

7-1-2008

## Promise and Possibility: Building collegial opportunities for scholarship

Thomas Lucey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lucey, Thomas (2008) "Promise and Possibility: Building collegial opportunities for scholarship," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 16.

DOI: 10.58809/OVTR8233

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol6/iss3/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-Reviewed Journals at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact [ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu](mailto:ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu).

---

# Academic Leadership Journal

## *Introduction*

The professoriate is a highly individualized endeavor where scholars work independently on projects of their choosing. High stakes issues of retentions and promotions require new faculty members to document a public expertise in scholarship. In one sense, academics are scholarly gamesmen (Maccoby 1976) who attempt to create a scholarly presence while interpreting their colleagues' patterns of actions and motivations. Such interpretations are created in an environment of "hollowed collegiality" (Massey, Wilger, and Colbeck, 1994) where superficial evidence of active participation often masquerades as community. For many new faculty members, connecting their work to a larger community of scholars can be an intimidating and lonely pursuit.

This article describes a collegial effort to promote scholarship through a faculty writing group during a three year period. This story describes the promise of community and the possibility of collegiality as faculty transition from individual concerns to collective responsibilities. Moreover, this story describes how writing groups embody the complex characteristics of community, illustrating how groups change based on the priorities established by its members. The authors conclude with recommendations for building collegial opportunities for individuals to contribute to a larger community of scholars.

## Literature

Individuals join groups to achieve goals they are unable to achieve themselves (Johnson and Johnson 2006). Lieberman and Grolnick (1997) described the importance of networks for building collegiality when they explained how common interests, a sense of commitment, voluntary participation, and effective facilitators provide the background for collaborative problem solving, conflict resolution, and shared decision making. Gardner (1996) posits ten attributes of a community: diversity, shared values, mutual obligation, effective communication, participation, reaffirmation, outside connections, vitality, adaptability and maintenance. O'Malley and Baker (2006) contend that successful groups become community when the mutual benefit of participants is realized through collaborative efforts to resolve conflicts and share decisions.

The significance of writing in the professional development of college faculty is well documented (Flythe 1989; Fassinger, Gilliland, and Johnson 1992; Badley 2003; O'Malley, et al. 2006). Numerous universities have established faculty writing groups to help faculty improve writing and research skills. Gillespie, et al. (2005) described work where small groups of faculty members met every two weeks to share their academic research. Rankin (2001) used writing groups to describe faculty engaged in supportive, collaborative and collegial conversations about scholarship. Huber and Hutchings (2005) introduced the teaching commons as a network to strengthen scholarship through communities of educators. O'Meara, Rice, and Edgerton, (2005) argued that supportive collegiality can be enhanced by rewarding multiple forms of scholarship, redefining faculty roles, and restructuring reward systems.

Little research has examined the life-cycle of a community of scholars writing about their work over

time. For our purposes, we wondered how a writing group sustained itself as priorities within the group changed. We contend that the lessons learned can inform the work of other writing groups interested in sustaining a sense of community and collegiality over time.

## **Background**

In the fall of year one, the associate dean at a public university in the Midwest called a college-wide meeting for those interested in forming writing groups. During the meeting, the associate dean spoke of the significance of writing in the profession and of the importance of collegial support in helping promote scholarship. Encouraged by this call, seven assistant professors assembled a writing group which represented a cross-section of disciplines: literacy, early childhood, secondary education, special education and music education.

## **Modeling community and collegiality**

An experienced professor organized a schedule for year one which included a weekly commitment to the writing group. In the first and third weeks of each month, a selected group member would send a manuscript electronically to all group members. On the second and fourth weeks of each month the group would convene and each group member would suggest improvements to the manuscript, noting strengths and weaknesses. During peer review sessions, the group reviewed information about publications, concentrating on themed journal issues and editorial requests. Members spent time matching research interests and writing styles to different publications. By the end of year one, the group had lamented about the solitary nature of academia, commiserated about the need to make ideas public, and complimented the camaraderie they felt was emerging within the writing group.

Year two brought numerous changes in leadership, membership, and organization. The experienced convener left the group and management responsibilities for monthly meetings were shared among junior faculty. Three recently hired faculty members joined the writing group and two professors left because of schedule conflicts. The group revised the format to allow each member to submit a paper for each monthly meeting and be paired with a colleague for reciprocal feedback. These different pairings limited group feedback, but allowed for more individual feedback.

In February of year two, writing members were asked to describe how the writing group had influenced their understanding of scholarship. A review of these testimonials revealed three themes: 1) members believed participation in the writing group provided a frame of reference for defining quality; 2) members believed the writing group provided structure for challenging ideas; and 3) members believed participation in the writing group provided opportunity for comparing their progress against others in the group. A follow up discussion was held in April to determine if writing group members could provide illustrations of the three themes described in the written testimonials. Group members agreed that group goals led to individual achievement. Moreover, members believed that the writing group was modeling collegiality because it provided a structure for giving and receiving supportive feedback. Initially, several members wondered if they had anything of valuable to offer to their colleagues. By the middle of the second year, members agreed an important set of personal skills were emerging within the group: confidence in judgment, a willingness to question practice and a better understanding of the rigors of scholarship.

## **Ending opportunities for collegiality**

Year three would be the final year for this writing group. Group procedures, easily resolved just one year earlier, resurfaced as major obstacles. Scheduling a time to meet became difficult. Attendance declined. Interruptions and distractions surfaced during meetings. Additionally, some group members began having more success publishing their work than others. The group now had five members as three members decided not to return for the third year. Non-returning members acknowledged that the review process no longer held merit for them. For some, the social compliments during peer review appeared as disingenuous, a poor substitute for a rigorous review of academic work. Most members agreed that structure of the review process had changed over time (experienced convener to rotating coordinators; weekly to monthly meetings) and was no longer as efficient or effective.

By Thanksgiving of the third year, the writing group decided that the next stage of their work would be to work collectively as needed on individual projects. Pleasantries and appreciations were exchanged as most admitted the writing group was ending. The writing group had served its original purpose: it provided members a glimpse into different approaches to scholarship and stimulated new collaborative efforts. The end of the writing group meant the possibility for members to collaborate in other ways if they so desired. If other forms of community were to emerge, it would be the result of new priorities which reflected new thinking about mutual benefit, lateral accountability and shared decision making.

#### Moving forward: Contributing to the academic community

One nature of community is the constant determination by its members whether the community acknowledges the needs of its members. This writing group affirmed the needs of its members (de Cremer and Tyler 2005) when it worked collectively on group goals, communicated changing expectations and created a structure that encouraged commitment. The demise of the writing group came when the group was unable or unwilling to adapt to a set of changing circumstances. Obvious and dramatic changes in structure and membership altered the context of this community. Less noticeable, but as significant, were the responses individuals made within this changing context. Individuals choose to participate, cooperate and collaborate based on how they perceive these context changes support their own interests. Unspoken individual preferences emerge when group priorities diminish—taking credit, the group succeeds because of me, or placing blame, I don't succeed because of the group. We contend that adults can sustain accountability among participants only as long as the group goals reflect the interchange of these different interests.

The writing group may have sustained its efforts if it had included senior faculty who were noted scholars. The examination of published work would have provided exemplars worth emulating. Instead, this writing group limited peer review to the work of its members and in doing so, focused on academic work at its beginning stages. Academia is a world where publications are the coin of the realm (Moxley and Taylor 1997). Regular and consistent contact with those who had accumulated this currency would have extended the community of scholars within this writing group. The opportunity to work directly with experienced scholars would have reinforced another important lesson: scholarship is much more than academic writing, just as a learning community is much more than a group of writers.

This writing group succeeded as community, if only temporarily, when educators began to envision themselves as scholars, moving awkwardly from personal concerns toward connections within a larger community. Boyer (1992) suggested that academia reconsider scholarship as four roles: discovery,

integration, application, and teaching. In many ways, this writing group should be complimented for its discovery of ways to promote the confidence of colleagues. For these promising academics, this small group experience provided the application of collegiality, a teaching opportunity for individuals to contribute to the success of others.

This article described how a writing group transitions through a process of development and decline within a community. Navigating through a dynamic academic environment of institutional expectations, personal goals and collegial opportunity is a daunting challenge for a new professor. To this end, the support of a writing group is the promise of practicing in private those skills one must demonstrate later in public. Writing groups serve multiple purposes for prospective scholars: signposts that instruct and inform; landmarks that model and illustrate; shelter for confused or unprepared travelers; and retreat for ideas to be shared among friends. The burden of this difficult journey becomes an academic career, an accomplishment which informs the work of others and honors the best of what a community might become: a place where trusting and collaborative relationships cultivate a deeper understanding of scholarship.

### References

- Badley, G. (2003) Improving the scholarship of teaching and learning. *Innovations in education and teaching international*, 40 (3), 303-310.
- Boyer, E.L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- de Cremer, D., & Tyler, T. R. (2005). Am I respected or not?: Inclusion and reputation as issues in group membership. *Social Justice Research*, 18(2), 121-153.
- Flythe, V. L. (1989). Beginning a Faculty Writing Group . *English Journal*, 78 (5), 62-63.
- Fassinger, P., N. Gilliland, N., and L. Johnson (1992). Benefits of a Faculty Writing Circle –Better Teaching. *College Teaching*, 41(2), 53-56.
- Gardner. J. (1996). Building community. *Community Education Journal*, 23 (3), 6-9.
- Gillespie, D., N. Dol'sak, B. Kochis, R. Krabill, K. Lerum, A. Peterson, and E. Thomas. (2005). Research circles: Supporting the scholarship of junior faculty. *Journal Innovative Higher Education*, 30 (3), 149-162.
- Huber. M., and P. Hutchings. (2005). *The advancement of learning: Building the teaching commons*. Indianapolis, IN: John Wiley & Sons.
- Johnson, D. and F. Johnson. (2006). *Joining together: Group theory and group skills*. Boston, MA: Pearson, Education, Inc.
- Lieberman, A. and M. Grolnick. (1997). Networks, reform and the professional development of Teachers. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *Rethinking Educational Change with Heart and Mind* (pp. 192-215). Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Maccoby, M. (1976). *The Gamesman. Winning and losing the career game*. New York: Bantam Books.

Massey, W.F., A.K. Wilger, and C. Colbeck. (1994). Overcoming hollowed collegiality . *Change*, 26(4), 10-20.

Moxley, J., and T. Taylor. (1997). *Writing and publishing for academic publications*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publications, Inc.

O'Malley, G., and P. Baker. (2006) Building a professional learning community: The Keystone Story. *National Association of Laboratory Schools Journal*, 30(1), 31-37.

O'Malley, G., A. Bates, N. Latham, T. Lucey, B. Meyer, E. Spycher, and L. Wedwick. (2006) Promoting scholarship through writing groups. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 10(4) 171-174.

O'Meara, K., Rice, R.E. & Edgerton, R. (2005). *Faculty priorities reconsidered: Rewarding multiple forms of scholarship*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rankin, E. (2001). *The work of writing: Insights for strategies for academics and professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

VN:R\_U [1.9.11\_1134]