Inkshed Online Newsletter, January 2015

The 2015 Inkshed conference will consist of a group writing experience, so it's appropriate to start the first 2015 Inkshed Newsletter with an account of how well such an event can work. Françoise Moreau-Johnson of the University of Ottawa offers an intriguing analysis of the faculty writing retreat that expanded into recurring workshops and regular one- and three-day events where professors sit down together to write, discuss writing, and comment on each other's writing. Theories of social support explain some of the results, but participants' own voices are even more inspiring. It's worth noting too that Moreau-Johnson developed this article over several of her own retreats, drawing on comments and suggestions from her fellow-participants.

If you have lost your zest for reading and thinking about style and usage, Rachael Cayley's review of Steven Pinker's new book supplies some reasons to reconsider.

And, finally, to remind us all that Canadian writing programs are world-class, here's a note about the third one to win a CCCC Certificate of Excellence.

Articles

"Feelings of Solidarity": Faculty Writing in the Company of Others

by **Françoise Moreau-Johnson, University of Ottawa**

> To go to a writing space is not a threat to one's reputation—
> rather, it can contribute to a faculty member's sense of
> self and public image as a serious writer and continuing learner.
>
> – Sorcinelli (Elbow & Sorcinelli, 2006: 20)

There's no doubt that the *product* of writing is valued: professors' publications guarantee tenure, promotion, and are a necessity to win competitive research grants. Not only are they a proof of productivity, they are also an indication of institutional or departmental prestige.

But what about the *process* of writing? In order to support faculty members in this key part of their work, the Centre for Academic Leadership at the University of Ottawa (hereafter the Centre) helps them focus on their writing.

Although the Centre's central mission is to support current and potential academic leaders so that they can fulfill their administrative responsibilities competently, its mandate extends to supporting the career development of all regular professors. One way it fulfills this is by creating interactions around the writing process. The Centre fosters opportunities for professors to write in the company of colleagues; these promote social support which is often lacking in the academic environment, and allow leadership development through interactions among professors, centered on the writing practice and process.

This is nothing revolutionary: UMass at Amherst has been providing faculty with a workspace away from distractions since 1991. Through their *Professors as Writers* initiative (Elbow and Sorcinelli, 2006), faculty have a place to work individually while feeling supported when surrounded by colleagues with similar goals. The objective of this piece is to show the value of these types of practices in universities. By sharing our successes, we hope to encourage you to instigate comparable initiatives in your institution.

uOttawa's Story

We started focusing on faculty writing in 2010 because of a request from a faculty member. Inspired by Barbara Grant's 2006 article, and recognizing herself as one of the women described by Grant who need space and time away from home and office routines, Professor Rhonda Pyper from the Telfer School of Management approached the Centre to publicize the five-day residential writing retreat she was organizing during the October 2010 reading week. The Centre promoted *Women Who Write*, took over the logistics (hotel communication, dietary

restrictions, carpooling, etc.) and provided financial support for half the cost of the retreat ($400 per participant). Within a couple of weeks, the 12 spaces were filled by professors from six different faculties (Arts, Education, Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Engineering and Management).

Following the retreat's success, and based on ongoing feedback from participants, we have since broadened our focus on writing by adding three-day mini-retreats on campus during reading weeks (October and February) as well as one-day writing events on a monthly basis during the academic year and series of weekly workshops during term. Our events are particularly popular with women faculty, and writing events on campus allow those who find it difficult to be away from home (especially those with young children) to reserve some time towards their research.

These successful undertakings have led us to set up a permanent meeting room for the Centre where we can now hold regular writing days at a low cost, including summer writing days. Although some would like to have a writing room opened 24/7, we fear that if a writing room was always available, it would lose the feeling of being special.

Social Support

There is much evidence that building a community and providing space and time for professors to concentrate on their writing can increase productivity (Elbow & Sorcinelli, 2006; Grant, 2006); in fact, as shown in a comparative summary of past studies (McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006), support groups like the writing days and retreats are a more effective type of intervention to increase publications than are writing courses.

The writing initiative at uOttawa was not deliberately designed to demonstrate theories of social support (for instance Barrera, 1986) or organizational support (for instance Eisenberger et al., 1986), but such theories help explain the clear result we've found, that being part of a group increases both productivity and enthusiasm for the task of writing. Social support is defined as enhancing the perception of personal control in one's life experience (Albrecht & Aderlman, 1986) and includes the concept of social network, the feeling of belonging to a group (Gottlieb, 2000). Comments from participants show that, during the writing days, they feel that they become part of a social network that brings them psychological support and that they have access to a group on which they can rely to get professional and personal support when needed:

- "I'm feeling less isolated."
- "I met many new colleagues and exchanged experiences and strategies with them."

Studies summarized by Hogan and Najarian (2002) have shown that having social support provides a feeling of being more in control, reduces stress, increases the feeling of being

competent, and increases collaboration and the sharing of resources. Again, this is reflected in the participants' comments:

- "Reduced my anxiety and gave me the confidence that I can complete this revision by the due date."

- "Confirmed that I was not the only one who finds writing challenging."

According to the theory of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), employees who perceive that their wellbeing is looked after and their contribution valued exhibit an increase in motivation, satisfaction, emotional commitment, work performance and a sense of belonging. By providing a pleasant room dedicated to writing, set up to facilitate the task and favouring interaction between participants, the University of Ottawa is concretely showing that the faculty's wellbeing is important, and their care is noted by participants:

- "I have felt supported in my work and felt I was part of a team."

- "I'm impressed by the quality of the service and the attention that is given to our work."

- "I appreciate that our university supports us in this way."

- "I feel extremely fortunate to be working at an institution which supports innovative initiatives."

Writing in a group may also produce an effect of competition. Being surrounded by colleagues whose publication projects are advancing could create a feeling of emulation, and bring some faculty members to perform as well as or even better than these colleagues.

- "There is a subtle peer pressure to keep active."

- "It was motivating to know everyone around me was working hard."

Evaluating the Initiative

At every writing event, we ask participants to fill in a short evaluation form, a mix of open and "scaled" questions. The open questions include whether they have accomplished the objectives they had set for the writing event, as well as how the writing event has contributed to their writing productivity.

We ask them to rate (from 1 to 5, where 4 and 5 are "satisfied" and "very satisfied"):

1. how group writing has made them more productive,

2. how satisfied they are with the writing event, as well as,

3. how being able to exchange with colleagues living the same reality was beneficial to them.

Interestingly, in over 200 evaluations gathered (n=170 for on-campus events, n=45 for residential retreats), participants report similar satisfaction levels during all the writing events:

- they feel that group writing has made them more productive
  (99% for on-campus, 100% for residential); and,

- they are satisfied with their progress during the event
  (95% for on-campus, 100% for residential).

However, we see a difference when comparing whether the "exchange with others" is seen as a benefit: 88% of on-campus mini-retreats and single writing days' participants rate the exchange as high (4) or very high (5), whereas 100% who participated in week-long residential retreats do.

The comments provided reveal three main benefits of writing events: increased productivity helped by being away from their normal environment; increased social support and validation that writing is a difficult, yet important task; and putting research and writing commitments back as a priority. We have grouped some of the comments in these three main categories below:

Feeling productive

- "I don't have distractions that I would have at my office."

- "It offered a break from the many distractions that can undermine productivity."

- "Forces me to concentrate on writing instead of emails and telephone calls."

- "Lots of concentration and energy with few distractions/interruptions."

Feeling supported by peers

- "I am always more concentrated when I'm surrounded by people who write… I feel less alone."

- "The energy in the room created by women quietly typing away does wonders for one's ability to settle down and write!"

- "It's stimulating to know that we are all working… together."

- "I enjoyed working on a paper more than I otherwise would have, because of the positive and supportive atmosphere."

- "There is great collective energy that motivates me to keep at it!"

Research as a priority

- "It always forces me to prepare and set my time aside."

- "Forced me to work and be present even while feeling a little unmotivated."

- "I managed to keep my bum glued to the chair until my daily goals were achieved."

- "It puts research back in the centre of our activities."

- "The writing days allow me to reserve time for writing, something that is pushed aside too often."

Writing Workshops

Providing the writing space (and opportunities) allows faculty members to disentangle themselves from all other tasks, to give their full focus to writing. The Centre complements the writing events with two sets of workshops. The first, *How to write a lot*(based on the book of the same title by Silvia, 2006), is a short how-to session to encourage professors to discard their misbeliefs about writing (e.g. "I need to be inspired" and "I need large blocks of time"), and to promote regular writing sessions as well as blocking the time in their schedule. The second workshop is more hands-on. Using *Writing your journal article in 12 weeks* (Belcher, 2009), professors go through the book as a group, meeting every week during the semester, doing the readings, exercises and writing daily for a minimum of 15 minutes, and working hard to get an article ready for publication in 12 weeks. Although not every participant manages to finish an article during the workshop, they all report that they focused more on their research for having taken part.

- "The workshop has helped me develop the habit of writing regularly."

- "This workshop helped me to prioritize writing, just as I prioritize teaching."

- "I learnt to write even if I have only 15 minutes and, more generally, to work in smaller chunks of time and with a higher frequency than I had before."

- "Having to write everyday destroyed the idea which I had that I needed multiple hours (days) free to do any writing."

Attitudinal Change

A clear benefit emanating from writing events and workshops is the change in faculty members' attitude towards writing, which outlasts the event or workshop in which they participate.

- "The collective 'pressure' to write stays with you even after you leave the writing room/retreat."

- "The people I met during writing days still provide me with energy for writing which is still present a year later."

- "My writing habits have shifted from not wanting to write to wanting to write in new creative ways. Writing is no longer a difficult process, but a positive one."

- "Having participated in a residential retreat has made me write more often during the school year."

- "I was reminded that writing deserves as much undivided attention as teaching or any other part of our core work. The retreat has changed the way I will approach my writing in the future. I intend to set aside regular chunks of clear time in my schedule."

- "This time firmly reoriented me from primarily a teacher to primarily a writer."

Writing Support – A Women's Affair?

Group writing activities, be it workshops, retreats, or single writing days, are more popular with women faculty than men: 85% of attendees in our events are women. Similarly, most studies on writing interventions (retreats and other forms) have been done on women, as they have been identified as a group requiring support to increase their publications (Grant & Knowles, 2000). Because of this bias, McGrail et al. (2006) have found it impossible to generalise the results of the 17 studies on projects to improve writing productivity that they surveyed: they fear that "strategies found beneficial for women may not have the same effect for males" (32). Numerous studies have shown that, generally, women provide more social support to others, are more engaged in their social networks and seek more social support to deal with stress. This could explain why these writing activities are more popular amongst women faculty. It could also be that male faculty feel that they do not require any help to improve their publication rate. If men and women do not see the value of social support and cooperation in the same way (Kuhn & Villeval, 2014), support initiatives like ours may not be the right ones for male faculty.

An Invitation!

All faculty, men and women, who take part in the current offerings report either through the evaluations or informally that they produce more, write better articles, have better networks and share information more. Furthermore, with the networking opportunities created during the writing events and workshops, the overall institutional knowledge is greater: there is an increase in social support and collective sharing of knowledge. By investing in these types of activities, the university demonstrates that it is engaged in the career development of faculty, building community learning, and breaking information silos.

Faculty who make the most of the Centre for Academic Leadership and its writing initiatives feel supported and include writing in their busy term schedule rather than waiting for the summer or their sabbatical. These ideas are simple and low cost; we hope they can be replicated across other universities to support faculty research. Although participants may not understand how it works ("I have no idea how it works – but it does"), the important thing is that it does work, and that universities can offer these types of opportunities to their faculty. We would love to hear from other institutions implementing similar programmes.

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Beyond Soggy Prose: A Review of Steven Pinker's *The Sense of Style*

By Rachael Cayley, University of Toronto

Pinker, S. (2014). *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin.

Steven Pinker's *The Sense of Style* offers a compelling and enjoyable account of how to craft strong prose. He begins by describing what goes on in good writing before lamenting its rarity. For Pinker, writing is often undermined by the attributes of what he calls "soggy prose": "metadiscourse, signposting, hedging, apologizing, professional narcissism, clichés, mixed metaphors, metaconcepts, zombie nouns, and unnecessary passives" (p. 55). In his view, we can resist these bad habits by reconceptualizing writing as the task of describing the world in a way that anticipates the needs of an interested audience. Our frequent inability to give our readers the lucid and coherent writing that they need is explained by his discussion of the curse of knowledge. Instead of simply vilifying weak writers, Pinker offers a convincing explanation of how difficult it is to get beyond what we ourselves know in order to convey it to a reader. The curse of knowledge must be counteracted, he tells us, by an ongoing attempt to understand the radical difference between the way we construct ideas in our own minds and the way we should construct texts for other minds.

Once this broad vision of effective writing is in place, Pinker turns his attention to three concrete ways to improve writing: better sentences, better flow, and better understanding of usage. In his chapter on sentences, he offers an impressively detailed account of how we construct sentences and how we might do so better. This understanding of sentence structure prepares us for his equally impressive chapter on coherence. His discussion of arcs of coherence, as he calls them, gives us a logical and sensitive account of the ways in which we juxtapose information in our writing.

Finally, he recognizes that our ability to put his advice into practice may be affected by our ongoing puzzlement over usage. He begins his long chapter on usage by moving beyond the stale debate between prescriptivism and descriptivism to a better understanding of the true nature of writing conventions. He then provides insight into one hundred instances in which we often need to make informed decisions about usage—and may wish to do so without relying on editorial-page cranks or half-remembered edicts from high school. His blending of opinion and evidence makes his advice both convincing and entertaining. The inclusion of a great many classic cartoons about writing just adds to the fun.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the mechanics of strong writing. Pinker's perceptive and pragmatic discussion of the choices that we make in writing

could improve one's own writing as well as one's ability to teach writing to others. My only reservation about this book concerns its tone: Pinker is clearly addressing writers that he believes should know better than to write turgid and inaccessible prose. However, treating weak writers as a monolithic group—without paying much attention to the challenges of learning to write or to the variation among different types of writing—carries a certain risk. His easy dismissal of the attributes of soggy writing fails to consider the way that those attributes function differently for novice writers and for different types of writing. This quibble is small but worth mentioning given the overall value of his sensible and apt advice. I hope that anyone who might be put off by the whiff of condescension in the opening chapters will stick around for the intelligent treatment of writing that occupies the bulk of this worthy book.

CCCC Recognizes Another Canadian Writing Program

For the third time, a Canadian writing program has received a Certificate of Excellence award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication. In 2015, Writing Studies 101: Exploring Writing (WRS 101), a new first-year writing course at the University of Alberta, will join the Writing Centre at the University of Toronto Scarborough and the Office of English Language and Writing Support at the School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto, in the list of CCCC honorees.

The award (described at www.ncte.org/cccc/awards/writingprogramcert), recognizes writing programs that use best current practices in the field, address student needs imaginatively, and treat faculty members respectfully and professionally. The course brochure for WRS101 makes abundantly evident that the course meets those criteria. It offers small classes, individual consultations, tutor-supported sections for international students, a demanding course contract, and a mix of online and face-to-face instruction. As called for by the U of A Writing Task Force (2005-2008), the course exploits "discovery writing" (a.k.a. inkshedding) to encourage students to explore ideas through writing and to reflect on their learning. Student work is evaluated through an end-of-term portfolio marked as part of a portfolio swap with other instructors to support shared standards across all sections.

Another distinctive feature is its subject matter. Based on a WAW (Writing-about-Writing) approach, the course introduces students to the discipline of Writing Studies while helping them develop both declarative and procedural knowledge in the five knowledge domains that (according to Anne Beaufort) expert writers draw on when they face challenging writing tasks in any field or profession: subject matter knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, writing process knowledge, genre knowledge, and—the overarching category—discourse community knowledge. Students read and write about topics in Writing Studies, using shared writing-to-

learn to explore the material of the course. They find learning to inkshed transformative: coded student reflections reveal that, during the past 3 years, 99.1% felt they had increased their ability to use writing to help them learn.

In 2007 Betsy Sargent and David Slomp taught the first two sections of the new course; this year 25 sections are being taught. Sargent directed WRS 101 for several years, followed as of September 1, 2014 by Jonathan Gordon. The course is housed in the Office of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Faculty of Arts and is open to students from all faculties. It's taught by a team of dedicated instructors from a range of disciplines, all of whom have completed 30 or more hours of grad-level work on composition theory: Jon Gordon, Christina Grant, Lucinda Rasmussen, Lisa Ann Robertson, Anna Chilewska, Greg Bechtel, Rachel Prusko, Melissa Stephens, Leilei Chen, and Nancy Bray.

Clearly the course has benefitted from the care that went into researching and planning writing initiatives at the U of A, from its ongoing close collaboration with the Centre for Writers, and from its incorporation of such elements as individual tutoring, attention to second-language acquisition, a focus on real subject matter, and avoidance of simplistic assessment. Does that sound Canadian? The standard saying is that Canadian universities lack a tradition of first-year composition, but this course seems to be shaping a new tradition.