

Making Do by Making Space: Multidisciplinary Graduate Writing Groups as Spaces Alongside Programmatic and Institutional Places

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Abstract: Graduate students are often students, teachers, consultants, mentors, and facilitators all at once. Their knowledge is utilized in teaching and administration, yet they are not fully credentialed and their decisions are under higher scrutiny than those of full-fledged faculty. Given the in-between position of graduate students, we argue that there is a great need for spaces that are free from the judgment of institutional assessment (*outside* departmental places) while still meeting institutional writing needs graduate students have (*alongside* the more official places). In two focus groups of graduate writing group members, we asked participants to tell us about their motivations for joining these groups, the benefits they gained through the groups, and the ways the groups were limited. In this chapter, we illustrate why such writing groups are important spaces for graduate education in that they provide support and community, structure and accountability, and multidisciplinary perspectives to their participants.

Keywords: Graduate Writing, Graduate Writing Education, Graduate Writing Groups, Writing Groups, Writing Centers, Space and Place, Communities of Support, Multidisciplinary

Each of us spent three-to-five years working with and mentoring graduate students in graduate writing groups at Michigan State University (MSU) while completing our own graduate degrees.¹ Our experiences with the graduate writing groups, as well

1 During the publication process, each author earned their degrees and began working at different universities.

as our own experiences as graduate students, have taught us that graduate school is a personal and emotional experience that has a significant impact on student identity and well-being. During graduate school, students become disciplined into fields of study seen as esoteric and elusive to their friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who work in different environments. For many graduate students, earning their degree isn't just about achieving a higher level of education, but about challenging themselves and contributing to and changing the world. Like other creative people, these individuals hope "to bring order to experience, to make something that will endure after one's death, to do something that allows humankind to go beyond its present power" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 38). The movement between their pre-graduate school identity and their degree-holding identity, like any movement "is rarely just about getting from A to B. The line that connects them, despite its apparent immateriality, is both meaningful and laden with power" (Cresswell, 2006, p. 9).

In "Introduction: (E)Merging Identities: Authority, Identity, and the Place(s) In-Between," Melissa Nicolas (2008) describes graduate school as an in-between space; we would contend that all *space* is similarly in-between and that graduate school is an excellent example of space. Nicolas writes:

In-between spaces are murky, stressful, overwhelming, exasperating, challenging, exciting, hopeful, and full of potential. Inhabiting an in-between place, whether professionally or personally, puts our minds in over-drive. . . . During this in-between time, we often experience moments of great clarity about who we are and what we want, quickly followed by moments of intense self-doubt and questions about our identity. Being in-between causes us to assess our situation and reflect on our strengths and weaknesses in order to accept or reject roles and to negotiate this liminal space. (p. 1)

Graduate students are often students, teachers, consultants, mentors, facilitators, and administrators all at once. Their knowledge is utilized in teaching and administration, yet they are not fully credentialed and their decisions are under higher scrutiny than those of full-fledged faculty. They question their own abilities; they question whether they have what it takes to finish the process. The spaces graduate students make alongside the formal place of the academy influence their confidence and success within their graduate programs. Despite the many roles graduate students play in their everyday lives, it is writing that often determines their progression through degree programs. Coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertations—as well as publications—are predominantly written products; the assessment of these products determines whether students' progress through their graduate programs and is linked to advisor and instructor judgment of students' academic capabilities. Yet, writing instruction and support at the graduate level is primarily dependent upon individual advisors and committee members.

Many of these instructional and supportive spaces and places tend to be rife with the same high stakes—assessment and judgment—as the final written products.

In this chapter, we focus on a very specific space: multidisciplinary graduate writing groups at Michigan State University.² We also focus on a specific context, that of a university writing center. We see the graduate writing groups facilitated through MSU's Writing Center as one of the spaces that graduate students make alongside the institutional places of their graduate programs, departments, and disciplines. We conducted two focus groups with participants of the MSU Writing Center's graduate writing groups to learn more about how they understood and used the groups as spaces alongside institutional places. Our questions centered on several key themes: why the students joined these groups, the benefits they gained through the groups, and the ways the groups were limited.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide working definitions of space and place that convey in-between-ness as a quality of space in particular and to show that the writing groups at Michigan State University are important spaces of writing support for graduate students because they function alongside places of institutionalized assessment and judgment. We use data from our focus groups to show how participants, as members of graduate writing groups, make spaces alongside and within institutional places that positively influence their academic abilities and identities. In particular, we discuss how graduate writing groups are informal spaces of writing and professional development that are important resources for graduate students precisely because they function alongside *and* within institutional places.

A Theory of Space and Place

It's important to note that space and place are relative terms. In general, place is more fixed and stable, and space is more flexible and fluid. However, what is a place to one person might be a space to another. For instance, as teachers we might have memories and experiences in particular classrooms that we have taught in for several semesters. We can connect multiple experiences, people, objects, and practices to a particular classroom. However, a student taking her first class in the same room will not immediately attribute any special feelings or memories to this classroom. For

2 Additional research on MSU's graduate writing groups is available in Garcia, Eum, and Watt's "Experiencing the Benefits of Difference within Multidisciplinary Graduate Writing Groups" (2013) and Kim and Wolke's "Graduate Writing Groups: Helping L2 Writers Navigate the Murky Waters of Academic Writing," found in this collection. Each study focuses on different elements of the groups and worked with different participants, but there is overlap across the pieces that could be of particular interest to readers developing or researching graduate writing groups on their own campuses.

her, the classroom is likely associated abstractly with other classrooms in her life, but it doesn't at first contain any distinctive meaning for her. Doreen Massey (2005) defines space as a "meeting-up of histories" (p. 4), as "stories-so-far" (p. 130), while places are stabilized collections of these stories. Rules and orders that limit practice and membership characterize places, while spaces tend to have less definition and regulation. Place is more stable than space and is given meaning through artifact, language, and practice. Spaces are made to change, adapt, and manipulate places.

To graduate students, programs, departments, and/or disciplines are sometimes seen as monolithic entities or places with static conventions and rules in which they "cannot find" or "have no" place. They appear as places in that they are fixed with stable rules and practices that maintain their boundaries. On the other hand, spaces are openings alongside and within these places that graduate students find and make in order to belong, in order to make room for themselves. Graduate programs, disciplines, and even genres themselves can be understood as places (Bawarshi, 2001) in that they feature rules and orders that limit who can take part in writing/making and reading them. Writing, then, is a practice that can open up and make space and/or create and maintain the boundaries of place.

Writing Center programming has less firm boundaries than disciplines and is more space-like than place-like, making writing centers easier for students to navigate. Muriel Harris (1995) points out that the tutorial instruction in writing centers "is very different from traditional classroom learning because it introduces into the educational setting a middle person, the tutor, who inhabits a world somewhere between students and teacher" (p. 28). These writing tutors and consultants are often undergraduate and graduate students themselves. The writing groups we discuss in this chapter were facilitated by graduate writing consultants at a writing center. Graduate students in a writing group, like students in a writing center session, "can also offer other useful information they would be less willing to give teachers" (p. 29). That is, the graduate writing groups we focus on also have softened boundaries and are spaces of negotiation around what "writing" is and what "good writing" means in the contexts writers discuss and experience both in and outside the groups.

The groups allow for a rhetorical understanding of writing that recognizes "writing as a site of long-term socialization or 'disciplining' of doctoral students into the discourses and genres of their fields—the repeated discursive practices that have evolved in specific research cultures through repetition over time" (Starke-Meyering, 2014, p. 66). The groups, then, become spaces of support that provide graduate students with opportunities to negotiate their scholarly identities in relation to institutional norms and conventions.

This is particularly important since the discourses and genres that graduate students are learning about and engaging in

regularize and regulate what can, must, or must not be said,

thought, or acknowledged; what and whose knowledge (e.g., indigenous knowledge, practitioner knowledge, etc.) or evidence counts or not; which conversations to take up and how; how to work out and position one's contribution amidst competing epistemological, ontological, and ideological factions of a given research culture; whom doctoral scholars are being asked to become as researchers through their writing; what disciplinary orthodoxies are to be reproduced; and much more. (Starke-Meyerring, 2014, p. 67)

Like Starke-Meyerring, we recognize that institutional environments created within higher education are maintained through daily practice that has often been made invisible and normalized as “common sense” and “how things are done,” without critical reflection. In particular, this normalization has silenced and marginalized conversation around academic writing. Spaces like writing centers and programs such as graduate writing groups and writing process camps (Busl, Donnelly, & Capdevielle, this collection) make explicit the implicit and encourage daily practices that create a space of opportunity to make disciplinary and institutional practices more visible, which in turn allows graduate students to enter into institutional realities with a clearer understanding of how the institution operates.

Our Groups

The Writing Center at Michigan State University hosts graduate writing groups. Each group is facilitated by a graduate writing consultant, and all groups are overseen by one graduate student coordinator. Like many other opportunities The Writing Center provides, the graduate writing groups are completely voluntary, with students requesting participation and leaving the groups when they determine participation is no longer necessary. In order for the groups to be useful and successful, the Center asks that writing group participants dedicate themselves to participating in writing group work for three hours a week for a full semester. A graduate writing consultant, often a Ph.D. student but sometimes an MA student, facilitates each group's two-hour weekly meeting, with the third hour dedicated to reading the work of other group members to prepare for the meeting. Groups vary in size from three to six members. In larger groups, members can expect to have conversations about their own writing every other week, while in smaller groups, discussions about each member's writing every week are possible. The number of groups varies semester to semester, typically with three to six active groups per semester, each with three to six members.

Although there is an attempt to group students together by discipline, availability becomes the most important consideration when scheduling a group. As a

result, most groups are multidisciplinary. Multidisciplinary groups have been selected more purposely by other researchers such as Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke (2009), who write, “The decision to run multi- rather than single-discipline groups was based partly on practical concerns, including the diverse backgrounds of participants—for instance there was only one person from Italian Studies, compared with ten from the predominantly social science disciplines housed within the School of Political and Social Inquiry” (p. 142). Cuthbert et al. also emphasized that multidisciplinary groups could more easily encourage “participants to focus primarily on writing, rather than on the discipline-specific details of content. In addition, it was felt that supervisors would (or should) be filling the role of ‘expert’ content readers” (2009, p. 142). Like Cuthbert et al. (2009), we came to see the multidisciplinary aspect of the writing groups as a strength.

When a group is first organized, the facilitator spends time with the group introducing a writing center approach to peer response to the group members. Participants discuss the difference between higher-order and lower-order concerns and how to provide productive feedback on structure and organization as well as sentence-level error. In addition to a foundation of productive peer response methods, the facilitator works with students to determine their writing goals for the semester as individuals and as a group. It is expected that group members will read the writing of selected group members prior to the weekly meeting and prepare some feedback. During each group’s weekly meeting, the first 15 minutes are spent with group members checking in about their writing progress for the week and any personal updates they would like to share. The bulk of the meeting is spent providing spoken peer response about group members’ writing. On occasion, the group will participate in a planning or writing activity during the group meeting, such as preparing a strategic plan for writing goals for the semester. The facilitator sees their role as to respond to writing in supportive and constructive ways and guide members to engage in this practice as well. The facilitator works with participants to focus on higher-order concerns, provide guidance on genre and disciplinary conventions, and build community.

Our Participants

Curious about the influence of the graduate writing groups on participants, we began developing an IRB-approved set of studies as part of a research cluster focused on graduate writing within Michigan State University’s Ph.D. program in Rhetoric and Writing. We designed a survey with Soo Kim and Shari Wolke (see Chapter 9, this collection) and emailed it to all former and current graduate writing group participants for the years of 2009-2011. The survey asked participants to provide information about their participation in the graduate writing groups, including their motivation for joining and satisfaction with the experience. They were also asked for informa-

tion about their familiarity with writing instruction, access to writing assistance and resources, and self-perceptions of their writing ability. We received 28 responses; 21 respondents answered all of the survey questions. The survey responses, for us, were primarily used to develop questions for our focus groups and to recruit participants for our focus groups. We sent a focus group request to everyone who completed the survey. Five people responded to the focus group requests. We held two focus group meetings, which each lasted around 90 minutes. Each of us transcribed and reviewed the interviews for patterns and themes in the responses.

Four graduate writing group members volunteered to participate in our focus groups: Angela, Lindsey, Adrienne, and Adam.³ Angela was a Ph.D. student in Organizational Psychology and joined one of Elena's groups in 2010. She was a member of a writing group that stayed together for more than a year; members of this group had a relationship prior to joining a Writing Center graduate writing group, which likely contributed to the longevity of the group, even after a Writing Center facilitator was no longer requested by the group. Lindsey and Adrienne both joined one of Elena's groups in the summer of 2011. Lindsey was a Comparative Religion major who was not an official MSU student—her husband was hired as a professor in the university, and she came to East Lansing with him. Adrienne was a Literature student who actively participated in writing groups both within her discipline and through other support services on campus, and she was interested in writing pedagogy at the graduate level. Adam—a Public Health Administration student who, like Lindsey, attended a different university but had moved to the East Lansing area—participated in another facilitator's group.

During our focus groups, we were primarily interested in learning about why participants sought out graduate writing groups, the benefits of being a member of a graduate writing group, and the limitations of these particular graduate writing groups. Throughout the focus groups, participants noted that the qualities they associated with the space of the writing groups are different than the qualities they associated with the place of their programs, departments, and disciplines. Three major themes linked to these differences arose: support and community, structure and accountability, and the strength of a multidisciplinary approach.

Support and Community

The participants reported that they found the groups helpful not just as a source of writing knowledge and practice but as a space of emotional as well as intellectual support. The groups provided community and helped participants feel that they were not alone. In these groups, students supported one another; they learned

3 Pseudonyms have been used by request of the participants.

about writing and mentoring through practice within the group. The most-cited need for a writing group mentioned by the students we talked to was a consistently available support system and community of peers.

Two of our participants were not technically MSU students—they were displaced students from other universities, in the area of East Lansing because of work, for themselves or their spouses. Lindsey explains her experience as follows:

I am a displaced graduate student. I don't go here for graduate school, but I moved here because my husband is a professor here. So, I was kind of writing to a void and had lost my community and needed a group to sort of stay productive and also remember that there is an audience out there.

Adam defined his similar experience as being “displaced” because he, too, was a graduate student from a different university. Students who were MSU students, like Angela, also expressed a sense of isolation: “I thought, I’m going to be writing. I had just lost a lot of support in my graduate program, and I wasn’t sure how I was going to get it done, so having any group to write with sounded like a good idea.” Because they had lost their previous support systems either through leaving their home institutions, finishing coursework, or because many of their disciplinary peers were not easy to connect with, they were most in need of some way to stay connected to other students.

The group members we spoke with emphasized the importance of getting support from their peers instead of authority figures. Angela shared:

I really liked that it felt like there was no judgment about my character as a graduate student. It was accepted that you're a doctoral student, you're trying to get somewhere, and we're trying to help you with your writing and trying to make it better. That's all the focus was on and I really liked that that was it. There was no other stuff brought into the room.

Her sentiments were echoed by others, which line up with this understanding of interacting with peers who were not understood as authorities, judges, or evaluators: “People ‘just playing’ at pool, or at math, or at coming up with clever rebuttals to arguments, do better than those who are trying to impress an evaluator—unless they are already highly skilled at the task” (Gray as cited in Wolfsberger, 2014, p. 183). Our participants expressed that the groups allowed them to develop confidence in a safe environment.

The group members also expressed that because the group felt safe and supportive, they felt comfortable sharing and learning from one another, which enabled them to build confidence and knowledge around writing strategies and in using writing terminology.

Adrienne: . . . getting more confidence for myself: I think because there are lots of mentoring structures in place in my department, it makes me feel more confident about sharing that advice. Since I feel more confident about my writing, . . . I can say, well, I struggle doing this. I feel confident enough to admit that I struggled and got out of it. And so sort of passing that on to other people through various means.

Lindsey: There was a person in our group, and she always talks about interventions and what her intervention is in the literature. And to me, what she means is what she's doing different. And the sort of original thinking that's going on. And so I was able eventually to say, well, what's your intervention here?

Because of the informal and peer-focused environment, group members felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and supporting each other without the sort of scrutiny they perceive as associated with working with faculty advisors.

Our findings regarding support and community as an important benefit of graduate writing groups are not unique. Cahill, Miller-Cochran, Pantoja, and Rodrigo (2008) note of their own graduate writing group that they had “become a community of support for one another and the support goes beyond writing. As our friendships have grown significantly, so has our commitment to one another’s professional and personal success” (p. 155). The writing groups at MSU, then, are once again similar to those studied by Starke-Meyerring (2014), who writes, “Doctoral students may well organize into groups to discuss writing, without necessarily identifying these arrangements as ‘writing groups,’ because for them writing may be inseparable from their academic life, positionalities, and the related politics of writing in institutions” (p. 71). While conversations about writing practices and specific writing projects were the main focus of the groups, group members also spent a lot of time discussing work-life balance, teaching concerns, problems with advising, and other topics that, while not directly about their writing, inform their writing situations and their professional lives. As Smith, Molloy, Kassens-Noor, Li, and Colunga-Garcia (2014) note of a similarly-organized faculty writing group, “We share not only writing pieces but also our stories, successes, joys, and frustrations with each other” (p. 182). This kind of sharing and connection beyond and around the writing itself was a motivator for sustaining the groups.

Structure and Accountability

One of the most consistent and powerful practices of a graduate writing group for these participants was, very simply, consistent and structured meeting times.

For all four participants, there was a clear need for the community of working regularly with other graduate students. Participants were especially interested in how the groups could help them with structure, deadlines, and accountability. In coursework, weekly classes, required homework, and the regular availability to talk with faculty provide structure and consistent accountability. Readings and responses are due each week; seminar papers are due at the end of the semester; there are clearly scheduled deadlines, and the student has to work diligently to keep up. Once coursework is complete “many graduate students find they need structured writing support in order to succeed” (Phillips, 2012). Time can be particularly difficult to manage, and there are few, if any, resources on college campuses that can provide the kind of regular, weekly support that our graduate writing groups did.

An isolated graduate student, for example, might go weeks, even months, without talking to their advisor or other committee members, who are not expected to actively keep track of each student. This is particularly the case when a student is in a situation like Angela’s where her department was hands-off and she was entirely responsible for completing her work. Angela revealed:

Since I’m sort of on my own these days, this will be great to have people to at least give me some feedback. Because I knew that the chair that I had moved to was a very hands-off person and he just expected you, just like the other faculty, to figure it out. It’s just that I knew that going into that relationship with him, so I was prepared to deal with it. And so when this idea came up, it’s like, I think this will fill the void of having constant feedback. I think that was about all I had thought about it, in terms of expectations of the group.

Angela’s response clearly and strongly articulates the need that many graduate students have to “fill a void” left when coursework ends. All four participants were in the exam or dissertation stage of their Ph.D. programs when they decided to join one of the Writing Center’s graduate writing groups. They had lost their previously-structured writing environments and sought an alternative.

Concerns about structure and accountability are often brought up in larger conversations regarding Ph.D. completion and retention rates, since the dissertation process can drag on for many years. Adam and Lindsey, in their focus group interaction, addressed this difficulty:

Adam: people, when they get to that level, when they have no more classes, they have—all they have to do is write. There’s a group of them out there that’s, I don’t want to use the word lonely, but I mean, I’ve been getting by with it, but it’s like it

would have been a little easier.

Lindsey: It's very isolating.

In her study of doctoral graduate writing groups, Claire Aitchison (2009) identified that the writing group participants she interviewed and observed “pointed to the greater regularity of the group meetings, compared to their difficulties accessing busy supervisors . . . [and] the sense of reciprocity and mutual obligation they shared” (p. 909) as primary benefits of working consistently with a writing group. Preparing for exams and especially writing the dissertation can be very lonely and isolating activities, and a writing group helps to mitigate that situation.

One of the most powerful roles the graduate writing groups can play in the life of an isolated or lonely student is that of providing a regularly-meeting support system through which students not only receive feedback on their work but also work through other difficulties and concerns they have about grad school and life more generally. The writing groups provide consistent scholarly, human contact which, when combined with the knowledge that they are being held accountable to others, can help students completing exams and dissertations maintain productivity.

Multidisciplinary Perspectives

Graduate writing groups offer unique opportunities for students to form different types of relationships than they have in their departments because multiple disciplines are represented in each group. Since students bring different disciplinary knowledge to the table, less emphasis is placed on knowledge linked to a particular discipline, and students can perform as experts within their own disciplines instead of the more traditional role of mentee noted above. While there have been calls for discipline-specific graduate writing groups, the multidisciplinary nature of the graduate writing groups can be beneficial for group members. Starke-Meyerring (2014) indicates that treating writing and research as rhetorical creates a paradox:

On the one hand, the demands placed on doctoral students were, of course, deeply rhetorical: students were expected to perform in the highly contextualized and historically evolved discursive practices of their research cultures. On the other hand, given the non-research-based assumptions about writing as a universal skill, these discursive practices remained shrouded in silence and therefore difficult to access for doctoral scholars. (p. 68)

Multidisciplinary writing groups can mitigate that paradox by showing participants the rhetoricity of writing. That is, that writing in different contexts for different disciplines requires different approaches, genres, and vocabularies.

Our participants indicate that they experienced first-hand how important context, audience, and purpose are to writing through their interactions in the groups.

Adrienne: I think that articulating how your discipline thinks about ideas is part of becoming disciplined; being able to say that.

Angela: (continuing the conversation from Adrienne) That's why this is English, that's why this is anthropology, this is why it's—

Adrienne: And that the terms are specific to those disciplines and they need to be thinking outside of them. So when the engineer asks what do you mean by “queer,” it has a really specific development within humanities or within these other disciplines. And then just articulating that for yourself makes you feel smarter. Oh, I know what that is and I know all these problems and I know how it's developed over the last 30 years, and being able to get that information out is, I think, just so productive . . . it does make you feel like an expert.

Andy: What I came to realize that those folks from other disciplines and similar disciplines, they were really my audience because my advisor and I, we get it. But if they don't get it, it means others won't get it, too, because we wrote for two people and we both agree with what we're getting at. But I think that was something that I learned that they don't understand it. And you kind of step back, and you look at it and say, maybe I can say that differently or I'm not making myself as clear as I could in that particular—or I expanded too much or I didn't expand.

Multidisciplinary groups tend to focus on learning about writing rather than only focusing on content and one discipline's way of making arguments.⁴

Learning ways to talk about writing and think about it differently became necessary when working with writers from various disciplines. Sometimes the simple fact of not really understanding the content put the emphasis back on the writing and required the group members to really think about writing structures.

Adrienne: There was still that sort of basic impulse of explaining the [content] idea to someone outside of the discipline, which

4 The previously-presented chapter by Garcia, Eum, and Watt, “Experiencing the Benefits of Difference within Multidisciplinary Graduate Writing Groups” in *Working with Faculty Writers* (2013), focuses entirely on the multidisciplinary benefits of the graduate writing groups at MSU. While there are some similarities between the content of that chapter and this section of our chapter, the different focus group participants lend additional insights.

is a different mode of creating interdisciplinary work. But no matter what the limits of that were, English was never thermodynamics. So reading people's work that I literally couldn't read—like I couldn't read a sentence because I didn't know, had to talk through the formula. So that, in a way, makes you focus on basics, like how was this paragraph put together. Even though I don't know what this sentence says, I know what this paragraph is about, it's comparing these two things. I have no idea what these two things are or their relationship is, but it just takes you down to the most basic level of sentence structure or paragraph structure. So that was one sort of positive aspect of the interdisciplinarity and my interest in doing it.

Recognizing that content and writing cannot be separated, as Adrienne describes, provided confidence to writers providing feedback to other writers, even though they were in different disciplines.

Lindsey: It was a big confidence builder to be able to give feedback to people in different fields about their writing and to be able to see what I thought about what they were writing was able to impact their writing for the better, even though I know nothing about whatever topic it was.

Readers were able to see that even though the topic and discipline of the writing may be unfamiliar, they could provide useful input about the ways they understood the messages in the text and how clear those messages were.

In multidisciplinary groups, graduate students are exposed to “different individual and disciplinary writing styles, conventions, practices, approaches, and strategies” (Garcia, Eum, & Watt, 2013, p. 266-67) and are able to practice being an expert. Perhaps because “individual participants may be the only representative from their disciplines in the group,” there was the opportunity to “foster disciplinary confidence and concomitant sense of authority” (Cuthbert et al., 2009, p. 145).

Lindsey: You own your stuff in a way that you can't when you're talking to, for instance, your advisers or to people who are—know a lot about your field. I mean, I think in the rest of the world outside of the group, it's one of the hardest things for me is believing that I am an expert. And outside of the group, it's really terrifying to do those same things and say, well, I really do know this thing.

Cuthbert et al.'s (2009) research on graduate writing groups has similar findings; they wrote that the groups “provided an opportunity to develop an ‘authoritative

voice' in speaking—and, importantly, writing—on her specialty, political theory, within a group with only general knowledge about the discipline and its key debates” (p. 145) and that the experience “enabled participants to ‘try out’ the role of disciplinary specialist in a supportive, rather than competitive, context” (p. 145). It shouldn't be surprising that multidisciplinary groups enhanced the confidence of writers about their knowledge of their own disciplines.

Group members also found the multidisciplinary approach as something that would benefit them as faculty members sitting on college- and campus-level committees.

Andy: I also feel it would be helpful if you were ever on a job search committee. You need to understand things from outside of the field and ask people in a pleasant, polite way when it doesn't make sense. And also help you when you are applying for a job and need to make sense of your own work to people who are very much outside the discipline.

Andy's reflection indicates that group members saw the practices they were learning outside the completion of their high-stakes writing projects as applicable to other considerations that have an impact on their future lives as faculty members, such as being in the academic job market, sitting on search committees, and arguing their own promotion and tenure cases at the college and campus levels to multidisciplinary audiences.

Before becoming members of the graduate writing groups through the MSU Writing Center, three of our four focus group participants commented that they were aware of the multidisciplinaryity of the groups and that this was an aspect that was specifically desired.

Adrienne: I liked the idea of it being interdisciplinary.⁵ I'm actually in two writing groups right now. One is through the Writing Center but discipline-specific and one is this interdisciplinary one that meets at the Writing Center. And I like the idea of having people ask really basic questions about your writing that people in the discipline might not ask and so giving you a chance to think through some of the assumptions that you make in your own writing.

In another segment of our conversation, Adrienne reiterated this desire to

5 In general, we see the groups as “multidisciplinary” more so than “interdisciplinary.” Interdisciplinary speaks to work in which disciplines are meshed together and intertwined. Multidisciplinary, instead, implies that multiple disciplines are represented and work together, but the work created by individual members still pertains to a particular discipline. In some cases, interdisciplinary work is done in a multidisciplinary writing group.

join an interdisciplinary group. She explained that her dissertation work is actually going to be fairly interdisciplinary in nature, utilizing psychoanalytic concepts to discuss literature, and so she had hoped to be placed in a group that included someone from a psychology background. This didn't actually happen, but her experiences in her own multidisciplinary group still seemed positive, as shown above.

Lindsey, too, commented that she wanted to work in a multidisciplinary group. She explained that her own work is very interdisciplinary in nature, so obtaining feedback from a wide variety of readers was important for her. She specifically explains her desire for such a group:

I personally feel like I'm working in an interdisciplinary field. I'm in comparative literature, but I also do comparative religion, and I'm hoping to be in a Jewish studies department—so I'm interested in being able to speak a language that does reach people in fields as different as ethnomusicology on the one hand and history on the other hand and English on the third hand.

And so being able to communicate with all of those people in our writing group who are in different fields was I think a high priority for me. I don't want to be somebody who writes with such disciplinary conventions that I can't communicate with the other people who might actually end up being in my same department.

Lindsey and Adrienne were both doing interdisciplinary work, and so they sought the multidisciplinary environment our groups provided. Adam, however, did not want to work originally in a multidisciplinary group because he wanted feedback that would help him write in an explicitly scientific manner. Due to the constraints of the group, his desire was not possible to meet, and while later we discuss his positive experiences with his group, Adam's situation highlights some of the limitations of multidisciplinary graduate writing groups.

In addition to the desires for inter- and multidisciplinary contact that Adrienne and Lindsey emphasize, Angela points out one more benefit to the diversity of these writing groups. She'd had some fairly negative experiences in her own department and described the non-departmentally-located groups as a chance for reprieve from the existing stress, which she describes in the following statement: "I really liked the fact that none of them knew any of my advisors, none of them knew, really, the history of what I had been through until I think I lost it in one of our meetings." Being part of a multidisciplinary writing group, for Angela, meant she did not have to deal with departmental politics. She was able to reveal her struggles when she felt comfortable with the relationships she had formed with her group members.

Making Space: Limitations and Strengths

Ultimately, this is a story of the everyday. Our daily lives as teachers, scholars, and ordinary people are affected by the spaces we work in as well as the spaces we're from and the spaces we live in. All of these spaces are made and maintained through particular practices. These practices are limited by rules as well as by physical boundaries. In many circumstances, workers in the academy must often make spaces for themselves, spaces alongside places of power. As Michel de Certeau (1984) would say, "People have to make do with what they have" (p. 18). Graduate students, especially, need to "make do"—with advisors and committee members, with the time allotted by those individuals, and, sometimes, with a lack of educational and emotional support.

Despite all the positive aspects of graduate writing groups we've discussed in this chapter, there are certainly limitations. In particular, participants lamented the lack of discipline-specific feedback. Adam described the need for group members with "some particular expertise," explaining that while the other graduate students in the group had similar professional development experiences, at the end of the day, no one else understood his work. He explained, "I have nobody else except my advisor" and recommended having professors join the groups to offer "that other level of feedback." This was echoed by other participants at first.

The desire for expertise highlights the need each graduate student has for multiple kinds of writing support. Graduate writing groups are not a panacea for all that ails graduate writers. That said, in both focus groups, the participants seemed to talk themselves out of the idea of wanting more "experts" in the groups and settled back on the idea that the groups were the most beneficial as is. According to another interviewee, "discipline-specific [groups are] still interdisciplinary." This seemed to be the ultimate consensus of both focus groups, and the benefits of the interdisciplinary groups compensated for the lack of "expert" authority.

While the multidisciplinary graduate writing groups we've described cannot provide specialized expertise like a student's dissertation advisor can, the groups provide a particular kind of space: one in which graduate students from across disciplines can talk about their writing, their advisors, their classmates, and their non-academic lives without the stress of assessment and disciplinary judgment. Our participants, after some reflection, decided they preferred the multidisciplinary approach. For Angela, in particular, the graduate writing group provided her with a space to discuss some of the personal and academic struggles she was having in her own department.

To further support this benefit of multidisciplinary, Angela shared a complex situation in which her advisor needed to leave while she was developing her dissertation proposal, and she began working with another faculty member. Unfortunately, the change was very rough, as this new faculty member pretty much told her

she should stop pursuing her Ph.D.. She explained that it was a relief to work with students outside of her department because of the fact that the other writing group members didn't know the history of what she had been going through. She added:

I really liked that it felt like there was no judgment about my character as a graduate student. It was accepted that you're a doctoral student, you're trying to go somewhere, and we're trying to help you with your writing and trying to make it better. That's all the focus was on and I really liked that that was it. There was no other stuff brought into the room.

Angela's reflection highlights the importance of having a space alongside but outside the place of her department to contemplate her professional work and get feedback on her writing.

Like interactions in traditional peer consulting at a writing center, work in graduate writing groups flattens hierarchies. The mentoring that happens in graduate writing groups has a very different power differential than that associated with mentoring by faculty members. Jenn Fishman and Andrea Lunsford (2008) explain the traditional role of mentee:

Regarded as a novice, a mentee is someone who undergoes an extended process of initiation and assimilation in order to learn duty and obedience alongside the rudiments of a discipline and/or profession. Construed as an apprentice, a mentee is not only a student or pupil (roles associated more with childhood than with professionalization), but also someone socially as well as intellectually subservient to a master or mentor. (p. 28)

The mentoring relationships in graduate writing groups, however, are more akin to Dianne Rothleder's "friendships of play," which are "more truly concerned about the emotional well-being both of the group as a whole and each individual in the group" (as cited in Ashe & Ervin, 2008, p. 90) than "traditional, product-oriented mentoring relationships [, which] can generally be categorized as friendships of utility." These relationships, Rothleder writes, bring out the best in people because they "make space for stories to be told, for people to feel connected" (as cited in Ashe & Ervin, 2008, p. 90).

The location of the writing groups in the Writing Center and their facilitation by trained Writing Center consultants helped to create the kind of space where Angela could feel safe with and respected by her peers. Writing centers have a standing tradition of working with students at their point of need, whether that need is focused on what's written on a page or if that need is for emotional support and security. In addition, many writing centers employ students as consultants, so the very nature of the interactions that take place between consultant and client exist

outside the traditional assessment and grading authority that exists within classes and departments.

The graduate writing groups at the MSU Writing Center create rather unique institutional spaces, spaces that exist outside of traditional institutional authority yet inside the institution itself. Because of their nature, they provide graduate students with an important “bubble” in which those students can more objectively examine the practices expected by their departments, classmates, and especially advisors. Like Thesen (2014), though, we want to caution: “It must be said that the circle sometimes feels very fragile, and the flattened hierarchy of the group does not solve all problems” (p. 165). The groups allow students to come together to share and compare experiences, departmental and disciplinary practices, and of course writing knowledge with the hope that such exposure helps everyone become better scholars and professionals

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