

NACADA Module Transcript

Writing 2 – Giving and Receiving Feedback

By

Rhonda Dean-Kyncl, Associate Dean for Students, College of Arts & Sciences
University of Oklahoma

INTRODUCTION

I'm Rhonda Dean Kyncl; I'm the Associate Dean for Students at the University of Oklahoma where I oversee academic advising and student engagement. I also have a Master's degree and a PhD from OU in Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy. Most of my academic life has been focused on writing; I taught First-Year Composition on our campus for the entirety of my degree from Fall 2000 until Spring 2009. I returned to the classroom after I became Associate Dean and have taught composition classes online and in traditional settings. I've also recently taught our writing for the medical professions course as well.

My other role at OU in the writing world was as assistant director of the OU Writing Center, and it was there that I first encountered writing groups and witnessed their power firsthand. I worked in the OU Writing Center from 2006-2009, while I was writing my doctoral dissertation. And during my last year of that work, I was a member of a Dissertation Support Group. We met once a week for the entire academic year...every Friday morning. There were five of us in the group, and all of us were working on either dissertations or theses for our graduate degrees. I was able to begin my dissertation in August of 2008 and defend it in May 2009, and I know that significant progress was due to my writing group:

they shared the same issues and struggles I was experiencing;

they held me accountable for my work;

they gave me essential feedback on my multiple drafts; and
they encouraged me when I became discouraged.

And I did the same for them!

I now have a wonderful new role with NACADA as the Coordinator of Writing Support. In that role, today I'd like to talk to you about giving and receiving feedback in Writing Groups.

THE NEED FOR WRITING GROUPS

One of the main reasons for writing in groups is to combat the myth of genius. This is the idea that really good writers sit in attic rooms and bring forth page after page of perfect texts on any given day they choose. If you believe in this myth, and yet you struggle to come up with an idea or to write a coherent page of text, you become frustrated and may eventually stop trying.

One of the things I learned during my dissertation-writing also impacts the need for writing groups and that is to fight the isolation we sometimes experience as writers. I found myself sitting at home, facing a blinking cursor on a white page and struggling to begin. I felt very alone; I felt that I didn't know enough; I felt unprepared to write a 200-page document; I was overwhelmed.

Good writing happens in good community, where you find generous colleagues who are willing to sit with you and hear your words while you also listen to theirs, where you all work together to create accountability and benchmarks that will provide a good pathway forward for your work.

And that brings me to one of the most important reasons for a writing group: your development as an adviser. Good writing follows good thinking. Good thinking depends on good writing. As you reflect on your work and develop ideas around it, you develop yourself as a professional. You begin to research and delve deeper into the concepts of our work, the theories that inform our practice, and the impacts on students. You also begin to hear the work of others and integrate it with your work. This communal and very synergistic process begins to make you a better and more engaged professional.

PRACTICE HOSPITALITY WITHIN YOUR WRITING GROUP

Supporting a colleague in a writing group requires a good deal of time and attention. By giving attention to another colleague's work, you are practicing hospitality. You are opening yourself to their ideas and their words and their voices. What a gift!

A writing group is also the perfect place to practice RECIPROCITY. You give generously of your time and attention, and then someone else returns that generous gift to you as they read and comment on your work.

This work can be incredibly meaningful and create a living, learning community if some essential guidelines are followed in the process.

GIVING FEEDBACK IN A WRITING GROUP

When you join a writing group, you agree to be a peer reviewer.

- You are first and foremost a colleague and a peer of the other members of your group.

You are not in any particular position of authority, and you are not the arbiter of all grammar correctness. Taking on these latter roles are sure fire ways of destroying the

camaraderie and collegiality of a writing group. No one should set themselves up as the resident expert.

- You are one voice among many for this writer, this friend and colleague who has asked for support and feedback. Take your role seriously, but remember you are reviewing the writer's work, not their experience.
- Ask the writer for the context or parameters of their work and what type of feedback she would like to receive. Is this work something they're submitting for publication? Is it an outline? Is it a research proposal? Before you can provide feedback on the draft, you must know the purpose it is designed to fulfill. In addition, allow the WRITER to determine the type of feedback you provide. If the writer doesn't want feedback on their grammar, don't provide it. Focus on the specific types of feedback the writer requests.
- Keep your comments and feedback focused on the writing and whether or not it meets the expectations and context that the writer has described. Don't critique the experience itself; don't get personal with comments about the writer. Let me give you an example: if your colleague's draft contains introductory material you find superfluous, you could remark that her introduction sounds like it was written by an 8th grader, OR you could provide specific feedback about the material in the introduction that seems that it doesn't provide context or support for the thesis statement. The former is a personal attack/criticism; the latter is specific feedback on the writing. Your feedback should always be the latter.

- I always begin any feedback with what I thought worked in the draft...the positives, what was done well, what meets the guidelines and purpose the writer has provided.
- When you get into the specifics of what did not work for you, remember to keep your comments subjective: don't say, "This paragraph is bad." Tell the writer specifically why you were confused or didn't like a particular paragraph...why it didn't work for you. And if you can't come up with a reason WHY, then don't make any comment at all.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK IN A WRITING GROUP

- Give good context about the purpose of the writing you're submitting and asking feedback for. Give the details of how this piece will be used, where you plan to submit it, how you plan to use it. The better the context and description and purpose you provide, the better the feedback will be.
- Tell the reviewers where you need help. If you're struggling in a particular part of the paper, clearly define that. Ask for exactly what you need from your readers and reviewers.
- Be vulnerable. Sharing your writing with others is a very intimate process. You may feel like you're exposing yourself because in fact, you are. But realize that there is no progress without that vulnerability. In order to write for an audience, you have to know your audience and how your writing is perceived by them. This process, while incredibly intimidating at times, is also immensely rewarding and can make your writing that much better and appropriate.
- Don't feel like you have to incorporate everyone's feedback. Particularly if a piece of feedback does not resonate with you, don't feel as though you must incorporate it.

- On the other hand, don't short circuit your improvement by ignoring everyone's advice because you are overly sensitive. Don't get defensive. You may feel that the feedback is not appropriate or not what you need, simply file it away then. Don't get overly protective of your work to the point that you "combat" every piece of feedback with a defense of your work.
- Remember each person's feedback will be subjective, so get lots of opinions and ideas. The more readers and reviewers you have, the better chance you have of reaching a broad audience with the work. Particularly if you see several reviewers finding the same weakness, or if several reviewers note one portion that is particularly resonant, you can count on that feedback because it came from more than one person.
- Ask follow-up questions to direct the reviewer to more specificity. If the feedback is general or there's a comment you don't understand, ask for more details. Often, a good follow-up question can lead the reviewer to give even more specific feedback that you will find more helpful.
- And most importantly, perhaps, your writing is not YOU; it is your work, but you have another identity outside of this particular piece of writing. Don't conflate the work with your identity. You are a strong professional; you do good work. But you also have a lot to learn, so take the feedback in stride.

Writing groups work best when there is a strong level of care and concern for one another built in, in addition to a sense of purpose that focuses on the work. In the long run, it is best to remember that the Golden Rule applies in writing groups as well as many other parts of life: treat others as you wish to be treated. In the writing context that means: provide good

feedback that is meaningful, provide feedback that will help your colleague write a better essay or article. And receive the feedback as you want your colleague to receive yours.

Best to you as you develop your skills as a reviewer and as a writer, and look for more information and resources on our NACADA Writer Support webpage.

END