

Outside – In:
Crossing Disciplinary
Borders in a Blended
Delivery Graduate Thesis
Writers' Group

ERIN STEWART EVES

ACADEMIC SKILLS CENTRE, TRENT UNIVERSITY

Graduate student success

Success is measured by timely completion of a thesis project that demonstrates independent research, sustained argument, and clear communication.

However, research shows increases in time to complete and attrition as participation in graduate studies grows (Crago, 2002).

Why? Some common challenges

- Isolation and anxiety
- Underdeveloped organizational skills
- Research-orientation puts writing last
- (see CAGS, 2004; Rose, 2012; Silvia, 2007; Zerubavel, 1999)

Supporting graduate students

Thesis writers need community engagement and support both within and outside of their programs and committees.

1. Safe space to develop ideas, practice skills, and share concerns
2. Acknowledge importance of writing process to quality of final product
3. Receive and offer thoughtful feedback on writing to refine skills
4. Goal setting and accountability

Writers' Group

One shared experience: Writing the thesis
(doing it and doing it well)

Regular contact

Instructor-led discussions on goal-setting, motivation, outlining, drafting, and revision

Peer review of writing

- Regular deadlines
- Normalize writing, revising, and reading
- Safe audience
- Learn from comments
- Learn through reflection

Trent contexts foster border crossings

Resources

- Institutional
 - Graduate student population: ~ 450
 - Graduate programs: 14
- Departmental
 - Academic Skills Centre staffing: 4 staff
 - Serve undergraduate and graduate students in writing and academic skills

Pedagogy

- Institutional
 - Interdisciplinarity
- Departmental
 - Non-specialist – writing across curriculum
 - Accessibility for all students

Blended delivery

Value

- Engage online to make contact time more meaningful
- Additional opportunity for community building to mediate isolation
- Accessibility for students (recognizing multiple barriers – field work, transportation, mental health)

Delivery

- Online access to skill development material
- Online discussion boards
- Online file sharing
- Fortnightly meetings in-person

Multi-disciplinary Peer Review

Value

- Good writing is common across disciplines: focused, clear, analytical
- Understanding conventions within and outside of your discipline
- Reading for writing to develop a critical eye and reflect on the writing process

Delivery

- Smaller multi-disciplinary reading groups, aligned to sciences, social sciences, and arts
- Guidelines for feedback encourage reading for higher order issues such as clarity, organization, and voice

Objectives/Observations

1. **Community Engagement:** Safe space to develop ideas, practice skills, and share concerns
2. **Productivity:** Goal setting and accountability
3. **Skill Development:** Receive and offer thoughtful feedback on writing to refine skills
4. **Reflective Process:** Acknowledge importance of writing process to quality of final product

Community engagement

“Group meetings were fantastic”

“Please run another group!”

- Value contact
- Minimize isolation, minimize anxiety
- Breaking down silos
- Choice to engage online: access to content; announcements; emails

But not for everyone – one group member was looking for “more commitment and communication from group members”

Productivity

“I actually submitted my proposal this last week because of the support of the group.”

- Many pages, chapters, articles written and re-written
- Goal-setting: supportive rather than competitive
- Accountability to group members
- Motivational reminders and gentle pushing via learning system
“more frequent email reminders for writing and submitting work”

Skill Development

“(Re-)learning the basics, from writing to structure to editing . . . [I] liked this the best.”

- Writing and Revision – outlines, note taking, transitions, integrating evidence, clear language, purposeful revision, grammar basics
- Organization and Planning – goal setting, action plans, motivation, productivity

Working outside of my discipline helps me to see style/structure and allows me to break out of habits.

- Understand conventions to work within and beyond; find own voice
- Established basis for reflective practice. Writing is a process, not just a final product.

Reflective Process

“The feedback from the group was incredibly useful, as it helped me look at my own writing from a different angle, not through my own eyes, as someone who was conducting the research, but more objectively.”

Acknowledge writing process to become a thoughtful and effective writer (within and beyond academia)

Lessons

Grad students can look outside of their fields for thoughtful and helpful feedback on writing.

- Less competition
- Focus on higher-order writing issues
- Understanding alternative approaches encourages reflection
- Affinity and context support multi-disciplinary peer review

Essential to the process of peer review and skill development is introduction or refresher to the basics of writing

- Encourage thinking about writing
- Recognize and shared knowledge and strengths

Silence doesn't mean they're not listening; online engagement varies.

- Contact is essential for engagement and community development.



C. Booth-Smith (2012)

www.trentu.ca/academicskills
estewarteves@trentu.ca

