

# Writing Relationships: Collaboration In A Faculty Writing Group\*

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## Abstract

(Our faculty writing group in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada began in 2009 and over the past three years it has grown into a successfully publishing community of practice. When we have presented papers on the writing group at conferences, we have found that the first question asked tends to be: How did you get the writing group to work? It is a deceptively simple question but the answer taps into many issues surrounding the difficulty of faculty writing and publishing in academic contexts. For many academics, the challenge of navigating the competitive discourse demands of conducting research and publishing journal articles, while at the same time navigating teaching and administrative loads, often leads to anxiety and stress. Situated within the literature on writing groups and research productivity, we contribute by narrating and analysing the evolving story of our group. The purpose of this paper is to explore why members continue to participate and why we have been able to successfully write and publish both individually and as a group. This study used 'the self as data', a qualitative methodology particularly relevant in the analysis of writing processes and groups. The data collected consisted of weekly written reflections, additional written narratives by each group member, and recordings of meeting discussions. We analysed the data qualitatively using the constant comparison method of analysis to generate themes. Results indicate that members attended the group because they were looking for a place to get support for research and writing and to cope with negotiating academic cultures. We argue that the ethos of a 'non-competitive environment' and 'relationships-first' were crucial in fostering collaboration and productivity despite diverse individual differences. We offer this analysis of our experiences, not only in terms of practicalities but also as an alternative way of working in the academy.

**Keywords:** Faculty, writing groups, academic productivity, writing, research

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## 1. Introduction.

Our faculty writing group began in 2009 and over the past four years it has grown into a successfully publishing community of practice. When we have presented papers on the writing group at conferences, we have found the first question asked tends to be: *How did you get the writing group to work?* It's a deceptively simple question but the answer taps into many issues surrounding the difficulty of faculty writing and publishing in academic contexts. For many academics, the challenge of navigating the competitive discourse demands of conducting research and publishing journal articles, while at the same time coping with teaching and administrative loads, often leads to anxiety and stress. Situated within the literature on writing groups specifically and research productivity generally, we contribute by narrating and analysing the evolving story of our group. The purpose of this paper is to explore why members of this group continue to participate and why we have been able to successfully write and publish individually and as a group. The paper begins with a description of the context and a review of the literature, followed by a narrative that explains the data collection methods. Themes, extracted from the data are presented and the final section serves to draw out the significance and implications of this research project.

## 2. Context.

Memorial University is situated on the outlying island of Newfoundland, which is one of the Atlantic provinces. It is the only university in the province and the vast distances needed to travel hamper collegial interaction with international and other Canadian scholars. While not exactly isolated since the university has high levels of technological connectivity, Memorial is certainly not at the geographical hub of academic practice. There are 14,825 undergraduates, 3,119 postgraduates and 1,108 fulltime academic staff at the university (CIAP, 2011). The Faculty of Education transitioned from a teacher's college and over the past 15 years has become increasingly research-focused. As the only Faculty of Education in the province, its

ethos is still rooted in teaching practice and the education of pre-service teachers; most faculty (full-time academic) positions require teaching experience in the school system. Consequently, many new faculty have less experience conducting research, applying for grants and publishing in scholarly journals than those in non-professional disciplines.

Over the past six years, the Faculty of Education had been through a process of hiring new academic staff as a wave of tenured faculty retired. Although all the new recruits were not hired in the same year, a relatively large group of untenured faculty exists, forming a cohort of new people. The Canadian university system has a probationary period of six years for full-time new hires, where faculty are expected to perform in terms of scholarly output, teaching excellence and service (administration and committee work). Every year the Promotions and Tenure Committee meets to review the faculty member's file on these three areas. If the person is deemed to have performed satisfactorily at the end of the probation period, tenure is granted and essentially the individual's job is secured. Those not granted tenure usually leave the institution. There is the possibility that all untenured faculty will become tenured, however, it is not guaranteed. Although service and teaching are considered important for gaining tenure, research productivity is a key area for assessment of worth. Consequently, there is enormous pressure to publish and to secure research funding (Polster, 2007). The faculty writing group was created to address the lack of experience in research for new faculty and to provide support for those who felt they could use it.

### **3. Writing Groups**

The value of writing groups for graduate students features largely in the literature and they are seen as positive spaces for masters and doctoral students (Aitchison, 2009; Clughen & Hardy, 2011; Cuthbert, Sparkes, & Burke, 2009; Ens, Boyd, Matczuk, & Nickerson, 2011; Ferguson, 2009; Guerin et al., 2012; Haas, 2011; Maher et al., 2008). More recently, however, the focus

has turned to include faculty writing groups. The growing literature in this area is testament not only to the difficulties many academics experience in writing and publishing but also to the value of writing groups as a way of providing support.

### **3.1 Productivity**

Published accounts of writing groups show that they do serve to increase writing productivity (Campbell, Ellis, & Adebajo, 2012; Cumbie, Weinert, Luparell, Conley, & Smith, 2005; Gillespie et al., 2005; Griffin, Parker, & Kitchen, 2010; Selepe, Grobler, Dicks, & Oldewage-Theron, 2012; Zutshi, McDonald, & Kalejs, 2012). McGrail, Rickard & Jones (2006) further argue that universities should develop regular, ongoing, structured interventions to help faculty increase their output. Professional disciplines, particularly, seem to find writing groups productive (Campbell et al., 2012). In the medical field, for example, research shows evidence of extensive measurable outcomes from writing groups (Steinert, McLeod, Liben, & Snell, 2008; Walton et al., 2011). There is also recognition of the increase in less-measurable outcomes. Hara (2009) argues that writing groups for first-year tenure-track faculty is a proven method of increasing confidence in publishing/writing and in acclimating one to a new career. Lea and Stierer (2009) argue that writing is the way professionals develop implicit and tacit knowledge around professional practice and writing is a central way academics come to know their profession. By reflecting on the beliefs and values that underpin writing, academics can begin to prioritize their writing (Murray, Thow, Moore & Murphy, 2008). As such, writing groups can play the role of allowing newcomers to find out what is 'normal' or it can be a way of critiquing and changing 'normal' practice for newcomers and more senior faculty.

### **3.2 Organization**

Several organizational factors appear to contribute to success in writing groups; these include: commitment; firm but flexible structure; dedicated time; and small group size.

Commitment to the group is not defined in detail in the literature, however it is alluded to as being regular attendance at meetings and commitment by the members to the activities and processes of the group (Clark, Jankowski, Springer, & Springer, 2000; Gillespie et al., 2005; Murray & Newton, 2009). Successful writing groups also have common characteristics of firm but flexible boundaries and structures. The firm aspects of structure tend to be group proceedings such as setting agendas and having specific writing tasks, and often relate to group or individual desired outcomes such as producing a journal article. Flexibility within the group structure requires members to attune to individual/group needs for emotional support and to focus on the relational aspects within the group. In particular, for writing groups with new faculty this flexibility often allows for engagement in issues frequently seen as peripheral to writing such as navigating institutional systems and academic cultures (Campbell et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2000; Gillespie et al., 2005; Lee & Boud, 2003). Many authors have reported that dedicated time to meet is essential for both the development and maintenance of writing groups (Clark et al., 2000; Murray & Newton, 2009). The time between meetings and length appears to be less relevant as there is wide variation from every week, to two weeks, to once a month. Although not always intentional, it appears that small group size is an organizational feature that relates to success (Aitchison, 2009; Clark et al., 2000; Ferguson, 2009; Gillespie et al., 2005; Pasternak, Longwell-Grice, Shea, & Hanson, 2009; Walton et al., 2011). Small group size allows for in depth discussion and reading of materials amongst members (Maher, Seaton, McMullen, Fitzgerald, Otsuji, & Lee, 2008).

### **3.3 Difficulties**

Despite the success of writing groups in producing tangible and intangible outcomes, there are many cautions in the literature. It is noted that writing groups are a complex process that require delicate negotiations (Pasternak et al., 2009) and that they are difficult to maintain (O'Malley & Lucey, 2008). Problems with writing groups include a lack of commitment to the

process or group, not wanting to give feedback on each other's work and lack of time. In addition, people from different disciplines or contexts may have different ideas of collaboration (Campbell et al., 2012). If membership is closed, others in the broader community might see the group as exclusionary and this could create tensions for members who need to succeed outside the group (Griffin et al., 2010). When the writing group tasks become burdensome members may retreat (Campbell et al., 2012). In the end, members stop attending when they are not getting what they need from the group (Hara, 2009). Kezar (2005) in a study on collaborative groups showed that 50% of all collaborations fail. While the literature addresses issues of why there is a need for writing groups, there is little research on *how* writing groups work (Aitchison, 2009) and it is at this juncture we situate our study. Our key guiding questions were: Why did members continue to attend the group? What needs were being met by the group?

## 4. Method

In an embryonic, evolving and developing process of individual/group reflection and interaction, it is sometimes difficult to separate the 'data' from the analysis. We decided that a structured period of data gathering would help us to focus on assembling the data before embarking on analytical inquiry. We have based this paper on data we collected during a five-month period. The data consisted of the weekly written reflections by all members of the group, weekly recorded discussions and other written reflections on specific topics during those five months. Using the 'self as data' as a qualitative methodology is particularly relevant in the analysis of writing processes and writing groups (Arnold, 2011; Ens et al., 2011, Richardson & St Pierre, 2008; Speedy et al., 2010). Framed within broader perspectives of narrative inquiry, autoethnography and writing as inquiry, this methodology recognises that, as Arnold (2011) argues, "narrative knowledge can legitimately add to scholarly conversations" (p.65). We purposefully generated written reflections that engaged the 'I' (the self) in academic practice (culture). Over the 5 -month data collection period, we generated a substantial amount of

writing and recordings. We then looked for patterns across the data using the constant comparison analysis method (Fram, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This involved an iterative and inductive process involving comparisons in a set of data (for example, comparing individual written reflections) and between sets of data (for example, comparing a group of written reflections) to extract keywords and phrases which were then broadened into themes to reflect emerging patterns. The narrative below outlines the journey of the group leading up to the data collection period and continuing on afterwards.

## 5. The Different Phases Of The Group

### 5.1 Phase 1: September 2009-November 2010

In September 2009, an email was sent out about the writing group to all faculty. In the first year, between six and ten people participated. Two men joined (one post-doctoral student and one non-tenured faculty) and the rest were non-tenured women. The facilitator of the group comments on its beginnings:

*Cecile: I joined the faculty in 2009 as a grant facilitator. My role was to support faculty in applying for grants but also to help with scholarly publishing. Prior to joining Memorial, I had taught in a university in South Africa for many years where one role was to help staff to publish. I had built up extensive experience and materials in the area of academic writing and publishing. I had also started several writing groups in the past but none survived for long. When I joined Memorial, the faculty had recently hired eight new members who were all feeling the pressure to publish. I initiated the writing group to help relieve some of this pressure.*

In the first year the group met every Friday for an hour and a half and each session was facilitated (by Cecile) around a topic, for example, conceptualising research, journal article genres or grant writing. The group generated topics and grant writing was a particular interest. Participants did do some writing in the sessions and pieces of writing were also submitted to the group for feedback, especially grant proposals. Attendance at the group was ad hoc. Not everyone attended every week. Some sessions were full and in others only one or two attended. There was an overall trend of declining attendance.

## 5.2 Phase 2: December 2010-May 2011

*Cecile: At the start of the Fall semester, I could see that the writing group was about to collapse. Many of the members wanted to attend and articulated how useful they found the group but they were being pulled in different directions. The one and a half hours once a week seemed to be too much time commitment for too little obvious returns. The levels of anxiety and strain among the group were high and I felt that there must be some way for the writing group to become more responsive to faculty needs. I devised a project where members would commit to the writing group for a five-month period. They would establish personal goals during that period. Each week, they were required to produce a written reflection on their writing that week. Those written reflections would be kept in a file. At the weekly meetings, each person had to report on their progress over the week and we recorded the discussions. In addition, to individual goals, we planned to have a group goal of producing one paper on our writing experiences during this five-month period. In this way, each person would work on their individual projects but also be motivated to continue attending because of the joint publication. I hoped that the joint publication would ease some of the pressure surrounding the need for publications but recognised that the process would need to be a developmental one.*

Despite the structured nature of the project, while collecting the data and afterwards, we emphasized flexibility in line with what has been highlighted in the literature. If someone could not attend, there were no chastisements or punishments. We had a no-policing policy. For example, although we kept a file for weekly reflections, it was the person's responsibility to add theirs and we did not look at the reflections until the data collection period was over. We also emphasized an environment of no-criticism. We could give constructive *feedback* on work presented but not *criticism*. Feedback involves specific instructive comments (e.g., "This research question doesn't align with your research problem") versus vague, ambiguous criticism (e.g., "I don't like what you have written here"). Finally, we agreed to promote support rather than competition. One member, Dorothy, whose research is concerned with restorative justice, introduced us to the idea of looking at each other 'with soft eyes' despite our disciplinary differences and varying epistemological perspectives.

Seven untenured women and the facilitator agreed to participate in the project. The group consisted of members from both qualitative and quantitative research backgrounds and represented various fields of education: Heather from Art Education, Sharon from Special Education, Jackie, Rhonda and Sarah from Counselling Psychology, Cecile from Adult Education, Dorothy from Social Studies, and Xuemei from English as a Second Language. (Gabrielle, also from Special Education, joined the group when she was hired). Each person was asked to write why it was important to participate in the project and what their goals were. The excerpts below illustrate that people felt a commitment to their own research but that they needed to be accountable to the group in order to achieve these writing goals:

*Jackie: I am committed to writing this paper because I believe that my research is relevant and should be published so that others will know about my research findings. In addition, I need to publish this paper as it will serve to meet one of the requirements for my promotion and tenure. I am committed to participating in the*

*current writing group as I feel that having an external body to which I am responsible will help me to reach my goal of completing this paper.*

*Heather: I do well in groups, especially if I have a responsibility to others and not just to myself.*

*Sharon: I will now have a commitment to a group rather than just a commitment to self. It's easy to justify to yourself that you are busy and you don't have time*

*Rhonda: ... off to a very busy start this semester ... very little time to collect my thoughts. I am very aware that while I have been busy with course work and trying to keep projects moving forward I have not been engaged in writing. I am hoping to become refocused and making a commitment to this group may help to get me in writing mode.*

*Dorothy: The project is important to me, as I believe I have the capability of writing well, but find myself confused as to how to make it the priority. I find myself engaging in too many different activities that encroach on the time I set aside for writing.*

As the weeks progressed, the format for the meetings was as follows: to circle the table; hear everyone's writing progress for the week; then to discuss any issues or problems that anyone had with regards to writing and being an academic generally; and finally to read/workshop/give feedback on short pieces of writing. While occasionally someone could not attend the group, all the reflections were filed every week and the trend was one of increasing attendance and growing involvement.

### 5.3 Phase 3: June 2011-September 2012

After the data collection period ended, we continued to meet regularly every Friday and outside of the meetings members of the group met to work on two joint papers about the writing group project. At the start of the Fall 2011 semester we again sent a call around to the Faculty and one new faculty member joined (Gabrielle, Special Education). During this period, the facilitator (Cecile) moved into a faculty position. With new teaching and research responsibilities, she found it difficult to devote as much time as she had before to administering and facilitating the writing group. It was during this period that the group experienced its bumpiest ride and potentially could have disbanded due to the changing structure. However, a solid enough foundation enabled us to talk through problems, and the goal-directed task of the joint papers allowed the group to re-form with a new facilitator-less structure. The group decided to have a floating 'chair'. Three people volunteered to take the post of chair. At the start of the group meeting, one of those three would volunteer to run the meeting so there was no need to plan ahead of time. We also decided on a separate role in the form of timekeeper. The timekeeper kept the chair and members aware of the time because keeping the meeting to an hour and a half was important to the group. Our meeting agendas have evolved over time to fit our busy schedules. We have developed a process of a check-in circle, instituted by Dorothy, where everyone says one or two words on a topic suggested by the chair (or another member) and this is by way of greeting, collecting ourselves and transitioning into the meeting. An example of a check-in topic is: What form of weather are you today? The check-in topics while whimsical and creative also serve as an opening for more thorny issues. For example, if a member wanted to discuss the 'storm' or turbulence they experienced during the week, they could do so. Since issues such as gender and work-life balance influence our visibility and progress in research endeavours, we did not want to dismiss or gloss over them. As we go around the circle we also indicate if we have anything for the agenda of this meeting and how urgent it is. The chair makes a list of agenda issues and at the end of the circle we work out what we can accommodate in the time and what needs to be left until the following week. More recently, one member (Gabrielle) volunteered to take minutes of any tabled issues and

this is posted on Dropbox. This format has worked successfully. We have maintained the voluntary nature of the group in that no one is obliged to attend, bringing writing is not a prerequisite and we do not do any policing. In September 2012, three more women joined the group.

The outcome of the five-month project was that we produced a group paper that was presented at a national conference (McLeod et al., 2011) and was submitted to a peer-review journal where it is under review. We also wrote a peer-reviewed book chapter (McLeod et al., forthcoming), a non-peer-review paper for *Women in Higher Education* (Badenhorst et al., 2012) and presented papers at three other national conferences. Currently we are working on a paper that is not related to the data we collected and we foresee several future projects that we will work on as a group. Not all members work on all group projects as involvement depends on research interests and availability.

## **6. Why Do Members Continue To Participate In The Group?**

Two clear themes emerged about why members continue to attend: To get support for research and writing and to negotiate academic cultures.

### **6.1 Support for research and writing**

The weekly reflections and being accountable to the group for one's writing progress were instrumental in keeping writing a priority. In the reflections, many talked about how they were not writing but accounting to the group served to keep their writing projects on their minds and near the top of their to-do lists. They came to get momentum to write and to keep those projects moving forward if only in incremental steps.

Jackie: *I'm feeling very frustrated with my research and writing today and thought that maybe some journaling might help me to see things more clearly.*

Rhonda: *It is funny how keeping it moving seems to be so important to me right now and believe it or not but once it got started and I could see something...*

Dorothy: *Another thing I did that helped was to actually write down why I was stuck. In the middle of the writing I simply wrote down why I couldn't move ahead. This ended up helping me see that I was struggling with wanting to include something about power that was not really necessary.*

Group members began to reflect on their own writing processes. Many expressed surprise at the understanding and insight they gained from these reflections:

Heather: *As with previous weeks I haven't made any headway on the paper- it's coming soon, I tell myself... But more than that there is the fact that I do not know what I think on a particular subject until I've written it.*

Dorothy: *Why do I not make writing my priority? If I schedule things in my writing time, I need to immediately replace that time in a different slot. But I don't. I find it is easy to let 'people' needs get in the way. I think overall I always believe when people have needs, or it is a very practical implementation of my research work, it takes priority.*

The reflections also show a level of frustration at perceptions of a slow pace of production. Yet the collection of reflections over the five-month period reveals that all group members were productive. At the end everyone wrote a reflection on whether or not they had achieved their

goals. Most were surprised that they had exceeded their goals. Some did not achieve the goal they had set out to do but had developed new goals and achieved those.

*Xuemei: Looking back at what I have done in this past week, I find I have only done one thing: writing up the proposal. ...It is a bit discouraging to find out how little I have done, but I'm glad it is checked off my list... I neglected to record last week that I had decided to apply for [a grant]. So this week, my article was put on hold as I took the ideas that had been formulating last week as well as through my article revisions and I wrote like crazy. It felt so, so good to actually write without getting stuck on every other sentence (or word!!). It felt like a breakthrough week that began with the breakthrough that I was experiencing with the article. I was surprised actually at how much I wrote for the grant in one week 9 pages, it is affirming for me that I can actually do this.*

Another key benefit of the group was to sound out new research ideas. Not only was this useful to articulate half-formed research conceptualisations but other members of the group gave practical advice on the logistics of grants and research designs. Contacts were also pooled and examples of articles, and grant and ethics proposals shared.

*Heather: For creative work (visual and written) I can work alone for long periods. However for analytical writing I seem to need to respond to texts and discussions. Thus I find that my writings have more depth when constructed after a group session.*

*Sharon: I particularly like having to produce one page for writing group. The process of starting the writing versus gathering information to write was the most helpful for me. Even though I haven't kept much from the original page it gave me a place to start.*

Dorothy: *The writing group continues to keep me focused. There also seems to be a shift for me. I am there less in order to learn, and more in order to share. It's a good feeling I think. Each session though I come away with ideas and new things I've learned.*

## 6.2 Coping with academic cultures

What became clear early on in the project was that the writing group provided support in areas other than research and writing. One issue that surfaced continually was *work/life balance*. Members discussed their teaching, committee work and other issues that impact on academic work. Balancing the competing demands of the job as well as achieving some sort of home/work balance was a concern for most.

Jackie: *At least I have something written for today's group. I'd hoped to do something with one of my projects last night but am feeling really tired and run down...This weekend will consist of grading and more thesis review so another week has passed by without much progress towards my writing goals...I am feeling very overwhelmed by the amount of writing that I have ahead of me. I have managed to get myself involved in several projects that need to be completed "yesterday"! ... I enjoyed writing group today even though it was more of a working mothers' support group!*

Xuemei: *[Her son] has been sick for 3 days now and I worked from home most of the time so I could take care of him. Taking him to the doctor's is also time-consuming. During the long wait, I was reading this article to be reviewed.*

Sarah: *I feel as though I am constantly juggling my multiple hats, new mom, pregnant mom, wife, daughter, sibling, psychologist, novice academic, caretaker... although I find great satisfaction and accomplishment in my professional career, I often struggle with this idea of balance.*

Rhonda: *A whirlwind of a day... Lots going on around me right now... Hard to keep focused or even find time for writing... I am trying to get what needs to be done today as well as writing several reference [letter]s... it all takes time...*

Anxiety is a constant companion for those undergoing the tenure process no matter how supportive their home institutions are. The feeling of being constantly under surveillance, becoming an object for evaluation and being measured against an unseen yardstick is anxiety provoking. In addition, changing careers and moving into new fields also causes anxiety (Snyder, 2011). Although group members were new to academia, they were generally mid-career and successful in the past work environments but felt anxious due to tenure requirements. The writing group was one way to cope with this anxiety.

Xuemei: *After writing some more on my collaboration reflection, I realized why I have been postponing writing this paper...Subconsciously, I was resisting this article due to the unpleasant feelings of being misunderstood and misjudged.*

Dorothy: *[I'm] feeling as if I am travelling down the Trans Canada Highway at 140 km per hour when I know 100 km is a lot safer and will get me to where I want to go with a lot less stress.... I need to stop, take a deep breath... I am becoming overwhelmed by all the possibilities and responsibilities before me. I am so intrigued by everything I want to do it all. But this spreads me so thin that I am incapacitated in terms of being productive or effective in any of the things I am doing.*

Gabrielle: *I was discouraged with my writing productivity. I have been told that this was not an unusual experience for a new faculty member, but that didn't help me feel less anxious about my writing...I walked away from this particular writing group meeting feeling encouraged.*

One recurring theme in the data was a sense of isolation as new academics. This is a theme that is echoed in the literature (Findlow, 2012). Since most of the group had been in prior careers as teachers or counsellors, many aspects of the job were new and unfamiliar. In previous contexts, group members were confident and experienced. Indeed, our first group conference paper was titled 'From there to here' and described the before-contexts and the now-context and made the argument that the writing group was the bridge between 'there' and 'here' (McLeod et al., 2011). Consequently, the group serves to foster a sense of belonging. We began to socialise together and members have subsequently formed partnerships on grant applications and other research projects that we may not have done before coming to know one another and understanding our common interests.

Sharon: *...the writing group has been extremely helpful and I feel that it has given me a support system. Having my colleagues talk about the same struggles has helped in that I realize that I am not alone....*

Xuemei: *I'm ... comforted and inspired by other's stories.*

Jackie: *What the writing group has given me is a sense of belonging in an environment where isolation is often the norm...we are all relatively new to the university and the group provides both personal and academic support. It minimizes our feelings that we are alone in the struggle for tenure and provides us with a sense of social connectedness.*

Rhonda: *As new academics, isolation is reduced, [we] feel supported, get guidance, learn. [We have] a sense of belonging.*

Sarah: *The “real” benefits are in the relationships developed and shared experiences.*

Heather: *We have accepted that it’s not just to be measured by the number of pieces of writing produced, instead we value the insights we have gained about our various processes – individual and group.*

## **7. Developing An Academic Identity**

Members continued to attend the group because they found support for their research and writing, and the group helped them to negotiate the academic culture in the Faculty. As Essén and Winterstorm Värlander (2012, p.9) argue: “material and immaterial aspects of academic writing are intertwined”. Ultimately, the group served to help members develop their academic identities. As we have worked on papers together we have mentored each other, learned how others write, and incorporated that learning into our own writing. Over time, we have developed a growing confidence in ourselves as individual researchers. Most of the group were professionals (teachers and counsellors) and Findlow (2012) has suggested practitioners often find their professional identity more meaningful than academic ones. Not all members feel that they are academics now but many feel that they are *more* academic than they were before they joined the group.

Sharon: *I never had any intention of ever becoming an “academic”. I loved working and being with children.*

Dorothy: *After this week's meeting, I felt encouraged by what the group said in term of the discrepancy between my writing and the expectations of the journal... the idea that I was working in a different paradigm than the reviewers.*

Rhonda: *Right now I am also reviewing a thesis and as I work through the thesis I am thinking about my own work... am also reading the thesis and looking for the things we have talked about in group. I certainly have a better sense of writing and reviewing as a result of this group... I can honestly say I am growing.*

Sarah: *For me [the writing group] has been about the merging of my identities. When the writing group surprised me with a baby shower... I was struck by how privileged I felt to be a part of this collection of women, academics, artists, mothers, professionals.*

Our group consisted of similar career stage academics working together (peer to peer) (Morrison, Dobbie, & McDonald, 2003). However, group members spanned the 6 pre-tenure years so there was some difference in experience and seniority. This horizontal type of collaboration has been important in fostering group and individual identity. We have found areas of mutual interest and that has served as an impetus for further collaboration (Carroll et al., 2010).

Gabrielle: *While we are all working in our individual research areas, it has been beneficial to know that you can approach individuals who are more acclimatized to this institution in order to pose specific questions about annual performance reviews or internal funding opportunities...our various educational backgrounds provide us with new and different lenses through which to view a problem.*

## 8. Conclusion

Without a doubt, the writing group has been beneficial. Since we began, almost everyone in the group has applied for and received funding for individual research. Some members partnered together and received grant funding. Most personal goals were achieved although not all members achieved this within the five months of data collection. Many were surprised at what they had accomplished and documented this through their reflective writing. Group members have published journal articles, book chapters and many other non-peer reviewed publications.

We have presented two key themes that emerged from the data in answer to the question: What kept members attending the group? These were support for research and writing and coping with academic cultures and we have argued that members began to develop academic identities as a result of the group. Group size did not seem to feature as a factor; dedicated time is important and we followed the firm but flexible structure highlighted in the literature. Yet, we feel that there are other significant issues, which further influence why members attended.

Firstly, collecting the data for the purposes of writing a joint paper directly fed into the needs of members who were under pressure to publish. In working together, we realised how beneficial it was to collaborate on papers. Although not all members participated in the subsequent publications because of other demands, for many it became a way to see how one worked in relation to others and to learn new methods of writing. We divided tasks so that writing a paper became less onerous and we had nine pairs of eyes combing through paragraphs. We discussed issues related to our joint papers analytically and as we became more familiar with the literature, increasingly with insight. In addition, we collectively agreed it was more fun to work together than it was to toil away alone. Our sessions were intense but also filled with laughter. We did have several discussions around authorship and came to the following conclusions: Anyone who was part of the original data collection would have their name on the

paper whether they contributed to the actual writing of the paper or not. This recognised their contribution and collaboration in a broader sense. Whoever 'championed' the paper, set up meetings around it and compiled drafts would be the lead author, followed by those who had worked the most on the paper. Everyone in the group commented on drafts and contributed ideas. Writing together was an unexpected pleasure and, as a result, we have continued to look for ways to produce papers.

Secondly, gender is a unifying theme in the group and contributed to continued membership. Although we maintain inclusivity and advertise for new members each academic year, women make up the core membership. Why is the group so appealing to women in particular? In another paper we are currently developing, we make the argument that the gendered nature of academia and even the tenure-process itself mitigates against women succeeding. Writing groups are, arguably, an essential strategy for supporting the professional development of women in academic contexts. Members came to group meetings because they feel in need of and received nurturing, mentoring and support.

Thirdly, the *ethos* of the group was crucial. Unknowingly, we followed Kezar's (2005) three-stage model of collaboration. The first stage is building commitment (nurturing the environment), the second is commitment (prioritizing the collaboration), and the third is sustaining (consolidating integrating structures). However, academic disciplines tend to value competitive self-interests and this is often a significant factor that undermines collaborative projects (Carr et al., 2009). In addition, the increasing corporatization of university contexts with neo-liberal values that also emphasize competition (Hartman & Darab, 2012) serve to erode autonomy and trust in collaborative groups (Findlow, 2012). To mitigate these contextual fragmenting tendencies, which we felt and experienced, we found that building commitment (nurturing the environment) was something that needed constant attention. We nurtured our environment through our no-competition, no-policing, no-judgement and relationships-first policy. As others have noted (Ens et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 2010; Selepe et

al., 2012) it takes time and commitment for trust to develop. We constantly remind ourselves to honour each other rather than measure (Vaandering, 2011) and to look at each other with 'soft eyes turned to wonder' (Palmer, 1997). This allows us to be vulnerable when we need to and to develop collective memory about that vulnerability that, in turn, leads to trust. We suggest this as an alternative way of working in the academy. In this way, writing groups can play the role of not only allowing newcomers to find out what is 'normal' in academic contexts and allowing them to feel comfortable critiquing and changing 'normal' practice.

## 2. References

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