

Writing Circles: Combining Peer Review, Commitment, and Gentle Guidance

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This is a story about small-group peer discussion, soft-gloved guidance, the necessity of commitment, and collaboration across campus. It describes a way to combine the rich potential of both writing groups and writing center pedagogy. The new Writing Circles—weekly small-group workshoping through a partial-credit class—seem to be filling a gap on our campus, Saint Mary's College of California, and extending quite widely the reaches of our center work. Ours is one of those fairly unique writing center and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) combined programs, and my directorship encompasses both. In addition to Writing Circles, we offer one-to-one sessions and workshops for students, plus faculty development workshops and curriculum guidance for faculty.

Our center's experiment with formal student writing groups began quite small, quite humbly, in response to a request: I was asked to design a writing support program for our college's Great Books Collegiate Seminars. During seminars, class time is devoted to deep discussion of texts. Half of a student's grade is based on the quality of discussion, but the other half is based on essays that spring from that discussion. Despite the emphasis on writing, there is little to no discussion about writing during class, and the seminars are taught by faculty from across the disciplines who might not be trained to facilitate writing development. The Seminar Program viewed its need for writing support through two lenses: faculty who were frustrated by student essays that did not interrogate the texts profoundly or that were riddled with error; and students who felt adrift, not knowing exactly how or what to write.

While considering how to respond, I knew I did not want to create some kind of remedial tutorial system under which

seminar students perceived as weak would be treated differently than other students walking through our center doors. And I did not want to propose a class that would be dominated by an instructor and look like an additional composition course. Either model might be unattractive to students and frankly less than fully effective. Another option, writing fellows, was not encouraged on our campus at that time.

I decided to try to capitalize on the powerful potential of writing workshops and peer review, during which students view their writing through each other's eyes and learn to analyze and deepen explorations of both content and expression. I agree with Laurie Grobman's description of the benefits of peer review when it in fact results in deep, reflective critique: "Learning the nuances of critique can in and of itself lead to improved writing abilities" (47). However, students do not always and inevitably grow as writers through peer review: under-structured sessions can lead to fumbling without focus; students who are not trained in discussion-based critique can give misguided, too little, or too much advice; and well-meaning instructors can sit down and join in, trying to help students reflect but instead inadvertently taking over, with students hanging on every word of the instructor instead of listening to each other. As for independent critique groups, those too can fall short of their potential: despite best intentions, students who arrange groups with no commitment other than their enthusiasm can find that more pressing commitments encroach; additionally, many peer-only workshops lack guidance in how to analyze and discuss writing.

I hoped to set up our new program in ways that might sidestep potential pitfalls right from the start. So I proposed creating small writing groups governed by our writing center pedagogy and ethos of guiding without directing. We dubbed these "Writing Circles." Each week, three to five students discuss their work for an hour, with a facilitator sharing writing strategies as needs arise but mostly helping the students discuss productively with each other: the facilitator guides students to describe each other's drafts via post-outlining and offer detailed, readerly feedback to each other. As Stephanie White and Elisabeth Miller argue in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, describing their journey toward adding center coordinators to the small-group table: "coordinators have a vital role in teaching students to drive their writing groups by providing direction along the way" (5). I began

our Writing Circles following a similar logic, creating the position of Circle facilitator. We have found this role to be a complex one: a facilitator is a step removed from a writing adviser (tutor); in essence, the facilitator is trying to guide students to be writing advisers for each other. Just as with one-to-one advising, facilitating small-group dialogue is an interesting balancing act—at its worst, bluntly directive, but at its best, minimalist, gentle, and collaborative.

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

The Circle facilitator needs to be able to discuss writing without sliding into telling the students what they should be writing. As in one-to-one sessions in the center, there are brief moments when the facilitator's role looks like a teacher's (such as when explaining methods to analyze texts or to write thesis statements), but during most of the Circle, a facilitator relies on the techniques of collaborative minimalism (such as open-ended questioning) that characterize writing center pedagogy.

Most of our Circle facilitators have pedagogical training and experience in writing center work. Nevertheless, before beginning to guide Circles, facilitators participate in daylong discussions of research on collaboration and effective strategies for leading groups. They learn how to guide students in giving curiosity-driven responses to each other and deconstructing each others' texts. Facilitator training continues throughout the semester: we meet monthly to share our best and most problematic Circle moments and brainstorm ways to encourage discussion; we maintain a reflective blog—each facilitator posts about that week's frustrations and successes and asks for suggestions—and we observe each other's Circles and discuss our observations. This multi-layered, ongoing collaboration among facilitators helps us continually improve. It also maintains an appreciation of our need to be always learning and always humble as we facilitate student discussion.

Some of the facilitators are veteran undergraduate and graduate-student writing advisers in our center. Most are adjunct instructors who were writing advisers while they were graduate students. The remaining facilitators include me, our center's associate director, and a couple of adjunct instructors without previous writing center experience, whom we have had to hire because of increasing demand for Circles. We ask these adjunct instructors to do extra observations, and we tailor training for them that includes one-to-one writing center

pedagogy; furthermore, they benefit by working and discussing alongside the other facilitators who are already comfortable with peer collaboration.

Circle students fill out surveys at the end of each semester, and the majority of their comments reflect what we are striving for. Here is an illustrative comment: the facilitator “guided us in the right direction, but gave us room to talk about our own ideas and problem solve with one another.” Another student said the facilitator “made sure that everyone got their input and that their opinions were heard.” Many survey comments reveal that students also see their facilitators as motivators who help create a comfortable forum for discussion: the facilitator’s “role was very comfortably pushing us into our own thoughts as we would write,” a student commented. Another said the facilitator “helps students feel secure and confident about their writings.” Reading through the dozens of comments each semester, we see facilitators described most often as leaders of discussion, and sometimes even as inspirers.

Nevertheless, some students have written comments about facilitators which appear to be positive but which give us pause, such as this one, describing the facilitator as “very helpful with reviewing my writing and giving feedback.” We reflect on the reality that facilitator feedback might be perceived as more important than the feedback of student peers. Yet there are times when facilitators do not want students to walk away with problems unsolved: what to do, for instance, when discussion is headed in a decidedly wrong direction? Holding back critical information is not useful for anyone. How, then, to guide discussion back to productivity without shutting down the input of students? These are some of the dilemmas we discuss during our meetings.

While some students seem more comfortable with a student facilitator versus an instructor facilitator, that preference seems to vary from group to group and therefore is not a dominant focus of concern. One instructor facilitator looks so young that his students sometimes initially assume he is a student, and he easily develops rapport with them. It was revealing that on his students’ surveys, they wrote about him as they might an instructor, not as a facilitator at all. This caused him to reflect that even when the Circle conversation is fluid and informal, he needs to remain vigilant about not straying into offering comments on the students’ papers.

Occasionally, students have seemed less inclined to discuss in earnest when the facilitator is a student: one group became so comfortable, even rowdy at times, that it was hard for the student facilitator to keep them on task; I hovered in the background one day, working on a project, and that took care of the problem. It is worth noting, at the same time, that some of the most engaging Circles have been led by students—could that be because the peer dynamic comes more easily in such configurations, or because of the unique abilities of those student facilitators to balance authority and camaraderie, or because of the unique grouping of students?

PROGRAM DETAILS

The student facilitators are paid through our center's student payroll. Instructors are paid as they would be for any other course. In addition to having a facilitator at the table, I felt that another important criterion was that the Writing Circles be linked to pass/fail course credit. Students must attend regularly in order to pass and therefore are likely to remain true to their own good intentions; furthermore, they can count on their peers to stick around, allowing them all to increasingly trust and respect each other—growing together as writers and discussers of writing as the semester builds, week by week. The course also needs to be pass/fail so that it remains true to the writing center ethos of eschewing judgment. Students must be able to converse creatively and openly, to ask questions, and to be unafraid that potentially wrong explorations could impact their GPAs. It is further advantageous that on our campus, quarter-credit courses are perceived as participation courses: they're used, for instance, for yoga and themed reading groups. Courses driven by academic content typically are full-credit courses. That paradigm helps our Writing Circles be viewed as a commitment, yet one that is low stakes and even enjoyable.

We offered COMM190: Writing Circles as an experimental course in fall 2012, and enough seminar students enrolled for it to be feasible. Because student response was positive, we continued offering seminar Circles in spring 2013, and we decided to see whether there might be broader interest. I reasoned that Circles could include students in any course that includes writing-to-learn. As soon as we started talking to other department chairs about the Circles, the response was nothing short of overwhelming: it was like barely lighting a match and a bonfire starts. We began to receive unsolicited inquiries from

program directors, instructors, and individual students.

Strategic scheduling has become a topic of conversation at the start of each semester, as we put together what we affectionately started calling “the playing board,” factoring in students’ courses, facilitators’ specialties, and students’ preferences for group members. We schedule groups of three, four, or five students. For some types of group projects, larger teams can work well, but through my own trial and error as a teacher of peer review, I have observed that groups of three lend themselves particularly well to collaborative discussion. Therefore, we prefer to create Circles of four to account for absences and the occasional student who drops the course. When Circles become large—with five students—it can be difficult to balance time on everyone’s draft and also to encourage contribution by all peers. We experiment with ways to inspire productive discussion. For instance, if two students in a Circle contribute often but three are mostly silent, during the next session, the facilitator might offer each peer a specific way to enter the conversation: one discusses the merit of sources, another the analysis of sources, another the introduction, and so on.

We try to form Circles of students who are working on the same types of writing projects and ideally enrolled in the same course section. I am not sure whether these boundaries are necessary, but students often deem it more productive to work with writers they view as true peers. Circle students might be writing in Communication, Sociology, or Spanish, to name a few disciplines, or they might be writing dissertations. Even though the Circles are often organized by content, they do not turn into a sort of content-based group tutoring because the discussion is focused on writing in that genre; there is plenty of writing to discuss, as the students do Circles for courses that use writing-to-learn.

Just as the Circles began in response to one request, so they have evolved request by request, in unpredictable ways. Some of the collaborations have been instigated by faculty, some by students. For instance, one of our writing advisers wondered whether Circles might be a good fit for two programs she’s involved in: her major, Integral,¹ and the High Potential Program² for first-generation college students, for which she serves as mentor. She and I met with leaders of both programs, and they both were immediately interested. Because of her initiative and outreach, all first-semester High Potential students now

participate in Circles, and we have a close working relationship with Integral professors, who encourage students to do Circles and also recommend students to become writing advisers. And as time goes on, more and more departments are suggesting that their capstone-writing students enroll in Circles.

ASSESSMENT

Circles are not a sideline to our center's role on campus but rather are helping define it. Granted, all of our services have grown significantly since our center's first year (2011-2012): faculty development workshops as well as student services, including one-to-one sessions, peer-review facilitating, and writing workshops. However, the expansion of the Circles has been the most dramatic. Now, more students sign in for Writing Circles every week than for one-to-one sessions or workshops. Across both semesters of the experimental first year of Circles (2012-2013), a total of 38 students participated. That compares with 233 students the next year, due to collaborations with several departments, and then 391 the third year (2014-2015). By way of context, Saint Mary's is a liberal-arts college with about 2,800 undergraduate and 1,700 graduate students.

The case for Circles has been easy to support because of demand and also because of student feedback. For instance, in the spring 2015 surveys, 98 percent of the students reported having effectively discussed writing during their Circles. In their open-ended responses, many students wrote about new brainstorming strategies they will continue to use, such as "how to effectively organize my thoughts and outline my papers." Others referred to having learned how to analyze the audience or prompt, or to critically read a text, as illustrated by this comment: "New ways to examine prompts and articles."

Many students spoke appreciatively about their peers' collaborations. One wrote that "talking out how things made sense to a reader versus the writer was helpful." And another: "My peers' comments allowed me to get a better understanding of how to structure my arguments in a more efficient manner." Students also offered perspectives into the process of their conversations. One student wrote, "We kept each other on track and whenever one of us had the wrong idea, we gave each other constructive criticism to help each other."

While we have been heartened by survey comments about how much students appreciate their peers' feedback and sometimes

even complain that they want more peer response, we consider this both a good sign and a potentially problematic one. How can we build in even more opportunity for peers to give each other comments? One alteration is to stop scheduling mini-lessons into the semester calendar. Instead, a facilitator reaches for a mini-lesson as need arises—having at-the-ready our center’s handout on effective thesis statements, for instance, for whenever students happen to be at that stage of their process.

UNIVERSALITY

A Writing Circle helps students navigate projects collaboratively, as illustrated by this student comment: “My peers’ comments helped me clarify the goals of the assignment and make sure I have the right thought process and organization for my papers.” Through sharing and discussing, under the gentle guidance of facilitators, students learn lifelong skills for analyzing and discussing writing. Facilitators also help students make connections across courses and genres. Toward the end of each semester, we build in reflective discussion that guides students to predict their uses of writing in the future. Our Writing Circle adventure continues to be an interesting extension of our work, our identity as a center. We are learning—from each other and from the students—creative ways for writers to work collaboratively. The Writing Circles are effective because students and facilitators are learning side-by-side and—importantly—because writing center pedagogy infuses every Writing Circle moment.

1. Integral Program majors attend few regular classes, earning their liberal arts degree through small group seminars (humanities and social sciences) and individual tutorials (mathematics and music) and laboratories (sciences). Seniors write a culminating essay, which they defend before Integral peers and faculty.

2. The High Potential Program helps first-generation college students of promise, including those from underrepresented college populations and low-income families, successfully negotiate the college experience.



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White, Stephanie, and Elisabeth Miller. “Senior-Thesis Writing Groups: Putting Students in the Driver’s Seat.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 39.5-6 (2015): 1-5. Print.