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Learning to "light out after it with a club"

The story of a faculty learning community for scholarly writing

"Don't loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club, and if you don't get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it."—Jack London, "Getting into Print," The Editor, *March 1903.*

This quotation identifies the core practice of writing with comfort and fluency: writing regularly, rather than in binges. In his 1903 essay, London advises, "Set yourself a 'stint,' and see that you do that 'stint' each day; you will have more words to your credit at the end of the year."[1] This method worked admirably for London; his collected writings fill 18 volumes. Over a century later, increasing numbers of college faculty are learning to apply London's advice to scholarly writing. Their practice is supported by research findings, workshops, guidebooks, and communities of faculty writers. I recently facilitated such a community. This article describes what we learned as a group, and what I learned as facilitator.

Close collaboration between the library and the Faculty Development Center

In May 2010, Appalachian State University's Hubbard Center for Faculty Development sponsored a weeklong writing retreat designed to help faculty become more productive writers in any academic genre. The retreat began with a two-day workshop conducted by Tara Gray, author of *Publish and Flourish: Become a Productive Scholar.*

Then, to provide in-depth follow-up to the retreat, the Hubbard Center established two academic yearlong Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs). I facilitated one group; an English professor, the other. The long-standing tradition of collaboration between the library and the Hubbard Center led to my being invited to facilitate one of the FLCs.

The Hubbard Center's comprehensive view of faculty development encompasses all faculty constituencies (full-time, part-time, administrative, new faculty, faculty planning for retirement, and, of course, librarians). Moreover, the Hubbard Center is concerned with all aspects of faculty work and well-being, including services available from units such as the library, and support for scholarly writing. Accordingly, the library has had a seat on the Hubbard Center's faculty advisory board since 1976, one year after the Hubbard Center began.

Library faculty have been regular presenters at New Faculty Orientation, sponsored by the Hubbard Center; written articles for the Hubbard Center's campus publications; served on search committees for Hubbard Center personnel; and presented faculty development workshops in the Hubbard Center's series of 20 to 25 workshops per semester. Librarians have led workshops on copyright, database searching, services for first-year seminar instructors and for instructors teaching off-campus courses, citation analysis to determine the impact of

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faculty publications, bibliographic citation software, and the MERLOT collection of free, peer-reviewed online learning materials. A librarian has also served a three-year term at the Hubbard Center as a half-time faculty development consultant. My own involvement with the Hubbard Center began in 1993 and has included serving on the faculty advisory board, serving on search committees, editing an issue of the center's teaching and learning magazine, and presenting faculty development workshops.

The scholarly writing Faculty Learning Community

FLCs, as defined by Miami University's Milton D. Cox, are usually cross-disciplinary groups of six to fifteen faculty who meet for a year. These groups are actively involved with projects that usually relate to teaching and learning, or to scholarship. They can be cohort-based or topic-based. Meetings are usually biweekly, and there may be some retreats. FLCs provide more structure and focus than other faculty development offerings, and community building is a key outcome.[2] The Hubbard Center's support for the FLCs included reassigned time for the two facilitators, publicity, Web-based registration, textbooks for the participants, background readings purchased for the facilitators, and assessment. The English faculty member and I jointly planned the structure and objectives for our FLCs. We selected Tara Gray's *Publish and Flourish* and Bob Boice's *Advice for New Faculty Members* as textbooks. The Basic Practices we asked participants to follow, derived from Gray's workshop and book, were introduced at the initial meeting in the fall semester. They included:

• Establish a daily writing schedule (15 to 20 minutes); avoid binge writing.

• Record time spent writing each day in a writing log.

• Send an e-mail summary of your writing log to the FLC facilitator each week.

• Write from the first day of your project.

• Write before completing your review of the related literature.

• Share early drafts with non-experts (e.g., FLC members).

• Submit later drafts to experts.

• Learn how to listen to feedback on your writing.

The seven-member FLCs met six times each semester for 90 minutes. My FLC included faculty from English, Interdisciplinary Studies, Social Work (two), Theatre, and the Library (two, including the facilitator). Our meetings began with a brief check-in, during which members reported on their current writing project and developing writing practice. We then discussed a learning topic (either a textbook section, or readings on a writing-related topic).

At the beginning of each semester, members selected the learning topics from a list that we generated jointly. They included identifying personal barriers to writing regularly; conducting the related-literature review; argumentation; writing abstracts and cover letters; and metadiscourse and "argument templates"[3] We also scheduled a half-day manuscript-review retreat at the end of each semester, allowing us two opportunities to practice giving and receiving supportive feedback.

Our FLC officially concluded with the end of the 2010-2011 academic year. Because we did not want to lose the structure and support that our group provided, we decided to continue as a writing circle. We chose a name (The PWWR—People Who Write Regularly— pronounced "power") and have continued to meet every three weeks, including the summer. The benefits we realized from our year of work as an FLC included:

• recognizing that many faculty struggle silently with the academy's expectations for scholarly productivity, believing they should—but realizing they don't—possess the skills and strategies for writing regularly and with comfort;

• learning that writing is much easier when done in brief daily sessions;

• producing more writing;

• becoming invested in each other's writing;

• learning to give feedback to other writers in a nonjudgmental manner;

• appreciating the interdisciplinary nature of the group; and

• building a community that supports us, in the broadest sense, as faculty.

Our findings are in accord with those that librarian Allyson Washburn describes from a similar activity at Brigham Young University. After attending Tara Gray's "Publish and Flourish" faculty development workshop, junior library faculty there formed a writing circle. Like us, their members reported the benefits of having a support group and receiving nonthreatening feedback on their writing. In addition, they achieved measurable productivity; after three years, the seven members had written 16 articles and gotten thirteen published.[4] Cynthia Tysick and Nancy Babb structured their writing group for tenure-track librarians at the University of Buffalo similarly to our FLC. Their advice on the writing process, and their guidelines for giving group members feedback on their manuscripts, came from Elizabeth Rankin's *The Work of Writing*. Their group met monthly for an hour. Like our members, they found that the "benefits . . . extended beyond writing and research." They greatly valued the supportive forum their group provided for conversations about the tenure process and the multiple challenges of academic life. Like Washburn's group, they were productive; by the end of their second year, nearly all of the original members had publications in print.[5]

Lessons learned

The following suggestions might be useful to librarians facilitating a faculty learning community or a writing circle:

• **Be flexible.** I read this recommendation as I prepared for the FLC and resolved to foreground it. Martha C. Petrone and Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens cite this as "one of the most important qualities" for facilitators. They quote Jack Gifford, an FLC facilitator at Miami University: "Stay flexible! . . . Be willing to pause; take valuable side trips dictated by the ebb and flow of the group. . . . Good things will happen, but it takes time and will not follow the road

map laid down on day one."[6] If one member needed to take extra time discussing an issue related to her writing, I accommodated those needs. Most importantly, if the group wanted to discuss a nonagenda topic, especially the challenges in our work as faculty that hindered our writing progress, we took the time to do so. I wanted the group to chart the course of our work as much as possible. With that goal in mind, however, I monitored whether we were 1) working towards our Basic Practices, 2) fulfilling the learning component of the FLC in most meetings, and 3) building a supportive community.

• **You don't have to have all the answers.** This perspective turned out to be key to my comfort with this new role. Being able to answer members' questions was the thing that concerned me most as I read and planned during the months before the FLC began. I knew that I had faculty from a variety of disciplines in the group. Besides disciplinary questions, I also wondered if I would be able to address all of the members' writing-related questions. As it turned out, when members posed questions about their writing projects, we worked as a group to come up with suggestions. Sometimes we relied on our own knowledge and experiences; other times, we recalled advice from the "Publish and Flourish" workshop or our textbooks. Sometimes we decided we needed to read further, perhaps turning the question into a learning topic for a future meeting.

I came to see that my initial reservations about leading an FLC stemmed not from the fact that this was a new role for me, nor from my level of knowledge and experience with scholarly writing. Rather, it was a mistaken perception of academic identity that I needed to reexamine. Literature professor and academic administrator Donald E. Hall, in his recommendations for gaining balance in academic life, urges us to relinquish the expectation of mastery, instead being "content with continuous intellectual engagement and the joys that such engagement offers."[7]

• **Strive to facilitate.** The philosophy of learning communities is that they are facilitated, not led. I found it helpful to keep in mind

these three roles (articulated by Petrone and Ortquist-Ahrens) in which the FLC facilitator functions: champion (keeping the big picture of growth and change before the group); coordinator (designing the framework of the FLC and overseeing ongoing tasks); and energizer (monitoring and adjusting group interactions so that they are moving in positive ways towards both the learning goals and the community-building goals of the FLC).[8]

- **Librarians bring valuable skills to FLC facilitation.** I did not undertake this project for the purpose of promoting library services. During the two semesters of the FLC, I considered myself a facilitator first, a fellow writer and learner second, and a librarian third. I told myself that if I found opportunities to mention library services or use my reference-librarian skills, that would be icing on the cake. As it turned out, however, there were several such opportunities. FLC members said they benefited from expanding their library research techniques for their related-literature reviews and from learning more about library/information literacy instruction by reading my manuscripts and those of my library colleague. Similarly, my library colleague and I learned more about the other members' academic fields and gained a fuller picture of the work life of nonlibrarian faculty.

Benefits to the facilitator

This endeavor had several benefits and advantages for me—as facilitator, as participant, or both:

- The year-long duration, the regular meetings lasting an hour and a half, and the learning component permitted deeper exploration of scholarly writing than a workshop or a book discussion group would have.
- The small group size, coupled with the year-long duration, encouraged community building.
- I developed new, or strengthened existing, relationships with members. They, in turn, developed relationships with each other, sometimes extending beyond the FLC.
- I learned a new paradigm for exploring an academic or professional topic—one that could be repeated with other topics.

- My own skills and knowledge about scholarly writing increased substantially.
- Both the background reading and the skills I developed by facilitating the FLC had unanticipated applications in my teaching, committee work, and professional writing.
- I saw the advantages of learning new techniques for completing major projects (such as scholarly manuscripts) within a supportive community, rather than learning them on my own. Our FLC's Basic Practices, along with other techniques we discussed, helped us structure our time and work incrementally toward our goals. As a group, we learned to hold ourselves and each other accountable.

Conclusion

Librarians interested in facilitating an FLC that is open to faculty campuswide have two options: proposing a topic to their faculty development or teaching enhancement center or offering the FLC through the library (with advice from the faculty development center). The topic of the FLC could be directly related to libraries, or it might be a nonlibrary topic applicable to all faculty. Examples might include integrating information literacy into a course or program; scholarly communication; assessment; or positive organizational scholarship. For library personnel, another option might be to use the FLC as an alternative structure for staff development or work projects. In sum: If you have a topic that is meaningful to you, if you see that it fits broad-based needs and interests, and if you're intrigued by the FLC format, then facilitating an FLC is a growth opportunity that greatly rewards the undertaking.

Further reading

Boice, Robert. *Advice for New Faculty Members: Nihil Nimus*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.

Gray, Tara. *Publish & Flourish: Become a Prolific Scholar*. Las Cruces, NM: Teaching Academy, New Mexico State University, 2005.

Lessons learned

There are a variety of user types and motivations for attending iPhone workshops. One of the biggest challenges in creating and delivering a technology workshop such as this is the need to respond to individual's levels of technology competence and familiarity. In order to alleviate these challenges, there should be adequate trained staff to respond to questions during hands-on portions. A new feature for future lab-based learning will be to create open lab time where students and staff could ask questions of staff based on the apps they need to create; having such open lab time to supplement instructional delivery will help to meet learner's individualized paces for learning and mobile application design.

The library is planning to further support student design teams, and these workshops have given the Undergraduate Library a starting point in recruiting student design teams that will help to codesign mobile apps for library services. From these workshops important student contacts are formed, and the library is recruiting design teams that are not solely from computer science departments, but that are from student organizations not typically associated with application development.

It is this population that may yield great results for mobile tools that offer the broadest relevance to students' everyday information needs, and may help further to connect library resources into the students' academic work, a desired outcome of any library workshop.

Conclusion

Technology workshops in general and mobile computing training in particular will form a vital component of the instructional portfolio of academic libraries as more students look to the library for technology training and experimentation. Libraries are forging new ways in which to be vital to student needs by delivering tailored instruction in mobile application development. While it is often stated that with mobile tools, "there is an app for that," perhaps libraries can show their cutting- edge instructional value in this new arena by bringing to campus a "workshop for that."

Notes

1. M. Ito, et al., *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media (*Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

2. As an example of library iPhone application developed using this method, see the University of Illinois experimental apps page at www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/about/Experimental_iPhone_Apps/iPhone_apps.html (accessed June 7, 2012).

3. J. Hahn, *iPhone Application Development: Strategies for Efficient Mobile Design and Delivery* (Oxford: Chandos, 2011).

4. http://uiuc.libguides.com/iphone. ℼ

Notes

1. Jack London, "Getting into Print," *The Editor,* March 1903, 57.

2. Milton D. Cox, "Introduction to Faculty Learning Communities," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 97 (2004): 8–9, 18.

3. See Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say,* 2006.

4. Allyson Washburn, "Writing Circle Feedback: Creating a Vibrant Community of Scholars," *Journal of Faculty Development* 22, no. 1 (2008): 33–35.

5. Cynthia Tysick and Nancy Babb, "Writing Support for Junior Faculty Librarians: A Case Study," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 1 (2006): 97–99.

6. Martha C. Petrone and Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens, "Facilitating Faculty Learning Communities: A Compact Guide to Creating Change and Inspiring Community," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 97 (2004): 67.

7. Donald E. Hall, *The Academic Community: A Manual for Change* (Columbus: Ohio UP, 2007), 140.

8. Martha C. Petrone and Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens, "Facilitating Faculty Learning Communities," in *Building Faculty Learning Communities* (Jossey-Bass, e-book), 64-66. ℼ