Our Writing, Ourselves: Portrait of a Writing Group

by JOAN COTICH, DEBORAH DIXON, LORRIE NELSON, ALINE SHAPIRO, AND BETH YEAGER

We came together on a warm, sunny afternoon, the five of us, to try and form a clear picture of the phenomenon we call "The Writing Group." What is it that enables us, once out of the nurturing cocoon of the Writing Project, to continue in the face of family and teaching obligations, when it is increasingly difficult to find time for anything, to meet once a month and to keep writing in our lives? What makes our group work? Why does each of us treasure and guard zealously the time set aside for our group meetings? Naturally, we sought the answers through a series of freewritings on ourselves and on each other, on what we think we get out of the group, on what we think makes the group work.

First, each of us wrote a description of herself as a group member and of each of the other members. What follows are the self portraits and a synthesis of the pieces we wrote about each other. From these sketches, the value of the group for each individual, as well as hints about the process, began to emerge. From the individual portraits, the group’s portrait takes on a clear form of its own.

THE GROUP ON BETH — We are amazed at Beth’s perceptiveness. She is very respectful of others’ writings — careful with the people with their skin off.

BETH ON BETH — I am a reader of faces, of the hidden and not so hidden needs. I search for accurate readings and want to respond to them, to preserve the integrity of our group process, wanting my fellow writers to find what they need from what we do.

THE GROUP ON JOAN — Joan grounds us in reality and truth that is invaluable. Her words are honest, courageous, vibrant with dashes of onomatopoeia for sparkle and wit.

JOAN ON JOAN — I have needed to write during my life during the emotional moments: the excitement with an issue, the anger over a controversy, but I never thought I was a “writer.” My writing group is special to me. I feel empowered by them.

THE GROUP ON LORRIE — Lorrie is a storyteller. Someday, one of the many stories tumbling around inside her will push its way forward, and she will write it down.

LORRIE ON LORRIE — I hesitate to write. I have stories in me. I can tell them, but putting the ideas on paper seems to lose an edge of spontaneity. These women are a circle of inspiration that embraces me, patiently waiting for me to find my voice.

THE GROUP ON DEBORAH — Deborah is a driving force, a driven force, a writer of intellect and power. She weaves together all our parts and brings them to a wholeness.

DEBORAH ON DEBORAH — I am a poet. Even as I write those words, I am tempted to cross them out, for I am still afraid to let loose my real self, my real feelings. However, my voice struggles to be heard, if I let it. My writing group listens for it.

THE GROUP ON ALINE — When Aline writes, she soars. She has the soul of a poet. Her writing is masterful, words strung like pearls that catch light and meaning perfectly, sentences unwinding and traveling to unpredictable distances.
ALINE ON ALINE — I love this writing group. Each person values what I have to say. And I almost believe them when they tell me how they feel about my writing. Writing makes me feel full, like I’ve eaten a ten course meal that I’ve thoroughly enjoyed.

As these portraits reveal, our writing group consists of five diverse women, all educators, all writers. Each of us teaches at a different level, from first grade through college. Each of us writes with a different voice, a different style, in different genres. The blend of interests, backgrounds, and experiences serves to enrich each individual as well as the group experience as a whole. The SCWriP Summer Institute deliberately arranges diversity in writing groups, and our experience seems to say that this is a positive way to begin. When we sat down to write these portraits, we had no idea what would emerge. We were surprised and delighted that we wrote so many of the same things about each other and about ourselves, for it revealed a level of communication, understanding, and caring that has developed over the years.

We discovered several common feelings. We like and respect one another in our differences. We don’t see the group as an obligation, but as a gift to ourselves. We value the combination of relaxation, collaboration, and intense work on writing. Clearly, whether we began the group thinking of ourselves as writers or as teachers who write, we now identify ourselves as members of a serious writing group. That, besides the laughter, support, and the gift of courage, is perhaps one of the things that is most important to us about our group. We are free to be as we are on any given night, to bring writing or not, to share the impatience and the anxiety. What one of us may feel one night, another might feel the next, and so we are free to support each other.

Over the years we have been meeting, we have arrived at a comfortable and productive format for our monthly meetings. We do not try to meet more than once a month, and this, for busy teachers and family members, is a plus. We can always manage to find one day out a month when we can all meet. We rotate the meeting places among the homes of the members as well as the responsibility for preparing and presenting a writing activity. Before adjourning our meeting, we always take out our calendars and determine the date and the place of our next meeting. This allows us to arrange our lives around this date as much as possible.

To begin with, we have deliberately chosen to set aside the first fifteen to thirty minutes of each meeting to chat and share a dessert. Eventually, someone, usually the person who is in charge of our writing exercise for the meeting, calls us to order. We spend twenty to thirty minutes of each meeting writing together. One member prepares and leads us in a writing activity. We find this is a wonderful way to be always writing, for even if we don’t write all month, we know we will write at the meeting. Sometimes these writings transform into finished pieces, sometimes they don’t, but it is a way to stretch our writing muscles, teach each other, and try new avenues of expression.

After writing, we share our pieces and get responses from the group. The following are two of these writing prompts, the instructions given to the group, and the products of the writing. The pieces are printed here as they were originally written.

IN THIS ROOM ... (January 26, 1993): Read introduction to Skinny Legs and All by Tom Robbins. This piece describes events that have happened in a room. The phrase ‘This is the room ...” is repeated throughout the text. Write off of this piece beginning with “This is the room where ...” Write for approximately ten minutes. Share and respond.

This is the room crickets serenade ghosts in the moonlight, where gorillas hide in the forest and crows watch the baby fingerpainting with strawberries and yogurt goosed on the clatterboard walls. The warped wooden floors tell the tales of monstrous black rats staining cat food in the pantry. This is the room perched in the twilight of the Gypsy Lady chopping carrots with the dulled blade bought for five cents at the swapmeet ... and there’s the pudgy baby boy squatting on the floor by the doorway speaking the words, ‘Mana, see the snake?’ Slowly, the tinsel body slithers in the morning sun watching the mother and child in the water tower. — ALINE

FIRST KISS (August 24, 1992): This exercise is taken from Writing From Within by Bernard Selling. Write the memory of your first kiss. Write in the present tense and first person. Begin by stating your age — “I am 13 years old.” Write for ten to fifteen minutes. Share and respond.
I am twelve years old with perfectly feathered bangs and sweaty palms. Matt and I skate, palm to palm, as “Stairway to Heaven” blares over the P.A. system. Tonight is the night I will kiss Matt Tapscott behind the Polar Palace. My best friend and I have planned this event for weeks.

The song is at that awkward spot when no one knows how to move — slow, fast, what? Matt and I search the rink for Kevin and Deanne. We find them at the north end and nod our heads to the EXIT.

The exit sign looms brightly and screams, “This way to your first romantic encounter!” we converge.

We find ourselves in the parking lot of the La Habra Polar Palace; a concrete maze of Pontiacs, Buicks, and Fords. The vacant field beyond the lot is an uncharted sea of romance, and we head for the tall weeds swaying in a breeze of moonlight.

Kevin and Deanne veer to the right. They want privacy. Alone with Matt, I am scared. We giggle and laugh. “Wanna go back inside?”

“No, if they do it, we’ve got to do it.”

Stalling the inevitable, I say, “Let’s watch them.”

But Kevin and Deanne disappear into the weeds. My heart is beating hard. “Matt, let’s go over to the dumpster. Nobody will see us. We can just pretend we did it. No one will know.”

We walk to the dumpster. As the tension mounts, our nostrils fill with the erotic fragrance of smeared ketchup and half-eaten burgers.

Matt plants a watery kiss on my lips.

I’m stunned. Instead of doing my imagined Marsha Brady response, I laugh heartily into Matt’s mouth, blowing air into his cheeks. They puff up before my eyes, like Dizzy Gillespie blowing his horn.

This is not what I imagined my first kiss would be like.  
— LORRIE

We find that this writing together is probably the one element most responsible for keeping our group together, for it keeps us writing. No matter what demands our lives, our teaching, our families make upon us, this time is set aside for us as writers.

Each writing activity is followed by sharing and responding. Appropriate response is probably the next most important element in the successful functioning of our group. Insensitive or inappropriate response undermines the very purpose of the writing group which is to nurture our writing. Learning constructive response and establishing ground rules are essential.

At the writing project we learned responses mainly based on those established by Peter Elbow in Writing Without Teachers. We began with a simple “Thank you for sharing that” after each reading. Then we moved on to the non-evaluative “pointing” and “sayback” techniques in which listeners or readers indicate what struck them and summarize what they heard. However, these rules are not as important as simply asking the writer what she wants to receive in the way of comments. This depends largely on what stage the piece is in — from first draft to the preparation to publish.

The majority of our writing group meeting time is spent in consideration of works-in-progress. After our initial writing activity, we ask if anyone has any work to share. How many pieces have been brought for discussion determines how much time can be spent on each piece, and we try to distribute the time fairly among the writers. Not all members bring work to each meeting and that’s fine; this flexibility enables us all to attend the meeting without apology, without feeling that we have failed to do an assignment. We find it helpful to bring copies of the piece to be shared to the meeting, and if it is a long piece, to mail it to the members in advance. The writer reads her piece to the group, sometimes more than once. She indicates as specifically as possible what kind of response would be most helpful to her at this time.

However, above all else, we maintain the writer’s ownership of the piece. Our responses, whether evaluative or not, respect the writer’s integrity as the sole arbiter of what she is trying to say and how she will say it. We find it helpful to ask the writer to read the piece in different ways, incorporating our suggestions as possibilities only. Elbow’s idea that as writer and reader “you are always right” and “always wrong”
means that the writer knows best what she wants to say while the reader knows best what she has heard. Negotiating the difference is the function of the writing group. This is not to say that all goes smoothly in every meeting, but trusting in the goodwill of our colleagues softens the bumps in the road.

Why are we so committed to our writing group? Each time we meet we are able to recapture the essence of our experience as a SCWriP fellow. We connect with other educators who are passionate about teaching, and we keep writing in our lives. The exchange of ideas during each meeting is intellectually challenging and creatively stimulating. We encourage each other, finding humor in the joys as well as the struggles of writing, teaching, and life in general. Finally, the structure of our meetings allows a commitment that isn’t a burden. At each meeting we write together, so we are continually writing. The group is responsive to our writing. Any individual who brings a piece in progress can assume that the group will swing into gear and respond in helpful and constructive ways. And, as we have only begun to discover, the joys of collaboration open new vistas of exploration of us as a group and as individuals.

Our last step in trying to achieve an understanding of this group process was to write a collaborative “found” poem that describes our group and our group process (March 30, 1993). It is an unabashed celebration of our writing, ourselves.

We are grandmothers eating oranges in the sunlight, hands rippling over piano keys
We are dancers soaring through the air
We are families, arms encircling each other in pain and love,
We are Gypsies searching for the one clear spot in the crystal ball
We are a common thread that weaves itself through a bolt of fabric so strong, many hands carry this strength, searching for the moments in our lives worth saving

We are the gardeners in planting season, tending delicate new growth,
Savoring the ripe fruits of our labor in hot sun and gentle rain
Growing together, blooming in different shades

We are the serious work of the sparrow, building her nest
Holding small, multi-colored eggs,
Resting comfortably side by side, enjoying the warmth

We are the five growth rings of an oak

We are the balancing scale, measuring new ingredients of wit and humor
We are the laughter-filled bubble, expanding until the air inside
Breaks through — pop!
Lemon zest gives snap, punch, verve,
A catalyst transforming reflection and inquiry

We are trapeze artists risking, turning, flying
And the taut, brown mesh of the safety net below
We are teachers coming into nighttime rooms, like snakes,
We peel off our skins and share

References


Joan Cotich teaches ESL writing classes at St. Marcos High School, Santa Barbara; Deborah Dixon teaches composition at the University of California and at Moorpark College; Lorrie Nelson teaches third grade at Mound Elementary School in Ventura; Eileen Shapiro teaches first grade at Peabody Elementary School in Santa Barbara; Beth Yee teaches fifth grade bilingual students at McKinley Elementary School in Santa Barbara. All are 1991 South Coast Writing Project fellows.

Deborah Dixon is the author of a monograph titled Writing Your Heritage: A Sequence of Thinking, Reading, and Writing Assignments (see page 29) recently published by the National Writing Project.