Graduate Writing Support Groups: An Affective Alternative to the "Boot Camp"

During my time as a Ph.D. student in the Rhetoric and Composition program at the University of Texas at El Paso, I spent a substantial amount of time as a tutor and Assistant Director at the University Writing Center (UWC), where I worked with a number of students who became nervous when writing because they were afraid of making grammatical errors or having their ideas denigrated by certain professors. It was here that my interest in writing anxiety was born. For the purposes of this article, I will use Lynn Bloom's definition of writing anxiety: she characterizes this term as a combination of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that interfere with a person's ability to write (121).

I had simultaneously developed an interest in the "impostor phenomenon" as pertains to graduate students. This term was coined by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, who define the term as "an internal experience of intellectual…" phoniness (1). According to the authors, many graduate students "fantasize that they were mistakenly admitted to graduate school because of an error by the admissions committee" (1). I had these feelings for at least the first year of my program. As I spoke to other graduate students, I found that many of them struggled with the same crisis. I speculated that this struggle could be tied to the impostor phenomenon, as experienced by graduate students. I had a general knowledge about the difficulty many people had when writing dissertations, and as I started interacting with graduate students throughout my campus, I learned that many of them had been working on their dissertations for six years or more.

In the past few years, writing centers at institutions such as Stanford University and the University of North Carolina have designed Dissertation Boot Camps (DBCs) in order to enable a greater rate of completion. Many camps have incorporated a "writing process model," which includes conversations about writing as part and parcel of having graduate students write (Lee & Golde 2).

David Pauley, a psychotherapist, conducted a study in which he facilitated a support group designed to help doctoral students reduce anxiety and develop confidence in writing their dissertations. He also found that the group helped to relieve those students of "isolation, perfectionistic thinking, and self-blame" (27). Claire Aitchison found, outside of DBCs, participating in critiques and mini-lessons on discursive and grammatical elements were beneficial for graduate students (914); however, as of February 29, 2016, I had yet to find groups in writing centers that focused specifically on helping students become less anxious about and more confident in their writing. This gap formed the groundwork for my idea of a formalized support group for graduate students facing these issues, but in a writing center with the title of "writing anxiety workshop." The research I had conducted on DBCs and other writing support groups at the time had only resulted in one such program, which was housed in the Counseling & Mental Health Center at the University of Texas at Austin. I asked the question as to whether this lack of confidence could be inhibiting these students from completing their projects. So as part of my project, I sought to ask whether graduate students could benefit from groups devoted to increasing self-confidence if these groups were positioned in a writing center. However, I

wished to open the population to include master's students completing theses, as I found from working with them that they faced some of the same writing problems as the doctoral population.

Fall 2012 – The Pilot Semester

During Fall 2012, I piloted such a support group, the goal of which was to help students foster greater self-efficacy in their writing. These workshops would be held once a week for seven weeks at ninety minutes per session, during which students would participate in the following activities: 1) explicit instruction on the writing process, writing anxiety, and writer's block; 2) students drawing their writing processes, which was meant to help participants reflect on their own writing practices; 3) an introduction to mindfulness meditation; 4) a session in which participants wrote contracts specifying manageable thesis- or dissertation-related tasks they could complete in the course of a week; 5) a session during which participants learned how to cultivate positive self-talk; and 6) journaling and discussion devoted to reflection on thesis/dissertation writing progress since the previous meeting.

My promotion of the workshops had multiple components. I designed flyers advertising a "writer's block workshop," as the term is more widely known than "writing anxiety." To promote, I distributed them on departmental bulletin boards across UTEP and sent them to graduate directors of the various academic departments on campus, accompanied by a short e-mail. Many of the advisors then forwarded the e-mail to their students.

The results were not what I expected or hoped for. Thirteen students attended the first session. By the end, only three attended regularly. I had received informal feedback from one of the participants who, after the end of the second session, thought it would be a step-by-step workshop on how to write a thesis or dissertation. When I first heard this, I was frustrated because I felt that I had made the message about overcoming writer's block clear in the flyers. My frustration, however, turned to hope when I received feedback from students in response to a brief questionnaire, which consisted of me asking for positive feedback about the workshop and what I could do more effectively. Two participants had only positive things to say about the workshop, while one stated that while she learned a great deal from the workshop, more activities and less time devoted to discussion might have improved the workshop.

Spring 2013

I repeated the program in the Spring of 2013, and made some adjustments based on the feedback, along with my own reflections. In response to the last piece of advice cited in the previous section, I allotted each participant two minutes at the beginning of each session to discuss the progress they had made outside the workshops in order to allow for more time to participate in various writing activities. I also shortened the number of sessions from seven to six, eliminating the seventh session, which was devoted to participants giving feedback on the workshop. The rationale for this decision was that it would be easier for participants to write their commentary in an e-mail than to devote a whole session to feedback. I also provided a space for students to complete

workshop activities online in the event they could not attend face-to-face sessions.. In addition, I added another avenue of promotion, which was a short presentation to the ENGL5316 – Graduate Writing Workshop classes offered by UTEP's English Department.

In preparation for the first session, I prepared a handout describing the workshop, on which I repeated the flyer's message that the workshops were geared toward helping students build confidence in their writing abilities as opposed to showing students how to write a dissertation. Out of the twelve students who attended the first session, three returned for the second, and two stayed for every session during the semester. One student, Victoria, who had attended during the Fall 2012 semester, also returned for the Spring 2013 session, adding up to a total of three regular participants.

Student Feedback

Samantha, a student who reported high levels of anxiety at the beginning of the workshop in the Fall of 2012, had the following to say in an interview that took place three months after the workshop in response to the question, "what do you like, if anything, about how you're writing your project?":

> *Ummm, I, I feel that it's more possible now than how I felt even, last year, so I feel that it's more possible, my look about it…I learned that it wasn't so much as uhhh a special issue…it's actually something that does exist, and I'm not the only one who battles with it, so i-it brought a lot of comfort and understanding*

Victoria, who took the workshops during both semesters, reported a better understanding of her own thinking patterns as related to her writing in a subsequent interview:

> *…it was as I read through the literature you provided which was a really good thing I was able to focus on some of the things and really focus on some of the things, the points it brought out, and maybe looking at myself looking at the way I perceive myself and my habits the things that I do the process of actually writing. I had to revisit those and kind of reexamine, is that really what I'm doing ask myself, and then see how I could change those patterns and so that helped a lot I think in taking the program* – (In response to the question, "Overall, what are your feelings about where you think you're going with your project?)

Another student, Samuel, found the workshop helped him develop more effective time management strategies:

> *Ummm, I learned just basically how to think about writing and not be, not the actual writing itself but how to think about it and calm down and not to think negatively* (In response to the question, "Overall, what are your feelings about where you think you're going with your project?")

Other interviews indicated mixed reactions toward the purpose of the workshop when I asked participants who left why they did so. The following is a random sampling of comments from participants who stopped attending. These were responses to the interview question, "After you attended, did the workshop meet your needs? The follow-up to the respondents who responded negatively was, "What were you hoping to learn as a result of the workshop?":

> *my expectation was this workshop will help me, how to write or writing experiences or what should be in professional writing but it was not so, that's the reason I backed off*– Michael

> *Ummm, I didn't care for some of the resources that you had in the workshop…it just kinda turned me off.* – Sara

> *I was looking for something to give me more structure or discipline towards my writing my thesis. I think that would I think that would help if somebody put something together and has a structure or outline of maybe what the thesis writing, what thesis writing is about and how it is in stages, it really should be umm deconstructed so its' more manageable...* – Laura

Upon further reflection on Laura's comment, I speculated that some students' worries about their projects caused them to glance at the flyer and perceive the words *thesis* and *dissertation* as clues that the workshop would provide explicit instruction on how to write the thesis or dissertation. In my post-workshop interviews, I learned that Victoria and Sara had finished their projects, while Samantha, Samuel, Michael and Laura had not.

Moving Forward

I surmised a self-confidence building workshop can be effective, but it also should combine elements of the writing process, explicit instruction on the discursive conventions of the thesis, and writing time during the sessions, which I did not provide during the workshops. My current theory is that a combination of these elements can meet the needs of all graduate students more effectively. However, that being said, I still found that confidence-building was effective for some of the participants, so I propose that writing centers begin to work collaboratively with counseling centers to help students develop their confidence in their writing abilities and provide basic training to tutors in strategies designed to help students develop confidence in their abilities.

Students who come into the writing center for help on dissertations can benefit from rudimentary counseling, or at the very least, explicit instruction on writing anxiety and the impostor phenomenon, just so that they know they are not alone in their feelings, as Samantha and Victoria realized. Writing can be a solitary process, but by helping graduate students connect with others who may share their feelings, writing centers may be able to remove the stigma they feel

and work toward completing dissertations. This can also be combined with explicit instruction on the discursive elements of the thesis and the dissertation. If writing centers can combine such psychotherapeutic strategies with explicit genre-based instruction, we can help graduate students achieve their academic goals. While I do not propose that tutors become counselors, they can benefit from a overview of cognitive-behavioral therapy, including learning about terms like “self-talk,” which is the internal conversation we have with ourselves (Whitbourne). This type of instruction can help tutors to understand how students may react emotionally when they are required to write. In some cases, students’ emotional reactions lead to what psychotherapists call “experiental avoidance,” which involves avoiding situations that produce uncomfortable internal experiences, such as anxiety (Santanello & Gardner 319). This avoidance is commonly referred to as procrastination by people outside of psychology.

Most importantly, such training may help writing centers understand the various reasons that lead graduate students to procrastinate. Writing centers can apply such knowledge in how they train tutors to work with students at finding the underlying psychological reasons behind procrastination. This application can lead to writing centers solving the kinds of writing problems that result and are the source of complaints we often hear (as writing center directors and as instructors of composition) from our colleagues in other disciplines.

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