Dodie and I were revising. I was moving from an immobilized state to one of action,

and was feeling OK about that. After Mary Ellen and I finished our work on course planning,

she asked me if I would review an article she had been working on. I read it, and offered

substantial comments on how the conclusions might be reworked. It was a little

uncomfortable for me to suggest a major overhaul, but I was looking at the article, not as

Mary Ellen's friend and colleague, but as a reviewer. When I thought about what had

transpired over the weekend on my drive back to Dayton, it occurred to me I made a

conscious choice to assume a different role than I had assumed in former times I had reviewed

for groups members. My journal entry of 8/13 continues:

> I can recall Laurice talking about feeling badly about the article-not just
> because it was rejected, but because she had been a part of the process in getting
> it sent out. I think we have to talk about this sense of responsibility and what
> does it mean to really critically review each other's work. I know that influenced
> me when I read ME's [Mary Ellen's] article when I stayed overnight in
> Cincinnati-I probably read with more care-read with more of a critical eye-since
> I had the experience with RT. This will be an interesting topic when we meet
> again this fall.

The conversation with Laurice about the responsibility we have to one another was not

the first time this topic had come up in Writer's Support Group. When we were just forming

our group and establishing our group norms, we agreed that our comments should be honest.

Connie, another member, made the comment at the time that being a critical reviewer would

be difficult for her. This may be an issue we will have to discuss in our meetings this fall.

What does it mean to be critical friend? How can we be for one another both friends,

colleagues, and peer reviewers? What does it mean to both give and receive support in a

Writer's Support Group?

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We started to talk about these questions as the 1998-99 school year started, even before our group met formally for the first time. My journal entry of 8/27 captures some of those thoughts:

> The conversation has continued about the role we take for one another in our Writer's Support Group. Laurice and I have had several more conversations about the article that I had rejected. . . . She mentioned again how badly she felt--given the comments from reviewers-that she hadn't had more to offer to improve. Connie and Laurice and I talked about it Tuesday night--after the opening School of Education meeting. I think we all agreed that the WSG will have some very specific purposes this year--brainstorming, helping each of us think about an article in a certain way. Laurice commented on our way over to the retreat that she thinks it is more helpful in our group when we have a specific problem for the group to address--like she did with her piece that asked for classroom ideas for the word boxes. So, I wonder if our group is evolving--last year we were very much an open forum for support for one another in our first year. That was most important.. . .

So--I think our challenge this year will be to refine the purpose of our group--Laurice and I already have some writing ideas that we are working on individually.

The manuscript that was the topic of numerous conversations and journal entries has now been sent out for review to another journal. Laurice reviewed second and third drafts of the revision, and wrote the following note to accompany her comments:

I'm being really critical 'cause I want you to publish this. [smiley face]

The Writer's Support Group, like any group, will evolve to meet the needs of its members. It occurs to me that as we grow as teachers and writers, so too will we grow in the process of effectively and honestly reviewing one another's written work. We came together as a Writer's Support Group to create a safe space to think and write. One aspect of that safety is knowing that every piece that we write and send out for public scrutiny will have benefited from the collective mind of our group. That is what writing support is all about.

Mary Ellen Seery, Ed.D.

Life is full of twists and turns, and in 57 years I have encountered many. Serendipity? Fate? Blundering? Probably all and more have played their part in the blended landscape I have called my life. The journey into higher education is no exception. To wit:

1992 (August): Looking for a career opportunity in clinical evaluation and diagnosis of young children with developmental disabilities, I approached a professor at the University of Cincinnati to talk about taking "just a few courses." Result: An offer of full scholarship and clinical internship if I would agree to become a full time student.

1993 (January): The traineeship and courses were going well. I made application to the doctoral program in Early Childhood Special Education at the University of Cincinnati.

1993-1996: It felt right. It went well. Degree in hand, I continued to make my place in the world of clinical diagnostic teams and classrooms for young children with disabilities.

1997 (April): A discernible shift took place in the leadership and mission of the diagnostic center where I had been happy. I wondered, "Do I belong here now?" In Salt Lake City, I was approached by several University of Dayton staff and faculty who wanted to discuss a new tenure track position in the Department of Teacher Education, Early Childhood Programs. I had never considered the possibility. At age 55, could I crack the code of higher education and make a successful career for myself?

1997 (May): The interview process began. First stop was the Provost's office and an appointment with the Assistant Provost. After 20 minutes of lively conversation the declaration was made:

"You are obviously a bright, capable woman and have been successful at what you've done, but I don't see you on faculty here at the University of Dayton. "Why is that?" I asked, startled and curious. "You have not been prepared for academia," came the answer. "That wasn't your track."

I continued the day-long interview process, pondering the question of preparation within a track. At the end of the day, I met with the department chair who allowed, "I have spoken with everyone, and they are all impressed." "Well, Dan," I replied, "not everyone." I accepted the position with some trepidation and an "I'll show you attitude."

1997 (August): The assistant provost hosted an orientation for all new University faculty members. Upon encountering me, he said with a genuine smile, "You know, Mary Ellen, I often think about our discussion."

I, too, often think about that conversation. And you were right, Dr. P., to express your concern about my preparation. As I started the academic year, the realization of the very different cultural demands of university life (teaching/advising, service, and scholarship) became abundantly clear. Add to that the importance of establishing professional friendships and learning how to access a variety of resources within and outside of the University, and the task of acclimating to higher education becomes complex and demanding. Of the five junior faculty in the Department (four of us new to the University), all but me had prepared themselves for careers in higher education. What we had in common was our mutual need to understand the culture of the University of Dayton. With that common need, we established the Writer's Support Group and in the process of our meetings have uncovered many individual needs. I, for example, had never published, but had a solid record of presentations. I had taught graduate courses, but not undergraduate. University-speak (FTEs, tenure track, promotion and tenure process, University governance at all levels, writing for peer-/nonpeer-reviewed journals, research agendas) needed to be understood and explored. Major issues of

program re-design, relationships with elementary schools, and new State of Ohio requirements for teacher licensure needed to be mastered. And then, of course, there was the matter of meeting classes and advising students, a strong value at the University.

During the early phase of WSG, it became clear that all of the individuals in the group sought support in a variety of areas. Writing and scholarship were frequent topics, but the cultural web in which we found ourselves was intricate, sometimes sticky, and often a challenge. What I needed was encouragement, praise, and constant reinforcement for understanding the culture of this university and the broader life of higher education across the United States. What I received was friendship, a constant flow of information, and productive critical analyses of my own work. I also received definition of myself as a woman in higher education who brought with her a variety of strengths, but who also needed to understand how to apply them in a new and unfamiliar culture.

Who belongs in higher education? Would I have survived even this long in higher education without the support of my colleagues in the WSG? I can answer "probably not" to the latter question, but the former is more difficult. Teacher education programs have come in for heavy criticism, much of which may be justified. New approaches need to be explored and this may mean that our traditional understanding that higher education faculty, at least in teacher education, must follow the academia-track in pursuit of a terminal degree may be somewhat faulty. We need to explore ways to enrich our higher education community that stretch the frame of current preservice preparation programs. Dr. P. was not inappropriate in his concern, but we probably should not address the question of who belongs in higher education in a broad sense. If we do, we will continue to manufacture stereotypes of acceptability. Rather, it seems we should continually evaluate the challenges of the various professions represented in higher education, identifying needs in an ongoing, systematic basis.

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Stretching the frame may be valuable and necessary, but support is critical for those of us who have not been schooled in the higher education culture so that we may contribute to the stretch. We will only perpetuate the myth of who does and does not belong if the university society cannot open itself up to changing its boundaries. Writer's Support Group provides a support structure that can allow the stretch to happen and, at the same time, provide an avenue for cultural transmission of deeply held University values.

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