Mount Holyoke College

From the Selected Works of Mary Deane Sorcinelli

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The Faculty Writing Place: A Room of Our Own

Mary Deane Sorcinelli, University of Massachusetts - Amherst
Peter Elbow, University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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this year marks the 15th year of a program called "Professors as Writers" at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. The first meeting was a half-day workshop at the end of a spring semester to help faculty launch the writing they wanted to do over the summer. The program has grown over the years and now includes monthly retreats, as well as a day-long session in May. We find a pleasant, usually off-campus room and invite any faculty member who wants to get away from office and home into a space where everyone else is writing.

The process is simultaneously social and private. And it was in one of these sessions that we started this co-authored article—sitting in the same room, each writing our own first thoughts. We've decided to use this approach for our product as well as our process. In what follows we each present our separate thoughts in parallel texts, side by side.

In the page on the left, Mary Deane, an associate provost for faculty development and a writer, reflects on what it takes to create and sustain this writing space and a writing community. On the right, Peter, a teacher of writing and a writer, reflects on how his theories of writing apply to a faculty retreat like this—and what it's useful to say and not to say. We hope this dual perspective will give readers a richer sense of this program.
MARY DEANE

It's a late-October day in Amherst, and I'm sitting in an open, light room at an off-campus conference center. I'm here as an organizer and participant in a one-Friday-a-month faculty-development program called "Professors as Writers." I forgot my computer mouse when I left home this morning so I'm writing with a pen, listening to the click-click of other colleagues' fingers on their keyboards. The sound is more comforting than distracting, encouraging me to keep my pen moving and get some writing done.

This is exactly the purpose of "Professors as Writers": to provide a quiet, comfortable working space for faculty, free of the distractions of office or home. It is also a common space, predicated on the notion that faculty will be more apt to do the solitary work of writing if they surround themselves with other writers pursuing the same goal. Our differences are many—gender, rank, discipline, style and genre—but in this time and space, writing is the tie that binds us.

"Professors as Writers" began 15 years ago to help faculty write more productively and successfully in their professional lives. Following the success of the first half-day, Peter volunteered to help establish an ongoing program. He had been involved in a long-running series of writing retreats for teachers in the schools and found it important work. Peter has facilitated the writing retreat ever since, and it has been consistently over-subscribed. I wish every faculty-development program could have a patron like Peter—a senior faculty member and a recognized writer on teaching, learning, and writing who generously volunteers his time and talent.

The program has evolved over the years as we've shifted from offering workshops to offering space to help faculty work on their scholarly writing. We've morphed from a half-day workshop to four winter-term sessions (one day-long and three evening sessions) to a day-long retreat in June (to help faculty get a jump-start on their summer writing) to the current configuration—a day-long June retreat followed by a once-a-month, day-long session during the academic year. We've also expanded campus partners to include the Office of Faculty Development, the UMass-Amherst Libraries, the Center for Teaching, the Offices of the Vice Provost for Research, and the Writing Program.

How it works is simple. At the start of each semester, we send out a flyer and emails, inviting all instructors to sign up for the dates and times that work for them—a single session, all four sessions, half days, or full days. We've accommodated up to 50 participants at the June retreat, but space for the monthly sessions is limited to about 15 participants—first come, first served. We ask faculty to block out the time on their calendars because we've discovered that once they pencil the commitment into a calendar, the time is less likely to be stolen by something else. We send a reminder; faculty members show up, pick a desk, and plug in their laptops. Peter always opens our summer retreat and stops in at monthly sessions if he can. After a few words from Peter, we are off and writing. There is a nook outside the room for a coffee pot, trading manuscripts, and socializing.

The organizing part of "Professors as Writers" is not quite so simple. Peter likes to call this a "non-program," but I have to remind him that actually it takes a good deal of planning and arranging. Someone needs to find a space with enough light and outlets, reserve it, publicize the series, take reservations, show up, brew the coffee, bring the muffins and cookies, and remember those extra power cords.

Also, finding a consistent home for the program has not been easy. We started at a meeting room in our campus center and quickly decided we wanted a space off campus. Faculty, especially early-career faculty, tell us that when they write on campus—or at home—there are too many distractions. The department chair stops by to check in, the napping baby wakes up, the laundry begs to be folded. But when they go to a space off campus to write, writing is what they do.

So over the years we've tried various venues—a colonial inn in town, a retreat center at a nearby woman's college. Most recently, we rented a meeting space in a new hotel minutes from campus, which had space for 14 large tables and windows with a calm view of trees and grass. Finally, much to our delight, this semester we are able—through the collaboration of the Office of Faculty Development and our libraries—to initiate "The Faculty Writing Place" in a lovely space on the 16th floor of the W. E. B. Du Bois Library. It offers lots of windows and light, beautiful views of the campus, and a quiet carpeted space with comfortable writing tables and chairs. It will be open nearly 24/7. We are also going to have available an experienced editor for some one-to-one coaching for early-career faculty.

While we love the idea of an writing space that's always there, we don't want that to fully replace what we have now, which is a sense of special occasion. We still plan to offer special sessions that will emphasize the strong points of the program to date: Faculty members coming together, Faculty members getting down to the hard work of writing. A slightly celebratory atmosphere.
PETER

Professors write things. If they don't write things, they don't get to be professors. Yet few professors experience themselves as "writers."

In our culture, the roles of professor and writer are interestingly different. Professors talk, do research, go to conferences, teach, figure things out, reason, analyze, argue. And it's become central to the role of professor to distrust language. In the last century, the entire intellectual and academic world took what is sometimes called the "linguistic turn." Academics became preoccupied with the realization that we don't see things in themselves—we see words or concepts: "chairs" or "tables" or "electrons" or "fairness." It's not just that everything comes with a word attached; everything is a word—that is, an instance of a word. (This seems to be a kind of anti-Platonic view of reality, yet I wonder if people are sufficiently embarrassed that it has a certain Platonic odor.) So it turns out that a central job of thinkers in all fields is to "interrogate" the word-packages that everything comes wrapped in.

This is one reason why so many academics love not just to argue but also to disagree. They have to get good at distrusting sentences. What the book says may be very impressive, what the colleague says may be very persuasive, and what the student says may be very smart. But there's every chance that there's a serious hidden flaw in what the book, colleague, or student says—a flaw that will be missed by less vigilant readers. Besides, if you can't find a mistake in what someone else wrote, you probably won't have anything to write yourself.

Ah, but the writing. It keeps not happening. When an academic writes, she knows that every sentence she writes—every word!—can be attacked and found wanting by others in her field. Often she even knows who will do the attacking. This can make writing painful and slow. We're tempted to build steel-plated qualifications and hedges into every sentence so that it can withstand every attack. But this makes it hard to write—and it's not too good for readers either.

What is a writer? A writer is someone who loves to put words down on paper or screen—even if the process is hard or anxiety-laden. "Scribblers" is what writers were called in the eighteenth century—and scribble is what writers do. If you want to be a writer, it helps to trust language. You don't get far unless you are willing to step inside a set of words and take a ride in them—not just stand outside and kick the tires. Most of the words won't be right at first, but you still have to be willing to entrust your weight to them. Later on, you can make them better, more precise—but not unless you take the risk of at least temporary trust. Listen to the distinguished poet and essayist William Stafford on this point in Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation (1978):

Any reasonable person who looks at water, and passes a hand through it, can see that it would not hold a person up. ... But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any prejudgments about the specific gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations—will result in creative progress. Writers are persons who write; swimmers are (and from teaching a child I know how hard it is to persuade a reasonable person of this)—swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence.

Mary Deane and I are writing about a program that's so simple, so minimal, that really it's almost a non-program. That's what's great about it. Nothing but a room and a time—also coffee, tea, cookies, and sometimes lunch. But there's something else: It's a chance to be away from the office and the phones and the email and inhabit the same room with other people who are trying to get things written. One more thing: There's no talking! (Just short whispered conversations in the corner or outside the room). How amazingly unprofessorial to have no public discussion or dialogue. (Of course lunch is very sociable.) Suddenly this minimalism is not so minimal. It's a way to be stuck away from things—towards the goal of being unstuck.

Mary Deane invited me to start these sessions with a few words, and I soon learned to keep it to five minutes, sometimes less. I pretty much don't talk about what I've just written—about "professor," "writer," "distrust of language." If I did, it might derail us into what always tempts professors: discussion. At every session I simply try to repeat the same simple message: "We don't get much uninterrupted writing time in a room full of allies like this. What's most precious is to get lots of words down on paper." Of course some people arrive with a draft of a manuscript and spend the day revising. I've done that; it's great. But I always stress that these days are particularly
I could never quite define what I especially liked about the feel of a “Professors as Writers” session until I signed up recently for a beginning yoga class. In the same way that yoga promises to stretch one’s physical muscles, freewriting can help us relax our writing muscles. Yoga, too, offers a unique mix of private and communal space. You arrive, nod to the other students if you want, take your mat, find an open space, and get some stretching and toning done. You can smile, say hello, chat at a break if you want—but you don’t need to. You can work out alone or in a group of people. There are no expectations to talk about the office or national politics or the last book you read. Both a writing space and yoga offer environments that encourage a quiet camaraderie free of forced collegiality.

Since we’ve been at this for over a decade, what have we learned along the way? I can offer six general lessons that might have value for other campuses.

**Keep it simple.** You don’t need a lot of talking, presenting, or sharing. A key strategy for helping faculty become more effective and productive writers is the setting aside of structured time and space for writing. *Focus on opportunity, rather than remediation.* Faculty members, like anyone else, are reluctant to admit that they might need support in their work. Writing together can counter the recurring inner doubt that affects not just professors but professional writers too: “This time, I won’t be able to write it.” But when everyone is sitting there writing, we’re buoyed by the feeling, “Well, if they can just write down words and not sweat it so much, then so can I.” Sometimes there’s a palpable feeling of concentration in the air—shared intensity and attention and involvement—and it can carry people along even when they feel tired or discouraged.

To go to a writing space is not a threat to one’s reputation—rather, it can contribute to a faculty member’s sense of self and public image as a serious writer and continuing learner.

**Affirm the integration of scholarship and teaching.** Too often academe sets up a teaching-versus-research dichotomy. Professors-as-writers programs can support the natural and positive connections between scholarship and teaching. Our faculty work on a wide range of manuscripts: outlines, articles, book chapters, lectures, class assignments, and, in one case, sermons. And they report gaining confidence not only in their writing but also in helping students learn to write, especially by modeling the use of freewriting and a “writing space” in their own courses.

**Encourage the participation of all faculty, but especially early-career faculty.** One unexpected outcome of the program has been its capacity to support pre-tenure faculty in developing productive habits in research and teaching. For example, young women faculty have reported that prior to signing on for the writing space, they struggled to start or finish writing at home, particularly if that home included young children. Two such participants came each month one year, and at the end of the year they reported finishing a chapter and an article, respectively. One likened the space to “a refuge” and the other (with a bow to Virginia Woolf) to “a room of my own.”

**Link the notions of academic work and community.** Especially at a large institution, faculty have few links with colleagues in other disciplines that are not based on doing the business of the institution, such as sitting on committees. Professors-as-writers programs create a sense of intellectual stimulation and community that help break down the isolation of many faculty as scholars and teachers. In evaluating the program, many of the participants report that one of its most important outcomes is this rhythm of its own. We had just the right balance between sustained periods of solitude and stimulating group interaction.”

A review of the retreat demonstrates its success. All participants have testified to its impact, and a majority of them have made their writing public. Future improvements will include processes to determine which candidates are apt to gain the most from this intensive editing support. Professor/writers who demonstrate commitment and promise and are new to publishing must retain the focus.

—Nancy Randall directs the Malaspina Teaching and Learning Centre and published an article drafted during a Blue Pencil Retreat.

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**Blue Pencil Retreats at Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC**

For the past three years, the Malaspina Research and Scholarly Activity Office has organized Blue Pencil Retreats to encourage faculty members as they build their writing capacities. Funded by a generous faculty member who donated the profits of his best-selling environmental CD to encourage faculty publication, the retreat is named for the blue pencil that editors use when commenting on drafts. An oceanfront resort provides a mix of reflective and social spaces and frees participants from the tyranny of office schedules. Cell phones are verboten, and the only blackberries allowed are those picked from the wild brambles on the rural roads.

A panel of previous participants selects three faculty members for the retreat, based on samples of their writing and their proposals to polish publishable work. An academic editor, also involved in the selection to ensure that he or she can meet the participants’ needs, dedicates three days to inspiring, critiquing, and affirming their writing. The editor facilitates a balance among introspective writing time, focused editing sessions, group critique, and social interaction. As one participant noted, “My experience at the retreat reaffirmed for me that writing has a life and
valuable for drafting and exploring, and that revising or feedback can happen later.

After lunch I mention that people can share some of what they’ve written if they can find someone else who wants to do the same. If so, I suggest just reading the words aloud to see how they sound—how they feel in the mouth—not pressing for feedback on a day like this. Besides, the listener probably doesn’t know your field. The main favor people can do for each other is to listen; then at the end they may say, “Thank you” or, at most, tell what they found most clear and interesting.

This is the reader-catalyst that helps keep up the momentum of writing. But in fact, most people use the afternoon for writing too, rather than spending time sharing their work. Folks begin to drift off at some point after three o’clock, and we close up at four. The point of the day is that we’re professors and we’re writing—and the less theory, the better.

Here’s some more of what I don’t say. When I first started teaching writing decades ago, most people thought it was odd to ask the whole class to sit silently and just write for 10 minutes or longer. “Take out your pens ...”—those are dreaded words in most people’s memories. I remember from grammar school and high school that the only time the teacher got us all writing was if we had misbehaved. (“I will not throw spitballs. I will not ...”), or if there was a test, or if he had a hangover (he would put his head down on his desk while we wrote).

In college, no professor ever asked us to write in class except on exams. The feeling was, “We’re serious adults. We’ve already done our reading, we’ve already thought deeply about it. During this short time together, we should discuss, have dialogue, learn from each other. We can write later when we’re alone.”

But being someone who had to drop out of graduate school on my first try because I couldn’t write—and (for that reason?) became a teacher of writing—I learned to take those dreaded words and make them cheerful:

Take out your pens (or laptops) and just write. Keep writing without stopping. Explore your thoughts. Keep going. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar, don’t worry about where to start, don’t worry about the reactions of colleagues in your field. Trust your mind, trust your language, trust your pen and see where it wants to go.

This is “freewriting,” which has become a staple in my teaching, but not something I peddle during these retreats. Pure freewriting is an exercise in private writing, not a way to produce a public finished product. It’s a way to limber up our writing limbs, to learn to trust that words and thoughts are always there at our fingertips—at least if the context is supportive.

But there is something I call the freewriting muscle that I often do talk about—although not usually by that name. It’s a crucial cognitive and linguistic ability that everyone has—an ability that most people demonstrate every day in speaking.

It’s the ability to utter words and thoughts about the topic at hand entirely without mentally rehearsing them beforehand. Few people do that when they write. “Unplanned language” sounds like what our teachers all warned us against, but it’s very precious when we are trying to write.

This freewriting gear—and it’s interesting to me that it’s our speaking gear—is very usable when engaged in writing a serious and high-stakes scholarly article, dissertation, or book.

If we’re willing to try out uttered, unrehearsed words on the page, it helps us notice a simple fact I always do explicitly stress: that even though we’re engaged in writing a high-stakes piece that will come in for fierce criticism, no living creature will see our early exploratory drafts except ourselves. We often write as though the police (or our colleagues) were about to break down the door and rip the text out of our hands.

But since this isn’t going to happen, it’s possible to get a lot of words down fast and not spend so much time sitting staring at the ceiling or trying to find the right word. The wrong word will usually do for now to keep our train of thought moving. (The wrong word is often the only word we have with a string attached to the inchoate idea we’re trying to articulate. If we throw away the wrong word, we throw away our only string. When I know I can’t find the right words, sometimes I’ll use a question mark or write it in ALL CAPS.)

So I’m not trying to get all these faculty members to do actual freewriting exercises (although I suggest them when people speak to me individually about feeling stuck or in pain about how slowly they write). But I’m trying to get the freewriting spirit into the air. Our goal is to provide a setting where hard-thinking, hard-assed, skeptical professors can get some momentum in their
integration of solitude and community. For example, a pre-tenure faculty member in journalism reported having spent his prior career as a journalist typing in a press room full of reporters. When he became an academic, he found writing alone to be too quiet and lonely. In a communal space—the quiet punctuated by the tap, tapping of his colleagues’ computer keys, whispered greetings, the door opening and closing—his writing was unblocked.

Use the talent, perspectives, and expertise of your own faculty. In our first campus-wide program, we brought in an outside consultant with expertise in writing. This session was an unqualified success, providing valuable stimulation and insights. At the same time, over the years we’ve had at least as great success with the use of local talent. Campuses might look to a writing-center director or a senior faculty member who is known as an accomplished writer. In fact, this program seems different than a number of faculty-development programs in the sense that the expertise is in the participants, not in an external speaker or consultant. It seems a more organic experiment.

These six lessons reveal how central writing is to academic life, how important it is to help faculty as writers to do their best work, and how powerful a force collegiality can be to such an endeavor.

The Visible Knowledge Project’s Writing Residency

The Visible Knowledge Project (VKP), hosted at Georgetown University from 2000 to 2005, fostered the scholarship of teaching and learning among 70 faculty from 15 U.S. institutions. The project allowed faculty to pursue classroom investigations about student learning, analyze evidence of that learning, and publicly document their findings. In fall 2004, the VKP launched its first writing residency—four days dedicated to supporting faculty in documenting what they had learned in order to share it in article form with peers in their discipline and others involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning. By June 2005, VKP had hosted nine residencies for 38 participants. Four articles have been published, with many more pending.

The impetus for the residencies stemmed from several needs: to support faculty in analyzing student learning, to document these insights in writing, to collect and publish this knowledge, and to create new forms of cooperative practice around the scholarship of teaching and learning. The residency allowed faculty the time to focus on their articles, with the simple goal being to leave with 15 pages of an article and a plan for its completion. Grant funding supported travel, accommodation, and meals during the weekend.

Each residency included six participants and three facilitators—VKP staff and experienced practitioners of research into teaching and learning. Participants prepared by writing a short draft article, reading each other’s initial drafts, and reading a sample article on teaching and learning. The opening discussion centered on this article as a means to examine characteristics of documenting scholarship in teaching and learning. “How much evidence is enough and what kind of evidence will be persuasive or engaging?” and “What voice is most appropriate for this type of writing?” were recurring questions, as it proved challenging for participants to engage in a form of scholarship outside of their field of expertise.

Facilitators encouraged participants to start with what they found most interesting about their evidence of student learning and to rely on their disciplinary skills to interpret, explain, and tell the story of that evidence. The remaining days alternated between ample writing time and brief group feedback sessions.

The VKP Writing Residency helped faculty make progress in their writing by balancing unstructured writing time with structured collaboration. This process could be adapted for communities of faculty engaged in professional development or investigations into student learning.

—Susannah McGowan is the assistant director for curriculum design at the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship at Georgetown University.