NACADA Module Transcript

Writing 1 – Overview of the NACADA Virtual Writing Group Initiative

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Hello, writers!

INTRODUCTIONS

I'm Rhonda Dean Kyncl; I'm the Associate Dean for Students at the University of Oklahoma where I oversee academic advising and student engagement. I also have a Master's degree and a PhD from OU in Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy. Most of my academic life has been focused on writing; I taught First-Year Composition on our campus for the entirety of my degree from Fall 2000 until Spring 2009. I returned to the classroom after I became Associate Dean and have taught composition classes online and in traditional settings. I've also recently taught our writing for the medical professions course as well.

My other role at OU in the writing world was as assistant director of the OU Writing Center, and it was there that I first encountered writing groups and witnessed their power firsthand. I worked in the OU Writing Center from 2006-2009, while I was writing my doctoral dissertation, and I'll be serving as the Interim Director of our campus Writing Center through May of 2020.

By the way, it is quite likely that your institution has a writing center, too. If you haven't already done so, check it out and make contact with the faculty and staff there.

But back to my experiences with writing.

As I worked on my dissertation and the research for it, I was a member of a Dissertation Support Group. We met once a week for the entire academic year…every Friday morning. There were five of us in the group, and all of us were working on either dissertations or theses for our graduate degrees. I was able to begin my dissertation in August of 2008 and defend it in May 2009, and I know that significant progress was due to my writing group:

- they shared the same issues and struggles I was experiencing;

- they held me accountable for my work;

- they gave me essential feedback on my multiple drafts; and

- they encouraged me when I became discouraged.

  And guess what? I did the same for each of them.

So in this session we'll talk about:

- The need for writing groups

- The advantages of writing groups

- The structure of NACADA's groups

- What writing groups are NOT

- And a bit about the design and structure of successful writing groups

THE NEED FOR WRITING GROUPS

One of the main reasons for writing in groups is to combat the myth of genius. This is the idea that really good writers sit in attic rooms and bring forth page after page of perfect texts on any given day they choose. If you believe in this myth, and yet you struggle to come up with an idea or to write a coherent page of text, you become frustrated and may eventually stop trying.

One of the things I learned during my dissertation-writing also impacts the need for writing groups and that is the isolation we sometimes experience as writers. I found myself sitting at home, facing a blinking cursor on a white page and struggling to begin. I felt very alone; I felt that I didn't know enough; I felt unprepared to write a 200-page document; I was overwhelmed.

ADVANTAGES OF WRITING GROUPS

All of these struggles and challenges were addressed when I joined a writing group. First of all, the writing group gave me a community where I could simply talk about my struggles. I quickly discovered that I was not alone in my feelings of isolation. The other members of my group had felt the same way. They too were staring at blank screens with flashing cursors, so we immediately had something in common and a connection.

During our first meeting, we each shared some about our topics and our experiences thus far. We also shared a few personal details about our lives and our academic journeys. Finally, we discussed how we would organize our group: how often we would meet, how often we would present our work, how we would provide feedback to one another, and what we all expected to gain from the group.

NACADA WRITING GROUPS

As we organize this year's writing support groups through NACADA, we will follow a similar trajectory to last year's. As you know, we've organized the groups based on general categories according to where you may be in your own writing process.

The first is **Idea Generation**: this is a group for those of you who want to form and articulate an idea for a written submission to a journal or a presentation at a conference. You are very early in the writing process; in fact, you may consider yourself a complete novice with no idea what you may want to write or present, but just with a vague idea that you want to be involved in this good work.

We'll begin this group by actually reviewing some articles and journal submissions that will give you some basic ideas about how the genre works. And we'll ask you, after you have read and reviewed 3 journal articles, to propose your own idea...an idea that joins your work with something you find resonates with you.

The second group is **Idea Development**: in this group we expect that you already have an idea, but you're in the early stages of outlining and mulling this idea over and figuring out how you might turn this idea into a submission to a journal or a conference. In this group, you'll share your idea outlines with one another, you'll give and receive feedback from your colleagues, and we hope that by the end of the group's meetings that you'll have a rough draft you're read to work on.

With the third group, **Drafting and Revising**: the members of this group will already have rough drafts that they're ready to share with colleagues. Based on the feedback you receive from your group, we hope that by the end of the year, you'll have a more polished draft that you're read to submit to a journal or to a conference as a presentation.

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Finally, we have a fourth group of writers who have requested **One-on-One Consultations**: this group will work closely with our final group of participants, our **Writing Mentors**. The writers in the one-on-one group may have a unique situation or a writing scenario that doesn't allow them to be a member of a group. We'll pair you with one of our writing mentors, but note that this is not meant to be an ongoing pairing. Join one of the writing groups for a more long-term journey!

WHAT WRITING GROUPS ARE NOT OR WAYS TO MAKE SURE YOUR WRITING GROUP FAILS

Before we get into the details of how our writing groups will function, I want to say a word about what writing groups ARE NOT, OR how you can ensure this writing group fails.

1. Be the "resident expert." The members of writing groups are NOT (necessarily) writing instructors or teachers. We expect that everyone in a group is a professional and already has the ability to communicate effectively. It's fine to come to the group with a question about grammar or style, but we encourage the group to look up the answers to such questions using online style guides or online writing labs (Purdue University, for example, has one of the best and most extensive online writing labs in the world, and it's freely accessible to everyone). Please do not set yourself up as a writing instructor, or the grammar checker for your group. The point of writing groups is not to correct grammar; it is to provide feedback, encouragement, and accountability for all members of the group.

   Setting yourself up as a "resident expert" can also trample on the voices and work of others in your group. When you become so heavy-handed with your review of another writer's work that you are marking through their words or crossing out paragraphs, you have taken over that work and made it your own. That is NOT the purpose of a writing group. Our goal is for each writer to feel empowered and enabled to bring their own ideas into the open and write about their experiences in their voices. A heavy-handed critique can essentially victimize another writer. Certainly, you should ask questions of the writer about portions of their work you don't understand. You should offer your

perspective on what the writer has written and express truthfully when you lose track of the main idea or thread. But you should stop short of making another writer's work sound like yours. *(For more details on our philosophy of writing groups, please see our statement on the website.)*

The other important thing to remember here is that most of us can figure out the grammar issues AFTER we've completed the draft. In the early stages of idea generation, development, and drafting, you want to focus on the BIG IDEAS: the thesis, how the article connects ideas from one to the next, whether or not the thesis speaks to resonant issues in academic advising, if the reader can follow the writer's train of thought…big picture issues. If you focus on grammar early, you will invariably create a situation for yourself or the writer that stymies creativity.

[We have a saying here at OU at our freshman orientation camps: "Drop your cool." And it would be a good idea to follow that guideline in these groups. This is not the place to show off your grammar prowess.]

2. Don't do the work you say you'll do. Another way to ensure the group will fail is to not meet the obligation or responsibility each member has agreed to: to show up on time and to review the writing/reading given and to present your own work to the group. Just do what you say you'll do.

3. Spend the entire session socializing. While some socializing will certainly occur, particularly at the beginning and end of meetings, the point is to focus on your writing and the preparation of your writing for publication and sharing with a wider audience. Don't spend the entire hour or 90 minutes just chatting. If you find that you really "hit it off" with certain members, arrange another time to socialize outside the group meeting times.

4. Latch onto someone else's ideas and present them as your own. Certainly writing groups ARE places to find collaborators…but if you want to collaborate with someone, reach out to them outside of the group and discuss that possibility with them. Then decide together if that collaboration will move forward or not.

WRITING GROUP METHODOLOGY

Now that we've got that out of the way, let's get down to the nitty-gritty now of how these writing groups will work. First, I will email all of you early in September with the names of your group members and their contact information; I will basically constitute your groups. Now there will be more than one group in each of our categories. We'll likely have several members sign up under each category, and I will divide those into smaller groups of 6 or 7. So, in early fall, look for an email from me with your particular group.

Secondly, in that email, I'll not only provide you with your group members and contact info, I'll also provide you with a Zoom link for your first meeting. Some of you have already volunteered to be a "Casual Coordinator" for each group, but you'll need one in each group. I wanted you to know that this doesn't meeting you're signing up to read all the papers or to be the genius (remember, I don't believe in that). This is just a person who will step out during that first meeting and say, hey let's introduce ourselves. And then after 10 minutes of chatting, the casual coordinator will say, 'hey, let's move on into our discussion of our ideas…or of our work.'

Most importantly, during that first meeting, you'll need to do what I talked about earlier in the webinar with my dissertation support group: you'll need to establish your parameters, your guidelines as a group. In this discussion, and I'll send you these questions in the email I send you that constitutes your group: you'll need to decide: how often will we meet, when will we meet. Who will be the first to submit an idea or a paper; how will we give feedback. You'll need to really design your group in that first meeting. So, let's go through these questions in a little more detail.

FIRST MEETING

1. You'll want to decide when and how often you will meet, and how long each meeting will be. This is basic. Keep in mind that some of you may be in different time zones. *We recommend that you meet at least every few weeks for 60-90 minutes. If you think about the academic semesters (or quarters), you want to meet often enough to accomplish significant progress during each 3-3 ½ month period.*

2. How will you communicate between meetings? *Will you just email one another? Or will you communicate via your cell phones or office phones? Talk about preferred methods for communication.*

3. Who will submit work first?

4. When will the work be submitted to the work in order to provide plenty of time for review before the next meeting? What will the group do if the work is not submitted? Or if the member who is to submit work is unable to do so? Make plans now for how you'll accommodate these situations. *We recommend you submit work (outline or draft) at least 10 days to 2 weeks before the meeting time, so that group members have ample opportunity to review your submission.*

5. What will you do during the meetings? *We will provide a set of questions for reviewing outlines or writing. But if you want to provide additional feedback or use different questions, the group is free to decide that.*

6. What kind of feedback are members most interested in? *Would you like to receive feedback via email? Or just orally during the meetings? How would you like for the members to provide the feedback they're giving?*

7. What would you like to get out of this writing group? *Discuss members' expectations and what their goals are. This is essential to ensuring that the group is productive and meets the needs of the members.*

SUBSEQUENT MEETINGS

The Casual Coordinator will keep track of meeting dates and times and emailing members with reminders. Be sure to follow the guidelines you agree to during the first meeting. And if you have any questions or bumps along the way, feel free to contact me.

It's also a good idea to review our "Writing Group Philosophy" statement. I shared the core philosophy earlier in this webinar, but read the full statement online and be sure to keep the principles in mind as you collaborate with your colleagues.

<u>Final Thoughts</u>

I think I've touched on most of the basics. I'm happy to answer your questions and comments via email at rkyncl@ou.edu.

And continue to check our webpage for more information and resources. Just a reminder to be sure to be logged in as a NACADA member to see all the content available to you.

Good luck with your writing . . . we need your voice and your contributions to the scholarship of academic advising!

END