

WRITING CIRCLES: A Formula for Scholarly Collaborations between Campus and County Extension Faculty



*Scholarly writing often generates fear and anxiety, as well as desire
(Lee & Bond, 2003)*

Overview

Cooperative Extension State and County Faculty have been writing publications for clientele for decades. The bulletins and newsletters generated by those individuals have been hallmarks of the work that is done by Land Grant Universities in every county in the United States. Recently, the emphasis on scholarly writing has increased. This change in focus has swept across the Cooperative Extension network and is often a challenge for County Faculty who lack experience and expertise in development of scholarly work.

In an effort to support the growth and development of these agents, University of Arizona, Cooperative Extension has encouraged collaboration between Cooperative Extension Specialists/Campus faculty and County Agents. One method for supporting county faculty's writing development is in the establishment of writing circles.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to outline the process for developing and implementing the concept of writing circles for collaboration between state and county faculty. This process offers one method of increasing scholarly publications at all levels (e.g., fact sheets, journal articles, curricula, and others).

Introduction

There are increasing scholarship demands within the land-grant university system for Cooperative Extension faculty both at the state and county levels. Lee and Boud (2003) note that, "The research function of universities has both expanded and significantly changed in character with growth and reorganization of the higher education sector over the last several decades" (p. 189). Historically, Extension faculty at both the state and county levels have focused on the development and implementation of programs across the state. The definition of scholarship for the Extension faculty now encompasses research and publication of materials in addition to program development. This expansion of scholarship now demands state and county faculty to develop curricula, fact sheets, and journal articles. The change in expectations offers county faculty the opportunity to engage further in scholarly activities. This expansion in the roles of county faculty provides state and county

faculty the opportunity to work collaboratively to develop models that offer the supports and opportunities necessary for county faculty to succeed.

Traditionally, writing groups or collaborative writing efforts have been used in a variety of academic and non-academic settings including classrooms and business. Although, the use of writing circles has been used previously in academic settings, this method of working has not been used between State and County Extension Faculty. As noted by Lee and Boud (2003) "a new culture of research and scholarship needs to be forged" with academic and non-academic faculty (pg. 188). This collaborative effort between the traditional academic faculty and non-traditional faculty must be encouraged and fostered. The writing circle process identifies a key issue or topic, identifies individuals at both the state and county level interested in researching, studying, and writing, and then identifies the tasks and time line needed to ensure the product is developed. This collective process offers each member the opportunity to use their skills and expertise to develop and hone other skills needed to successfully develop and publish research-based information. This approach fosters an environment of trust and responsibility that encourages collective brainstorming, problem solving, and critical reflection (Reed, McCarthy, & Briley 2002). Together the group is able to develop critical documents needed by the community and the larger academic community. Writing circles provide a unique opportunity for both state and county faculty to build positive relationships with other members of the academic community, to increase their knowledge and skills, and to produce scholarly products. Moreover, the use of writing circles offer a professional development opportunity for county faculty that assists with the development of skills and expertise needed for writing scholarly materials.

Writing Circles

Writing can be difficult work and single authorship can be daunting for individuals without prior experience. Writing circle offers both experienced and inexperienced writers the opportunity to work together. By pooling the talents of many

individuals, the task can more easily be managed (Noel & Robert, 2004). While the collaborative nature of writing can increase the productivity of each author, there are additional concerns about task division and percentage of authorship which do not arise in single-authored works. Having a strategy for collaborative writing sets guidelines for participants. Without a clear strategy for group members, members may become frustrated, confused by the expectations, and the products may not be completed; thus, wasting valuable time and effort without results.

Given the importance of developing a clear strategy, Posner and Baecker (1993) offer several: 1) Single writer—one person does the majority of writing while others have various duties within the group, 2) Separate writers—authors write sections which are combined at a later date, 3) Joint writing—two or more authors simultaneously work on the text, 4) Scribe—one member writes the combined thoughts of the group. Kim and Eklundh (2001) identify one person in the group as the “Document Manager” who tends to have centralized control of the document and that most writing groups had four or less authors. Other group members were utilized more in the editing process than the actual writing.

Furthermore, Kim and Eklundh (2001) analyze the process of editing and make a case that all members establish a consistent protocol for revisions. Utilizing “track changes” in a Word document seems a simple request, yet participants unfamiliar with the technological aspects of the task may have difficulties. Furthermore, once changes have been made, saving the manuscript with the current date becomes paramount so edits are not lost in multiple files of the same document.

The Writing Circle Process

The writing circle process is a collaborative group that includes Campus and County faculty that meet with the purpose of developing scholarly work. Through this process the group will research, write, edit, and submit work(s) for review. Writing circles can bring together a diverse group including researchers, graduate students, Extension Specialists, and county personnel to fulfill the Land Grant Mission of bringing university level research and information to the general public.



Determining the Need

Once there is buy in for a collaborative process, then the actual work begins with a key question—what is it that we want to write about (there is always something worth writing about—but the group needs to identify an area/topic that appeals to all participants—something that benefits all). The first step, even before the establishment of or the continuation of a writing circle, is the determination that there is a need for a dissemination of particular information. The establishment of a writing group prior to the identification of the need leaves the writing group without clear direction. The need must be clearly defined before the establishment of the writing circle.

An Example of Expectations and Time Line Chart

Individual Responsible	Assignment	Due Date
All	Initial meeting to determine focus for project	June 15 th
All	Review of literature—minimum of five journal articles on the topic	September 1 st
All	Write literary review—two page summary of journal articles	September 15 th
Document Manager	Condense multiple reviews into one comprehensive literary review sent to all	October 15 th
P/I	Conference call for updates of progress, explanation of next step (perhaps identifying potential journals in which to submit), troubleshooting any problems encountered	November 1 st
Researcher	Present on analysis of data	November 1 st
All	Write assigned task and submit to Document Manager	January 1 st
Document Manager	Compiles sections submitted and sends out to all	February 1 st
P/I	Conference Call to discuss flow of publication, determine plan for edits, reconfirm percentages of authorship	
All	Edit using “track changes”	March 1 st
Document Manager	Finalized edits and submits for peer review	April 1 st
P/I	Plan for edits that come back from peer review committee and timeline for that work	

Establishment of the Writing Circle

Writing Circles can either be newly established or these groups can be ad-hoc. Regardless, if it is a newly formed group or an established writing circle it requires members to review the identified problem and establish if anyone is missing from the writing group

Writing Circles not unlike other group processes must establish basic operating principles including:

- Identification of leadership
- Group expectations and behaviors that support writing—Lee and Boud (2003) indicate a need to think about the work of the group being mutually beneficial rather than collegially, which would indicate a sense of individuality that is not useful in writing group settings. Writing groups require that each member be active and a valued member of the group.

- Expectations and responsibilities of members
- Authorship order
- Meeting methodology (e.g., conference calls, on-line conversations, email, and others)
- Established time line: These can be helpful in facilitating assignments and timelines.

Conclusion

In conclusion the benefits of the writing circle process are numerous. Faculty members become familiar with all aspects of writing including the development of curriculum, fact sheets, journal articles, and others. It offers the opportunity for writing circle members to contribute to the current knowledge base within their discipline. Finally, the writing circle process offers members the opportunity to use their current skills, knowledge, and expertise to learn new ones.

The Work of the Writing Circle

The work of the writing circle begins following the determination of need/topic, the establishment of working principles. The writing circle process includes the following steps:

1. Determining the audience? Who needs information, for what purpose, etc.?
2. Identifying the best delivery method for the identified topic
 - a. What delivery method offers the greatest visibility for the information?
 - b. Does this delivery method provide easy and wide-spread access to the identified audience the greatest access to this information?
3. Describe the relevance of this journal article/fact sheet and/or other materials for this audience
 - a. Why is this topic important for this particular audience?
 - b. How will they use the information?
4. Conduct a literature review
 - a. Is their current research available pertaining to this topic?
 - b. Can you find more than one article pertaining to this topic?
 - c. How current is the material?
 - d. Are all members expected to read the current literature and develop a synopsis of the current information?
 - e. How will the literature review be organized?
5. Develop core content
 - a. Using the literature review as a guide determine the key information to be included in the fact sheet, curriculum, or article
6. Conclusion
 - a. The conclusion should summarize the central message of the materials.
 - b. What has been learned?
7. Recommendations
 - a. How is this information useful to the reader?
8. Resources
 - a. Are there books, journal articles, web sites, or other materials that might be useful and helpful?
9. References
 - a. All reference materials should all be listed in the appropriate style.

Resources

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association
<http://apastyle.apa.org/>

History of Writing Circles

<http://writing.msu.edu/writers/fipse/history.htm>

Recommendations

One key to successful writing groups is to maintain frequent contact among the members of the group. Time between meetings needs to be short not more than one month.

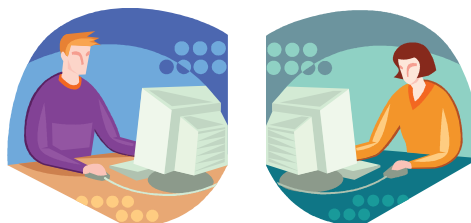
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