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Scholarly Writing and Collaboration: A Book Review on Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond

Carroll E. Bronson
Cardinal Stritch University, cebronson@stritch.edu

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Abstract

Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond is a detailed text outlining collaborative writing pedagogies suitable for academics, doctoral students, and doctoral advisors. The text is broken into 3 sections with a total of 15 chapters. A variety of different paradigms are critically interpreted within the writing group setting, which offers the reader a look inside the pedagogy and practice of writing. In particular, the text supports qualitative thesis or dissertation writing and offers guidelines to help increase writing productivity.

Keywords

Doctoral Writing, Graduate Writing, Writing Groups, Writing Pedagogies, Doctoral Advising

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Scholarly Writing and Collaboration: A Book Review on *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond*

Carroll E. Bronson

Cardinal Stritch University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond is a detailed text outlining collaborative writing pedagogies suitable for academics, doctoral students, and doctoral advisors. The text is broken into 3 sections with a total of 15 chapters. A variety of different paradigms are critically interpreted within the writing group setting, which offers the reader a look inside the pedagogy and practice of writing. In particular, the text supports qualitative thesis or dissertation writing and offers guidelines to help increase writing productivity. Keywords: Doctoral Writing, Graduate Writing, Writing Groups, Writing Pedagogies, Doctoral Advising

Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014) is a detailed text outlining collaborative writing pedagogies suitable for academics, doctoral students, and doctoral supervisors. It serves as a guide to “showcase the potential of writing groups for advanced academic writing by pulling together a unique mix of authors and scholarly approaches.” (Aitchison, 2014, back cover). The book focuses on the real need for scholarly writing in academic life and addresses the trepidation felt by doctoral students and early career scholars for producing written, publishable work. For doctoral students completing the dissertation is a major hurdle and lacking confidence in writing can derail the process. For non-tenured academics, the pressure to publish alongside full workloads is a challenging proposition and writing generally happens outside of paid working hours. For supervisors of doctoral students, increased work demands and high advising numbers limits the capacity for strong supervisor-student relationships to develop throughout the dissertation process. It is in this context that the book offers guidelines to help increase writing productivity through various types of writing groups. The authors use the term “writing group” as a “generic term to refer to situations where two or more people come together to work on their writing in a sustained way, over repeated gatherings, for doing, discussing or sharing their writing for agreed purposes” (Aitchison, 2014, p. 7). A variety of different paradigms are critically interpreted within the writing group setting, which offers the reader a look inside the pedagogy and practice of writing.

There are several key strengths to this text that include, pedagogical responses for increased writing productivity and the “push to publish,” innovations for supporting academic writing quality, confidence and output, scaffolding the thesis writing process, new theoretical explorations of collaborative writing approaches, and writing group formulations. The text is divided into 15 chapters and these chapters are divided into a total of 3 sections. Section 1 titled, “Setting the Scene,” is made up of the first 3 Chapters of the book. Chapter 1 focuses on introducing writing groups, pedagogy, theory and its relationship to practice. Chapter 2 outlines the historical background of writing groups in research education, and Chapter 3 presents a typology of writing groups that identifies characteristics of writing groups. By the end of Section 1, the reader is more acquainted with the relationship of writing groups to the academic setting and the key components that make writing groups successful.

Section II, titled, “Theory and Reflection,” focuses on the elements of creating and engaging in writing groups for doctoral students. This section is made up of Chapters 4–9. Chapter 4 launches into a discussion on the potential complexities that exist with multiple

sources of feedback that doctoral students must negotiate within the context of their academic writing. Chapter 5 discusses the potential of writing groups to alleviate the barriers that doctoral students encounter throughout the dissertation process. Chapter 6 introduces the idea of doctoral students writing with their supervisors to breakdown the writing process, overcome barriers and interrupt hierarchies within higher education institutions. The author discusses this through the cognitive apprenticeship model in order to explore the exchange of ideas from supervisor to doctoral student in supporting the writing process. Chapter 7 focuses on writing retreats for doctoral students and explores how these experiences are translated from retreat to the real world. Students are encouraged to continue meeting in micro-groups after the structured retreats and the author explores the notion of coherence as a lens to understand student writing behaviors. Chapter 8 suggests that emotional and environmental conditions can aid the overall writing process. The combination of faculty and students engaging in a collegial atmosphere is a unique benefit of writing retreats. Chapter 9 concludes this section by explaining the gift exchange theory and its powerful effect on building confidence in doctoral students.

Section III, titled, “Pedagogy in Practice,” is made up of Chapters 10–15. This section describes specific insights gleaned from the writing group process. Chapter 10 describes a scaffolding process used with multilingual scholars in a facilitated writing group situation. The author suggests that an empathetic approach is necessary when dealing with diverse international doctoral students from various different cultures. Chapter 11 explores the dimensions of laughter and risks in the post-colonial context of writing groups in a South African university and Chapter 12 describes the need for playfulness and applause in writing programs outside the academic setting. The author maintains that writing groups show success when students gather to work on writing outside academia. Chapter 13 outlines creative writing groups for doctoral students including facilitation by both supervisors and peers using the studio model, which approaches writing as a design activity. Chapter 14 focuses on the nuances of women writing together and Chapter 15 explores the use of mobile and social media technologies in the writing process.

Overall, *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond* (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014) is a collection of research offering suggestions on increasing writing productivity. The authors stress that “writing groups do a lot more than simply develop writing skills: writing groups also provide an important emotional space for doctoral students and early career researchers” (Aitchison, 2014, p. 12). Collaborating with others during a writing session, whether it is a supervisor, peer, or professor, offers a connectedness that supports writing. It is obvious that the authors are advocates of writing groups, but they do mention a few limitations to the approach. Writing groups are a complement but not a substitution for sound supervision and advice. Additionally, the authors state, “we don’t believe writing groups are the ultimate *fix*; however, we do see that the kind of social practice pedagogies enacted as writing groups have specific characteristics that match the requirements of advanced research scholarship and writing” (Aitchison, 2014, p. 7). Personally, I see a direct connection of the book’s content to my work as an Assistant Professor in higher education. I teach research methods courses to doctoral level graduate students and feel that this book would be an excellent supplemental text to my current advising load. I currently serve as the Dissertation Chair for approximately 24 students and sit as a committee member on an additional 18 committees. I am always looking for new ideas in order to help students overcome their writing issues, and the potential of writing groups as a method to increase productivity is very encouraging. I am looking forward to developing a writing workshop for current and ABD students during the summer term. The implication of this book’s content crosses various disciplines and is relevant for any doctoral student, supervisor, or early career academic. The book supports scholarly writing, which is a central component of academic life.

References

Aitchison, C., & Guerin, C. (Eds.). (2014). *Writing groups for doctoral education and beyond - Innovations in practice and theory*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Author Note

Dr. Carroll Bronson received her Ph.D. in Urban Education, specializing in Administrative Leadership from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She earned her Master's in Education from DePaul University and her Bachelor's degree in Psychology from Bethany College. Carroll is an Assistant Professor in the Doctoral Leadership Department, and teaches many different research courses to first through third year students. Dr. Bronson's areas of expertise and research interests are focused on collaboration and engagement. More specifically, she has been investigating how leaders collaborate during reform initiatives, how leaders engage others within a change effort, and how collaboration occurs within a virtual environment. She has presented locally, nationally, and internationally at research conferences on these topics and published several articles in referred publications. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed directly to: Carroll E. Bronson at, Cardinal Stritch University, 1037 W. McKinley Avenue, #103, Milwaukee, WI 53205; Email: cebronson@stritch.edu; Phone: (414) 704-1842.

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