

## *Staying on Track: Writing Our Way Through a Global Pandemic*

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**Abstract:** It is commonplace for the literature to highlight writing groups that focus on increasing academic productivity. Matters of aesthetic and more pleasurable aspects of writing along with the fulfilment of belongingness that a writing group can provide, particularly in a virtual environment are rare. In this article, we examine the productive and connective pleasure of an online academic writing community, how it kept the community coming together amid a global pandemic, why it located and mobilised the community as academic writers, and how the community engaged and travelled with each other to create a sense of belonging.

**Résumé :** C'est souvent compris que les groupes d'écriture se concentrent surtout sur l'augmentation de la productivité académique. Les questions esthétiques et plus agréables de l'écriture ainsi que l'appartenance à une communauté dans un environnement virtuel, sont rares. Dans cet article, nous examinons le plaisir productif d'une communauté de rédaction et comment l'activité d'écriture à amener cette communauté de membres académiques à se rencontrer malgré la pandémie mondiale. L'article examine également pourquoi l'activité d'écriture a permis à la communauté de se mobiliser et comment les membres du groupe se sont engagés les uns avec les autres pour créer un sentiment d'appartenance.

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## Introduction

Within the academy, the pressures of publish or perish figure prominently. It has been well documented that novice and experienced researchers alike are expected and required to publish as evidence of their research activity (Altbach, 2013; Lee, 2013; McGrail et al., 2006; Nygaard, 2015) and to advance themselves as academics and add value to their higher education institution (Habibie & Hyland, 2019; Rodas et al., 2021). Many academic writing groups are formed to support researchers to fulfil their requirement to publish, as it is often argued that writing groups are nothing new (Gere, 1987), relatively easy to establish (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; McGrail et al., 2006), and can provide emotional safety for its members (Badenhorst et al., 2019). In this article, we share the pleasurable, relational processes of a pandemic writing group as it created a place of belonging generous in its commitments to the ongoing and productive movement of scholarship. We offer insight into undertaking and sustaining academic writing and social/collegial connections virtually amidst the physical and academic isolation (Vázquez, 2022) compounded by the pandemic (Leal Filho et al., 2021).

## Writing Groups

The literature is abundant with accounts of writing groups in academia (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Guerin et al., 2013; Hemmings, 2012; Lee & Boud, 2003; Lock et al., 2019; Macleod et al., 2012; Olszewska & Lock, 2016; Page et al., 2012; Steinert, et al., 2008). Within various descriptions of writing groups, there exists a continuum from expert-led groups (Aitchison, 2010; Cuthbert et al., 2009), to structured and timed groups (Grant, et al., 2010; Lock et al., 2019; Olszewska & Lock, 2016), to peer-to-peer groups (Dwyer et al., 2012; Speedy et al., 2010). Our online academic writing group is best described as a peer-to-peer group within a Faculty of Education. Peer-to-peer writing groups “originate from within one department or discipline rather than being made up of members from across different disciplines” (Nairn et al., 2015, p. 598).

The sustainability of academic writing groups (Olszewska & Lock, 2016) has been examined and explored as part of social and situated practice, a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002), within a context of academic identity formation (Aitchison & Lee,

2006; Guerin et al., 2013; Hemmings, 2012; Lee & Boud, 2003; Lock et al., 2019; Olszewska & Lock, 2016). Although the success and sustainability of physically co-located writing groups is well documented (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Guerin et al., 2013; Hemmings, 2012; Lee & Boud, 2003; Macleod et al., 2012; Page et al., 2012), the literature on online writing groups is sparse, with very little commentary on such groups that were formed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Matters of pleasure and productivity in academic writing, a finely held tension, are rarely discussed in research (Nairn et al., 2015). However, in this article, as part of examining an online writing group formed during COVID-19, we explore how both wayfinding and belonging figure strongly in themes of our sense of belonging as we traversed the academic landscape together in our writing group. Intentionally drawing upon ecological metaphors, we discuss the ways that belonging to this group has been a source of academic and social sustenance during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In traversing the landscape of academic writing, we discuss the ways in which a sense of belonging serves to sustain, connect, provide pleasure, and support each of us to grow in our academic writing and publishing. We draw from the human geography literature to seek to understand the nature of belonging, that includes “affective aspects of belonging [which] are mobilised and ...on feelings of being in place” (Mee & Wright, 2009, p. 772).

## Introducing Ourselves

Members of our writing group who engaged in discussing and writing this paper consist of a recent doctoral graduate, two postdoctoral scholars, and an assortment of assistant, associate, and full professors, who are part of a larger group of academics who continue to gather online each week to talk about our own writing in the larger context and culture of academic writing.

Nadia, a self-described burgeoning academic, recently completed her PhD. Jennifer and Enrique are postdoctoral scholars. Jennifer, in her first year of her postdoctoral journey, says that initially the writing group was exciting and intimidating; she found herself somewhat awed as there are so many well-established scholars in the group with countless publications. Enrique, a postdoctoral scholar, says he drew inspiration and encouragement to join our group from his wife, who facilitates such a group in Mexico. Christy is in her first year as an academic at a university different from the one that hosts the writing group. She says that

knowing that there is a well carved out pathway for an academic career is helpful for knowing the end goal, but also for knowing how she could navigate that path and who journeys with her along the way. Ronna, also in her early years as an academic, sought us out, noting the group offered her an opening into a community and into a space and place of belonging, where writing once again might become possible. She sought connection as a sense of isolation was a defining pandemic experience for her. Krista says that having to report on her writing on a weekly basis reminded her, “groups are great for helping you stay motivated because they provide support and friendly pressure” (Belcher, 2009, p. xviii). Roswita indicates she enjoys the collegial community of support that provides a space where there is an impetus to be honest about one’s challenges and proud of one’s successes. For Barb, connecting with colleagues and learning about the challenges, successes, and strategies of keeping writing on track is important. As an associate dean within the faculty, intentionally setting aside time for writing helps to keep her focused. Sylvie, also an associate dean, looks to the group to keep focused on her writing. Michele, an experienced professor on administrative leave at the time the writing group formed online, says that the writing group helped her to find her anchor, as well as a compass to replot her writing journey during the pandemic. The writing group supported her to become more accountable to herself and at the same time to an academic community. For Sharon, reinhabiting the life of an academic after nine years in senior administration in the Faculty required that she once again become disciplined, learning once again to embody the *habitus* of academic writing, and allowing herself to engage in unfettered and unbounded academic camaraderie.

From our brief introductions, it is apparent that, although we came to this group for different reasons, two things bind us together—the desire to write and the need for belongingness to see us through a pandemic. Knowing that successful academic writers talk about their writing (Belcher, 2019) and “the more you make your writing social, in person or virtually, the more positive your experience of writing will be” (p. 20), we longed for social connection. The pandemic created a new set of challenges for us—how to find inspiration for our ideas, to find those who will support us by talking through how to improve our ideas and our writing, and discussing how to navigate a writing landscape amid isolation and lockdown. The pandemic created a sense of workplace displacement for many of us. In relocating ourselves, coming to know where one is in a

landscape, required us to create a new network of connections that linked one's present location to the larger space (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 139). Learning the landscape, in this case of academic writing during a pandemic, is an idea rooted in ecological thinking where any particular thing in an ecosystem is understood to exist only in relation to and in dependence upon the field of relations in which it lives. It is where the vibrancy of knowledge, its creation, its demonstration, and its dissemination live, and can be understood as an evolving scope of possibilities.

## On Writing

Drawing upon images and metaphors from ecology, we begin by exploring what it means to traverse the academic writing landscape together. While inhabiting different paths and timelines as academics, none of us entered the online writing group as novices. For us, the experience of writing was familiar, as was coming together as a community of writers (Lock et al., 2019). What was new for us was undertaking, sustaining, and continuing to evolve our academic writing and social connections virtually during a global pandemic.

### *The Impulse to Write*

In choosing to write, we are initially reminded that we are connected to a rich lineage of those who travelled this landscape prior to our arrival. For the past 100,000 years humans have left markings, first on natural surfaces such as stones and cave walls, and later on manufactured surfaces, such as paper. Saini (2019) says that these representational markings are the "mark of human modernity" (p. 2).

The impulse for humans to write, to record events, thoughts, ideas, and knowledge is not only encoded on surfaces, but it also remains encoded and embedded in language. Writing also provides people with the ability to reflect upon, interpret, and learn from those ideas and events. For us, writing is not merely a "mopping-up activity at the end of a research project... [but] also a way of 'knowing' ... a method of inquiry" (Richardson, 1994, p. 516), rather, coming together to talk about our writing provides us with opportunities to learn with and from each other, to acknowledge and address our feelings and fears about our writing (Belcher, 2019), as we write.

*The Academic Writing Landscape*

The associated webs of learning as following a track are deeply entrenched. Tracing the connecting path to the historical beginnings of the word learning, Macfarlane (2012) explains:

The trail begins with our verb to learn, meaning 'to acquire knowledge.' Moving backwards in language time, we reach the Old English leornian, 'to get knowledge, to be cultivated.' From leornian the path leads further back, into the fricative thickets of Proto-Germanic, and to the word liznojan, which has a base sense of 'to follow or to find a track' (from the Proto-Indo-European prefix leis-, meaning 'track'). 'To learn' therefore means at root - at route - 'to follow a track.' (p. 31)

This rather simplistic linear way back through language time to understand learning and writing—the track or path, is much like a railroad track or rutted path, which takes shape and is marked by use. Within the academy, there are tracks. A tenure-track is set, predetermined, and engineered with mile markers and well-defined pathways to ensure the newly initiated do not venture too far astray. For some, there is little give while on this track and derailments can be catastrophic. In some institutions, the tenure track is guarded by Procrustes, himself. Like the mythical Greek innkeeper who offered only one size of beds, new academics are required to conform to a standardised, or Procrustean system of measurement known as tenure. Like the stories of long ago, when challenged by travellers who were too tall, Procrustes cut feet and legs down to size, tenure is similar in that there is a penalty or cost for those who stick out, or those who are seen to advance too quickly. Like Procrustes, there is a rack to stretch those academics who find themselves too short in the fixed and allotted time frame given for tenure.

Within the K-12 school system, a system that many of us in the group know well experientially and through our research as pracademics (Friesen, 2022), the well-worn rutted path reminds us of the ways that curricula were meant to be implemented. This track harkens back to the days of Roman chariots. "To the Romans, a curriculum was a rutted course that guided the path of two-wheeled chariots... [Similarly today,] vast numbers of learning objectives, each associated with pedagogical strategies, serve as mileposts along the trail mapped by texts from kindergarten to the twelfth

grade" (National Research Council, 1990, p. 4). Trodden paths laid down in this manner, generally tend to fall short as learning a landscape involves "learning your way around, learning what resources are available, and learning how to use those resources in conducting your activities productively and enjoyably" (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 139). Grounded in ecological thinking, where any particular thing in an ecosystem is understood to exist only in relation to and dependent on the field of relations, learning through writing and talking about our writing with each other creates a rich connection of intersecting and interconnected paths not only among the ideas but also among those who traverse these paths. Learning to write from those who have gone before and from those in our virtual writing community, we, both the newly initiated and more experienced, engage in representing, reflecting, interpreting, learning, and disseminating through our engagement and collaboration with each other.

As a beginning scholar, Jennifer acknowledges the pressures, not only to write, but to publish solo. However, at the same time, she turns away from the rutted, narrow track to find a place of connection.

The academy often puts pressure on early career scholars to strive for solo authorship on publications in top-tier journals. While writing alone can be valuable and has its place, I find that writing with others strengthens the quality of the publications. My co-authored pieces are among my favourites as the co-authors and I have negotiated the various aspects of the articles, from conception and framing, to themes and articulations. Writing with peers is also motivating and keeps the process on track, as I will prioritise my responsibility to the group ahead of my individual pursuits. In some ways, the writing group creates that same sense of accountability for both my individual and collaborative work.

Prior to this online writing group, an on-campus group was formed in our faculty focused on learning about writing through internal and guest speakers (Olszewska & Lock, 2016). However, our online writing group took on a different purpose, primarily in response to the need to connect during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Rather than searching for those from outside the writing group to provide

writing advice, we looked to each other in our weekly online meetings. It is accountability to each other and to ourselves, and to meeting regularly to talk about our writing, that keeps us on the path of learning and writing during a time that this pandemic wrought havoc throughout the world.

When someone told me (Sylvie) at the beginning of my career that “you have something to say, so you should write.” I understood that writing and publishing were essential. During the pandemic, the writing group became more significant for me, not as the Associate Dean Research, but as a writer. I do not want to forget that my main objective in academia is to disseminate knowledge and inspire people in the society. I can accomplish this by writing... writing different genres and writing for different audiences...

With such a diverse group of writers, who bring from a few to many years and types of experiences in the academy, we draw upon each other to provide insight, inspiration, and conversations to guide our writing. Members of the group, novice and experienced, eagerly support each other to learn the writing landscape by traversing the paths together.

### **Wayfinding**

In historical times, travellers over land or sea created techniques to mark relatively unmarked or uncharted territories. While many writers have marked the writing landscape, the context and circumstances for our group is less travelled. We found ourselves and each other in this landscape during a pandemic, so as a group of fellow travellers, we undertook wayfinding, seeking to understand what it meant to encounter the living traditions and character of academic writing during this unprecedented time.

For me (Barb), the writing group is a great place to connect with colleagues and learn about what my colleagues are working on and learn from their successes and challenges. I find it helpful to hear about how my colleagues are working on multiple writing projects that are at different stages. It’s also helpful to hear about how projects progress from drafts to finished products over

time. Some of the participants are my co-authors on various projects and it's also helpful to take this time to learn about some of their other research projects and knowledge mobilisation activities.

"For some time now it has seemed to me that the two questions we should ask of any strong landscape are these: firstly, what do I know when I am in this place that I can know nowhere else? And then, vainly, what does this place know of me that I cannot know of myself" (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 27). As we check in each week, we seek ways to link our present location to the larger space. "My paper received a revise and resubmit," one of us reports. This is an important marker. Such markers of familiarity not only locate us, but also give us pause. "Revise and resubmit" signifies the writing has been judged to be good, to be satisfactory.

Being part of this writing group has supported me (Christy), in finding my way as an early scholar. Knowing that there is a well carved out pathway for an academic career is helpful for knowing the end goal but how you navigate that path and who journeys with you along the way matters. Joining this writing group during the pandemic has allowed me to connect with established scholars and other early scholars and learn from their wisdom and their own academic writing journeys. This has given me the opportunity to develop my own writing capabilities as a scholar. Participating in this online writing group and hearing colleagues share their writing goals and sharing my own has created a generative space. When we meet and share these goals, there is also an opportunity to ask questions and seek advice on how to navigate next steps in writing.

Calling out the markers to one another, even the difficult ones, reminds us we are on a path, one that others have walked before, and will walk again, and that the markers guide the way onward. Turning to Macfarlane (2012) once more, paths connect places, and they also connect people (p. 17). The markers and their paths "are means of communion as well as means of motion" (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 21). Learning more about the different markers and the ways colleagues work through, and persist, when faced with revisions or rejections, provides a sense of belonging within a

supportive community of scholars, and motivation to persist with writing.

Learning to navigate new, unfamiliar, and ever-changing landscapes—be they academic or geographical—reflects wayfinding traditions that are both embodied and attuned to rhythms of place (Davis, 2009). Often, the knowledge of how to traverse the terrain is learned experientially and in community, with both experts and novices sharing space and responsibilities along the journey.

### **Belonging**

While definitions of belonging vary, there appears to be consensus that a “sense of belonging” has to do with connectedness and perceived cohesion with a group (Maher, 2013). In some ways, belonging remains tethered to its mid 14th century Germanic roots, *belangen*, “to go along with” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Belonging however can also take on a multidimensional frame as individuals come together for a common purpose whether it is established initially or evolves as a result of the work, dynamic of people, and depth of communication or sharing.

In her Massey Lecture, *Belonging: The Paradox of Citizenship*, Adrienne Clarkson (2014) contends, “the joy of working with others should be in the effort of working together, not in the scramble to gain power, praise, or pleasure” (p. 11). She is careful to add,

But it must always be remembered that to subjugate your selfhood, ideas, inclinations, and emotions in order to be part of a collective is not belonging. Belonging, in its truest sense, means understanding the nature of the connections between one another—the very nature of interconnectedness. To define belonging is to understand its laterality. It will always move horizontally and never vertically. (p. 43)

Within our writing group landscape, matters of belonging, belonging to each other and also to the academic writing landscape itself, remind us concretely and powerfully of the ways that interdependence and interconnectedness are manifested. It may be that in returning to more ecological images to understand our online writing group and our ability to create the conditions under which our writing thrives, we have encountered what is needed to return to each of us a sense of the whole. We are able ask ourselves, what

does writing require of me, and also what does writing know of me that I am just awakening to myself?

Our online writing group is where we gather each week and (re)connect with each other to share. Like a river that picks up particles as it flows, depositing some and picking up others, the membership of the writing group and its ways of interacting have evolved over the course of time. In the early days, years ago, a small group in our faculty gathered around a coffee table in a carpeted meeting room on campus. As the group's structure formalised, the location shifted to a conference room with access to technology for presentations. Writing about the origins of that writing group, Lock et al. (2019) indicates, some became regulars, some drifted away. Reflecting back on the beginnings of that writing group,

I (Roswita) recall, one early round worked so well that I was able to give and get several rounds of feedback from another writing group member, who later became a co-author. However, most rounds were not as productive or effective at building a community of active members and I watched in dismay as the group seemed to be getting smaller and attracting fewer new members at each new entry point. I felt and expressed that something needed to change to revitalise the group, but I would never have dreamed that the pandemic and the subsequent switch to online would be the impetus.

Participants in our online writing group created and shaped a safe and welcoming place at a time when it was most needed.

I (Nadia) found the timing of the start of the pandemic and the compulsory move to online instruction across the university resulted in an invitation to this online somewhat unstructured writing group. From a sociological perspective, the societal shift that predicated this forum created an instant community not only of learners but professionals that have a dual motivation to come together in scholarship and understanding/support. As the medium of communication shifted so too did the engagement; however, the foundational support system thrived even contrary to the notion that online interactions lack the frame for in depth relational development.

There is a particular culture that isolation during pandemic created. Murphy (2020) described how buildings became unsafe locations due to the possibility of people coming into close contact. Meeting weekly, in an online environment, provided a constant and safe space, a flexible and accessible place, to meet with colleagues during a time of disruption.

Belonging is also about social and emotional attachment (Roffey, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is a primal need in humans, the need to belong, to thrive. It is fundamental to a sense of well-being. This awareness has been heightened during this global pandemic.

For me (Michele), the writing group gives me a sense of belonging to a community of fellow travellers who experience some of the paradoxes that I do: disorientation and focus; acceptance and rejection; orienteering and exploration; joy and disappointment, that come with academic writing and research. At first, I was less aware that I had much to offer the writing group. However, it has become a space for connection and mutual mentorship. At times, I have offered a strategy or idea or my approach to writing or ways I engage in research that may be relevant or have value for the group given the conversation at that time, or in response to a query, an offering or opening made by others; many more times, I have benefitted from the diverse knowledge, experience, ideas and expertise that my peers bring and share with our writing group.

Weaving the webs of relationship and sense of place that are essential for the existence of a community, each writer formed and was formed by the landscape that extended, expanded, and sustained the connections within our writing group. Upon reflection, our sense of connection and belonging was rekindled anew in part because of the constraints imposed by the pandemic, along with the affordances of a flexible and accessible online environment. Each of us was always keenly aware of how close each of us was to experiencing dislocation, loneliness, and isolation: common emotions amongst academics in higher education (Vázquez, 2022). I (Ronna) sought out the writing group as it

offered an opening into a community and into a space where writing once again might become possible. A sense of isolation was quite defining for me for the first several months of the COVID work-from-home and social restrictions. I felt disconnected and unsettled, with no ground beneath my feet, no touchpoints, and no road ahead.

While various definitions of belonging are prevalent (Maher et al., 2015), within human geography, matters of a sense of belonging have to do with place. It is appropriate that feelings of belonging to a place are necessary to anchor or ground. Such an orientation to belonging, requires an understanding of place that exceeds its physicality. In this way, finding an affinity to and with the online place not only creates a sense of belonging, but also a sense of longing.

I (Enrique) came to this group out of a sense of longing and a need to belong. My wife is a literature lover and teacher. She always encourages me to read and write about everything, not only academics. During the pandemic, she started a writing group with Mexican friends focusing on writing literary challenges (e.g., write a horror story, write a story about a photo you like the most, write a tale for kids, etcetera). They are a group who meet weekly to read, discuss, and critique others' work. I like to discuss her ideas from the beginning and listen to her read her final product. I felt her cheerfulness, yet feelings of pressure brought upon by the commitment to write one page or two in a week. This friendly pressure, as Belcher (2009) said, was present in her informal group. I wanted the same for me because the pressure I felt since the pandemic started was far from friendly.

Much like the diverse ecosystems that thrive within a landscape and the boundaries that transition one from another, matters of belonging in an online environment also involve flexible and permeable boundaries. Knowing this, we keep the boundaries of our group fluid. The new writers are warmly welcomed and those who linger for a while and return only occasionally are welcomed back. For us, memories of estrangement, of not belonging, of isolation, of disruption, are ever present, "like the feeling of standing in a

crowded street with no one to speak to, no one who knows your name" (Greene, 2001, p. 164). The writing group provided a place of belonging and connection that has helped a group of colleagues stay on track amid and beyond the pandemic. Our online writing group continues as a sustained community of practice that meets weekly as members now move freely and join online whether they are on-campus or in other work spaces. Members of this online writing group continue to be drawn together by a shared purpose, mutual regard, and sense of belonging to each other and to the writing.

### **End Bit**

While acknowledging that writing groups have a long-standing tradition and that there are many writing groups in many universities, we offer insights and themes from the ways our online writing group found a sense of wayfinding and belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our peer-to-peer writing group provided members with not only a weekly virtual space, but a shared online place, a landscape where we could once again connect with writing and a sense of belonging to each other. Regular conversations, such as those about submissions, rejections, revisions, resubmissions, encouraged writers to persist with a manuscript, to embrace peer review as subjective while focusing on continual improvement. Our online academic writing group created a professional learning community of fellow travellers, a trusted and trusting social group, and a valued academic group of accomplished and generous authors. It offered an open invitation into conversations with others that pushes beyond the boundaries and silos of specialisations of many writing groups and physical workspaces to create a collective that motivated and challenged each other to grow and expand their capacity and accomplishments.

Our peer-to-peer online academic writing group remains relatively unstructured, inviting, open-ended, informal, and generous. It has been established through relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) versus through a formal structure and a prescribed regimen. In contrast to the competition, tension, and mutiny described by Nairn et al. (2015), we seamlessly engaged in turn-taking and respectful facilitation versus relying on or looking to one leader. There remains a sense of walking alongside each other and generosity versus watchfulness, competition, and hoarding. Our relational and organic, weekly online conversations offer a contrast to the structure, formality, and pressure of many writing groups. Priority continues to be placed on socio-emotional well-

being, in a flexible and accessible online space, as well as the academic process, progress, and products of the writing group as a whole in which we all make and traverse various intersecting and connecting paths. We learned that our orientation to writing, which evolved to overcome the physical and social isolation compounded by COVID-19, is a structure for academic writing groups that creates a sense of belonging to something greater than the need to fulfil an academic requirement to stay on track.

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