

University of New England

**Wendy Beck, Kerry Dunne, Josie Fisher, Jane O'Sullivan,  
Alison Sheridan**

***Turning up the heat: collaboration as a response to a chilly  
research environment***

*Abstract*

*This paper characterises the composition and activities of our academic writing group. The group consists of five women of disparate disciplinary backgrounds who meet regularly to present current work and receive constructive comment and encouragement, much of which is motivated and informed by a shared feminist consciousness, an appreciation of the role of collaboration and openness to multidisciplinary work. In these respects, our group comprises a creative response to a 'chilly' higher education environment where the pressures increase to publish or perish, at the same time as we face higher teaching loads and more administration. Different contexts will result in different groups. Here, taking the perspective of 'insiders', we reflect on the key characteristics that have contributed to the longevity of the group and enhanced the research productivity of individual members.*

**Introduction**

We are five academic women with varied disciplinary backgrounds and different personalities who have worked productively in a writing group for over a decade. This paper takes our group as a case study of long-term collaboration over a period of ten years. Our study is set within the context of global pressures in university research environments, which are undergoing similar changes in Australia, New Zealand and Britain to increase research productivity, through targets that are set by external agencies (eg, Sikes 2006).

The aim is to contribute an in-depth study of how and why academic writers work together, from an insider's perspective rather than an outsider's view. Other studies that analyse characteristics of academic writing groups have mostly been written from the facilitator's perspective (Lee & Boud 2003; Morss & Murray 2001). Our case study allows for our experiences to be compared and contrasted with other groups, but also provides for a richer understanding of the complexities of long-term motivation. Our group works from a feminist tradition of reflective practice and values women's experiences as a basis for research. This explicit feminist tradition also provides a contrast to most other work on academic writing groups (but see Grant 2006). While writing is often categorised as falling into three discrete categories - creative, professional and academic - in our group's experience and in the writing we have produced, these distinctions are arbitrary. We consider our work and processes are creative in their movement between these categories (Beck et al 2006).

In this paper we briefly review the nature of writing groups more generally. We then provide a description of our disciplinary backgrounds to highlight the variety of experiences from which we draw. We explain the format of our regular meetings, before we turn to the common themes - collaboration; a shared feminist consciousness; openness to multidisciplinary work - we identified as contributing to the longevity of our group and the benefits we gain from being part of it. In making sense of the success of our writing group, we reflect on the similarities and differences between our writing group and other writing groups. We conclude with the observation that, in responding to the pressures to publish within the university sector, the evolution of our writing group has been a creative response that has enabled us to operate 'productively' in terms of conventional research outcomes, as well as achieving the more qualitative outcomes of confidence in our writing selves and feeling nourished by the group.

### **Collaborative writing groups in academia**

What is a 'successful' writing group? The conventional view of measuring success has been to draw out both 'hard' (i.e. quantitative, numbers of research publications) and 'soft' (qualitative, changes in practice and knowledge) outcomes (Morss & Murray 2001). Over time, our group has moved from emphasising one to the other. We began our academic writing group in 1996 with a shared goal of writing for publication. At that time, 'success' for us was defined by an increase in conventional research productivity, our publication output in journals, books and other forms. However, over the years this idea of success has been broadened as our lives and careers have changed and we, like many other academic women (Gray 1994), have found there is a certain ambivalence about achieving success in the academy, which has often been labelled a 'chilly climate' for women (Martin 1994; Chilly Collective 1995; Cotterill, Hughes & Letherby 2006). This ambivalence has led us to question to what extent success in research productivity means a complete acceptance of current systems. We see from our experiences within our writers' group that creative responses are possible to this challenge; that we can create a 'warmer' environment in which we can operate.

We are not claiming our collaboration is unique. In fact, collaboration in writing groups has a long history. Collaboration in writing has not been recently invented, but perhaps has gained a new status (Harris 1992; Holt 1993). Gere (1987) demonstrates that writing groups have existed for over two hundred years. There are two main areas where collaboration and writing come together - in the field of education, and in the field of creative writing (for example, Ede & Lundsford 1992; Laird 2000). There is only a small body of work specifically about academic writing groups (see Blaxter et al 1998; Murray 2005 for reviews) and most of it is situated within a pedagogical or staff development framework (eg, Aitchison & Lee 2006; Boice 1997; Boud & Lee 2005). This reflects the 'outsider's' perspective; that is, a view from the group organiser. We prefer instead to use the framework of collaboration to describe our group writing processes, as it fits better with our identity as 'insiders' within the group, and with our ideas about our long-lived success.

The definition of collaboration in writing ranges from the most general ways of working together, to that of only specific co-authoring. Inclusive definitions of collaboration allow for a kind of collective knowledge-making, which takes advantage of postmodern, multi-vocal awareness of knowledge creation. For example, collaborative writing can be co-authoring, workshoping and

especially, knowledge-making. This fits well with feminist ideas of collaboration as teamwork rather than as just co-authorship (Laird 2000: 346). This is the 'master narrative of collaboration-as-group-work-of-any-kind' (Yancey & Spooner 1998: 56). This definition of writing collaboration is, however, too general to describe our process, which has a specific template and form.

A middle ground is expressed by Yancey and Spooner's notion of collaboration as the 'expectation of a singular purpose and a seamless integration of the parts, as if the conceptual object were produced by a single good mind' (1998: 56). They play with the idea of a circular or spiral continuum between individuals and collaborators - circular because the final product is a collective individual. Collaboration here is likened to a string quartet (Yancey & Spooner 1998: 56). This definition fits more comfortably with our concept of a collaborative writing group, where we have previously described it as an *a capella*, with the significant difference that when we leave the group our publications - or performance outcomes - are as *divas* (Beck et al 2006).

### **Making sense of our approach**

We initially posed the question 'What makes our group successful?' in one of our regular meetings, and we each had to respond in our own words. An analysis of our individual written responses pointed to three key themes: the value of working collaboratively in what can be an otherwise alienating environment and the personal satisfaction we gain from the particular form of collaboration we engage in; the importance of a shared feminist consciousness; and an openness to multidisciplinary paradigms. As the group itself is made up of women with different personalities and disciplinary backgrounds, this shared feminist consciousness and context leads to productive conversations and outcomes. In keeping with how the group works in its regular meetings, parts of this article are written in a way that reflects our interactions, differences and similarities. Rather than presenting an agreed response, we have each retained our individual voice and we use these voices to illustrate a nuanced response to the common themes; much as we would interact in one of our meetings.

Unlike other academic collaborations, which are often drawn from the same disciplinary backgrounds (Mavin & Bryans 2002), our group is disparate. To illustrate, we describe the differences in our disciplinary foundations and how we have each crossed disciplines as we have developed in our careers.

**Wendy:** My undergraduate majors were microbiology and biochemistry, but I did not relish the idea of working in a laboratory for the rest of my life. So, after a summer school in field archaeology I was converted! After some bridging studies I completed a PhD in Australian Aboriginal prehistory, which did involve some laboratory analyses. I have always seen the idea of working across disciplinary boundaries as attractive, and archaeology allows me to work across humanities and sciences. The ideas and experiences of women's roles as workers in academic institutions was what led me to write about firstly, my own experience as a female postgraduate in a 'blokey' (and field-orientated) discipline, and then as a junior but female academic in the 1980s.

**Kerry:** I did my first degree in German and Japanese, and then went on to complete a Masters by research in comparative

literature. It was only after a relationship break up that I began to put my career first and I completed a PhD in German literature. When I arrived at this university, I looked outside my all-male department to networks of women academics and with two of these women, set up the Women's Studies program in the late 1980s and early 1990s. My interest in cross-disciplinary collaboration has remained a focus and has been a significant advantage in my career overall: in my former position as Head of the School of Arts and in my current position as academic director for the Arts and Sciences I have oversight of a complex range of disciplines.

**Josie:** I began university study in my 30s, completing a BA with majors in French and philosophy while I continued to work in business. When I studied my first philosophy unit I knew I had found the discipline for me and I was determined to be successful even though this was (and still is) a male-dominated discipline and all of my philosophy lecturers and supervisors were males. I continued studying philosophy, completing a PhD in applied ethics. It was my study of moral philosophy and applied ethics that made me aware of, and question, the predominant paradigms in these subjects. Academic positions in philosophy are rare and so I did not expect to find employment in the regional university where I had completed my studies. I was fortunate to obtain (mainly on the basis of my business experience) an associate lectureship in management in a Department of Marketing and Management. What a contrast to philosophy!

**Jane:** Having been a secondary school teacher for many years I needed a change from marking, marking, teaching, teaching, and administration, administration. So, I completed my honours year and a PhD and switched to the tertiary sector, where it sometimes feels as though I am mostly marking, marking ... etc. When I am able to make time for research, my focus is on the representation of gender in film, fiction and popular culture. My PhD thesis offered a feminist poststructuralist critique of gender in the fiction of John Fowles and I continued work in a feminist interdisciplinary manner in my academic position in English literature and Women's and Gender Studies.

**Alison:** While my undergraduate degree was in agricultural economics, I always found the notion of 'rational man' pretty hard to digest. Working in the very 'masculine' meat industry in the 1980s first pricked my feminist consciousness, which when pursuing my doctoral studies in the 1990s evolved much further. My PhD was on the practice of affirmative action, and while I was in a regional university in a Department of Marketing and Management dominated by men (who were generally very supportive of me), there was always a sense of the marginal about my work. There were no more senior women in the department than me, let alone any writing about gender issues in management.

### **The collaborative group process**

As is apparent from the biographies above, we are a disparate group of women and at this point we should explain how we found each other. This may sound like we were gearing up for an introduction agency, and in fact we did respond to an advertisement. In this case, however, it was an ad across the university calling for academic staff interested in attending a five-day writing for publication workshop offered through the academic development unit and run by an external consultant, Robert Brown (Brown 1994/1995). As with all such workshops there is no such thing as a free lunch; rather, you had to turn up with an article that was well underway, and finish with a clear outline of a publishable paper. We were five of the fifteen participants in the workshop.

The structure of the workshop included sessions about expectations of academic writing and the structure of papers; free-writing (brain-dump) sessions; relationships between personality types and writing; analysing academic writing; drafting techniques; and responding to editors and referees. However the sessions that had the most immediate impact for us were the sessions on 'posters'. These posters were a series of eight questions or prompts (eg. *What is the question I am asking in this paper?*) which had to be answered succinctly in 25-50 words, and which acted as a test of communication of the ideas in the paper, as a start to the formal writing process and as a guide to the structure of the paper as a whole. These questions can be found in Brown (1994/1995) and in Murray (2005: 111). The workshop also illustrated the value of group work in writing. The posters were presented verbally by the authors (in five minutes) and then 15 minutes were given over to comments and questions from the audience, while another member acted as scribe. The audience was instructed to focus on the differences between the written and spoken word and between discrepancies between the questions and the answers. This was a very effective demonstration of the value of other perspectives, as well as good tool for sharpening arguments. It is this format that we maintained in the structure of our group.

Relatively soon after the workshop was finished, we decided to take up Robert Brown's suggestion that organising a writing group would be a productive way to continue. Initially there were two or three other members but they did not continue after the first couple of meetings. And more than ten years on, we continue as the same feminist five.

As part of the workshop we were profiled using the Myers-Briggs Indicator (Myers & Briggs Foundation 2006) to identify our individual strengths and weaknesses in writing. From this process it also became clear to us how different our personalities are. As it turns out we see this as one of the factors contributing to the success of our collaboration. We see and do things differently from one another: in our discussions we benefit from the multiple perspectives derived from our different disciplines.

Over the years, the process we have negotiated within our writing group is that we meet monthly and individuals present their own research for the scrutiny of the group. This scrutiny attends to the structure, clarity and focus of the paper being written rather than the content. Acting as educated lay readers, we bring our disciplinary approaches to bear on what we hear and read. This is not an unwieldy, free for all conversation but follows a discussion template adapted from the workshop and outlined in an earlier paper (Beck et al 2006).

### **The chilly climate**

That the current research climate is not necessarily conducive to female academics has been clearly canvassed in recent research by Dever (Dever 2006; Dever et al 2006). Research policies are predicated on the lone researcher and not on a model of collaborative interplay of ideas and outcomes. Publish or perish has long been a mantra in academic life, and the implementation of research policies such as the Research Quality Framework (RQF) in Australia,[1] and the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK has intensified the pressure. Individually authored, ostensibly academic, publications produced by the lone researcher are most highly rewarded in the current research-funding environment. Different, arguably more creative, forms of writing are not recognised in this paradigm. It is a paradigm based on gendered premises reflecting a masculinist perspective. This is consistent with a view of 'the individual' as described in the early modern period and most associated with the work of Rene Descartes whose maxim, 'I think therefore I am' (*cogito ergo sum*), envisages the individual thinker as a 'self-defining and self sufficient [subject] coded as male ... fully conscious to himself, in control of his actions, thoughts and meanings' (Cranny-Francis et al 2003: 10). This notion of the lone, male researcher is still targeted in feminist scholarly critiques of received research methods, for example, Frohlick (2002) and Pomponio (1999).

The RQF and RAE are predicated on the (male) researcher who pursues an academic career single-mindedly and without interruption. Women frequently combine a successful career with having primary responsibility for the family, and the resulting juggling act is not easy. Women are also more likely to have a break in their careers. Maternity leave and parental leave to care for young children are perhaps the most common reasons for a break in women's academic careers. They are, however, by no means the only reasons as women are often those called on to care for elderly parents. The operationalisation of the RQF and RAE makes no allowance for interruptions to academic careers. Indeed, women and maternity leave are perceived to pose 'a serious risk for department heads as they try to maximise their departmental scores. Even though the RAE pays lip-service to the researchers who take maternity leave, the accounting doesn't add up' (Birkhead 2007: 33). Moreover, a break in research has consequences that last longer than the period of the interruption because of the long lead-time in research (Birkhead 2007). Dever's study of the impact of research practices and policies on female academics' research careers shows that some have implemented strategies to lessen the impact of breaks in research, by securing funding for projects which will run through the period of maternity leave and continue after it (Dever et al 2006: 23). However, this is not always possible: female academics are often concentrated in areas that find it difficult to attract external funding (Dever 2006: 2).

Although it is imperative that the issue not be constructed so that women are seen as the 'problem' (Probert 2005), we female academics are under considerable pressure to reconcile work life demands while maintaining career momentum in research as well as teaching and administration. Our collaborative practice allows us to perform as required, but also derive support from traditional female gendered work practices. The traditionally female coded domain of the private is strategically employed to come up with products to meet demands of the public domain. What we have been doing is collaborative and multidisciplinary in process but our outcomes are individual. We are thus fulfilling the requirements of the external environment.

### **What makes the group successful?**

In writing this paper, we posed a series of questions to elucidate the factors contributing to the group's success. We wrote our answers and then discussed and edited them into the account that follows. Three key themes emerged from this process, as noted above: the value of working collaboratively; a shared feminist consciousness; and an openness to multidisciplinary. Our individual responses are noted below.

### ***Collaboration***

**Jane:** I sometimes think of the group as having the makings of a novel or film script in which women from different walks of life, or disciplinary spheres, come together at designated times - rather like the many tales in which such meetings are initiated by class reunions, weddings or christenings, and even at times of difficulty and loss. Such stories of the formation and operation of small groups of female friends are common in the novels and films of our formal and informal education.

One such well-known story is *Little Women*, the novel by Louisa May Alcott, 1917, and its various film versions, in which four sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, join with their mother, Marmee, in the face of adversity. It is still the case that when a group of women, bound by friendship and common ambition and adversity, meets in a bid to encourage and assist in their mutual safe passage through the labyrinthine research funding processes of an academic career, they are involved in that all too familiar, perhaps even formative, narrative of groups of 'sisters' appropriating and reworking that other literary call to arms, 'all for one and one for all'. In our narrative each member of the group has her own story to tell, and we come together, this time as a scholarly sorority and in a library, to achieve individual fulfilment and to emerge, from time to time, each as a heroine in her own 'write'.

In effect this reflects the type of collaboration that frequently came up when we reflected on the group's success.

**Wendy:** Collaboration for me is about belonging and it enables me to do things more easily, better, and differently. I seek out collaborative opportunities, as an antidote to feeling blocked or inadequate for both problem solving and creative activities. Collaboration in the sense of overcoming distance between the goal and the current position has been an effective way of achieving some outcomes for me.

The success of our writing group is that it makes explicit the kinds of alienation we feel in an academic world - alienation from colleagues, from disciplinary norms, from students and from the university institution. We are able to bring out the sense of feeling strange and distant in our shared conversations. And then the collaborative process strengthens us as individuals to break down the alienation, not by removing it, but by making it less threatening and sometimes more understandable. Through collaboration we learn about strategies around institutional/disciplinary obstacles, and by sharing we learn to co-operate in achieving disciplinary/institutional goals (such as increased publication outputs) but in ways that suit us.

**Josie:** It seems to me that all of us express concerns related to 'traditional' approaches to research and collaboration, and more broadly concerns about the ethics of the contexts in which we work. All of us have experienced inequities in workloads and have suffered because we do not belong to the 'in' group (Kjeldal, Rindfleish & Sheridan 2005).

One observation is that all of us pursue research that is to some extent marginalised. When issues to do with the future of the university are discussed, it is often the case that those working in disciplines (or sub-disciplines) where there is less than a perceived 'critical mass' of researchers and/or in areas that historically have not attracted large research grants are made to feel vulnerable. Is it any wonder that we value our collaboration as one way to deal with this situation?

**Kerry:** For me the collaborative process in the group has been invaluable because the others hone in on the blind spots in my argument. Regardless of why they are there, the collaborative process of analysing and discussing my responses to the template questions provides me with an insight into the leaps in my thinking, as well as to the assumptions that can abound but which are not necessarily conducive to clear, lucid writing and discussion. It also provides me with an insight into the way we write as individuals, which then allows me to reflect on my own practice.

Another common theme to emerge through our individual reflections on the success of the group is that of the importance of a shared feminist consciousness.

### *A shared feminist consciousness*

**Jane:** To me this means a woman being conscious of the ways in which being a woman impacts on her experiences and opportunities in life. By 'being a woman' I mean enacting or performing in a manner inflected by the education (formal and informal) experienced as a result of being identified as female and consequently gendered as feminine. It also means being aware that the prescriptions and proscriptions set down in this engendering process are cultural, not 'natural', and therefore can, and should be open to challenge and change. In addition, such an awareness or consciousness means recognising a commonality with other women and the possibility of the benefits of communal/collaborative actions and endeavours.

Long ago, Sneja Gunew (1990) wrote of the need for feminist scholars to engage in both critique and construct - to challenge and offer alternatives (in actions and words) to - the assumed and possibly patriarchal (and therefore potentially exclusionary) conventions, methodologies, and practices of the cultures within which they operate. I think our group does this in its united and individual questioning of scholarly conventions, and in its actual modes of operation that are different from (and perhaps resistant to) those conventions.

**Kerry:** For me it is the focus on gender and on women's experiences in much of our work. Not all of our work is



explicitly on women's experience, although we have all written on topics about women informed by feminist scholarship, but the ideas that come with this approach are applied to other topics. It is the focus on the relativities of truths, and the unpacking of a hierarchical order that relegates women, their concerns and their experience to second place. It is the emphasis on analysing the language with which women and men are depicted to reveal hidden assumptions and biases.

**Alison:** The feminist consciousness within the group has been significant for me because while I have generally relished my research into the gendered nature of the workplace, I have in recent years become more conscious that in choosing to focus my research in this domain, I have marginalised myself in a number of ways. Not only is my research not significant in the way that strategy or international business may be perceived to be within the norms of business schools, but I believe it is also seen by some of my male colleagues as me being in some ways antagonistic. That being a feminist in a business school may be hard work is not a new idea (Sinclair 2000). Nicholson (1996: 83) describes how academic women raising issues of gender can be seen as 'aggressive haridans', while Mavin and Bryans (2002), in relating their experiences as feminists working in business schools, describe how overwhelming it can be to be the gender voice in the face of the masculinist norms implicit in the operations of business/management.

In reflecting on the marginalisation of my subject matter within my School, I believe I would have been far more vulnerable to abandoning my research interests without the regular meetings of the group, where gender as a research focus was not seen to be outrageous. Rather, within this group of feminists, to focus on gender is the norm. The counterbalancing of the alienation I experience within my discipline with the openness to multidisciplinary feminist thinking of the group has been a major support.

**Wendy:** Feminist consciousness became significant because of my experiences in the 'chilly climate' of the workplace (Hall & Sandler 1984). It is a consciousness about having a woman-centred view, which doesn't just accept this chilly climate, but which seeks to understand why and how it has arisen and how it may be changed. It is reading about feminist ideas within my discipline particularly, and sometimes applying them to my own archaeology. It is about being conscious of the gendered dimensions of teaching, research and scholarship both implicitly and explicitly.

### ***Multidisciplinarity***

**Josie:** When the group was formed there was no conscious effort to identify a multidisciplinary group; nonetheless, I think that it is part of the 'glue' that binds the group together. While coming from quite different 'home' disciplines they are complementary - all humanities or social sciences based. Each of us is interested in qualitative research methods (for some in addition to quantitative methodologies).

Recognition of the value of multidisciplinary and openness to other perspectives provide a common lens through which we can contribute to the work of others within the group and for this reason I think we need to acknowledge the contribution this has made to the success of the group.

**Kerry:** Multidisciplinary has always been important because for me it represented a way of connecting with larger bodies of knowledge. More specifically, the writing group gave me exposure to different research paradigms and theoretical frameworks. While I might have read some of these, it is significantly different, and for me more useful, to hear and see how one of the writing group members uses a particular paradigm to address a problem.

Another important factor is that I take the group with me when I leave the meetings. When I rewrite a paper or develop an article discussed at a meeting, I hear the voices of the others. I think that here the different styles of the group's members make an important contribution: their personal styles as revealed by the Myers-Briggs personality types and their academic styles reflecting their disciplines. The fact that we have been trained in different disciplines is perhaps also significant even though in discussing our research we focus on the meta-aspects of question, answer and message. Our disciplinary differences give the group a productive and creative breadth of approach. Two members of the group are from more quantitative disciplines while another is from a discipline characterised by returning to the core concepts, and yet another from one in which the focus is at times on the meta-aspects of depictions and descriptions.

**Jane:** I am inclined to think that, to some extent, the mix of various personalities allows for a sort of 'universal' range of responses - perhaps able to anticipate some of the questions or resistances of the referees.

One of the things I find helpful is that I am writing for members of the group who come from a range of disciplines, because it is necessary for me to be very clear, to provide a background, to build a logical argument from base upwards without skipping steps on the basis of what is assumed knowledge in the discipline. This may assist in strengthening my case such that it can withstand the reservations (prejudices/ competing investments) of a same discipline readership.

**Alison:** For me, the role multidisciplinary plays in the group's success has two dimensions. In the first instance I think it positively affects how we interact with each other. Each of us is in some way seeking to transgress the boundaries and restrictions of existing paradigms; to contribute in some way to a non-reductionist social science. In rejecting the disciplinary constraints it seems that, individually, we open ourselves to more meaningful interaction in our meetings. If we were more tightly bound to the mainstream of our disciplines, we would not be able to engage in the interchanges about each other's work that characterise our meetings.

The second dimension concerns the breadth of knowledge I am exposed to when I share my work, and when I am contributing to the feedback to other members. That my writing peers are open to my non main(male)stream interests, in a way that many of my discipline peers don't seem to be, reflects their own openness to thinking beyond the boundaries of specific disciplines. The insights they contribute to my sense-making (Weick 1995) from their own broad interests expand my perspective. As such, there are clearly benefits to me from being part of the group from both a process and content perspective.

### **Final reflections on the benefits of being part of the group**

The group meetings have been very sustaining during periods when we have each had substantial administrative responsibilities. The benefit derived is not only due to the supportive nature of the group's meetings but also to the fact that it is rare in a competitive work environment like academe to know about the experiences of others. It is in fact a privilege to be given an insight into how others work and think, and how they deal with particular issues. Dealing with the meta-aspects of the issues individuals confront (for instance, applying for study leave, grants, promotions and dealing with difficult colleagues), our discussions range over many things during meetings. The experiences of the members in the group help to clarify whether the issues considered are individual or systemic. Together the group also offers creative responses. Analogously, group members have gained much from discussions about reconciling the competing demands of family and career, personal time and work time and many other topics relating to the intersection of work and 'othered' activities.

**Kerry:** Being able to discuss a referee's report with the other members of the group has proven to be very useful and empowering. The initial writing for publication workshop provided some guidelines on what editorial and referee comments really mean, and advice on how to respond to them to ensure a better chance of the revised version being accepted. We share our experiences in this respect and again derive benefit from a far broader perspective and larger pool of experience than each would have individually.

In responding to reviews, the group's support is extremely important if confronted by one of those vitriolic, personal reviews that feel like an attack on the writer rather than a reasoned evaluation of the research. Although they are not common, a report like this is upsetting and undermines confidence. The group process helps to put the criticism into perspective.

**Alison:** While we continue to write as individuals, the process of sharing the work with women who are sound scholars - where my definition of 'sound' is that I have confidence in their ability to articulate a reasoned argument, their understanding of the importance of structural coherence, that they are feminists and can laugh at the absurdity of academia too - enhances the process. It allows me the space for my writing to be exposed, without the risk of harsh, destructive criticism. Instead, the

feedback is always constructive. There is an openness that prevails even though we are critiquing each other's writing. There is no sense of competition between the writers, partly because each of us is writing in a different field and partly because we are confident that the process of giving our 'advice' to the others, while not necessarily immediately returned will, in the longer term, be reciprocated.

**Josie:** Yes, I agree. Our meetings are enjoyable and I also benefit from hearing about others' successes - a published paper, a promotion, a successful grant etc. I also feel that the group celebrates my successes too. Even when we share not so positive outcomes, the feeling of collegiality provides a buffer and I think this makes me better able to cope with negative comments from reviewers, for example. Over time, as our relationships deepened, it is not only our professional lives that are discussed and shared, the 'personal' has become important as well. The writers' group provides a space in which I can be 'me'. I feel safe, I can let my guard down without feeling threatened and can confess my feelings of insecurity and self-doubt about my work. The group provides a safe and supportive environment - it feels good.

I also attribute concrete outcomes to my participation in the group. I feel that my output is greater than it would have been if I were working in isolation and I am better able to carry out the roles I have taken on.

**Jane:** The group meetings are also a space for innovation - for floating new ideas and approaches, giving an argument a trial to see if it holds water, and testing it for clarity. And while critical questioning and practical support of work in progress is unconditionally offered within the group, platitudes and mere lip service to the provision of considered feedback is not.

**Kerry:** Others have also indirectly benefited from my involvement in the group. This flow-on benefit suggests that one of the significant factors in the group dynamic is the productivity and applicability of the outcomes in a range of contexts. My research students at honours and postgraduate level have benefited from my application of the general techniques of the group's discussions to their work. I have also found that the same techniques have helped me to mentor colleagues who have asked me to give feedback on their applications for promotion, for research or teaching grants.

**Wendy:** Our academic collaboration results in more papers being published by individuals in our group. In institutional terms the benefits of collaboration which have been noted in the literature are: greater intellectual creativity; higher productivity through mutual goals; an atmosphere for mentoring and role modelling; and an appreciation and recognition of achievement (Austin & Baldwin 1991). In individual terms Kennedy (1995: 31) identifies positive outcomes of friendship, intellectual growth and productive scholarship. However, in the academy, the humanities and social sciences fields are still more likely to privilege the individual author, rather than joint authorship (Kennedy 1995:

29). For example, recently a senior academic commenting on a promotion application in the humanities and social sciences observed that the academic had not published enough single authored papers. The myth of the lone and independent scholar is examined closely for humanities fields by Sullivan (1994), as an ideal with a long history, but one that is not actually achieved in practice. So the benefits for us (and for our university) of being part of the group echo the experiences of other scholars in the humanities and social sciences, whereby our writing process is collaborative, but the end product is individual.

**Josie:** In looking for an explanation of our success, I am drawn back to the six points we made in our 'Diva' paper (Beck et al 2006). The motivation to translate research into publications is a necessary condition for the success of our group, though not sufficient, and connects with a commitment to practice on a regular basis, which is also a necessary condition. While we all shared both the motivation to publish and a commitment to assist each other to be successful, the imperative to 'publish or perish' has added an extra dimension to our working lives. Moreover, all members of the group have taken on leadership roles and more responsibilities. The writers' group has provided an enjoyable forum for discussion and reflection on these higher expectations. In one way, what we do could be seen as subverting a regime that has been imposed upon us. We value our interactions and the outcomes they stimulate and facilitate, however, these outcomes also meet the organisational expectations of academics. We can relate with humour some of the challenges we face and reconceptualise them from a feminist perspective. Like all relationships, ongoing success requires time, commitment and caring. I think this is another essential dimension to our success. An ethic of care with its emphasis on context, relationships, mutual interdependence, emotional response and solidarity underpins our practice.

**Alison:** In fostering the relationships within the writers' group, we have had to allow for the changing life and work circumstances each of us have faced; taking on additional responsibilities in our academic schools, caring for family members, absences with sabbaticals etc. The shifting circumstances we have experienced over the decade, means that at different times, each of us was not always able to contribute directly to the group; but that has been accepted as part of being a member. In the early years of the group, this meant more explanation around our absences or lack of activity than is now the case. We now implicitly assume that whatever may be 'constraining' an individual, whether it relates to their own writing or their absences from meetings, will not be permanent; they will reconnect with the group.

As such, while our initial measures of success concerned the publications we were each enjoying, we have all become more appreciative of the broader benefits we experience from being part of the group. How the group sustains us all now (a 'soft' measure of success) is probably more valued than the numbers of publications we achieve (a 'hard' measure of success).

## Discussion and conclusion

An analysis of our individual responses pointed to a number of key themes: the value of working collaboratively in what can be an otherwise alienating environment and the personal satisfaction we gain from the particular form of collaboration we engage in; the importance of a shared feminist consciousness; and an openness to multidisciplinary paradigms. To what extent are these key themes found in other accounts of academic writing groups?

We have chosen to situate our group in relation to three empirical accounts of academic writing groups, as these comparative examples are similarly focussed on groups of academics (rather than postgraduate students), and on analysing the impact of the groups on the participants. The first is Morss and Murray's (2001) study of a 'Writing for Publication' program at a Scottish university. The study centred on a group of ten academics who participated in a six-month program (somewhat similar to the workshop we participated in), which was structured to include time for free writing, outlining, and feedback on drafts, in part from the group and in part from a 'study buddy' system of paired writers. It was not explicitly focussed on teaching writing 'skills' as such. The impact of the program was monitored carefully by a variety of measures including evaluating completed writing against goals, discussions, monitoring forms, questionnaires and focus groups. All members did achieve successful writing outcomes. The results showed that the most important impact was increased confidence in writing, and that the essential process in building confidence was group and pair discussion (Morss & Murray 2001: 49). The other impacts noted that activities such as goal setting, peer support, a structured approach and regular writing strategies also contributed to confidence building. So this study shows a similar focus on personal satisfaction and collaboration as key motivating factors for the successful writing group. However, the nature of multidisciplinary or shared worldviews was not explored in this research.

Lee and Boud's (2003) account of two writing groups at an Australian university looks more broadly at some of these issues. The two writing groups were a New Researchers group of ten academics, which lasted for two years, and an Extending Publication group, which regularly met with 15 people over a semester. The actual content of the groups' activities were determined by the groups and not precisely specified in this paper, but both aimed to increase writing for publication outputs through group practice. Perhaps these groups were less structured in format than our group. However, the evaluation process involved questionnaires and analysis of correspondence. Three general principles were drawn out from this research for the general success of writing groups: Mutuality; Normal Business; and Identity and Desire. Mutuality has in common with our key theme of collaboration the idea of a common project that is worked on together, but with differences accommodated and with reciprocity between the members. Normal Business was seen to be how the building up of expertise and know-how in writing became part of the working lives of the group members. This is not one of our key themes but is seen to be an additional benefit of our group work. Identity and Desire as a principle was seen by Lee and Boud as the positive and productive desire for change and to sustain impetus for overcoming fears about writing and research. Again this is not one of our key themes, but perhaps this issue could be explored further. The contributions of multidisciplinary or shared worldviews were not explicitly addressed in this research.

From an academic womens' perspective comes the paper of Grant (2006). This paper concerns a live-in retreat for academic women writers, which has been held annually in New Zealand since 1997, with about 18 participants for the week-long workshop. Although not strictly analogous to our monthly meeting

format, it does provide a point of comparison for our feminist group. The structure of this workshop is that of goal setting, concentrated writing in communal rooms, and a work in progress presentation required of each individual. Optional workshops on aspects of writing are also held each day. Again, this is a less structured approach than the one our group uses. Thirty-one questionnaires were analysed from women who had attended the retreats, with the questions being more about what happened rather than why, which is what we were interested in. The major findings from Grant's work were that the women increased their writing regularity and pleasure; that their sense of themselves as writers was increased; and that their research productivity was enhanced. These themes can also be seen in our writing group outcomes. Grant also brings out the importance of the women-only nature of the retreats as a reason for their success when she notes 'we (academic women) have often claimed that there is a need for culture change in universities away from the traditional individualism. The retreats are an example of such a deeply transgressive change' (2006: 494). As with our group, a shared tradition derived from feminist research is a factor in this writing group's success.

It seems our group shares with other analyses some common themes, such as mutuality and confidence building. However, in our group's experience the most important key impact has been the value of working collaboratively in what can be an otherwise chilly environment. This is what has been sustaining for ten years of practice. We also found unlike some other researchers, that our group identified multidisciplinary and a feminist worldview as particular themes for our group. There are still unanswered questions however about the processes of writing groups. Our case study and the contrast with other groups suggests that there is not one recipe for success, although it does seem clear that psychological, social and rhetorical processes are all involved (Murray 2005). Indeed the complexities of group interaction and individual motivation are apparent from our study, as well as the factors which might be most important to some groups will not be the same.

In the decade since our group's inception, the group process has not only been supportive but has also enabled us to sustain publication and confidence in our professional writing selves in an alienating research environment. Like many institutions across the world, we are currently undergoing a process of evaluating research outputs and quality. In this environment, collaboration is encouraged but funding flows to individual fields. Our group provides the benefits of collaboration but still allows us to deliver the outcomes in the form required by the institution.

Within this current environment it seems most useful to reflect and document our process as it may well be that others will wish to create similar groups. An additional application of our documenting of this process is the manner in which it might be adapted to quite different writing projects. Just as in our writing group, we have collaborated on processes such as the structuring of our arguments, so too a creative writing group may collaborate on the structuring and perhaps pacing and register of their narratives (Ede & Lundsford 1992; Gere 1987; Laird 2000). Creative writing groups do of course meet in various writing centres and associations, and seek to assist one another and still retain the originality of content in their texts, just as we do. Our articles, ranging across disciplines and discipline specific, are not uniform in content or style, what they have in common is a heightened clarity of purpose, and this could be adapted to other creative writing groups and programs. Rowena Murray's work (Murray 2005) provides a framework for teaching this type of approach.

## Endnotes

1. In January 2008, the RQF was jettisoned and a new research quality and evaluation system, the Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative (ERA), is being developed for implementation in 2009. The indicators for discipline clusters are being reviewed, but the essential thrust of the system is not likely to be markedly different. return to text

## List of works cited

Aitchison, C & A Lee 2006 'Research writing: problems and pedagogies', *Teaching in higher education* 11.3: 265-78 return to text

Austin, AE & RG Baldwin 1991 'Faculty collaboration, enhancing the quality of scholarship and teaching', *ASHE-ERIC higher education reports* 7 return to text

Beck, W, K Dunne, J Fisher, J O'Sullivan & A Sheridan 2006 '*A capella* and diva: a collaborative process for individual academic writing', *M/C journal* 9.2 return to text

Birkhead, T 2007 'Beware the grant-getting lottery', *The Australian*, 6 June: 33 return to text

Blaxter, L, C Hughes & M Tight 1998 'Writing on academic careers', *Studies in higher education* 23.3: 281-95 return to text

Boice, R 1997 'A program for facilitating scholarly writing', *Higher education research and development* 6.1: 9-20 return to text

Boud, D & A Lee 2005 'Peer learning as pedagogic discourse for higher education', *Studies in higher education* 30.5: 501-15 return to text

Brown, R 1994/1995 'Write right first time', *Literati newsletter* (special issue for authors and editors): 1-8 return to text

Chilly Collective (ed) 1995 *Breaking anonymity: the chilly climate for women faculty*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press return to text

Cotterill, P, C Hughes & G Letherby 2006 'Editorial: transgression and gender in higher education', *Studies in higher education* 31.4: 403-406 return to text

Cranny-Francis, A, W Waring, P Stavropoulos & J Kirkby 2003 *Gender studies: terms and debates*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan return to text

Dever, M 2006 'Fully flexible: research performance, professionalism and performativity. Paper presented at the *Change in climate: prospects for gender equity in universities* / ATN WEXDEV conference, Adelaide, April return to text

Dever, M, Z Morrison, B Dalton & S Tayton 2006 'When research works for women'. Project Report Melbourne: Monash University return to text

Ede, L & A Lundsford 1992 *Singular texts/plural authors, perspectives on collaborative writing*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press return to text

Frohlick, SE 2002 'You brought your baby to base camp? Families and field sites', *The Great Lakes Geographer* 9.1: 49-58 return to text

Gere, A Ruggles 1987 *Writing groups, history, theory and implications*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press return to text

Grant, BM 2006 'Writing in the company of other women: exceeding the boundaries', *Studies in higher education* 31.4: 483-95 return to text

Gray, B 1994 'Women in higher education: what are we doing to ourselves?', in S Davies, C Lubelska & J Quinn (eds), *Changing the subject: women in higher education*, London: Taylor and Francis, 75-88 return to text



- Gunew, S 1990 'Feminist knowledge: critique and construct', in S Gunew (ed), *Feminist knowledge: critique and construct*, London: Routledge, 13-35 return to text
- Hall, R & B Sandler 1984 'Out of the classroom: a chilly campus climate for women?', *Project on the status and education of women*, Washington: Association of American Colleges return to text
- Harris, M 1992 'Collaboration is not collaboration is not collaboration: writing center tutorials vs peer-response groups', *College composition and communication* 43.3: 369-83 return to text
- Holt, M 1993 'Knowledge, social relations and authority in collaborative practices of the 1930s and 1950s', *College composition and communication* 44.4: 538-55 return to text
- Kennedy, EL 1995 'In pursuit of connection: reflections on collaborative work', *American anthropologist* 97.1: 26-33 return to text
- Kjeldal, S, J Rindfleish & A Sheridan 2005 'Deal making and rule breaking: beyond the façade of equity in academia', *Gender and education* 17.4: 331-47 return to text
- Laird, H 2000 *Women co-authors*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press return to text
- Lee, A & D Boud 2003 'Writing groups, change and academic identity: research development as local practice', *Studies in higher education* 28.2: 187-200 return to text
- Martin, J 1994 'Methodological essentialism, false difference, and other dangerous traps', *Signs: journal of women in culture and society* 19.3: 630-57 return to text
- Mavin, S & P Bryans 2002 'Academic women in the UK: mainstreaming our experiences and networking for action', *Gender and education* 14.3: 235-50 return to text
- Morss, K & R Murray 2001 'Researching academic writing within a structured program: insights and outcomes', *Studies in higher education* 26.1: 35-52 return to text
- Murray, R 2005 *Writing for academic journals*, Maidenhead: Open University Press return to text
- Myers & Briggs Foundation 2006 *Myers Briggs type indicator at work*, Myers & Briggs Foundation, <http://www.myersbriggs.org/> (accessed 27 October 2006) return to text
- Nicholson, P 1996 *Gender, power and organisations: a psychological approach*, London: Routledge return to text
- Pompinio, A 1999 'Review of Fieldwork and families: constructing new models for ethnographic research by Julianna Flinn; Leslie Marshall & Jocelyn Armstrong', *Pacific Affairs* 72.2: 310-12 return to text
- Probert, B 2005 "'I just couldn't fit it in": gender and unequal outcomes in academic careers', *Gender, work and organization* 12.1: 50-72 return to text
- Sikes, P 2006 'Working in a "new" university: in the shadow of the Research Assessment Exercise?', *Studies in higher education* 31.5: 555-68 return to text
- Sinclair, A 2000 'Teaching managers about masculinities: are you kidding?' *Management learning* 31.1: 83-101 return to text
- Sullivan, PA 1994 'Revising the myth of the independent scholar', in SB Reagan, T Fox & D Bleich (eds), *Writing with: new directions in collaborative teaching, learning and research*, Albany: State University of New York Press return to text
- Weick, KE 1995 *Sensemaking in organizations*, Sage: Thousand Oaks return to text
- Yancey, K & M Spooner 1998 'A single good mind: collaboration, cooperation and the writing self', *College composition and communication* 49.1: 45-62 return to text

**Wendy Beck** is an associate professor in Archaeology at the University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia. Her research interests include Australian archaeology and World Heritage places. She does interdisciplinary research in place studies.

**Kerry Dunne** is a professor and Academic Director for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the University of New England. Her current research interests are gender questions in German literature and film, and online language learning.

**Josie Fisher** is a senior lecturer in the School of Business, Economics and Public Policy at the University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia. Her teaching and research focuses on applied ethics, social responsibility and gender issues.

**Jane O'Sullivan** is a senior lecturer in the School of Arts at the University of New England, and her research interests include the representation of gender in film, fiction and television drama.

**Alison Sheridan** is a professor in the School of Business, Economics and Public Policy, University of New England. Her research publications have predominantly been around women's experiences of the workforce.

---

## TEXT

Vol 12 No 2 October 2008

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au