

Part I



Writing Group One: *Creating Our Professional Identities*



The Gift of Time

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We first met in September 2002, a diverse collection of educators, seemingly with little in common except an interest in writing and curiosity about how the community we'd been invited to join would help us grow professionally. We all aspired to be better writers and teachers of writing. We had confidence in the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project—the local NWP site that had assembled the larger inquiry community for this project and then divided us into small writing groups. But we didn't know each other yet. And we weren't sure we'd jell as a group.

We came from different instructional levels—elementary, secondary, and university. George had just completed his masters in professional writing, and he is a secondary English teacher. Dede and Carol are college professors. Dede, Carol, and George had subject areas or specialties, whereas Debby, an elementary teacher, is a generalist. This diversity of backgrounds worried us at first, but wound up making us strong, because we brought a variety of perspectives to the writing as it emerged, and we asked each other tough questions.

Our process was very slow. We were not only in different locations, but we also had miles—and traffic—between us in the greater Atlanta area. We joked in emails to each other about trailing the other writing groups. Our different teaching contexts made scheduling meetings difficult, and we lagged behind, individually, getting started on our drafts. We postponed a couple of get-togethers as we each struggled on our own to begin writing. Then an important small-group meeting was held one wintry evening, on a date when we'd promised to come, however brief and unformed our texts. We arrived with very incomplete drafts, nervous about our seeming lack of progress. We sat together, silent at first, passing our very rough pieces to each other to read, making notes to ourselves along the way. Slowly, palpably, the intellectual excitement in the room grew. What we were reading was thought-provoking—exciting even. We sensed we had worthwhile things to say to an audience that could cut across teaching levels, and we also realized we could help each other say it.

That evening, we also realized the importance of protected “face time” together. We had been exchanging emails for weeks, but it was only when we met in person as a writing group that the communal energy began to do its magic. While it was difficult to make that initial commitment to get started—

it was right before Christmas and we were all juggling family responsibilities with end-of-semester grading—once we trekked out in the cold to sit in Carol's office, we were so invigorated that we made time in busy schedules for more meetings: we wrote them on our calendars and we stuck to them.

As we studied each others' papers, we became aware of the bond of our professional identities as well as the common issues we addressed in our essays. From the intellectual connections in our work, trust emerged. Debby felt competent enough to comment on Dede's topic of mentoring since Debby had expertise and experience in mentoring. George's subject of portfolios in high school could be applied to elementary classrooms like Debby's or to Carol's college-level portfolios in teacher education. As we began tentative discussion of our drafts, we found out how much each of us valued good teaching and discovered that politics exist at every level. The common ground of our essays became our starting point for the writing group's work.

It was somewhere midway in our writing process, many months later, that all of us discovered how much the small group work was going to deepen and enrich our writing at a conceptual level, rather than simply address surface concerns such as style and sentence structure. We were able to give substantive comments to each other because we had come to know each others' thinking and goals. We didn't always agree philosophically, but the shared comments informed our reflective process. And what we gained was invaluable and completely unforeseen: a big-picture view on education from the primary level to the college level. And we each gained three good friends and colleagues.

This deep learning didn't come easily at first. It took time and patience. Our first couple of meetings ran way over the planned schedule. We needed some practice collaborating to refine our protocols. For example, at our start-up meeting, we each brought only one copy of our drafts and passed them around, but that approach made us hesitant to put margin notes on the papers, for fear of shaping someone else's reading. Also, it was sometimes tempting to speak up and ask the author a question, but we quickly saw how that broke others' concentration on the different essays they were reading. And by the time we began talking about a particular piece, it was hard for the first reader to re-focus on that essay. At later meetings, we brought multiple copies, and we would all read the same essay at the same time, then discuss it.

Those discussions were powerful, once we established the protocol that was right for our group. Typically, we would first take ten minutes or more to read silently, each of us quietly making margin notes—both questions and comments—on our individual copies. Then, we would go around our circle to talk about the essay, letting each reader ask questions. The writer responded

orally to reader comments, and other group members, in turn, would add response. (Once we had all made oral comments on a particular essay, we passed our copies to the author to take home, where s/he could read additional margin notes and synthesize them.)

What came out over time, in a seemingly serendipitous manner, were the connections that each essay had with the others. As we provided responses, we often recounted experiences from our own teaching, experiences linked to the topics under discussion in the essay. Through that sharing, the written text (with its moves to logic and rationality) often gave way to the unwritten verbal texts we were making together—texts that were more conversational, more grounded in authentic, shared emotion. Our oral responses merged, gradually, and found their way into the essays and into a kind of meta-discourse of ongoing, shared learning based in our writing. Marginalia we put on each others' written texts turned to conversation, then to more writing, and at the same time to stronger emotional bonds of communal experience in our small group.

Along the way, we all benefited from the superimposed structure of the large group. However, what had initially seemed a weakness—our different levels and working in different places—became our greatest strength. Our personal and professional bonds were growing, and so were our essays. By our final small-group meeting, well beyond the time when the other groups had finished their revisions, we were fully vested in each other's writing. We were actually reflecting collaboratively—and often in unison. And by then we had moved from worrying about time to savoring our time together.

A lesson about time and group commitment, in fact, was perhaps the most important aspect of our learning about writing groups. Time needs to be truly dedicated to sharing, we discovered, and careful attention needs to be paid to the writing group itself. One thing that came to mean a lot to us was the feeling that time stopped when our group started. If we had to stay a bit later to work with one of the writers, then we stayed later. We didn't hurry our work. And if that meant that someone didn't get a review at that meeting, then we scheduled another get-together, or we let that person go first next time. Our "real world" is a place of constant hurry, we eventually admitted, but the writing group should not be. For people to be supported, we had to give each other the gift of time.

Everyone worked hard. We learned the power of deadlines. Knowing that the others in our group would come to a session with some writing prepared for shared review helped all of us move forward. In a writing group, we found that we could be kind to each other in what we said and how we said it, yet be intellectually rigorous at the same time. We held each others' feet to the fire, but with gentle language, being cheerleaders. In return, none

of us wanted to let the others down. Even while striving to be kind, we learned to tell the truth to fellow group members. If someone felt a piece's tone was inappropriate, or that an essay section lacked specificity, or that the politics of an argument were troubling, we developed ways for saying so. Feedback could be both honest and kind at the same time, we came to understand. Having gotten to know each other as caring professionals, we became very comfortable with our process and knew we were not being judged; we knew that we would receive only constructive criticism. Thus, we were increasingly empowered to take risks with our writing, to let go of individual ownership, and to make major changes in our texts, however difficult it had been at first to do so.

As seemingly impossible as our work had seemed in the early stages, the more we drafted, the more text we had to show each other at every meeting, the easier the task became. Deleting and revising was easier than generating—especially because, through the struggle of generating, we had developed comfort within our group. Therefore, once we did approach final revision, our pride was a community one.

Our writing group experience enhanced our teaching as well as our writing. Fresh from the energy of the group's process, Dede engineered more conferences with her students and more peer sharing opportunities in class. Excited about the experience of working in a cross-level writing group, Carol collaborated with another college instructor to create overlaps in their syllabi, so students in a cohort graduate program would have more opportunities to collaborate, to see the content they were learning as cutting across normal course boundaries.

As a group, we are now comfortable offering advice to other teachers interested in forming a writing group. We think at least half of the meetings should be in person. We believe the meeting space itself is important—that it should be somewhere protected from interruptions so that the time for writing group work can be kept undisturbed. We would recommend establishing parameters for group discussion, such as agreeing to complete honesty delivered with kindness. We feel that deadlines are important and that honoring meeting dates and times is crucial. We also think it's helpful to set a group goal for each particular meeting—such as coming with a plan or (later) a full draft—and that, whatever the agreed-upon assignment, it should involve bringing some piece of written text that others can read. We also affirm the importance of conversation in the group process.

Teachers, all of us, have our wisdom about our work. Strong teachers are reflective, but reflection becomes even more powerful when we have an opportunity to share our reflections with other educators. Then our reflection

can change our classrooms—can even change the teaching of others. When we work collaboratively in a writing group focused on teaching, that group may initially be just a refuge—a way to avoid isolation. But it becomes more. The topics we choose to write about are the message, but the group itself becomes the medium: through the writing group process, we are able to influence others to join us in being lifelong learners. And, along the way, we become true professionals.