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## STRATEGIES TO CREATE A WRITING GROUP AS A COOPERATIVE LEARNING SPACE

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# STRATEGIES TO CREATE A WRITING GROUP AS A COOPERATIVE LEARNING SPACE

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**Abstract**

*Examining the significance of academic collaborative spaces, specifically writing groups, to support the progress of doctoral students, this Dialogue focuses on the challenges posed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Billie Jane, Sarah, and Joanne share personal narratives as two doctoral students and a part-time instructor who encountered unique circumstances during the pandemic and successfully navigated them by creating an online co-working community. Grounded in self-directed and collective learning theories, we highlight the importance of addressing the agency, collaboration, and continuous learning in personal and collective development within a professional peer writing group. We propose strategies to support adult learning, such as making online acquaintances, building a community, fostering camaraderie, and incorporating a mentorship component. The reflections emphasize the significance of consistency, adaptability, and transitioning from online to in-person interactions. We conclude with recommendations for those seeking to establish writing groups, emphasizing shared goals, community building, and the passing on of knowledge and mentorship. Overall, this exploration provides valuable insights into creating effective online collaborative spaces for graduate students and professionals, especially in the face of unprecedented challenges like the global pandemic.*

**Résumé**

*Ce dialogue examine l'importance des espaces collaboratifs pour favoriser les progrès des doctorants et surmonter des obstacles (ex. ceux causés par la pandémie de la COVID-19). Billie Jane, Sarah et Joanne, deux doctorantes et une instructrice à temps partiel, présentent leurs expériences naviguant des circonstances uniques en créant une communauté de travail collaboratif en ligne. Dans*

*l'optique de l'apprentissage autonome et collectif, nous montrons l'importance de parler d'agence, de collaboration et de formation en développement personnel et professionnel dans des groupes d'écritures avec des collègues. Nous proposons des stratégies pour favoriser l'apprentissage des adultes, notamment les relations en ligne, la communauté, la camaraderie et le mentorat. Les réflexions soulignent l'importance de l'uniformité, l'adaptabilité et la transition des interactions en ligne vers celles en personne. Nous présentons des recommandations pour créer des groupes d'écriture, soit les objectifs communs, la communauté et le transfert de connaissances grâce au mentorat. Cette exploration offre des conseils pour créer des espaces en ligne pour les étudiants diplômés et les professionnels, surtout face à des défis comme une pandémie mondiale.*

**Keywords**

Academic collaborative spaces serve as hubs for social learning, fostering interaction and knowledge exchange among students, researchers, and faculty (Kyrö & Artto, 2015). They also offer students a positive and unconstrained setting where they can engage in activities like talking, eating, and socializing (Matthews et al., 2011, p. 114). By breaking down institutional barriers and bringing together individuals from various affiliations, these spaces have transformed the traditional approach to learning and research (Orel & Bennis, 2020). Recognizing the co-operative learning space emphasized by Chakma et al. (2021), setting up a writing group involves acknowledging its dual role. Not only does it support pedagogy, aiding in the enhancement of informal learning for advancing doctoral writing or professional endeavours, but it also carries considerable social significance that warrants attention.

In higher education environments, writing groups involve students collaboratively pursuing shared or individual academic writing goals simultaneously. These writing groups help address challenges like perceived deficiencies in writing skills, low self-efficacy, and writer's block (Al-Imari et al., 2016). At the University of Ottawa, graduate students could convene at a designated campus location for a writing group or "café," where they would collaboratively focus on their dissertations and participate in conversations about the writing process. This model encouraged an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Through a professional peer writing group, the social nature of learning could be met by fostering a sense of agency, collaboration, and continuous learning in personal and collective development (Caffarella, 1993; Knowles, 1975; Wenger, 1999).

The shift toward more online and remote doctoral programs has made it challenging to develop meaningful connections (Juvonen et al., 2021); the COVID-19 pandemic was a *force majeure* that made it nearly impossible to develop meaningful connections with other graduate students. At the University of Ottawa, co-working or peer productivity groups, such as graduate writing cafés, were offered in-person and online (via a conferencing app—e.g., Zoom); however, they were exclusive to students in the writing phase of their dissertations. As a result, doctoral students in other phases of their studies were excluded.

In this Dialogue, we present reflections on expectations that affected our graduate studies or professional work, and challenges we encountered at the beginning of the

COVID-19 pandemic. Grounded in self-directed and collective learning theories (Caffarella, 1993; Knowles, 1975; Wenger, 1999), we describe the strategies we employed to foster connection and promote productivity regardless of stage in our professional work.

## Our Professional Identities

Attaining a PhD is a formidable task, marked by intellectual challenges, physical demands, and emotional strain (Hermosura et al., 2023). While the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa suggests a four-year full-time completion for a PhD (uOttawa, n.d.), numerous graduate students find this timeline unrealistic due to unforeseen life events and challenges (Hermosura et al., 2023). Despite the time, isolation, and stress associated with the academic journey, doctoral students commonly express a commitment to maintaining focus on their research and active engagement in the research community.

Similarly, developing compelling curricula can pose challenges for new professors (Perrotta & Bohan, 2020). Interestingly, curriculum updates can serve as occasions for professors to undergo transformative learning experiences (Kandiko Howson & Kingsbury, 2023). Industry practitioners in higher education can uniquely influence students' educational journeys by sharing their industry expertise.

### Billie Jane's Story

Billie Jane specialized in Health Professions Education (HPE) in the Faculty of Education, a program that, unlike other concentrations, had the fewest doctoral students. In her cohort, she stood as the sole doctoral candidate in HPE, which limited her chances to connect with peers who shared similar educational interests. Despite this, Billie Jane actively participated in the graduate students' association and research symposium committees, allowing her to establish a supportive in-person network with fellow graduate students at various stages of their academic journeys. This network became a valuable resource for discussions related to the PhD experience and navigating the faculty building. Unfortunately, the onset of the pandemic led to the dissolution of this network.

As the pandemic unfolded, Billie Jane found herself in the process of data collection and the initial stages of data analysis for her research. Faced with the uncertainty of employment during the global crisis, she opted to work part-time on her research. Billie Jane took on several part-time contracts from the university and public service organizations, aiding in the transition of their courses to an online format. Juggling multiple priorities for several months, she eventually reached a juncture where she needed focused time to complete her data analysis and embark on the dissertation writing process.

### Sarah's Story

Sarah started her PhD at the University of Ottawa in September 2019 with a concentration in Leadership, Evaluation, Curriculum, and Policy Studies. In her first semester she attended classes in person, which helped her make connections within her cohort. She attended informational sessions and volunteered at the student conference held at the university every year. In 2020, when the world moved online, Sarah moved from Ottawa for financial reasons and decided to continue her program virtually with the permission of her supervisor. This started a vastly different journey than she had originally planned when starting the program the previous fall (Guest et al., 2021). Throughout this process, Sarah

found that the challenges of working remotely on a PhD were difficult for her friends and family to understand. Without having physical meetings to go to, it was hard to explain or justify the time she needed to work on her writing.

### Joanne's Story

Joanne joined the online co-working session not as a PhD candidate but as a sessional instructor at Carleton University. She had just taken on her first university teaching assignment. The course she adopted required significant updates, which added to her workload as a full-time professional. The co-working sessions were scheduled before the workday began and provided structure and focus. At the beginning of each session, she would share with the group what tasks would be tackled that day. Joanne then spent the next 90 minutes working toward that goal. During a very work-intensive period in Joanne's life, this co-working space was a source of encouragement from and camaraderie with other academics. It was effective in helping her complete the tasks involved with her course work, and she carried on with the group after her teaching term, using it to help tackle and complete personal freelance projects.

### Experience Participating in Writing Cafés

Before the pandemic began, Billie Jane actively engaged in an online writing café, focusing on developing her literature and methodology chapters. This writing café created a concentrated environment for collaborative work among students with diverse projects. Tailored exclusively for doctoral students in the final writing phase, it spanned four weeks, with a weekly format comprising one full day from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., including a one-hour lunch break. The sessions began with a 30-minute roundtable discussion, followed by participants setting their session goals using virtual sticky notes on a whiteboard. There were six writing blocks per session, each lasting 50 minutes with 10-minute breaks in between.

As the pandemic unfolded in March 2020, the university extended support for additional writing cafés. However, the high demand and limited space made it challenging for Billie Jane to secure a spot. Simultaneously, Sarah, in the initial stages of her PhD journey, faced difficulties joining a writing group because few were available for individuals at this phase of the writing process.

Fast-forward to the spring semester of 2021. Billie Jane found herself teaching a virtual course with Sarah as the teaching assistant. Initially centred on course-related discussions and allocated time for grading, their weekly online meetings continued after the course's completion in fall 2021. Recognizing the productivity of their collaboration, Billie Jane and Sarah decided to persist with their joint efforts, despite being at different stages in their PhD journeys. They aimed to advance their research, appreciating the accountability and motivation derived from working together as peers.

### Co-working at the Onset of a Global Pandemic

Billie Jane and Sarah defined a co-working session as designated "protected time," exclusively dedicated to concentrating on their individual doctoral projects. Together, they committed to spending these sessions working solely on tasks related to their research. With the added responsibilities that often come with being a PhD student, such as teaching

and research assistant roles, taking on part-time work was necessary to financially sustain their academic pursuits (Marhnouj, 2022). Establishing protected time served as a crucial accountability mechanism when explaining their unavailability to others—they were "working." This ultimately helped them achieve their primary goal, which was to create a distraction-free environment for advancing their respective projects.

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**Reflections and Discussion / Recommendations**

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Self-directed learning (Caffarella, 1993; Knowles, 1975) and collective learning (Wenger, 1999) are interconnected rather than opposing concepts. Self-directed learners often engage in collective learning within communities of practice, benefiting from shared expertise, feedback, and collaboration while maintaining autonomy and initiative in their learning journeys. Likewise, collective learning thrives when individuals within a group demonstrate self-directedness, taking ownership of their learning contributions and leveraging collective resources effectively. Both approaches emphasize the dynamic, social nature of learning and highlight the importance of agency, collaboration, and continuous learning in personal and collective development.

Knowles (1975) suggested that self-directed learning hinges on an adult learner's independence and willingness to engage in learning autonomously. It encompasses setting goals, finding resources, and assessing progress independently. It underscores the importance of learners taking the lead and owning their learning journey (Caffarella, 1993). During the pandemic, we were eager to advance our projects. While there were institutional objectives, such as completing a research proposal or applying to the ethics committee, we took charge of our day-to-day writing responsibilities. In addition, we possessed confidence in our capacity to achieve our professional goals. With writing and self-management skills, such as time and stress management, as well as adaptability, we were well-equipped to pursue our daily and short-term writing objectives.

A lack of support in cultivating a sense of competence, autonomy, and connection can lead to feelings of alienation and distress (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Kaufmann and Vallade (2022), in the online learning realm, perceptions of loneliness decrease significantly when there is robust rapport and connectivity among students, rather than solely interactions with the instructor. To begin, we established consistent times to meet during the week. Inspired by Billie Jane's experience in writing cafés, we adopted a Pomodoro-style working session (Cirillo, 2018). Billie Jane scheduled continuous three-hour sessions, using a Zoom business account to overcome the limitations of the free version of Zoom, which limits meetings to 45 minutes. Each session began with a social conversation with video on, during which we identified specific writing goals for the session—for example, Billie Jane focused on writing subsections of her thesis, while Sarah concentrated on her proposal or survey tool development, and Joanne worked on developing course lectures. After turning off the video, we dedicated 50 minutes to focused work, followed by a 10-minute break for a quick check-in. This 60-minute cycle was repeated until the final check-in at the end of the co-working session. We then discussed the session's progress and identified the focus for the next co-working session.

### *Strategies to Support Self-Directed and Collective Learning*

The four strategies below outline how to form, implement, leverage, and maintain success

within a peer writing group for graduate students and professionals through self-directed and collective learning. This incorporates insights from both existing literature and our individual experiences.

**Amplifying Connections.** Wenger (1999) viewed learning as a social activity even in self-directed contexts. The concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) suggests learners engage with others sharing common interests and goals, thereby supporting and enriching their self-directed learning journeys. Establishing friendships in online post-secondary education can be challenging due to a lack of shared activities. For Billie Jane and Sarah, the online course they taught together in 2021 served as a "gathering space," with Billie Jane as the instructor and Sarah as her teaching assistant. Initially focused on course tasks, the virtual space evolved into casual conversations, bridging the gap between professional collaboration and personal updates. A shortage of peer connections can adversely affect online learning experiences (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022), so leveraging this professional connection provided a respectful and safe foundation for continued online collaborative work. Billie Jane and Sarah needed to reimagine and reshape how they approached their day-to-day graduate experience.

Ensuring safety and respect are also essential to building community (Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014). Though Billie Jane and Sarah initially co-worked alone, the community grew as they invited others into the online space. This inclusive environment encouraged individuals to allocate time for their work. While each person had their own projects, the support from the virtual community proved beneficial. This space was not exclusive to PhD students; working professionals like Joanne also found it valuable for their side projects. Collective learning occurs when individuals share knowledge, ideas, and experiences, contributing to a collective understanding that goes beyond individual perspectives (Caffarella, 1993). We maintain a consistent schedule, adjusting meeting days/times weekly, emphasizing that consistency transforms acquaintances into close connections.

**Building Community.** The interest in social interaction, community, and learning dates to the 1990s (Trespalacios et al., 2021). Rooted in various theories of social learning, various researchers have explored these concepts. For example, Brown (2001) defined community as support derived from individuals who share common experiences. Community building involves fostering a sense of belonging, continuity, connection, and shared ideas and values (Brown, 2001; Dede, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1994). Furthermore, Knowles (1975) recognized the value of peer learning and group dynamics in adult education. Collaborative activities promote active engagement, diverse perspectives, and deeper understanding through discussions, debates, and collaborative projects. Completing a PhD can be a solitary process, particularly after the initial year of classes, leading to feelings of isolation as each graduate student works on their project. This isolation intensified during the pandemic. In 2021 we created, and have since maintained, an online community through co-working sessions. Initially designed for productivity, it also addressed feelings of isolation. The community's foundation lies in consistent scheduling and an initial focus on doctoral tasks, providing mutual support, shared goals, and accountability. Billie Jane, in the final stages of her dissertation, added a mentorship element to the sessions, benefiting Sarah in the proposal-writing phase. The online co-working space facilitated questions, shared insights, experiences, and constructive feedback, fostering an atmosphere of collaboration. Aydemir and Ulusu (2020) noted graduate students' creative responses to the

uncertainty and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. For us, logging on three times a week during the pandemic helped build a community based on consistency.

**Cultivating Camaraderie.** Through our online co-working, we developed camaraderie, experiencing a sense of belonging and mutual support (Brown, 2001). This connection, rooted in overlapping interests, grew stronger over time. Both Billie Jane and Sarah found that engaging in outdoor activities, whether biking, running, or walking, boosted their productivity in front of the computer. Taking their online friendship offline, Sarah visited Ottawa in 2022 for the Ottawa race weekend, providing an opportunity for a coffee meetup. Additionally, Billie Jane invited Sarah and Joanne to her celebration dinner in fall 2022 after successfully defending her thesis. These in-person celebrations enhanced the community originally formed online. Cultivating camaraderie is a key component of building community because it strengthens interpersonal bonds and reinforces a shared sense of belonging among individuals with common experiences. By fostering trust, mutual support, and positive relationships, camaraderie helps sustain the continuity and connection that define a strong community.

**Mentorship.** Through our regular meeting times, initially designated as work periods, mentorship naturally occurred as questions about the PhD process surfaced. Questions ranged from practical concerns such as form submissions and timeframes to more nuanced inquiries about chapter framing. The online workspace also served as a place to share professional development resources. Reisman et al. (2022) explained that they wished their PhD programs would take "concrete steps to support career preparedness throughout their academic journey" (p. 895). The pandemic did not allow much networking or in-person professional development, so we created that space for ourselves. As knowledge was passed from Billie Jane to Sarah, Sarah, nearing the end of her PhD journey, passed this invaluable information to other peers in the program, showing the ripple effect of mentorship. Mentorship extended beyond an exchange of information to also encompass academic encouragement, offering shared reflections about the challenges of completing a PhD fully online. Despite the inherently solitary nature of the PhD journey, having a mentor has proved immensely beneficial.

### *Implications and Conclusion*

The experiences the three of us shared provide valuable guidance in the following areas for graduate students and professionals looking to create a writing group or build online connections:

**1. Identify a common ground and establish consistency.** Find a common space or activity, even if it is initially focused on coursework or writing. In our case, an online co-working time provided the initial gathering space, gradually evolving into a platform for both professional collaboration and personal updates. Establish and maintain a consistent schedule. Regular online meetings help in building a sense of kinship. Kinship is a product of the regular meetings, but also of accountability to one another. By adjusting meeting days and times as needed, we have demonstrated how consistency transforms acquaintances into a close-knit community.

**2. Build community by gradual inclusion of others.** If starting as a writing partnership, be open to including additional individuals. Expanding the community encourages others to set aside dedicated time for their work, fostering a supportive environment.

Acknowledge the solitary nature of PhD work and the potential for isolation, especially in the later stages. Creating a virtual community through co-working sessions can combat these feelings, providing mutual support, a shared goal, and accountability.

**3. Develop camaraderie and shared interests.** Develop camaraderie by discovering and sharing common interests. For Billie Jane and Sarah, activities like outdoor exercise played a role in improving productivity. Celebrating personal milestones, both online and in person, deepened their sense of community. If possible, transition online connections to occasional in-person meetings or gatherings. In-person interactions, such as meeting for coffee or celebrating achievements together, strengthen the bonds established online.

**4. Pass on knowledge and mentorship.** The community built during a PhD journey can become a platform for passing on knowledge and insights. Sharing experiences and resources helps support and mentor others who find themselves in a similar position of completing a PhD fully online. As members progress through distinct stages of their projects, mentorship naturally evolves. Having someone a step ahead in the process, as demonstrated by Billie Jane and Sarah, adds a valuable mentorship component to regular working sessions.

In conclusion, the success of an online writing group hinges on shared goals, consistency, adaptability, and the gradual development of camaraderie and mentorship. Building a sense of community provides not only support for individual progress but also a platform for sharing experiences and insights with others in similar academic journeys.

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