

Supporting Graduate Writers Through a Writing Commons

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This paper reports on how we developed a Writing Commons to support graduate student needs within our faculty. Graduate writers often require more concentrated and specific support than traditional support sources (e.g., writing centres, supervisors) can provide. We argue that local writing support spaces, like a Writing Commons, can meet these needs for graduate writers by opening a flexible, student-centric space for both writing support and time to write. We detail how faculties can go beyond just establishing graduate communities and instead provide concentrated writing support for graduate students. A Writing Commons can mitigate the isolation and pressures of the high stakes writing experiences that graduate students face by providing feedback and support, space to discuss common writing challenges within a program, and community with other writers. Near the end of the paper, we discuss steps that others can take to increase support for graduate writers.

Cet article rend compte de la façon dont nous avons développé un centre d'écriture commune pour répondre aux besoins des étudiants diplômés au sein de notre faculté. Les écrivains diplômés ont souvent besoin d'un soutien plus concentré et plus spécifique que celui que les sources de soutien traditionnelles (p. ex., les centres d'écriture, les superviseurs) peuvent offrir. Nous soutenons que les espaces locaux de soutien à l'écriture, comme les centres d'écriture, peuvent répondre à ces besoins des écrivains diplômés en ouvrant un espace polyvalent, centré sur l'étudiant, à la fois pour le soutien à l'écriture et pour le temps d'écrire. Nous expliquons en détail comment les facultés peuvent aller au-delà de la simple création de communautés d'étudiants diplômés et offrir plutôt un soutien à l'écriture visant les étudiants diplômés. Un centre d'écriture peut atténuer l'isolement et la pression des expériences d'écriture à enjeux élevés auxquelles les étudiants diplômés sont confrontés en fournissant des commentaires et du soutien, un espace pour discuter des défis d'écriture communs au sein d'un programme et une communauté avec d'autres écrivains. Vers la fin du document, nous discutons des mesures que d'autres peuvent prendre pour accroître le soutien aux rédacteurs diplômés.

Graduate Writing Support: Something's Missing

Writing in graduate school is often challenging. Graduate writers are faced with a host of new genres, from grants to conference proposals, literature reviews, methodologies, results chapters, and papers for publication. The myriad genres that graduate students encounter require that they not only demonstrate the dexterity to adapt to the writing demands of the genres themselves, but they also require that student writing mirrors how knowledge is produced within their discourse

communities. For many students, the challenges of adapting to writing in graduate school are compounded by more complex family and social lives that place increased demands on their time and pull them from their writing.

These challenges—adapting to new genres, accommodating writing demands for a new discourse community, balancing writing with increased demands from personal lives—accentuate a need for graduate writing support. Although the need is evident, many faculties do not have structures in place to support this writing in the ways that graduate writers need. Traditional avenues for writing support, such as writing centres and supervisors, have limited time and resources to offer graduate writers. Graduate writers often require more concentrated and specific support than these sources can provide. The situation is more acute in Canada where writing instruction has been instituted ad hoc according to local needs (Graves & Graves, 2006). Canadian graduate students are unlikely to have received much, if any, concentrated writing instruction before entering their graduate programs.

More localized writing support can fill the gap in graduate writing journeys that remains despite the efforts of supervisors and writing centres. We argue that local writing support spaces, like a Writing Commons, can meet graduate writers' needs by opening a flexible, student-centric space for writing support and time to write. As part of this argument, we detail how faculties can use a Writing Commons to collaborate with graduate students and provide concentrated writing support that better meets their needs as they move through their programs. A Writing Commons can mitigate the isolation and pressures of the high stakes writing experiences that graduate students face by providing feedback and support, space to discuss common writing challenges within a program, and community with other writers.

We will report on our initiative to begin a graduate student Writing Commons at a Faculty of Education in Ontario. Through a collaborative autoethnography, we will compare how we established, coordinated, and adjusted the Writing Commons to support graduate students' needs and meet challenges that arose. Collaborative autoethnography involves critical self-reflection (Chang et al., 2013) that is guided by questions/prompts specific to a shared experience. The reflections of each person's experience are then combined to facilitate an analysis of the experience as a whole. The paper will begin by detailing the various pressure points that exist for graduate writers and how they can impact the graduate journey. It will then discuss three common themes derived from our autoethnography: our initial apprehensions, how we adapted the Writing Commons to meet shifting expectations, and emotional labour. To round out the paper, our discussion will analyze the implications of these themes and use them to outline steps others can take to increase support for graduate writers.

The Challenges of Writing in Graduate School

Writing is a central—if not the central—activity that graduate students do. From coursework to program completion, writing is how graduate students join their respective discourse communities and disseminate knowledge from their research and learning.

Despite writing's centrality, it is frequently acknowledged as a significant gap in graduate curricula. Many graduate programs have limited program flexibility, which renders a stand-alone graduate writing course unrealistic (Sallee et al., 2011). Once graduate programmatic curricula account for discipline-specific courses and modules, integrate examinations, and leave space for dissertation research and writing, there is little room for explicit writing instruction. These challenges are compounded by the fact that “students have only a semester or two to arrive at

some realization of how they ought to read and write within the traditions or genres associated with a particular discipline” (Dias, 1994, p. 194). These factors exist without accounting for the pressure associated with graduate students completing their degrees on-time, which means that students must produce strong writing, but have little time to learn how to accomplish this.

Conversations about graduate writing generally discuss the gap in writing support and instruction along two lines. The first is the need for writing instruction so that students may contribute using disciplinary genres. The second is the emotional toll that graduate writing can take when there is a lack of support.

The gap in writing support for graduate students has prompted many to express concern that students are not equipped with the tools required to properly contribute to their disciplines. Too often, “the expectation is that students already know how to write before they begin graduate school” (Sallee et al., 2011, p. 66). This assumption derives from a writing-as-a skill narrative that, as Doody et al. (2017) explained, positions doctoral students either as proficient writers or as writers who require remedial/external support. Such assumptions ignore the context from which students come to graduate writing. They ignore the space, place, and experiences that underpin students’ writing, leaving little space for the “identity work” (Maher et al., 2008, p. 266) that comes with graduate writing as students start to form disciplinary and scholarly identities through their writing. This identity work allows them to both join and contribute to their disciplines. An overarching idea of graduate writing instruction is that it is “thought of as simply technical enterprise and as a service” (Rose & McClafferty, 2001, p. 32) wherein writing is a set of “portable skills” (Paré et al., 2011, p. 220) that students already possess and must transfer to their new genre contexts. This approach assumes that “writing competency amounts to a set of static skills learned once and for all” (Micciche & Carr, 2011, p. 494). This assumption continues through dissertation writing. The challenge with these assumptions is that many students are never introduced to the complex disciplinary genres that they encounter in graduate school until they begin their programs.

This means that graduate students must often learn to write in graduate school, where it is assumed that, if they have not learned previously, they will pick it up along the way. Even for students who have previous writing instruction, graduate school has a host of new genres that they must learn. As Micciche and Carr (2011) discussed, it is assumed that graduate students “learn how to write critically through repeated exposure and an osmosis-like process” (p. 485). Even if this osmosis-like process occurs, there is little time or space for it to transpire. Students often do not receive the time to engage in the process of writing and dwell in the specific rhetorical and disciplinary conventions of their disciplines.

An Emotional Experience

Graduate writing is also an alienating and emotionally-charged experience. Because graduate writing is often done privately, Micciche (2020) highlighted that it can be a largely invisible practice. Graduate students often consider writing “an emotionally fraught, privately experienced hardship” (Micciche & Carr, 2011, p. 479) that can create a profound sense of isolation (Doody et al., 2017; Kinney et al., 2019). Students lack the sense of community and interaction that is crucial to the writing process. This community can “give rise to talk” (Rose & McClafferty, 2001, p. 29) and help them reach “greater articulation and understanding” (p. 30) of their material. Like much school-based writing instruction, there is “a high value on individualism” (Slomp et al., 2014, p. 543) that leaves little space for students to engage in “generative, collaborative processes” (p. 543)

when it comes to writing. They often cannot access the emotional and pedagogical support that can derive from scholarly relationships and having people with whom they can exchange ideas and work through similar challenges with writing.

The emotional level of writing is compounded by the increased personal demands that graduate students often encounter. Although there is less acknowledgement of these demands in the literature, Micciche's (2020) participants accentuated the complex social lives that impact graduate student writing, as did the doctoral writers who collaborated in Doody et al.'s (2017) autoethnography of doctoral writing groups. As the writers featured in these articles highlight, many graduate students undertake their studies alongside other professional obligations, such as teaching positions, and many have families of their own. Similarly, Bates and Goff (2012) crystallized the challenges of balancing time, work commitments, and educational requirements. All of these issues exist for graduate students and, for Bates and Goff, can be exacerbated by various factors including part-time studies. Blocking off writing time amidst the pressing needs of one's family and vocation can be difficult, increasing stresses placed on family life by obligations as a graduate student and vice versa. Often, both writing and personal lives become strained by the demands of graduate studies.

Our Faculty of Education Context

The Ontario, Canada graduate environment in which we embarked upon our graduate studies have similar patterns to those shown in the literature. Formal writing instruction and writing support is rare in our Faculty of Education. Even though a writing centre exists on campus to support student writing, appointments book quickly. Because of the demands placed on writing centres and their generally underfunded status (Garbati & Samuels, 2016), they are limited in the range of concentrated support they may offer students. This problem was exacerbated in our context because the Faculty of Education was separated from the main campus, which made attending regular writing centre appointments more difficult. What students needed was a space that could attend to their specific writing needs.

The Writing Commons

To respond to this need for concentrated student writing support, Chris began a weekly Writing Commons as his Research Assistant position. The Writing Commons was designed to give students time to work on projects and get writing help on demand from a graduate student colleague. The Writing Commons operated out of a small research centre at the faculty that had tables, white boards, a projector, and (some would say most importantly) a coffee maker. Chris had previously worked in two writing centres. When he started the Writing Commons, he was completing a PhD exploring writing pedagogies and teaching writing at a local college. The Writing Commons was influenced by these experiences, which helped Chris establish a structure for the space.

The Writing Commons was offered for twelve weeks each semester. Students could either book an appointment or drop by during designated hours to get help with any aspect of graduate writing, including interpreting feedback, developing grant applications, structuring literature reviews, improving grammar, polishing dissertation proposals and drafts, and conducting research. The structure for the first two years of the initiative tended towards more one-hour appointments. Students could book appointments up to one week in advance, and most students

would book a time week after week. As time developed, students began to stay beyond their appointments to work quietly in the writing commons space. Frequently, students would form small writing groups each week to collaborate on assignments, help each other interpret feedback, and exchange advice about different aspects of their graduate program. Chris, being a graduate student as well, could participate as a colleague in these conversations. This contributed to the formation of the group and to his own understanding of the assignments and challenges other students faced in the program. Chris still provided concentrated writing support for individual students, but the support extended beyond a single appointment.

After two years, Chris completed his doctoral requirements. The Writing Commons had generated significant demand and the Research Centre decided to continue the initiative. Jill took over the Writing Commons as part of her Research Assistant requirements in the PhD. Jill came from a very different background than Chris. Jill's only experience in writing centres was as a recipient. Jill's background was not in writing, which would be concerning for anyone taking on this initiative. However, when she began her doctoral studies, Jill was fortunate enough for Chris's writing help that always ended in a clearer understanding of her work as well as boosted confidence. This experience as a participant in the Writing Commons exposed Jill to a collaborative learning model that she used when she took over.

Jill implemented several new features. On top of continuing to offer drop-in writing sessions and appointments for writing support, Jill created focused writing times wherein students could simply write. Jill also arranged for guest speakers to teach graduate students about specific writing and research elements. These lunch-and-learn sessions brought graduate students together and provided various writing tips that graduate students could implement in their own projects. These sessions had the added benefit of connecting various dimensions of graduate student writing support, helping graduate students engage with many of the previously independent and unnetworked support resources available on campus, from library research supports, to previous writing instructors, to citation management.

It is noteworthy that we received incredible support from the Faculty of Education. The initiative was possible because our supervisor dedicated one of her research assistant allotments for the position. She facilitated early meetings with the Associate Dean who supported the initiative from the beginning. We then received support from several faculty members who would send their graduate students to us. These faculty members encouraged us and saw the value in what we were doing. Having terrific support for the initiative is part of the reason it was successful and continued year-over-year. Whenever it came time to renew the Writing Commons for the following school year, it seemed like the answer was automatic: yes.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Writing Groups

The Writing Commons vision was framed both by writing support and community building frameworks. Chris initially designed the Writing Commons according to his background in writing support and writing centres. These ideas were inspired by the idea of writing as a situated social practice (Paré et al., 2011) and that writing groups can create communities of conversation wherein students can freely exchange ideas and seek support. These ongoing conversations may contribute to the "collective knowledge-making endeavor" (p. 229) that can help graduate students make sense of their writing from various perspectives. These spaces, when infused with writing expertise, can help students "make sense of a piece of writing and assist in improving it" (Rose & McClafferty, 2001, p. 30).

This collective knowledge-making is particularly important for graduate writers because they are often forming new identities as writers as they develop their research (Maher et al., 2008). Whereas many of the assumptions about graduate writers' proficiency (see Doody et al., 2017, Micciche & Carr, 2011) ignore these identities and assume they all come from similar places and have had similar experiences, collectives don't operate under these taken-for-granted assumptions. Instead, they build space for the wide-array of identities that come to writing groups. These spaces allow students with varying degrees of writing expertise and life experiences to collaborate. Some students may be coming straight from an undergraduate degree, and others will be returning to graduate education after several years in the workforce. Students who are adapting to new cultural and institutional norms can learn with peers who have grown up with these norms and know how to navigate the environment. Institutional programming often conflates experience to establish norms and standards (necessarily). Collaborative writing groups can give space to the range of experiences that exist.

The spaces provide a collaborative context in which students may work on their writing with other students. This collaboration "fosters metacognitive engagement" (Slomp et al., 2014, p. 547). Students learn to think of themselves as writers alongside other writers who are going through the same journey. As such, they can crowdsource writing knowledges and experiences to enhance their writing as well as their relationship with writing.

These groups also double as spaces for emotional support. By bringing graduate students together, these spaces can disrupt the isolation graduate students feel (Kinney et al., 2019). The intellectual communities of writers that form offer tremendous emotional benefits for those who participate (see Maher et al., 2013). The purpose of the groups extends beyond writing. Indeed, the legacy of these groups is often defined by the communities of practice that form and the way that these communities can support writing. A need for writing support brings people together, but it's the collection of people who enhance the writing support.

Where the Writing Commons differed from these other models was in the way support was built in not just as a by-product of these communities but rather as the organizing feature of the initiative. It was a space for concentrated writing support that developed into a larger community. Writers did not come to the space to work in isolation and then exchange writing samples, nor was it designed as a social space (even if it became one at times). It was a place for a type of writing support and instruction that was difficult to access elsewhere on campus. It had a larger institutional commitment that facilitated the initiative as a means to offer increased and concentrated support for graduate writers.

Collaborative Autoethnography

Our study is developed using a collaborative autoethnography. Autoethnography, which stems from narrative research methods, uses narratives of the self to critically analyze lived experiences and to obtain a deep understanding of complex situations. In this framework, an autoethnographer goes "beyond reflection and makes herself or himself a subject to critical analysis" (Kim, 2016, p. 124). It is a type of critical self-study that looks not to shine a spotlight on the author's life, but rather "to problematize social and cultural norms and practices" (Kim, 2016, p. 124) as they relate to personal experience. Our individual narratives of experience form a baseline for analysis of how each author interpreted and implemented the Writing Commons and how we reflected upon our experiences after we left the initiative.

The collaborative component of this autoethnographic approach enriches these analyses. Collaborating in autoethnography allows collective analysis to complement self-reflection (Chang et al., 2013). This collective exploration “lends credibility to the research” (Doody et al., 2017, p. 149) because “details of particular stories are considered from the perspective of a variety of interpretive lenses” (Garbati & Samuels, 2016, p. 335). The collaborative approach allows researchers to analyze their experiences from multiple perspectives. The multiplicity of perspectives facilitates analysis that considers both insider and outsider analysis of the narratives, which simultaneously honours the authors’ accounts of their lived experiences and allows outside perspectives to challenge and enrich the way these experiences are interpreted.

Our Collaboration

Our collaborative autoethnography draws inspiration from a range of previous papers written on both peer writing groups (Doody et al., 2017; Maher et al., 2013) and on writing support (Garbati & Samuels, 2016). The reflections in the conversations that precede us have provided a framework to approach and analyze both the peer support elements of our experiences and the wider contexts in which writing support are situated. We began by writing our own narratives. We framed our narratives by triangulating our emotions and reflections on our time operating the Writing Commons with field notes and marketing documents from this time. This approach allowed us to combine our retrospective interpretation with an analysis of the artifacts that were created and disseminated while we were in our roles.

The analysis of the narratives occurred after we completed our initial narratives. At this stage, we exchanged our narratives and provided comments/asked questions about what the other person had written. We used an open coding approach (Chang et al., 2012) to identify preliminary themes we saw in the narratives. This exchange of ideas allowed us to prompt each other to see and integrate new details that would create more detailed and nuanced individual narratives.

Once we completed these revisions, we met twice to code and analyze the narratives. In our initial meeting, we discussed various thematic links from our narratives and discussed ways that we could interpret and discuss these themes. Our interpretations were framed by the narrative affordances of autoethnographic research (see Chang et al., 2013; Kim, 2016). We knew our interpretations were subjective; autoethnographic research acknowledges researchers’ biases and offers a framework to work alongside these biases and form an analysis. The questions we asked early in our research and the prompts we used to write our reflections were framed by our personal experiences (e.g., the emotional dimensions of the Writing Commons, managing writers’ expectations, interpreting supervisory relationships to support student writing). They helped us narrow the range of topics based on what we, collectively, felt were the most salient aspects of our experiences. Autoethnography allowed us to write subjectively about these themes. Then, the collaborative dimension of our research allowed us to come together and view these reflections from new perspectives framed around dialogue and asking more nuanced questions. The approach does not eliminate bias but rather negotiates this bias alongside a structured analysis of the reflections. We then let the narratives and analysis sit for a period of time so we could reflect on the documents themselves and the analysis. We met a second time to exchange new thoughts on the themes that emerged and to integrate new thematic connections that we generated in our time away.

What We Learned

As we shared our experiences with each other and traced patterns in our narratives, it became clear that the Writing Commons itself grew out of the challenges that we encountered. Sometimes these challenges were personal, and other times they were created by external pressures that impacted our work. Both authors established a basic Writing Commons space that centred on providing students with time and support for writing. More often than not, the specific nuances that allowed those features to develop emerged from ways that we build upon that space to meet student needs.

Our results and analysis will begin by tracing how we both managed personal apprehensions and writing insecurities by doing the work. It will then transition to discuss how we drew upon disparate experiences with writing to support students. The final part of our analysis will consider how we adapted the Writing Commons to manage various expectations, from faculty and student conceptions of the space to our own emotional attachments to the initiative.

Initial Apprehensions

Although we both approached the Writing Commons with apprehension, our insecurities spawned in different ways. These initial trepidations impacted how we initially conceived of the space and what we would offer students, and it took time to pacify these concerns.

Despite having the experience of working in previous writing centres, Chris felt apprehensive when creating the Writing Commons. He was aware that he “was taking a much more difficult path for what amounted to a typical Research Assistant position and that the reward was uncertain.” Part of this uncertainty for Chris came from a place of vulnerability due to limited resources (which amounted to a contract for 10 hours per week and a study space at the Faculty to meet students). He describes this isolation when he reflects on his first few days running the Writing Commons: “it felt like just me, a room, and my R.A. money wouldn’t go all that far, but it would have to be better than nothing.” He knew that having institutional support was important, even if it was simply time allotted to a research assistantship. This support provided space and resources to allow writing support to exist. It was a recognition of writing’s importance and the need for increased support for the faculty’s graduate students.

He was also worried about “the variety of requests that would push me beyond my realm of expertise.” Chris’s apprehensions derived from logistical concerns and a desire to create a successful venture. On one hand, he did not want to get overwhelmed with the number of requests for appointments. His writing centre experience taught him how quickly writing support spaces booked. On the other hand, he wanted to accommodate as many people and support their learning as much as possible.

Accomplishing this within the confines of graduate funding allowances seemed daunting, especially considering that he was not expecting writing to be as communal as it became. It took time for these insecurities to dissipate. What helped him to overcome these fears was the momentum that the Writing Commons generated from people who were influenced by the space.

Soon enough, students were booking week-over-week, and they were telling their friends. Supervisors would walk by and chuckle (excitedly) seeing their students seeking help from the Writing Commons. That first year, students actually opted to stay in the room and work collaboratively on their own work.

Things seemed to snowball once students and professors saw the value of the initiative. What began as broader faculty support for the initiative expanded to more concentrated and specific forms of support for the Writing Commons, where individual faculty members saw value and sent students for support. After this, the Writing Commons seemed to take on a life of its own. Chris needed to adjust to the way students were booking appointments and some of the expectations that came from students and faculty alike, but his initial concerns about space/time/resources were abated by this momentum. Instead, the initiative seemed to develop organically within those parameters once students recognized the value of writing support within the faculty.

Jill had a different series of concerns as she adopted the Writing Commons and carried it into its third year. Riding on the coattails of the success and accomplishments Chris created for the Writing Commons in the first two years, Jill felt anxious heading into its third year given she felt she was not a “literary magician” who was qualified to help others with their writing. Many of the hurdles that she faced stemmed from comparing herself to Chris.

One hurdle that I needed to overcome was a little voice comparing myself to my predecessor’s strong writing chops. This was not any one’s voice but the voice of my vulnerability that comes with something new and moving into deeper waters.

Since she did not have the same writing background, she was worried that she would be unable to help people. Following someone who had writing support experience and taking over a successful initiative like the Writing Commons was a vulnerable experience that made it difficult to assume the role, at least initially, despite having the faculty’s support for the initiative and having a cheerleader and willing aide in Chris still by her side for informal advice and consultation.

What helped her to overcome these vulnerabilities was remembering her own experiences attending the Writing Commons as a student. In these experiences, Jill learned not just from the expertise of the writing support person (Chris), but rather from the co-construction of “ideas exchanged, and notes jotted down from what I was saying, that made the process easier to understand.” This approach helped her to establish a direction in which she did not need to be the sole source of writing support. The space was designed to support writing, but this support could manifest in various ways. As such, she focused on adding to the writing support to “initiate programs to help ease the isolation I had been hearing so many of my colleagues speak to in their second year.” This is where the writing retreats and writing talks originated. Similar to Chris’s experiences, Jill experienced a transition from insecurities about being the only form of writing support to adapting to a space that encouraged and facilitated a co-constructive writing support community.

It is important to acknowledge these as factors because they were prominent in both of our early approaches to the Writing Commons. We were both apprehensive about aspects of the venture, and, because they existed in the background of our experience, there was little way to mitigate them initially. That said, apprehensions about such initiatives are normal and extend beyond the uncertainty that comes with starting a new project: they combine general graduate student anxieties about joining communities with the vulnerabilities of writing that most academics feel. In the case of the Writing Commons, there was the added layer of supporting people who were struggling with writing and feeling the need to help them despite the fact that we were experiencing similar struggles with our own writing. It did not matter so much whether the person had an extensive background in writing studies, such as Chris, or came to writing support with little formal background in writing but with plenty of exposure to the ebbs and flows

of the writing process, like Jill. Sometimes just providing a space for writing support can be enough. This space encourages collaboration that can provide multiple ways to support writing.

Expectations and Adaptations

Managing expectations became a prominent component of the Writing Commons once the community grew. Both Chris and Jill noticed that, as the space developed, students and faculty alike developed their own conceptions of what the Writing Commons would and should offer writers. The Writing Commons was a fluid space in which expectations constantly shifted, and it became necessary for us to negotiate these external expectations with our own expectations and conceptions of the Writing Commons. Some of the student and faculty expectations were plausible and helped us to adapt the space to better support student writing. Other times, however, it became necessary to manage unrealistic expectations to maintain the integrity of the space and of the community.

Our Expectations

We both conceived of the Writing Commons similarly. We believed that appointments should function like 1-1 peer tutoring sessions that are found at many Writing Centres. We would provide mini-lessons and concentrated support for students' most pressing needs. Conversations would begin with the fundamental question: "What do I need to know about your paper?" during which time and we would be listening for student priorities, struggles, and needs, and we would begin drafting ideas on the whiteboard. We were seeking teachable moments, even in requests for APA or grammatical support, where we could help students develop strategies for dealing with similar situations in the future. Because we could not look through papers in their entirety, these teachable moments would allow us to empower the student to go through the rest, alter similar areas, and, as Jill asserted, "make a plan of what they are going to do moving forward."

Student Expectations

Students came with their own interpretation of the space. We both encountered different frustrations about editing. Similar to what happens in many Writing Centres, some students approached the Writing Commons as a proofreading service. They wanted to correct their spelling, citation, and grammatical errors before submission. These instances required some delicate resistance on our parts as peer supports because, although we were willing to help with these elements, we wanted to ensure that students also engaged with the learning process.

Although these cases were rare, they could become frustrating and mentally draining. Chris had experienced this in his previous writing centre work, but the Writing Commons model was different in that many students came week after week. He noted that there were "recurring students who wanted me to act more as an editor, and I became vulnerable to the frustration of dealing with this every single week and not seeing students improve because they didn't want to." What made the Writing Commons community so robust also made it more difficult to deal with students who wanted "quick fix" writing approaches because it never ended. Because there were so many recurring students who sought support, the same issues would crop up time and again. Seeing the same faces also meant that the authors developed more personal relationships with the people they were supporting. Although this was a huge benefit to forming a writing community,

relationships are complicated and can become frustrating in situations where a student's vision for the Writing Commons did not align with our own.

Many of these students would also come in at the last minute. This was particularly the case for Jill, who lamented how "more times than not, students initially came in for editing with the paper due later that day." Given that Jill prioritized helping to build a student's confidence and creating plans for the next time they sat down with their paper, it was difficult for her to support students who did not have a plan to work with their papers further. When the space and community that developed within it was largely predicated on iteration, co-construction, and long-term writing goals, this short-term work was difficult to accommodate.

It was not all negative, however. Sometimes, students varying conceptions of the space pushed it to new levels. This happened with the writing communities in the first year of the Writing Commons, and there were moments of this in Chris's second year where the students who came to the Writing Commons "pushed me a bit more" to think beyond paper writing support. One time, a student entered without a paper; instead, they brought chart paper and multicoloured markers. Instead of searching for support on writing specifically, they wanted to discuss ideas and map them. What we found useful was recording ideas on the whiteboard, refining them, and then mapping them on the chart paper to trace what details came together and which were extraneous to the paper. This process continued for several weeks and eventually morphed into weekly sessions to revise the student's paper.

What we saw in this case was an extension of the same ideas that made the writing communities successful. A student came to the space with their own needs and ideas of how the Writing Commons functioned. By being open to modifying the Writing Commons' approach so it extended beyond examining papers specifically, Chris could open dialogue with the student and contribute to a broader and more communal writing process.

Any writing support role requires managing expectations, especially when it comes to editing or proofreading. Although we tried to stipulate that we wouldn't edit or proofread, these requests are inevitable and unavoidable. There is a risk that being too strict with a writing space's offerings will limit the range of people who will seek the service. By being flexible, we could facilitate a more communal space. Spaces for writing support often form in the liminal space between what the space offers and what it does not.

Emotional Labour

Tied to all these elements were the emotional dimensions of our venture. During our discussions, we repeatedly emphasized our attachment to the Writing Commons and to the students.

Working closely with students meant that we assumed some of their struggles, successes, and emotions along the way. In the moment, these emotions fueled momentum and contributed to great conversations about writing. These more personal moments where we connected with students as fellow students were central to supporting them as writers.

Over time, these same emotions took their toll. Chris found that, by the end of his second year, he was ready to leave the role even though he loved doing it. He found himself "needing more time to decompress after a day, and I came to dread certain students walking through the door. I still enjoyed the work, but I was feeling stretched thin." He initially dismissed this as simply being "time to move on," but there is something deeper at work here. Being flexible, forming relationships with students, being a close part of their writing process can weigh on a person.

Jill pinpointed some of these emotional pressures. For her, the emotion stemmed from becoming a third party to the supervisor/supervisee relationship:

One of the main activities I did was help interpret feedback from the professor or supervisor. At times, I found this challenging and had to step back from how distracted I was from what I too perceived as a potentially unnecessary feedback to the student. I had to justify and diffuse the emotion that sometimes the student felt about the comments and therefore their confidence in their ability to do the work. I found myself feeling very protective over the student and would come up with strategies in their responses to their supervisor or professors, that built their confidence and not to stay stuck in defeat. My process was strategies and next steps to keep them on track and moving forward. That was important for their success; to have someone cheering them on at the sidelines.

Supervisor-supervisee relationships are emotional. Although this relationship is “a primary vehicle through which students begin to identify as academics” (Hibbert et al., 2014, p. 88), this relationship can be “sometimes intimate, sometimes conflicted” as supervisor and supervisee “negotiate new meaning in what is often uncharted territory” (p. 89). Relationships between supervisor and graduate student are highly dependent on “supervisors’ commitments to provide mentorship” (Niemczyk, 2019, p. 232). Although Niemczyk referred specifically to the research assistantship, the same logic applies to supporting writing and the supervisor/supervisee relationship. It is easy—perhaps natural—for someone supporting a student’s writing week after week to become emotionally invested in the stakes, especially when it was clear that the supervisory relationship lacked some of the commitment required for the student to succeed. As Jill described, “we became cheerleaders who were emotionally implicated in a student’s path.” What started as a space for writing support evolved into a small community where we wanted students to succeed and endured part of their emotional rollercoaster as they revised their writing.

The emotional labour of the Writing Commons is best crystallized by our difficulty in letting the space go. We both left the Writing Commons knowing that the initiative would continue, but leaving it was bittersweet. Although Chris was ready to leave, he also recognized how fortunate he was to begin and grow through the Writing Commons, particularly since it played a big factor in his post-graduate job search: “the Writing Commons, the exposure it gave me, the relationships that I formed, have paid dividends as I applied to and interviewed for academic positions, and I am grateful I have had this opportunity.”

Jill, on the other hand, began with trepidation but ended in a place where “the biggest surprise [she] found in this role was letting go.” What began as a role she was taking from someone else’s success became a new iteration of an initiative that she could call her own.

Implications of a Writing Commons

Graduate writing groups can be successful. Groups can form, serve their purpose, and then disband as the group members’ priorities shift. However, these groups are a student response to a lack of graduate writing support. They do not address the reasons behind that lack in the first place. What is needed is something more. This “something more” could come in the form of a Writing Commons, a space dedicated to supporting student writing that can be sustained year after year and adapt to student needs.

The importance of institutional support and consistency for these initiatives cannot be overstated. In their analysis of two writing groups, Olszewska and Lock (2016) identified six

conditions to support sustainable academic development through writing groups and three implications for sustainability. Several conditions relate to the support group that is consistent yet flexible so it can respond to writers' needs. Having the same people in place to support the initiative and foster relationships with the writers can facilitate relationship-building and support. As such, the space can become more relational and communal, both of which can promote the group's sustainability.

However, institutional support is also imperative both in forming and sustaining these forms of writing support. We were fortunate because we had support from the top (the Associate Dean), through to our supervisor, and then from various faculty members. The Writing Commons would not have been successful without their ongoing commitment. It is not necessary for everyone to be on board, but a small group of faculty advocates can go a long way to ensuring the initiative's long-term viability. Institutional commitment to "promote formal or informal supports for academic writing and to clearly articulate performance expectations can facilitate the growth of writing groups, thus establishing them as sustainable practice" (Olszewska & Lock, 2016, p. 143). The more that these spaces, like the Writing Commons, have institutional support, the more entrenched they become in the fabric of a department, faculty, or other academic unit. The more entrenched they become, the more that writing support becomes a part of graduate writing praxis.

Creating a Writing Commons

The Writing Commons model can be easily adapted for other contexts. The fact that it is a peer-oriented initiative funded through a Research Assistantship means that other faculties/departments already have structures in place for a similar model. We will spend a few paragraphs discussing some logistics and considerations for how the model can be replicated.

The foundation for the Writing Commons is straightforward: space and time. For space, we were fortunate to have a small centre that acted as a multi-purpose space. Anywhere with space to write and a board to map thoughts can be used. The computer and projector are a bonus. The goal is to ensure that the space is consistent. We benefitted from students walking by our room and dropping in. Even if they did not need help immediately, having a consistent space meant that they knew where to find us when they did.

Timing the Writing Commons is more complicated. It is not possible to coordinate around grad schedules because they are unpredictable. Nevertheless, we avoided scheduling the Writing Commons on Mondays and Fridays for different reasons. Based on informal conversations with students in the initial planning for the Writing Commons, it was clear that Mondays were difficult for students to commit to week after week because they had not settled into their work routines yet. Fridays were a day for meetings and many students found it difficult to commit to a Friday appointment. Tuesday-Thursday seemed like a sweet spot for us.

Having a consistent day in the week was important. Like the reasons behind having a consistent space, having a consistent time allowed the Writing Commons to become part of people's routines. Consistency also helps protect the person who is coordinating the Writing Commons. Spreading sessions across numerous days (which at some point we both did) meant that we were seemingly never "off the job." Choosing a single day and maintaining that schedule established necessary boundaries. The boundaries did not undermine our ability to help graduate writers or limit the Writing Commons' success. We found that we could dedicate 7-8 hours to the Writing Commons and then spend the other 2-3 hours in our allotted hours dealing with logistics, such as scheduling appointments, responding to inquiries, maintaining our marketing documents

(which for us were disseminated through the faculty's weekly newsletter), or setting up space for regular debriefing meetings so that a supervisor/advisor may check in with the person coordinating the initiative (see below).

There is, however, the potential for more hidden elements that impact the person who coordinates a similar initiative. Because this role differs from traditional graduate student funding initiatives, there are unique pressure points that one does not experience in a research or teaching assistant role. The people who come to these communities do so with their own conception of the space and what it offers. These different conceptions mean that the demands placed on graduate students leading a Writing Commons are constantly shifting. Although the fluidity of this position can produce incredible writing communities, the shifting demands take an emotional and intellectual toll. Providing outlets to support those who lead the initiatives, such as regular debriefing meetings with a supervisor or with a peer, would help to ensure the initiative's long-term success and help prevent burnout.

A Writing Commons may emerge from the pre-existing graduate funding structures that many departments and faculties have. By thinking beyond traditional classroom or research spaces for teaching assistant or research assistant positions, a space like the Writing Commons can be created.

Looking Ahead

The main purpose of the Writing Commons was to support student writing. Even though the initial conception of the Writing Commons emphasized formal writing support such as 1-1 appointments, what emerged was so much more. Over time, a community of students formed, evolved, and changed the way the space was conceived. Simply creating an outlet to support graduate writers on their writing journeys was beneficial.

However, in establishing a space like the Writing Commons, it's important to think beyond simply having a graduate writing group. The Writing Commons is a space created to mitigate the various challenges that graduate writers face, and it is a commitment by the institution to ensuring that graduate writers receive the support they require. This type of space is designed to fill a gap that is so common in graduate education but that often gets overlooked in the widespread assumptions that graduate students are intelligent and therefore know how to write in new genres, for new audiences, and for new purposes. A Writing Commons can provide a flexible space that responds more readily to student needs. In doing so, it can bring graduate students together in a community of support. Once these communities form, graduate students can build a space where their writing can develop and receive the time, space, energy, and support it deserves.

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