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Communities of Practice in Higher Education: Transformative Dialogues Toward a Productive Academic Writing Practice

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Abstract:

Because faculty have advanced degrees, it is often assumed that they have perfected the skills needed to be productive, successful academic writers. In reality, many faculty struggle with the demands of academic writing and the resulting loss of energy for teaching and other aspects of their roles. This article reflects on the impact of an academic writing program through a community-of-practice lens. We describe the program and its elements, its development into a thriving cross-discipline writing community, the role of central program elements such as accountability and dialogue, and the benefits stemming from a learning-community emphasis across program elements.

Key Words:

Community-of-Practice, Academic Writing, Learning Communities, Strategies, Writing Program.

Introduction

What happens when faculty from diverse disciplines come together with a common interest in critical reflection over what hampers, and what facilitates a more productive, satisfying academic writing practice? Can academic writers from different disciplines and academic ranks form a community of practice around academic writing? Can such communities benefit faculty as scholars, writers, and teachers?

When we first considered forming communities-of-practice to address faculty challenges and concerns related to academic writing, we had many questions. On one hand, just because faculty have achieved an advanced degree, many assume that faculty possess the academic writing and publishing skills to write and publish a lot (Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008). We wondered how much struggle faculty had with writing and publishing. We wondered if communities-of-practice might address their needs. In addition, we were curious about what faculty would do in their communities and whether what they were learning about academic writing in their communities might impact their teaching of writing. What has evolved over four years has taught us much about the power and potential of academic writing communities-of-practice. The writing communities have also built a thriving cross-discipline dialogue with a recognizable identity across campus, as well as a cadre of faculty who have extended their learning about writing into their work with students.

Jumpstart Academic Writing Program

The Jumpstart Faculty Writing Program was developed at a public urban university, with a student population of approximately 29,000 undergraduate and graduate students and 1,700 faculty. For many years the university has supported faculty professional development through the Office of Academic Innovation (OAI) that offers resources, consultation and programs focused on teaching and learning. Before the Jumpstart Program, the only academic writing activities offered were day-long writing retreats where faculty were provided a quiet space to work with breakfast and lunch provided.

Over time, it became increasingly apparent that faculty were experiencing numerous obstacles connected to academic writing. For example, they spoke about the challenge of balancing the demands of writing with their numerous other professional and personal responsibilities, the need to identify elements that both helped and hindered their progress as writers, and the knowledge of publication strategies not typically taught in graduate school, such as getting a book published. Though the campus offered occasional workshops on publication topics, faculty were communicating that a more comprehensive approach would be helpful. Thus began the idea of a writing program focused on creating a community of writers, building writing skills, and developing the strategies that undergird a successful and sustainable writing practice.

Research on writing groups echoed our feelings that writing together and talking about writing was beneficial for faculty where they can make their goals public and celebrate their accomplishments (Atchison & Lee, 2006; Lee & Boud, 2003; Murray & Newton, 2008). In faculty writing groups, faculty begin to change the traditional view of academic writing as an isolated, close-your-office-door activity to a communal activity

shared with others faculty members who experience a number of benefits, “such as meeting at a regular time, the opportunity for discussion with peers and receiving feedback at various stages” (Devlin & Radloff, 2014, p. 231).

The Jumpstart Faculty Writing Program was the result of OAI’s positive response to the idea of having university-wide faculty writing program that offers more than writing retreats. We wanted our groups to be cross department and cross-disciplinary. Faculty told us of one of their unfortunate experiences working on writing with a department mentor whose writing advice was “Well, just write!” Newly arrived faculty found that advice intimidating, demoralizing, and inadequate. Other faculty told us they were afraid of appearing to be a “weak” writer if they sought writing help within their own department. A university-wide writing program seemed to be an excellent solution to some of these faculty concerns. In addition, a university-wide program could keep faculty aware of some of the rich academic writing resources that are available today, such as Belcher (2009), Silvia (2007), Graff and Birkenstein (2010) and Goodson (2013).

The Office embraced the development of writing communities alongside teaching and learning programming. If faculty were repeatedly reporting that writing responsibilities were getting in the way of satisfying teaching experiences, then a more holistic response to multiple faculty roles was needed. A Faculty-in-Residence for Academic Writing position was created in order to oversee programming and facilitate faculty communities. OAI handled the advertising and communications, meeting logistics, materials and other program costs. Faculty were invited to participate voluntarily without financial reward. The following description of the Jumpstart program structure and outcomes elaborates how the program evolved as a community-of-practice and the resulting impact on multiple faculty roles, including instruction.

Jumpstart as a Community-of-Practice

Jumpstart program participants initially became involved by signing up for monthly meetings through the Office of Academic Innovation. A great deal of effort is made to reach out to new faculty each year, as well as faculty who are at milestone stages in their careers, such as pre-tenure review. Participants received materials, such as blank books to be used as writing journals, which have become emblematic of membership in the Jumpstart community. Meetings are deliberately structured around values connected to promoting communities of learners who increasingly became identified with groups of cross-discipline colleagues. Over the first year, during the monthly group meetings (10 to 12 people) and the multiple small weekly group meetings (3-4 people), faculty found that they were not alone in their interest and struggles with academic writing. They found others in Jumpstart who had similar concerns about writing, similar interests in developing the knowledge and skills connected to academic writing, and an unexpected ability to support one another in fostering community members’ identities as writers. By focusing on these goals along with program content, the Jumpstart Program has evolved over the last four years into a Community-of-Practice by encouraging members to “build expertise around their common interest or motivation” (Monaghan, 2011, p. 431), and the program has subsequently grown to over 200 faculty.

At monthly gatherings, the Faculty-in-Residence for Academic Writing introduces participants across departments, then facilitates conversation and collaborative activities connected to the process of academic writing. For example, participants might learn the strategies of text structure analysis to increase the chances for acceptance into selective journals, or discuss the results of an academic writing inventory that provides insights into individual writing blocks that undermine a productive writing practice. Current literature on academic writing is shared and discussed, based on topics that participants themselves agree upon (e.g., Belcher, 2007). Time for participants to share individual challenges and struggles is prioritized, as well as sharing strategies and successes. As faculty deepen their understanding of academic writing challenges and strategies that transcend disciplinary boundaries, they report that hearing the perspectives of colleagues from other academic backgrounds is a highly valuable aspect of these discussions.

One of the challenges of the communities-of-practice is that those who participated in the first few years, stopped coming to the monthly meetings because a set of basic topics were repeated each year. Subsequently, new kinds of writing groups were born that focused on a book on academic writing or focused on writing about a specific topic like community-based learning. In addition, the experienced Jumpstart participants became conveners of their own writing groups among their peers or with their students. We call this the “Ripple Effect” where writing strategies taught in Jumpstart are adapted and passed onto students.

Communities Within Communities-of-Practice: The Role of Accountability

As faculty come to know one another within the larger Jumpstart community monthly meetings and writing retreats, they also have the opportunity to sign up for small weekly writing groups in which 3-4 faculty meet together typically for an hour, over the academic year. Faculty are matched with colleagues across disciplines according to their preferred group structure, for example:

- Write-on-site groups: members bring their laptops and just write for an hour,
- Writing feedback groups: members share a short piece of writing for feedback from the group,
- Writing goals and accountability groups: members share writing goals for the next week, are accountable for completing them and for offering support to each other in accomplishing their goals.

Members report that no matter what kind of group, the element of accountability serves an important function in their progress as writers, an experience also frequently found in scholarship on faculty academic writing (Devlin & Radloff, 2014; Silvia, 2007). The role of accountability also impacts expectations across the Jumpstart community, as the norm for participation includes one’s role in the support of colleagues, as well as one’s individual progression.

The strategies that undergird the importance of accountability and community support have also impacted the Jumpstart writing retreat structure. For example, during week-long summer writing retreats, while participants have quiet time to write, they are

also paired with colleagues with whom they check in each day to share their writing goals and progress, and have additional time during lunch breaks to explore daily writing themes of interest. The program also offers optional, mini-writing workshops during the day where small groups of faculty can meet one another around mutual writing interests (for example, writing a book proposal). Writing retreat participants report a strong sense of cross-discipline community stemming from these intensive, week-long experiences, many of which are sustained throughout Jumpstart community activities throughout the academic year. At the end of the retreat, many ask to continue the buddy system established in the retreat to get help in creating a small writing group.

Celebrating Communities-of Practice

Each year, time is set aside to celebrate Jumpstart members' successes and accomplishments at campus-wide celebratory gatherings. Individual work is acknowledged, along with opportunities to acknowledge the support of writing colleagues in the Jumpstart community. The celebration underscores the central roles of colleagues and of developing shared meanings about academic writing practices across disciplines. Fifteen faculty attended the celebration for Jumpstart in 2015. Before the celebration, faculty listed their accomplishments and made comments about their progress regarding academic writing. A summary of the accomplishments of these fifteen includes eleven published articles, five submitted journal articles that are under review, twelve conference proposals, one proceedings article published, nine book chapters, one book proposal and one blog created. One faculty member did not have any submissions but acknowledged that the foundation had been laid for future work: “

I have written over 15,000 words this year and will have two manuscripts ready to send off by the end of the academic year. I've established good writing habits and I'm energized and excited by the writing I am doing. The several years of guilt I had about not writing, along with all of the habits I'd developed to avoid writing, are quickly disappearing.

As another faculty member stated, “It [Jumpstart] affirmed that none of us just ‘knows’ how to be a successful academic writer by virtue of a degree in some area. We gathered that knowledge together [in our writing groups].” Another faculty member noted that “My deepest insights came in the company of others from different backgrounds, but having the same experiences.”

From Writing to Teaching

Jumpstart program assessment has revealed that participation in the program has resulted in the application of new teaching strategies connected to writing. For example, many faculty integrated the strategies they learned and practiced in Jumpstart into their own course curricula to improve students' writing. In an effort to help her students overcome “academic procrastination” (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004) and based on her experiences in Jumpstart, one faculty member had her graduate students assess their own procrastination tendencies and, then, taught them how to be accountable for goal completion in a small writing group. Other faculty created student writing groups and other writing activities within their programs to encourage accountability and student communities connected to writing in the discipline. The Office of Academic Innovation

also noticed Jumpstart members participating in greater numbers in teaching-focused programs, some for the first time. Perhaps the comfort and familiarity with the Office fostered by participation in writing communities paved the way for entrance to communities-of-practice connected to teaching. As one faculty wrote, “Jumpstart was my gateway to OAI...normally solitary, I was surprised by how much my writing process improved in the company of others. More recently, I’ve found the same is true when joining discussions on teaching.” Finally, the acceptance of campus writing communities has allowed faculty involved in scholarship of teaching (SOTL) to more readily find common interests across disciplines. A faculty member from Applied Linguistics along with an Education faculty member who were in the same writing group submitted an article to *College Teaching* about using the Jumpstart writing strategies in her Masters level research writing class. This is an excellent example of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Growing the Jumpstart SOTL interest area is a priority in future program planning efforts, as interdisciplinary SOTL communities have been shown to further campus awareness of, and reflection about the complexity of teaching and learning (Cox, 2003).

Conclusion

As a program informed first and foremost by the values connected to fostering communities-of-practice, the Jumpstart has benefitted faculty in several ways. First, the program has increased awareness of the unspoken norms of writing and publishing in higher education. Second, by building on this collective knowledge, participants gain strategies and skills as writers, and many become faculty leaders who themselves become practitioners who mentor newcomers to the community. Finally, faculty report increased capacity as teachers as they use the same strategies they have directly experienced to empower their own students as writers. As expectations for scholarly and writing productivity increase, communities-of-practice offer tremendous potential for supporting the lived experience of faculty professional growth as academic writers – and educators.

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