Pick-n-Mix Model of Writers' Groups

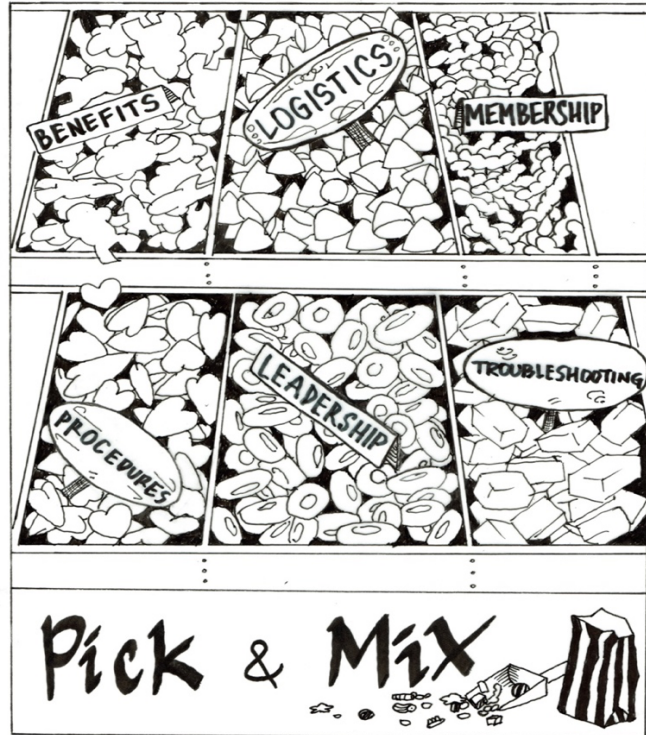

Illustration by Ed Shima 2023

Haas, S.(2023). Meeting Needs: A model for writers' group sustainability. EAPRIL Conference 2022 proceedings.

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Murray, R. (2017). Ebook: How to write a thesis. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

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Structuring Your Writing Time

- **B**rief
  - Goal-setting
    - task goals
    - process goals
    - over-riding goal is to stay seated, stay working (or at least *pretend* to work so you aren't a distraction for others)
  - Predict distractions or possible stuck points
  - Pre-emptive Strategies
- **F**ocus
  - Be aware of your writing process
  - be aware of distractions
    - distraction ticks (record when you become distracted)
    - parked thoughts (write down the thoughts that are distracting you)
- **D**ebrief
  - Reflect on the Focus time
    - to what extent did you meet your task/process goals
    - what did you learn from this
    - what can you take forward to future writing sessions
- **B**reak
  - Get some fresh air
  - Get some natural light
  - Get some movement

miro

My BFDB Model (or GSD model) was inspired by and adapted from the work of Rowena Murray (esp 2009)

Murray, R. (2017). Ebook: How to write a thesis. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Murray, R. (2014). 'Snack'and'Binge'writing: editorial for Journal of Academic Development and Education. The Journal of Academic Development and Education, (2), 5-8.

Murray, R., & Newton, M. (2009). Writing retreat as structured intervention: margin or mainstream?. Higher Education Research & Development, 28(5), 541-553.

With continued data collection/analysis, the model continues to evolve. Earlier versions of the model published in:

Haas, S., De Soete, A., & Ulstein, G. (2020). Zooming through Covid: Fostering safe communities of critical reflection via online writers' group interaction. Double Helix, 8. (Hamden)

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EAPRIL 2022
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

EAPRIL Conference
23 - 25 November 2022
Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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PREFACE

EAPRIL is …

EAPRIL is the European Association for Practitioner Research on Improving Learning. The association promotes practice-based and practitioner research on learning issues in the context of formal, informal, non-formal, lifelong learning and professional development with the aim to professionally develop and train educators and, as a result, to enhance practice. Its focus entails learning of individuals (from kindergarten over students in higher education to workers at the workplace), teams, organisations and networks.
More specifically

- Promotion and development of learning and instruction practice within Europe, by means of practice-based research.
- To promote the development and distribution of knowledge and methods for practice-based research and the distribution of research results on learning and instruction in specific contexts.
- To promote the exchange of information on learning and instruction practice, obtained by means of practice-based research, among the members of the association and among other associations, by means of an international network for exchange of knowledge and experience in relation to learning and instruction practice.
- To establish an international network and communication forum for practitioners working in the field of learning and instruction in education and corporate contexts and develop knowledge on this issue by means of practically-oriented research methods.
- To encourage collaboration and exchange of expertise between educational practitioners, trainers, policy makers and academic researchers with the intent to support and improve the practice of learning and instruction in education and professional contexts.
- By the aforementioned goals the professional development and traning of practitioners, trainers, educational policy makers, developers, educational researchers and all involved in education and learning in its broad context are stimulated.

Practice based and Practitioner research

Practice-based and practitioner research focuses on research for, with and by professional practice, starting from a need expressed by practice. Academic and practitioner researchers play an equally important role in the process of sharing, constructing and creating knowledge to develop practice and theory. Actors in learning need to be engaged in the multidisciplinary and sometimes trans-disciplinary research process as problem-definers, researchers, data gatherers, interpreters, and implementers.

Practice-based and Practitioner research results in actionable knowledge that leads to evidence-informed practice and knowledge-in-use. Not only the utility of the research for and its impact on practice is a quality standard, but also its contribution to existing theory on what works in practice, its validity and transparency are of utmost importance.

Context

EAPRIL encompasses all contexts where people learn, e.g. schools of various educational levels, general, vocational and professional education; organisations and corporations, and this across fields, such as teacher education, engineering, medicine, nursing, food, agriculture, nature, business, languages, … All levels, i.e. individual, group, organisation and context, are taken into account.

For whom

Practitioner researchers, academic researchers, teachers, teachers educators, professional trainers, educational technologists, curriculum developers, educational policy makers, school leaders, staff developers, learning consultants, people involved in organisational change and innovation, L&D managers, corporate learning directors, academics in the field of professional learning and all who are interested in improving the learning and development of praxis.

How

Via organising the annual EAPRIL conference where people meet, exchange research, ideas, projects, and experiences, learn and co-create, for example via workshops, training, educational activities, interactive sessions, school or company visits, transformational labs, and other opportunities for cooperation and discussion. Via supporting thematic sub communities 'Clouds', where people find each other because they share the same thematic curiosity. Cloud coordinators facilitate and stimulate activities at the conference and during the year. Activities such as organizing symposia, writing joined projects, speed dating, inviting keynotes and keeping up interest/expertise list of members are organised for cloud participants in order to promote collaboration among European organisations in the field of education or research, including companies, national and international authorities. Via newsletters, access to the EAPRIL conference presentations and papers on the conference website, conference proceedings, regular updates on cloud meetings and activities throughout the year, access to Frontline Learning Research journal, and a discount for EAPRIL members to the annual conference.

More information on the upcoming 2023 Conference as well as some afterglow moments of the 2022 Conference can be found on our conference website http://www.eapril.org.

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MEETING NEEDS: A MODEL FOR WRITERS' GROUP SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Writers' groups have been found to offer many potential benefits to academic writers at all levels. A problem facing those who want to start up writers' groups however, is that there is no standard recipe for how a group should function: writers' groups can exist in many shapes, colours and sizes. While this lack of absolutes offers adaptability, the lack of a precise 'how-to' can mean that not all writers' groups function as well as hoped. Some groups might prosper for years, while others that begin with a great deal of enthusiasm, might quickly die out. To examine the question of what makes writers' groups sustainable, or not, audio recordings from writing retreats, writers' logs from PhD students in the natural science, individual correspondence, and focus group recordings were used. Reasons group members specifically gave for continuing in their writers' groups, or deciding to leave, were isolated and analysed. The results suggest that if group members' needs are being met, the groups will flourish (for as long as members need them); on the other hand, if members' needs are not being met, members will leave, and the group will likely fizzle out. Four categories of needs were identified: logistical needs; purpose/procedural needs; safety needs, and the need for mutual support. Using the results of the analysis and an existing model for starting writers' groups, a model for sustainable writers' groups was derived. The model is being tested and adapted; a preliminary evaluation suggests that it may function well as a flexible recipe for setting up writers' groups that are more likely to flourish than fizzle.

WRITERS' GROUPS: BENEFICIAL TO WRITERS, BUT HARD TO KNOW HOW TO DO 'EM

There is by now a substantial body of research indicating that writers' groups offer many potential benefits for academic writers of all levels. People "writ[ing] in social spaces" (Murray 2014), whether in writers' groups or on writing retreats, have long been conceptualized as communities of practice, which have been found to, among other things, provide emotional safety for community members (Badenhorst et al., 2019; Thesen, 2014), and open a space for critical reflection (Haas et al, 2020; Kaufhold & Yencken, 2021). Writers' group members find that they have increased output, fewer feelings of isolation, and better written products (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Elbow, 1998; Kornhaber et al., 2016). As the benefits are becoming increasingly well-known, writers' groups and retreats should, and are, becoming increasingly mainstream (Murray, 2009; Déri et al., 2022).

No One-Size-Fits-All Writers' Group: A double-edged sword

While there has been plentiful research revealing the benefits of writers' groups, and while there has thus far been none indicating that writers' groups pose drawbacks to writers, a known problem is that writers' groups can exist in so many shapes and sizes that there is no one set recipe for establishing and maintaining a group that will work for everyone. While this lack of an absolute offers the advantages of flexibility and adaptability, it can also mean that people who want to initiate their own groups might run into trouble if they are 1) at a loss regarding where and how to start, or 2) if they set up a group that might not function in a sustainable way.

In an earlier attempt to address the first problem (knowing how to get started), a "Pick & Mix" model was developed (Haas 2014). This model put forth the myriad ways writers' groups could vary, and suggested that if writers

a) *knew* that there was no *one* recipe they had to follow, and they
b) knew about the many different elements that could be mixed together, as it suited them, and they
c) tried out a few of those elements so they could experience what it was they wanted, they could then set up custom writers' groups that suited them, resting assured that they were not 'doing it wrong'.

After several years of using the Pick-n-Mix model to help PhD writers successfully *set up* their own writers' groups, but subsequently watching some of these groups quickly fizzle out, while others flourished for years, it became apparent that while this approach might help with some of the barriers to getting a writers' group started, it did not seem to satisfactorily address issues of sustainability.

WHY DO SOME WRITERS' GROUPS FLOURISH WHILE OTHERS FIZZLE?

Since 2009, I have run my Writer Development (WD) course for a mixture of master's students, PhD students, post-docs, and faculty members. The WD courses are "guided writing retreats"[12] that offer writing time interspersed with writing workshops. One of the workshops is devoted to helping delegates set up their own writers' groups. They set up and participate in these groups as part of the course requirements or recommendations (requirements for students; recommendations for faculty members). Following Girgensohn (2010) It is required or recommended that participants meet in groups (either virtually or in-person) at least twice, for at least two hours each time.

As was hoped, many of the writers' groups continued to function well beyond the minimum 4-hour course requirement. Some have been lasting years after the course has been finished, consistently recruiting new members as older members completed their theses and moved on. However, there were some groups that did die out after they had put in the compulsory (or recommended) four hours of writers' group time. While there were more groups that continued on than died out, it is still relevant to know what factors contribute to the difference. Answers were sought in data that had been accumulating for 15+ years of social-writing-related work. In the spring of 2020, Covid 19 provided the gift of time necessary to examine data that had long lain dormant.

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[12] A "guided writing retreat" is the name I give to a retreat that uses Murray and Newton's (2009) "structured retreat" but also includes writing workshops.

The Informants: Voices from writers writing together

In addition to the WD courses described above, I have been leading or been a "start-up leader" (Haas 2014) for writers' groups of undergraduates, master's students, PhD students and faculty members since 2002. The data used in this study have come, with permission, from all of these sources. Some of the participants of the writers' groups and retreats kept writers' logs, which include reflections and general thoughts about writing and writers' groups. Explicit permission was given by 1432 writers for their writers' logs to be used for research-related purposes. In addition to the reflective writing from participants, audio-recordings of group discussions in writers' groups, and on retreats, as well as the debriefs at the ends of the writing retreats were considered. While explicit permission was given from all participants for all audio recordings, there were a few participants who were uncomfortable that the recordings be used for research, or other times when permission was not specifically sought to use the recordings for research-related purposes. These recordings were eliminated. Along with the logs and audio recordings, I consulted my own notes taken during writers' group meetings and on retreats. A focus group was formed of eight people who had been part of a writers' group where four people stayed, and four people left the group. Finally, if there was permission to do so, I considered emails from writers who sometimes send spontaneous thoughts and reflections. Thus, the data collected from research writers in social writing situations include:

- reflective logs from 1432 research writers
- audio recordings of meetings from 25 writers' groups
- my own notes from 86 Writer Development courses
- audio recordings of group discussions and debriefs from 59 WD courses or other retreats
- an audio-recording of a focus group that met to specifically discuss why they chose to stay or leave a writers' group they had been involved in

The ± 2500 writers who have generously agreed to allow others to learn from their insights and thoughts have come from a wide range of disciplines, from nine different universities in six different countries.

Data Analysis

To treat the data openly, without any pre-determined categories, an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis was taken, using Cho and Lee's (2014, p.15) overview as a rough guide. Data were reduced by going through writers' logs, recordings, emails, and notes, and isolating anything that was related to the functioning of writers' groups—more specifically anything that gave indication or insight into why someone had decided to attend writers' group meetings, or to skip them; to continue being a member of the writers' group, or to drop out. Each discrete extract was entered (transcribed or copied) into separate lines on a spreadsheet, and subsequently categorised through several rounds of coding.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis suggested a deceptively simple answer: people stay in writers' groups because their needs are being met; they leave writers' groups when their needs are not being met. In this section, this obvious answer will be nuanced by introducing four different categories of needs that were identified, and then suggesting an adaptation to the original pick-n-mix model.

If members' needs are met, the group is more likely to flourish

The needs of writers in groups could be separated into four categories: logistical needs, safety needs, purpose and procedural needs, and the need for mutual support. Each of these will be discussed in turn, with relevant extracts from the data used as examples.

Logistical needs

On a very basic level, if people are involved in a writers' group that is logistically suitable, they are more likely to stay in the group. Logistics include day of the week, time of day, location of meetings, length of meetings, etc. Simply put, if it is *relatively* convenient, in an already busy life, for someone to attend a writers' group, they will be more likely to attend than if it takes effort to get to the writers' group.

This works on the same principle as the advice to join a gym on the way home from work rather than one in the opposite direction of home: we are more likely to do something we know is good for us (but takes effort) if we don't have to make a lot of extra effort just to get started.

Easy logistics can work to keep people who *do* want to attend group meetings going to meetings: "I really liked going to the writers' group. I think it was important that I didn't have to commute though. If I'd had to bike 30 minutes for a 2-hour meeting [like some of the others did], I probably wouldn't have gone, even though I know it's helpful". Easy logistics can also tip the balance for people who are less committed as well: "I didn't usually really feel like going to the writers' group, but it was right there next to my office, so I decided to go anyway, and I was always glad I did."

If the logistics get complicated, or too inconvenient, it can cause people who might otherwise be committed to drop out; "I really liked the writers' group, and I was always efficient there. But it was always held on a really busy day of the week, so I couldn't make it work". Inconvenient logistics also helped people who were more undecided make the decision *not* to go: "Yeah, the writers' group might be a good idea, but I didn't want to make the commitment to go across town for it. Plus it was in the morning. I thought I could be more efficient with my time if I stayed in the office on my own schedule".

Safety Needs

Writers' group members also need to feel safe in their groups. Feelings of safety, or unsafety, can be emotional, physical, or academic.

Academic writing is a high-stakes activity, and writers can often feel vulnerable and in need of emotional safety. There were data suggesting that emotional safety was the very thing that kept some writers in their groups; on the other hand, there were also instances showing that writers left groups because they had felt "bullied" by other members who criticised their research, or their writing.

Physical safety did not come up as often as emotional safety, but there were groups working in cities where potential physical danger was a reality, and thus they needed to consider it. A different kind of physical safety was presented by the covid-19 pandemic: when the lockdown measures lifted, and groups started meeting in person again, some writers left their groups because they did not like that other members did not take the safety measures (masks and distancing, for example) as seriously as other members would have liked.

It has fortunately not happened very often, but there two cases where writers were afraid that fellow group members were plagiarising their work: "I talked about this in my writers' group, and then I find [someone else from the group] presenting [my idea] to [our supervisor]". Sadly, academic safety needs to be considered as well.

Purpose and Procedural Needs

Members need to be in writers' groups that do what they need writers' groups to do. While there is a wide range of activities that can go on in writers' groups (please see Haas, 2014 and Déri et al., 2022 for overviews), writers' group purposes and activities can be broken down into to writing (writing in the company of other writers), reading (reading each others' work, for example) and talking (giving feedback, goal-setting, discussions on writing processes, social chat, etc). For a writers' group to flourish, these needs should align.

If, for example, the main purpose of a group is to get a lot of writing done (increase written output), their procedures/activities would most likely largely consist of actual writing time. If the purpose of the group, on the other hand, is to improve the quality of the written work of members, the procedures/activities would probably fall more into reading each others' texts and giving feedback on it. Writers' groups can quickly fall apart if there is a mis-alignment of these purposes and procedures. If, for example, some group members want to give and receive feedback on texts, and other members need to use the time to get their writing done, the writers' group will probably not last very long (unless the needs are stated explicitly and two groups are formed instead of one).

Even if the purpose are generally agreed upon, if there is a mis-alignment of how this is done, members might leave. One member of the focus group explained that

while she really loved the writing group, their decision to write in 45-minute time-slots simply did not work for her, as she needed at least 60 mintues of focused writing time with each writing session.

The Need for Mutual *Support*

The last need that was uncovered in the analysis is the need for all writers in the group to feel (and be) supported. In order for writers' groups to function well and be sustainable, everyone needs to be getting the support they need, and the kind of support they need. Support needs include emotional support, support with text quality, process support, support in staying focused and being productive, support with accountability and goal-setting, etc. In order for writers' groups to be sustainable, they need function in a balanced way in which *everyone* is receiving as well as giving support.

Some writers chose to leave their groups because they felt there were other members who often asked for help, but were not available to offer support in return. An example is group members asking for feedback on their texts several times, but always being too busy to give feedback on others' texts. Another example is a group member who dominated writers' group conversation time with tales of their own writing woes, but would not be available to lend support to other group members when they needed it.

Updated Pick-n-Mix model for sustainable writers' groups

With the uncovering of the different categories of needs, it became clear that simply knowing that writers' groups can vary, and how they can vary is not enough for running a writers' group that will last. Below is presented an updated version of a previously-used procedure for starting writers' groups. The new Pick-n-Mix model incorporates the old one, but adds to it, taking into consideration that in order for writers' groups to be sustainable, members' various needs must be met. The first three steps are the same as the old model; steps 4 and 5 are adjusted to accommodate what we now know about writers' needs in groups.

This procedure has been used on the Writer Development courses, where 10-15 PhD students have been on retreat together, and thus have a pool of prospective co-group members. Adaptations could be made for starting groups in different situations.

1. *Understand that there's no one best way to do a writers' group*
   The first step of the old model is transferred to the new, as it is still relevant: knowing that there is no one way to do a writers' group can reassure those just starting out that they are not going to mess things up.

2. *Know what's available (get to know the pick & mix)*
   The original Pick & Mix (Haas, 2014) offers an overview of the myriad ways writers' groups can vary (leadership, membership, logistics, activities, etc). Having this bigger picture can help new members start to think of what constellation of qualities might be suitable for themselves.

3. *Try out a few different writers' group activities*
   Giving some of the different activities a try (goal-setting, writing together, giving feedback, etc) will help ensure that members get to know what it is that they prefer, rather than relying on knee-jerk reactions when they see the possibilities in print.

4. *Think carefully about what you need/prefer*
   After getting an overview of what is available, and trying out a few different things, members can then start thinking carefully about what it is that they need from a writers' group. All needs, logistical, safety, purpose and procedural, and support needs should all be carefully considered. How much and what kind of support is needed should also be explicitly addressed.

5. *Make needs and preferences known*
   Once members have at least an initial understanding of what they themselves need, in order for writers' groups to be sustainable, the needs should be communicated to other potential group members. To facilitate this, it is good to keep in mind that expressing needs to a group might not always be very easy, especially if individual members' needs are perceived to go against others' needs (for example, even if one member is aware that they want to

give and receive feedback as part of writers' group activities, they might be hesitant to express this because they think it goes against other group members' wishes. A safe space for honesty needs to be established in order of this part to be effective.

6. *Group up according to preferences, or negotiate (or both)*
   Once all prospective group members' needs are known and discussed, it is a good idea, if there are enough people, to form groups according to compatible preferences. While there will never be large groups of people who are exactly compatible on all the different possibilities, starting with logistical needs/preferences, moving on to purpose/procedural needs and negotiating from there seems to work.

7. *Make the purposes and procedures explicit*
   Once the preferences and needs are known, and some compatible grouping and/or negotiation has been done, it is a good idea to make the purposes and procedures of the group explicit. Write them down. It does not need to be long or complicated, but formalising this, even minimally, not only clarifies in everyone's mind what exactly they are doing, but it can also serve as a starting point for updating, re-forming, or re-negotiating the purposes and procedures, if and when a bit of a group refresh is necessary (step 9).

8. *Establish a start-up commitment*
   It can happen that people start out thinking writers' groups are a really good idea, do all the work of getting one set up, and then having their lives get in the way, so they never actually end up meeting. As part of forming a group, establishing an initial commitment (like the 2 x 2hr commitment on the WD course) can help get the momentum going, after which it is easier to *keep* going.

9. *Re-assess periodically, and re-form if necessary*
   If the group continues for a long time, and especially if new members enter the group, while some members leave, so that the group has a different composition than it did when it was set up, it is good to re-assess, and re-form (repeat steps 1-7 with current group members). Even if membership has not shifted, members' needs might have shifted. Re-examining these, re-

negotiating, re-stating and re-establishing needs, purposes and procedures will make sure that the group does not grow stagnant. This activity can also breath new life into a group that has just been running on the old operating procedures without anyone really thinking much about it.

This new model has been being adapted and adjusted for three years, and so far it seems that it may be a useful way to guide writers into setting up groups that will last as long as they need them. I am reluctant to make any solid claims at this point, however, as not only have not enough data been collected, but also two of the three years were covid years. Further research is needed.

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