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PEER WRITING GROUPS AS PRODUCTIVITY, RESEARCH, AND SUPPORT NETWORKS FOR EXTENSION AGENTS

Brooke, C. T., County Extension Agent-Agriculture & Natural Resources, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension

Martin, J.M., Director of Research, Center of Excellence for Bison Studies, South Dakota State University

Short, R.A., NSF Postdoctoral Scholar, Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology

ABSTRACT

Peer writing groups serve an important role in providing a venue to improve written productivity, provide support, and brainstorm research ideas. Peer accountability assists with focusing attention on tasks at hand, which often receive less attention due to the demands on agent's and researcher's time. Establishing dedicated meeting times to prioritize writing and editing improves time management, writing efficiency, research progression, and overall productivity. For extension agents and researchers, these components are essential for completing daily tasks and career advancement. Interdisciplinary writing groups also help broaden the scope of expertise, provide professional development experiences, and support the land grant mission.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is often a solo endeavor, and is an important part of the Cooperative Extension Service. Extension Agents frequently research, collaborate, and produce written materials in the forms of lesson plans, reports, fact sheets, publications, presentations, and other materials integral to the mission of Extension. These materials also serve as a means of gaining recognition and awards from professional associations such as the National Association of County Extension Agents, who often support the development of these materials as a means of professional development. Despite these expectations and encouragement, it is often challenging for extension agents to develop these cross-disciplinary writing skills in a purposeful and time-efficient manner. Peer writing groups increase accountability, productivity, and quality of writing for individuals (Myatt et al., 2014; Skarupski and Foucher, 2018; University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2020).

Previous work has shown that common barriers to professional development for extension agents are more commonly related to increased workloads and lack of time or funding rather than a lack of motivation on the agent's part (Lakai et al., 2012). Agents in the cooperative extension service are often tasked with a broad and diverse range of job duties ranging from developing educational programming, managing volunteers, handling constant communication from the public, participating in speaking engagements, and managing a myriad of county, state, and national issues (Ensle, 2005; Bengé et al., 2015). In this context of limited time and constant unscheduled demands on that time, agents often prioritize necessary tasks like reporting and paperwork, over attending trainings and professional development which are often difficult to integrate into their schedule (Conklin et al., 2002).

Written materials and products such as bulletins, presentations, and newsletters among others are routinely developed by extension agents, though there is seldom training given on improving the quality of those materials. Building skills in research, writing, editing, and critiquing are challenging and take time and practice to develop (Wegener et al., 2016). Multidisciplinary peer writing groups pose an opportunity for extension agents to develop their writing and critiquing skills within a flexible, yet structured environment by providing a defined and consistent time to focus on material development and review. These groups are successfully used by a variety of people such as medical professionals, graduate students, and research scientists among others to provide constructive criticism on manuscripts in progress, improve writing productivity, and provide peer-to-peer accountability and support (Ness et al, 2014; Steinert et al., 2008; Wegener et al., 2016). Participants of these groups, when successful, often see improvements in writing, critiquing and editing skills, confidence in the material generated, and expanded support networks by their participants (Cahusac et al., 2017; Stiller-Reeve et al., 2016) — ultimately improving production efficiency, integration of cross-disciplinary context, and overall writing ability.

One of the advantages of the peer writing group structure that applies to the needs of extension agents is the flexibility of the group structure to meet the needs of its participants. Whether formed with other extension agents or external groups, peer writing groups may address the challenges of managing growing workloads in a planned and reasoned manner. This time may then be dedicated to lesson plans, professional development, or other tasks that get deprioritized as a result of a lack of urgency. While a single office may choose to organize an in-person writing group of two or three agents; a regional, state, or national group could easily set up their meetings utilizing established teleconference platforms. Moreover, multi-disciplinary groups of agents and researchers expand shared content knowledge and broaden readability and applicability of written materials because of the integration of various perspectives and background knowledge.

This paper discusses concepts of peer writing groups and makes a case for the use of these groups by extension agents across the country. We do so by detailing the structure of peer writing groups and sharing our experiences from our own writing group, 'The Write Stuff', we hope to inspire other extension agents to form or join existing peer writing groups and utilize them as a part of their program and material development process.

THE PEER WRITING GROUP STRUCTURE

The role of peer writing groups is fundamentally one of productivity, knowledge sharing, and professional development. Setting aside a regular block of time for purposeful writing and material development increases the productivity of its participants (Silva, 2018). This is particularly evident in regard to tasks and projects that require multiple revisions and significant content generation such as lesson plans, grant applications, theses or dissertations, and publications (Van Bavel & Gruber, 2019). In addition to the content generated, participating in peer writing and editing contributes to the development of publishable writing (Nairn, 2020).

The structure of peer writing groups may vary depending on the discipline of the participants, constraints on meeting space or size, and scheduling amongst the group's participants. Some groups have utilized structured online meeting platforms (Stiller-Reeve et al., 2016) or physical meetings in a shared space (Wegener et al., 2016). Lee & Golde (2009) from bring forward a set of questions to aid the initial organization of a writing group:

- How often will the group meet, for how long, and where?
- How big will the group be?
- Are there rules for participation in the group?
- What is the format for each meeting?
- Are there formal roles for the group?
- What are the expectations for submitting work for peer feedback?
- What kind of feedback is reasonable for peer edits and reviews?
- What is the initial commitment for new participants?

The success and failure of a writing group depends upon the goals, objectives, and dynamics of the group. Characteristics of successful groups include strong leadership, gradual development, and regular attendance. Factors that lead to unsuccessful groups include schedule conflicts, low motivation, poor group dynamics and intrapersonal conflict, and unclear objectives (Stiller-Reeve et al., 2016). One part of success is maintaining a diversity of participants who can contribute to the overall character of the group. While the writing process and products may vary based on the discipline of the various group participants (Wegener et al., 2016), having participants from diverse job roles and backgrounds often leads to better overall quality of work (Guerin et al., 2013).

'THE WRITE STUFF' — AN EXAMPLE OF A PEER WRITING GROUP

'The Write Stuff' was organized in 2017 as a peer writing group at Texas A&M University to improve writing productivity amongst graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. As a peer writing group for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars, the original 'The Write Stuff' included participants from three Texas A&M departments: Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences (now the Department of Rangeland, Wildlife, and Fisheries Management), Ecosystem Science and Management (now the Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology), and Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Sciences. The group was named as a play on the title of the popular 1979 book and 1983 movie, 'The Right Stuff.' The group has grown since then, and now includes active members from academia and extension representing eight institutions across the United States, all working towards a similar goal: to increase writing productivity and build professional connections with members across the country.

Originally, 'The Write Stuff' met in-person on the Texas A&M University campus in College Station, TX, and transitioned to an online format as participants accepted new positions across the country. In the context of Lee and Golde's (2009) framework for organizing writing groups, 'The Write Stuff' meets twice per week for two hours each session on Zoom and coordinates the meetings via SLACK — a shared online workspace. The group is limited to 10 active participants, defined as attending at least one meeting per month, to maintain the quality of interaction and review. Each meeting generally begins with a short time of socialization then proceeds to writing and review for the rest of the period. The roles in the group are informal, but broadly include the Organizer (responsible for coordinating the zoom meetings), Time Manager (maintaining the shared calendar and automated event reminders), and Data Collector (tabulates the products generated over the course of the group). Feedback on materials is requested before or at the start of each meeting, and must be constructive and helpful. Finally, as new members are enrolled, they are simply expected to contribute to and be active in the group.

CHANGES IN WRITING HABITS OF WRITING GROUP MEMBERS

Prior to joining 'The Write Stuff', the habits of group members varied greatly depending on their career status. For instance, graduate students and extension agents have different constraints on their time and different expectations of productivity. Most early members of 'The Write Stuff' were graduate students or early career postdoctoral researchers. Members found it difficult to dedicate time for writing especially early in their graduate student careers when expectations and deadlines can be particularly overwhelming. This caused important work, such as dissertation writing and manuscript publishing, to receive less priority than other more time-sensitive tasks, such as teaching, coursework, and meeting administrative deadlines. Writing was often delayed or done in small bursts in hopes of having a large block of time available in the near future. Often, this time would not materialize. Many graduate student members also felt isolated without a support network of peers with whom to share their experiences or seek advice. This comradery built by the group was particularly useful for the first-generation graduate students in the group.

As an extension agent, the lead author — Brooke — had inconsistent writing habits prior to joining the group. While he had participated and led peer writing groups during his graduate coursework, his duties as a county extension agent made it challenging to self-organize time to write or work on projects. As such writing was often subject to interruption by clientele, program planning, or other tasks, and progress was generally made during slow periods of the year, or on a last-minute basis before impending deadlines. As a result, writing quality suffered, especially when impending deadlines did not allow time for review and revision. Increased emotional stress and workloads caused optional or collaborative projects to get dropped or tabled due to the volume of backlog. As an example, given the seasonality of livestock shows, crop harvest, and other extension-related duties, without purposeful planning, Brooke would generally lack opportunities based on this pre-writing group workflow to make substantive progress on publishing manuscripts, co-write fact sheets with extension specialists, or make progress on other long-term projects that were significant career contributions, but ultimately left on a perpetual backburner.

After participating in the group, members reported that peer accountability helped maintain and protect regularly structured time for writing, and ultimately increased the consistency of progress and productivity. For example, as participants of 'The Write Stuff,' — Martin and Short — collectively completed two doctoral dissertations, produced 10 peer-reviewed publications, and are now in post-doctoral positions at research universities. Brooke found that having two

uninterrupted two-hour writing sessions per week improved his productivity and quality of work, while important and critical calls and drop-in visits were still taken. Similarly, consistent time for writing and related tasks had additional positive impacts on the quality of his extension programs. Time spent in the writing group was often applied towards building marketing materials, developing fact sheets and handouts for extension programs, developing and interpreting program evaluations, and generating summary documents and reports. By allocating specific time for these tasks, the overall quality, quantity, and timeliness of materials improved.

Since its beginning in 2017, members of the 'The Write Stuff' have generated over 80 writing products including 7 dissertations/theses, 11 grant proposals, 17 peer-reviewed papers, 27 PowerPoints, 7 popular/news articles, and other miscellaneous works. In addition to the productivity benefits that active participation in 'The Write Stuff' has brought to its members, one of the major benefits observed has been the mentorship and networking that the group provides. As established members progress in their careers, the group allows an opportunity for them to mentor new members, often graduate students, as they navigate the challenges of academia. At the same time, early career researchers benefit from having the support of more experienced professionals. Whether it's discussions on applying for grants, non-academic job options, or collaborations and speaking opportunities, having a diverse network can greatly enhance the experience of participants at any stage of their career.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating a defined writing time through participating in peer writing groups provides extension agents with opportunities to make substantive progress on written reports, presentations, publications, and other materials as well as providing a peer support network — two factors that have been identified as challenges in retaining extension agents (Benge et al., 2015). Additionally, the distribution of participants across various career paths and stages facilitates non-formal discussion about career development across multiple disciplines. Similarly, including non-extension participants exposes other members of the group to the role that extension agents play in the land-grant institution mission. Overall, these experiences improve agent's skills in the academic processes of research, peer-review, and grantsmanship - all of which are beneficial to their career and have been tied to job satisfaction (Arnold and Place, 2010).

Given the ability to utilize existing, free online platforms to facilitate the development of these groups, the primary challenge for forming peer writing groups is not necessarily technological, rather finding active, driven participants. To address this, state or national extension associations could facilitate these peer writing groups as a means of increasing participation from agents in publishing their work and contributing to the communication awards process via their association. Finally, while there has been much work done on the role of peer writing groups for graduate students and early career scientists, there remains the opportunity to quantitatively explore the role that these groups could play in extension mentorship and professional development.

In conclusion, peer writing groups are commonly used in academic and professional circles as a means of improving written productivity and providing professional development for their participants (Wegener et al., 2016). While there has been little published information on the use of peer writing groups in extension, extension agents can utilize this format to become more productive in producing materials for their programs and scholarly works. When formed across universities, extension offices, and other institutions, peer writing groups have the potential to support the land grant mission by exposing students and peers to extension work and connect agents with ongoing research. Forming these groups does require collaboration across a variety of people, but professional associations may be able to facilitate the formation of these groups and encourage the study of their effectiveness.

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