

Chapter 13

Writing Groups in the Digital Age: A Case Study Analysis of Shut Up & Write Tuesdays

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ABSTRACT

Social media writing groups are an emerging phenomenon in the academic world. Combining the discipline, mentorship, and peer support of face-to-face writing groups, with the convenience, global reach, and interdisciplinary networks of social media, they offer a way for scholars to apply new digital technologies to the old problem of developing, maintaining, and protecting an academic writing practice. Despite their growing popularity, however, there has been little critical or empirical analysis of these groups. Using Shut Up & Write Tuesdays (SUWT) as a case study, this chapter examines the purpose, use, outcomes, and challenges of a social media writing group for academics. Usage data from the three SUWT Twitter accounts, a survey of SUWT participants, and the narrative reflections of the SUWT hosts, are drawn together to highlight the value, strengths, and limitations of social media writing groups as a scholarly activity in the digital age.

Because writing gave me a place to go and be and grow when I wanted to give up. And I'd like to jam my foot in the doorway so that others might find this place too. - Lidia Yuknavitch, The Chronology of Water

Twitter should ban my mother. - Frances Bean Cobain, Rolling Stone

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a central part of academic life. Academics¹ write to propose new projects, to secure funding, and to share their findings. They also write to explore their own ideas, to critique the ideas of others, and to vent their frustrations. As a feature of academic life, writing has been described as fundamental, crucial, and core (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Maher et al., 2008; Weller, 2011). Despite this, writing “continues to be marginalized and squeezed out of the everyday academic practices of researchers and academics” (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014, p4) as the neoliberal values of productivity, efficiency, and competition come to govern the contemporary university (Mountz et al., in press). The struggle to find time to write is compounded by a lack of explicit writing training for academics (Starke-Meyerring, 2014), leaving many (if not all) academics with what MacLeod and colleagues (2012) have called writing-related anxiety.

In this context, writing groups have emerged as an effort to dedicate time to writing, develop writing skills, provide guidance and support, and resist the neoliberal view of writing as a product rather than a process (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Lee & Boud, 2010; Mountz et al., in press). These groups seek to provide a community of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) for academic writers, bringing individuals together with the aim of generating knowledge, learning from the experience of others, fostering intellectual and social leadership, and enabling people at different stages to “learn, grow confidence, and start to see themselves as legitimate researchers” (Ng & Permberton, 2013, p1536). In particular, academic writing groups are communities that seek to foster the development of meaningful academic writing practices and identities (Lee & Boud, 2010).

Research on academic writing groups has shown that they are effective in: making the process of writing visible and explicit; enabling participants to quarantine time and space for writing; reducing fear and anxiety; providing emotional and social support; and improving both the quantity and the quality of written outputs (Haas, 2014; Kozar & Lum, 2015; Lee & Boud, 2010; MacLeod, Steckley & Murray, 2012; Maher et al., 2008; Murray & Newtown, 2009; Mussell, 2012; Price, Coffey & Nethery, 2015).

Academic writing groups are not, however, without limitations. They may perpetuate the privileging of written outputs over less traditional means of knowledge production (or certain types of written outputs over others); they may reinforce the marginalisation of certain groups of scholars (e.g. those with English as a second language or those with insecure employment); they can lead to institutional backlash; they can be difficult to sustain; and they can be destructive if poorly run (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Bosanquet et al., 2014; Canagarajah, 2002; Starke-Meyerring, 2014). Furthermore, as Aitchison & Guerin (2014) note, “our understanding of when, how, and why writing groups operate in academic scholarship is still fragmented” (p6) and we must continue to critically examine their role in academic life. This critical approach is particularly important in the digital age, as writing groups – like so many other things in life – come to be enacted on social media.

Social media are not yet a central part of academic life, but for many academics they have become an important means of gathering information, disseminating findings, and connecting with other academics (Lang & Lemon, 2014; Lupton, 2014; Mussell, 2012; Regis, 2012). The chance to connect with academics across disciplines and across the world is particularly prized, as social media provide new ways to offer support, share experiences, develop skills, and explore ideas (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013; Regis, 2012; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012; Weller, 2011). Furthermore, because social media platforms offer

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