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Looking at faculty writing groups from within: some insights for their sustainability and future implementations

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly publications are a key component of academics' development in their roles as teachers and researchers. Writing groups seem to be effective to accompany this process as participants share their texts to improve them through peer feedback. To help academic developers in the understanding and implementation of faculty writing groups, a detailed analysis of what members talk about during their meetings was carried out with three Ecuadorian writing groups, complemented by in-depth interviews. Results show that in all groups most interactions focused on their common goal, the text and comments, and the organization of their meetings, supported by the facilitator.

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Introduction

Nowadays, many academics are expected not only to teach but also to be ready to assume administrative and research roles (Sutherland, 2018). The latter role has gained importance as scholarly publications have become key in academic promotion and as an added value for higher education institutions to account for their scientific production (Habibie & Hyland, 2019; McGrail et al., 2006). However, many experienced and early career academics are unprepared for this research role and often become frustrated when faced with the challenges presented by academic writing (Sword et al., 2018); this is compounded by the reality of limited or infrequent opportunities to develop the literacy practices of academic writing since it is assumed that professors know them (Gómez-Nashiki et al., 2014; Kwan, 2010).

In Latin America, support initiatives to promote faculty writing for publication are even less common than in North American, European, and Australian universities, which provide workshops, tutorials, or writing groups (WGs) with varying regularity (McGrail et al., 2006). What is offered in Latin America is generally implemented sporadically or within the framework of graduate programs (Chois-Lenis et al., 2020; Colombo, 2013; Navarro, 2017). Indeed, few experiences aimed at increasing and improving scholars' scientific publications are related to the implementation of WGs (e.g. Marquez-Guzman & Gómez-Zermeño, 2018; Rodas & Colombo, 2019).

Why should WGs be considered for academic development? They constitute a useful and relatively easy-to-implement tool to develop academic-scientific writing through peer interaction (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). Often, they are created with the purpose of supporting academics in their efforts to increase publication outputs by working on individual and collaborative texts on a continued basis (Gibbs, 2016; Smith et al., 2013) and also function as a space to develop a sense of fellowship with others (Godbee, 2012; Johnson et al., 2017). Furthermore, through the collaborative and inter-active engagement to develop a text, WGs offer learning opportunities (Nairn, 2020).

One characteristic of WGs is that they hold members accountable by keeping them on track to achieve their objectives (e.g. Faulconer et al., 2010; Marquis et al., 2017). As academics struggle to allocate time for writing within their busy schedules (e.g. Grant & Knowles, 2000; Plummer et al., 2019), WGs present a safe haven (Lock et al., 2019) where they can prioritize what for many are self-managed research projects. Another characteristic of WGs is their flexibility in regards to the leadership role; they can have no leader (e.g. Sheridan et al., 2020), be peer-led or share leadership (Dwyer et al., 2012), or have a facilitator who organizes the regular activities of the group (e.g. Aitchison, 2009; Guerin et al., 2013; Marquis et al., 2017).

For academic developers to consider implementing and leading WGs in different contexts, we believe it is important to understand what happens within their sessions that influences their sustainability. A deeper insight into the factors that play a role in their development would guide WGs' organization in a variety of settings, according to the different needs of faculty and the purposes for which they are implemented (Guerin & Aitchison, 2018). What members 'talk' about is fundamental for their engagement in reflective practice, connecting reading and writing to build meaning and a sense of community (Aitchison, 2009, 2020). The WGs herein were implemented as spaces for academics to improve the quality of their writing through peer feedback, a literacy practice common and essential in the academic-scientific world (Colombo, 2013; Faulconer et al., 2010; Washburn, 2008).

Although some studies have analyzed contextual and intrinsic factors that contribute to the effectiveness and sustainability of WGs, such as clarity of purpose, dedicated space and time, the feedback process, and institutional support (e.g. Aitchison, 2010; Bergen et al., 2020; Dawson, 2017; Dawson et al., 2013; Wardale et al., 2015), the impact of what goes on within WGs has not been studied in depth as an aspect that might influence their functioning. Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of what factors influence how faculty writing groups (FWGs) function by focusing on what members talked about during their meetings. To do this, an analysis of the interactions among the members of three FWGs at an Ecuadorian public university was carried out. Although findings cannot be generalized, a systematic and detailed analysis of this type of experience could inform academic developers how to support similar initiatives in new settings.

Methodology

This qualitative exploratory study used a multiple-case study approach as its main strategy of inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 1995) to gain a deeper understanding of the functioning of FWGs through a detailed analysis of

what members talked about during their meetings. In 2017, the writing program at an Ecuadorian public university appointed a coordinator to implement WGs for early career academics and tenured professors of different disciplinary fields, an initiative uncommon in this setting. Through peer feedback groups, the goal was to support the development of academic-scientific texts toward publication. To help disengage participants from other activities and avoid disruptions as much as possible (Murray, 2013), meetings were held within the writing program's offices.

The writing group coordinator (WGC), the first author, attended all sessions but did not present any writing to be reviewed. The WGC set up the groups, helped organize their text presentations, modeled feedback practices through her own comments, and provided support regarding academic writing. The coordinator had meant to be only a start-up leader (Haas, 2014); however, the members requested the WGC remain in her role for an additional level of accountability.

The three FWGs analyzed had met weekly or bi-weekly for more than two consecutive semesters at the time of the study (30 to 60-minute sessions). The initial meeting served to establish the group's functioning rules, such as meeting frequency, and parameters for giving and receiving feedback. Written feedback was given in advance on one participant's text through documents on Google Drive and later expanded in the face-to-face sessions. All sessions were audio recorded with the members' consent.

Twelve participants (9 women and 3 men) with a range of writing experience formed groups of three to five members each, plus the coordinator as participant. Attendance was voluntary, on participants' own time; the WGC had assigned hours for this purpose. Codes have been assigned as reference in conversations and interviews used herein (G = group; M = member; WGC = coordinator); numbers do not indicate a hierarchical order. Although interdisciplinary in composition, group members came mainly from the hard sciences (i.e. chemistry, medicine, industrial engineering, environmental engineering, architecture, geoscience, sustainability). The coordinator's disciplinary background was in academic writing and English language teaching.

What WG participants talked about during their sessions was determined through the analysis of an intentional sample. Four work sessions were selected for each group (12 out of 39 sessions from a two-semester period). Inclusion criteria required all participants to be present during the FWG's meetings. The WGC's field notes and 10 semi-structured interviews complemented this data. To lessen any possible bias in the collection of information due to the WGC's familiarity with the FWG members, two members of this study's research team unconnected and unknown to the participants conducted the interviews. Meetings were transcribed verbatim and excerpts used herein were translated from Spanish by the authors.

The analysis used a quantitative and qualitative strategy. Haas' typology about writers' groups (2014) was used to guide the development of a preliminary set of descriptive categories and codes based on the dimension termed *In-meeting activities*. Using these preliminary categories, the 12 transcriptions were analyzed inductively and separately by two research team members (excluding the WGC) using the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987). The categories were color-coded accordingly; this process involved reading the material several times to identify phrases, sentences, or paragraphs/fragments about the WG to represent an idea or unit. The categories and codes were adjusted and redefined continuously to identify new units (Creswell, 2007).

This analysis yielded four categories participants focused on: text and comments, organization of the WG, researching and teaching activities, and personal life. To determine how much talk in each session was devoted to each category, word count of each color-coded section was used to obtain general percentages, including the WGC's talk as participant observer. The members of the research team discussed the analytic units, categories, and interpretations to ensure reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The themes and codes that emerged from the grouped categories were identified and used to report the results.

Results

The analysis of what participants talked about during their sessions offers important insights into the factors that could influence the implementation and sustainability of WGs. The data indicate that participants kept to the purpose of the WGs during most of the meeting; members mainly discussed the text and comments and the organization of the group itself, 95% of the oral exchanges (see Table 1). Issues connected to being a researcher or university professor (3.6%) and participants' personal life (1.1%) received scant attention. Following we present a detailed analysis of what seem to be two factors that influence the way these FWGs function.

Maintaining the FWGs' purpose: improving a text through peer feedback

Most of the interactions among the members of the FWGs revolved around the main purpose for their implementation: to provide support to academic staff through peer feedback on their texts. On average, the groups spent at least 80% of their meeting time talking about the written comments and contextualizing them, either by asking for more information or expanding the written feedback to make it more understandable to the author. Participants in all groups would generally comment on the text if something about it caused miscomprehension, as the following excerpt from G1 exemplifies:

G1-M2: What I'm still unclear about, maybe, can you read this? . . . so, I don't know, maybe, please read it again . . . I don't know, something doesn't fit with this part. So take a look, okay? Because a little more information is missing.

G1-M1: okay

This participant's need for information called for the author to consider what could make the argument clearer. Similarly, regarding one of her written comments, G2-M4 indicated in the session that it had been triggered when she felt something was missing: 'In truth, from what I reviewed, I only made a comment about what I didn't understand. So, here, it [that particular section] is as though it's in the air [disconnected to other

Table 1. What participants' interactions focused on during in-meeting activities (in percentages).

Categories	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Average
Text and comments	80.5	77.7	87.1	81.8
Organization of the WG	16.7	14.2	9.3	13.5
Researching and teaching activities	2.8	5.5	2.9	3.6
Personal life	0.0	2.5	0.7	1.1

ideas].’ In fact, for all interviewed participants (n = 10), this WGs’ feedback process was considered one of the main benefits as comments on their texts pointed to areas that needed to be made more comprehensible, beyond what was taken for granted in a research team, as G2-M3 points out:

They [the other members] helped to highlight the problems we had in communicating our ideas . . . In the research group we would write a phrase and it seemed understandable. But, in the writing group, they would say, ‘well, this here is not understandable on first reading it.’ These points of view greatly helped to strengthen our writing, and how to reach an audience.

Additionally, all participants seemed to value the members’ disciplinary diversity, which provided them an outsider’s perspective on their particular topics. For G3-M3, for example, ‘people from outside [other disciplines] help you to have that less-informed vision to better structure your text’. While for G1-M3, ‘another of the positive things is that they are interdisciplinary groups, and from that perspective, writing has to be much more universal, comprehensible to all professional fields’. As these FWG members were mainly in the hard sciences, their disciplinary distance (Colombo & Rodas, 2021) was not too large, thus making their differences a positive aspect. Other studies about WGs have also highlighted advantages to having a diverse disciplinary pool among group members (e.g. Allen, 2019; Fajt et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2013), such as those seen in this study.

As illustrated, access to a real and varied audience allowed WG participants to better adjust their texts based on their peers’ interpretations. This analysis of the text and comments on which members focused most of their attention during in-meeting activities reinforces the fact that they kept to their main purpose: their oral exchanges prompted the improvement of their drafts and their continued work on them toward publication.

Maintaining the groups on track: the role of the facilitator

Talking about organizational issues, which seems to have played an important role in the functioning of the FWGs, was generally started and led by the WGC. Members spent on average 13% of their talk on two organizational points: first, settling down to the main purpose of the meeting (i.e. checking in, opening the text under review in each person’s computer) and deciding who would begin commenting on the text overall and on his/her written comments specifically, and second, at the end of each meeting, planning future meeting days and the texts to be presented in subsequent sessions (e.g. Grant & Knowles, 2000). The following excerpt illustrates the latter:

WGC: Let’s agree on the dates for the presentations of your texts. So, the 13th is a holiday. Great! Everyone has that day to dedicate it to writing [all laugh]. The next date [for the meeting] would be the 20th. [addresses G2-M3] What would you like to present, G2-M3?

G2-M3: Well, I have finished a draft, so we could look at the introduction or the theoretical framework.

WGC: Is it very long?

G2-M3: Ah, the introduction and the theoretical framework are about three pages.

WGC Okay, so G2-M3 on the 20th. The 27th? [asking the other members]

G2-M4 I can present my methodology and I hope to also have the results.

WGC Okay, methodology [writes down the information] on the 27th.

G2-M4 Okay, I will have more time, then.

WGC From there we go to the 4th. Who can present? G2-M2? Can you?

G2-M2 Okay, but I have just realized that we have to write an abstract for the 23rd . . . so I'd better start to write the abstract.

WGC You could present it with G2-M4 since it is a short text. [. . .] But we still have the following date [meaning the 4th].

G2-M3 Me, then. I'm already in the process of reviewing.

WGC. Do you only want to set dates until the 4th?

G2-M3 Yes, for now.

WGC Perfect. Thank you everyone [the meeting ends].

The exchanges initiated by the WGC helped each participant to exert control over what happened in each meeting by agreeing or not to a date to send his/her text for review but also actively worked to keep the group on track (Marquis et al., 2017). The organization set by the WGC was remarked by all members interviewed as one of the factors that helped them to set goals and thus progress with their writing projects, as the following quote from G3-M1 exemplifies:

The probability of finishing a manuscript successfully will increase significantly in case of participating in the group. It is the case for me. The manuscripts that I have taken to the group are truly those that have been finished. Those that I haven't taken [to the group] are in folders; they have been left behind. While they [the texts] are in the group you know that, even slowly, they have a rhythm and you can see progress and that is very important.

Apart from setting the schedule and keeping the group on track with their writing goals (Marquis et al., 2017), the WGC maintained the groups' organization flexible, making a point to consider members' different responsibilities and roles, another aspect that was commented on by several members. This was the case of G1-M1, who also had an administrative position at the university, which sometimes interfered with her FWG attendance. She stated: 'I also like that [the FWG's organization] because it gives us flexibility so that we can also do the other activities that we have.' In the same line, G2-M3, mentioned:

Sometimes, when another activity came up with the other activities that we had [at the university], and we couldn't do a revision [of a text], for example, there was no problem. We talked about it and we would say: okay, let's postpone. Maybe the other person has it [another text] ready . . . It is flexible, to the point that, it is not as if, if you don't meet the deadline you are kicked out of the group. No, no, not at all.

Overall, the WGC in this context seems to have played an integral role in the functioning of these FWGs since she helped members to manage their individual writing endeavors and created a rhythm to meet the activities of the WG. Because most members were not familiar with this type of initiative, the WGC added an element of accountability and

support, as was indicated earlier. In this sense, as a near-peer leader, ‘having slightly more experience than the other members’ (Haas, 2014, p. 35), the WGC acted as a colleague who also provided feedback (Grant & Knowles, 2000). The WGC could guide the organization of meeting dates that would work for everyone, taking into account their other responsibilities and trying to diminish the possibility of members forfeiting their participation in the FWGs when possible.

Additionally, the WGC seemed to have provided support and encouragement. As G1-M1 put it: ‘I think that here it is also important the person who is leading the WG. I think that a fundamental thing is that this person was always motivating those who wanted to learn’. Apart from setting a supportive tone for the meetings and focusing time for the organization of future dates, this leadership role also included continuous email communication with members to confirm or rearrange meeting dates, if something unexpected happened. Finally, by having the WGC as leader, members did not add another layer of responsibility to their already heavy loads by being in charge of organizing the FWG themselves, even on a rotating basis.

Discussion and implications for academic development

Due to the pressure to publish that demands from scholars ‘ever-increasing levels of productivity and perfection’ (Sword et al., 2018, p. 860), higher education institutions are faced with the need to promote initiatives that are easy to implement to assist them in this endeavor. Through the analysis of 12 sessions of three FWGs at a public Ecuadorian university, complemented by 10 semi-structured interviews, the results of this study provide insights to guide the creation and facilitation of FWGs by academic developers in other contexts.

First, our results indicate that WGs constitute a means through which academics are able to prioritize their writing and the advancement of their texts to publication by keeping to a common goal through peer support (Lock et al., 2019; Murray, 2013). Aligned with previous findings, the participants in these groups spent most of their meeting time on the task at hand: their texts and the comments aimed to help clarify and improve their writing projects’ overall comprehensibility (Guerin et al., 2013). Thus, participants developed a text accessible to a wider audience, where communicating clearly took precedence (e.g. Aitchison, 2010; Alexander & Shaver, 2020; Dawson, 2017).

Second, the leadership role assumed by the WGC seems to have played a central role for the FWGs in this context by adding a layer of accountability through flexible management (Allen, 2019). The WGC oversaw the democratic organization of their schedule and kept them on track (Marquis et al., 2017) as well as reduced the members’ responsibility load by not having to assume a leadership role themselves. Many academics contend with the tensions created by the demands placed on them at the university, especially regarding teaching and researching (Stensaker, 2018), as was the case of some of these FWG members. Thus, the implementation of peer-led WGs might not be ideal if members are expected to lead and organize meetings apart from their other responsibilities.

In this case, the WGC seems to have eased this burden by: a) providing functioning rules, b) modeling giving and receiving feedback, and c) maintaining a supportive environment during meetings and through ongoing email communication, as has been

the case in other facilitated WGs (e.g. Aitchison, 2009; Allen, 2019; Lock et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2013). Because this type of initiative is yet uncommon in many Latin American universities and many faculty hesitate to share their writing with others, academic developers in this or similar contexts could consider the inclusion of a coordinator to guide this process mainly in its first stages. As academics continue to struggle with feelings of frustration associated with academic writing (Sword et al., 2018) and with efforts to disengage from other demands to find time to write (Murray, 2013), a facilitator could provide encouragement and a flexible organization for the WG's activities. This would promote the group's maintenance and smooth running, as has been the case in other studies (e.g. Aitchison, 2010; Allen, 2019) where WGs have also been proved to constitute a safe space responsive to the needs of its members (Dawson et al., 2013; Hyer et al., 2020).

We consider that, as a flexible tool, WGs can be accommodated to the needs of the specific context in which they are implemented. As such, academic developers can play a key role in assisting academics by organizing FWGs with facilitators as start-up leaders (Haas, 2014) to familiarize participants with the feedback process and provide strategies for the group's sustainability. Later on, this experience could motivate FWG members to implement similar writing initiatives in their own classrooms with the support of academic developers and/or writing center staff (Rodas & Colombo, 2021), thus extending the impact of this type of initiative across different institutional actors.

However, this would only be possible if higher level institutions are willing to consistently assign the necessary resources to academic development, so it is possible to train and assign facilitators for FWGs or other similar initiatives. Whether initiated and facilitated by a coordinator or eventually by trained group members, we believe that the maintenance of this role is essential for the smooth running of FWGs. Future studies could compare no-leader or peer-led groups (Haas, 2014) for a better understanding of this role and the implications regarding the implementation of FWGs.

As our analysis shows, the sustainability of FWGs can hinge on different factors. For these groups, focusing on their purpose, the text and comments, as well as the facilitating and encouraging role of the coordinator through the group's organization stand out as contributing factors. They have propelled the majority of members to continue attending, which we consider a measure of success. Those that were unable to continue at the time of the study attributed this situation to a familiar issue: limited time due to heavy workloads (e.g. Grzybowski et al., 2003; Myatt et al., 2014). Another measure of success consists of the number of articles submitted for publication by the members: by the time of the study, half of the participants had sent their manuscripts to journals for peer review, with one of them acknowledging the contribution of his fellow FWG members in his paper.

We hope our analysis offers some concrete insights regarding the functioning of FWGs and contributes to the growing literature on this topic from a Latin American perspective. We believe faculty need specific and continuous support to face the increasing tensions connected to research and publication (Sheridan et al., 2020), which peer feedback WGs could serve to ease through the commitment to a common purpose and the facilitation of this initiative through academic development programs. More importantly, we wish to highlight the need for universities to support and allocate resources to encourage the creation and maintenance of FWGs or other long-term initiatives for

faculty development. In this regard, higher education institutions could provide support in two ways: first, make available the use of a dedicated space for FWG meetings to help participants to disengage from their other responsibilities, an activity made easier when connecting with others who write (Murray, 2013); second, offer trained facilitators to guide FWGs through the process and keep participants engaged and accountable for their progress (Alexander & Shaver, 2020; Faulconer et al., 2010).

Although our results cannot be generalized, we believe that the insights gained from looking at FWGs from within can help academic developers when implementing this pedagogical tool in support of faculty to develop their writing-for-publication practices. By making the process of scholarly writing more visible, academic developers cannot only support faculty with their research endeavours but also provide them with concrete experiences of a pedagogical tool that can be used in their own teaching practices.

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