Get Together to Write

In supporting one another’s scholarship, these new faculty learned about more than writing and publishing.

By Jennifer I. Friend and Juan Carlos González

New faculty members are traditionally indoctrinated into a system that demands that they write incessantly and successfully publish their manuscripts. Yet they typically are not offered help in navigating the publishing process. For junior faculty members who have little experience with scholarly writing beyond their doctoral dissertations, these expectations can be daunting. Compounding the problem is a lack of clear criteria—how many publications are “enough” to meet the expectations of the promotion and tenure review board? Two peer-reviewed journal articles a year? One peer-reviewed article and one book chapter? Which journals qualify as “high status”?

Faced with these questions, we got together as first-year tenuretrack faculty members to form a writing group to provide support and mentorship for scholarly writing, as well as help in navigating the culture and politics of the university. Our group established a space for collaboratively critiquing one another’s writing that evolved over three years to include conversations about the politics of writing, the nuances of the tenure process, and even pedagogical practices.

Promotion and Tenure: Community and Socialization in Academe, a 1996 book by higher education scholars William G. Tierney and Estela Mara Bensimon, provides a framework for examining the academic socialization of faculty. Tierney and Bensimon call the tenure and promotion process a rite of passage that concludes either with tenure and promotion or termination of employment, noting that the socialization of women tenure candidates and candidates of color may differ from that of white men. Departments are not necessarily overtly sexist or racist toward junior minority and women faculty, but unwelcoming environments in some departments can easily be perceived as such, particularly when, for example, minority women are the only minorities in departments of mostly white male faculty.

Initiating the Writing Group
In our first year as faculty members, we were assigned mentors who advised us about the importance of publication in the evaluation process. However, the effectiveness of senior faculty mentorship varies, and we lacked a formal structure to ensure regular feedback and direction for our writing. Following a conversation by the copy machine at the beginning of our first semester, we decided to form our writing group so we could give and receive constructive feedback on our scholarly writing in a collaborative setting.

Writing groups within composition classrooms have existed since the late nineteenth century. They bring many benefits for scholarly writers, including immediate response from a peer audience, the opportunity for collaborative critique that may inform manuscript revision prior to submission for publication, and greater understanding of the writing style and format expected for publication.

The two of us had followed different career paths before securing tenure-track positions in the School of Education at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. Jennifer was in transition from being a school principal to entering the world of academe. For her, scholarly writing for publication involved an entirely new set of skills and practices. Juan Carlos was a student of higher education who had been mentored on the culture of publication by higher education scholar Caroline Turner of Arizona State University, coauthor of *Faculty of Color in Academe: Bittersweet Success*. Yet he, too, experienced anxiety about the process. Our common ground was a passion for writing, and our styles seemed to complement one another. Jennifer, the organizational type, wanted structure, while Juan Carlos, the organic type, wanted to bring people together to learn something positive about their writing.

We set out in early September 2005 to create a mission statement and procedures for monthly meetings. We agreed that, at that stage in our development as writers, we wanted the formative critique offered by peers prior to submission for publication rather than the summative feedback provided by anonymous peer reviewers on an editorial board. We also wanted to develop our voices as writers, explore the politics of writing, learn about the practices of journals and about other opportunities for publication, and use writing deadlines to stay motivated. We hoped the writing group would be a positive experience for the faculty who became involved.

We started by inviting other nontenured faculty to join us, and the group soon expanded when the dean asked us to include any interested faculty members in the School of Education. At monthly faculty meetings, we invited everyone in attendance to join, and all faculty received a flyer by e-mail announcing the formation of the writing group.

**Feedback**

Each month, participants brought copies of five pages of their writing to share with groups of no more than four faculty members. If needed, the groups would break up into smaller subgroups. They spent from
thirty to forty-five minutes reading and commenting on each person’s writing. The feedback could be editorial or structural or it could involve any other kind of constructive comment. At the end of each session, participants received all their pages back, including any comments written on them.

Some of the younger faculty members tended to provide basic structural feedback, such as specific suggestions about APA (American Psychological Association) style, grammar, or sentence structure. Some of the more experienced faculty offered more philosophical or conceptual feedback that sometimes helped us take our writing to a higher level. Regardless of the type of feedback, we always took something positive from our morning coffee-and-doughnut writing sessions. We not only began to feel “scholarly,” but we also started to love the writing process.

The Writing Experience

We experienced other positive outcomes as a result of the group as well; for example, it helped strengthen our relationships with our new colleagues. It also helped us with time management, encouraging us to schedule adequate time for writing. As the first year progressed, demands on our schedules increased in the form of heavier teaching loads, participation in committee work, and invitations to become involved in community and professional initiatives. These activities included meetings and deadlines, while writing was an activity without external accountability.

The writing group, however, provided monthly accountability, helping us to remain productive. Often, colleagues would stay awake well after midnight to prepare their five pages to bring to the critique session the following morning. As the group progressed over two years, the membership varied, although Jennifer and Juan Carlos attended every meeting. At times, the length of the critique sessions increased—some sessions lasted over six hours to facilitate feedback for entire manuscripts. We became real mentors to one another, expanding support beyond writing to other aspects of scholarship, teaching, and service.

More Than Writing

Many factors, such as gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, and age, affect the complicated roles and responsibilities of faculty members. With that in mind, we invited senior faculty members to teach us about these issues and how to integrate them into our scholarship. We referred to this topic as the “politics of writing.” While understanding that it was not the primary purpose for forming the writing group, we realized the importance of this knowledge to our survival in the university. We soon saw that the only way to learn about the politics of writing is to write, submit manuscripts to journals, and develop relationships with the editors of journals in which you wish to publish so that they know your work.

During the second year of the writing group, we continued to invite all faculty members in the School of Education. Some senior faculty members attended a meeting without bringing original writing, instead
focusing on providing feedback on the writing brought by junior faculty members. Other professors praised us for forming the writing group but did not participate, and yet others said they wanted to join but never came to a meeting. We began to invite junior faculty members of color from across the university who expressed interest in participating, later moving the writing group from the School of Education to the university faculty center for monthly meetings open to all faculty.

Although we were initially disappointed by a lack of involvement among tenured faculty, the second and third years have seen increased interest among tenured professors, some of whom have attended the monthly meetings with their own writing. Because of the group, we began our first year as faculty members with the confidence and support we needed to feel that we belonged and were contributing members of a scholarly community.

Occasionally, candidates interviewing for faculty positions who were told about the writing group would stop by our meeting room during their guided tours of the education building. In a sense, our small start-up writing group was presented as an enticement to faculty being recruited. During the fall of the second year, the dean announced during a faculty meeting that two interview candidates had commended our school for the support available through the faculty writing group.

Thus the implications of the writing group for recruitment, retention, and promotion of junior faculty are greater than we initially imagined; as a result, so are the prospects for growth and expansion. The recruitment and retention of women and faculty of color are especially critical if the demography of our university is to reflect that of the nation. The experiences of first-year faculty members influence the success of their transition into academe. New faculty need a variety of institutional and departmental support structures to help them with this transition.

For us, forming the writing group created a space for collaborative critique of writing. This space was flexible, and we could concentrate on the writing process, or we could engage in critical dialogue about the political and social structure of the institution. We constructed our own framework for our monthly meetings, and our time together fostered greater collegiality and helped us establish friendships based on the advancement of critical scholarship. Through our engagement in the process, we indirectly influenced our own learning of the politics of writing. We look forward to continued growth within the university, strong relationships with our colleagues, and the ability, through the writing group, to help develop, integrate, and socialize junior faculty members into the larger academic culture.

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