

Article

Developing Dissertation Support in the Writing Centre

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Abstract

The uneven levels of writing support that dissertation writers receive throughout each stage of their PhDs has contributed to low completion rates and general dissatisfaction with the doctoral process. By offering both collective and individual assistance, the Café and one-to-one writing programming described herein centres students in their own work by examining the often-unspoken expectations that structure their PhDs. This programming establishes honest communication with dissertation writers in order to promote self-advocacy and intrinsic motivation so that they may take greater control over their projects. By modeling a reflective understanding of dissertation writing, this programming enhances longer term productive processes that enable higher completion rates and a greater sense of fulfillment with the PhD.

Introduction

In the balancing of writing centre resource distribution, graduate writing support is often a lower priority, particularly when compared with the wide extent and variety of programming available to undergraduate students whose writing skills are typically assumed to be lagging. The opportunities for graduate writing support are often limited in scope when depicted as an impediment to degree completion (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). This gap leaves the heavy lifting of meeting graduate writing needs on the shoulders of an increasingly stretched supervisory faculty. The gap in support may be explained by the assumption that dissertation writers already know how to write (Turner & Edwards, 2006), or that the dissertation, as a highly individualized project, necessitates “solitary activity” (Mullen, 2006). Perhaps unwittingly, this translates into a downplaying of the complex challenges of dissertation writing by policy makers and their impact on mental health issues in

graduate education (Evans, 2018). Given these assumptions, failure to strive is often interpreted by the student as the individual student's shortcoming (Le Feuvre, 2010; Webb et al., 2013), despite ample evidence that highlights the numerous benefits of supporting student self-development (Lindsay, 2015) and the impact of anxiety on a dissertation writer's efficacy (Huerta et al., 2017).

Operating within this context, in 2018 the York University Writing Centre began a program of writing support geared at building writing momentum through a process designed to boost dissertation writers' confidence in their own abilities, particularly through self-advocacy as a means to achieving dissertation writers' goals. Working under the principle that the more attuned students are to their goals, the more they are empowered to establish positive academic relationships, for instance by i.e. locating their own desired trajectory in the context of their academic program's expectations (Hoskings and Goldberg, 2005), this support aimed at activating the students' focus on the intrinsic value of their own production. In what follows, I will present and examine these support services. While this is not a one-size-fits-all approach, the practical and pedagogical processes sketched out below offer a way of approaching and implementing a student-centred model of writing and motivational support. The programming is defined by two separate yet connected supports: 1) A weekly Café writing group and 2) four one-to-one appointments with a graduate writing specialist.

Demonstrating Needs and Identifying Problems

In developing our programming, we began by identifying best practices in the literature of graduate writing support, and investigating what opportunities already existed on campus outside of department specific offerings, among which the quality and quantity of support varied dramatically. A survey of non-writing centre programs aimed at supporting graduate students and decreasing time-to-completion rates revealed a trend toward establishing benchmarks and setting arbitrary deadlines, the purpose of which was largely unclear to students. While initially designed as a motivating tool, such measures often interpellate dissertation writers as in some way deficient when they experience challenges in degree completion. A reason for this may be that, as Madden (2016) notes, "faculty often bear the incorrect assumption that students are already socialized as expert communicators for their disciplines by the time they enter their graduate programs" (p. 1). It is not uncommon for students to internalize this assumption which, in turn, may contribute to conceptions of self-defined by inadequacy, thus increasing the potential for detrimental effects on graduate students' mental health.

Likewise, external measurements of success can negatively impact a writer's progress. Measuring success in ways contrary to how the student conceives of and situates their project by placing the burden of motivation on "extrinsic" factors may have detrimental effects on writing outcomes (Bansel, 2011). The resulting work "produces less satisfaction and lowers self-esteem" (Fegan, p. 24), and this is heightened by an excessive focus on the product over the process and by the expectation that projects must be intelligible before they are fully formed in the writer's mind (Rath, 2018). While this limited view of achievement is felt unevenly, it may disadvantage those who feel unable to compete (Burford 2017).

In response, a key purpose guiding York's Writing Cafés has been to configure a support infrastructure that builds intrinsic motivation by offering a productive and collaborative space where students share their work with others. The benefits of communal writing groups have been well established in the literature, and in this setting we hoped to mobilize what Carr et al. (2010) refer to as "nourished scholarship" as a way to help students navigate towards completion. In this way, the writing space reinforces "the value of regular peer group communication and connectedness for developing a sense of belonging" (Hutchings, 2017, p. 11). Through promoting this sense of belonging and shared experience in a community of interest, we were able to address any negative emotional attachments that students may have formed with their projects. This has been best achieved through the sharing of and learning from students' individual experiences of the dissertation writing process in various disciplinary settings.

Breaking down the Programming: What is involved?

Our aim was to foreground peer-based structured conversation and individualized support that would centre the learner's active participation through a dialogic student-led process (Nordlof, 2014). An explicit goal was to promote a culture of self-advocacy that locates within each writer the ability to take a firmer grasp of the reins of their studies. A desired and necessary effect of nurturing intrinsic motivation is that the writer develops a clearer self-orientation that allows them to act in accordance with their own devised path. The strategy was to promote an explicit understanding of the complex practices that define dissertation writing and locate the ways these filter down to a student's particular circumstances. Through developing a more nuanced understanding of the larger context in which they find themselves, students are better positioned to fulfill their intrinsic expectations and reconnect with the authentic motivations that drove them to pursue a doctoral program.

Cafés: Composition and Numbers

The Café is run weekly over the course of a term for a total of eleven weeks. Each weekly meeting runs for three hours. While initial iterations included up to fifteen students, attendance in subsequent meetings was reduced to ten in order to increase individual involvement. Due to our limited capacity to meet increasing demand, several criteria were established to narrow eligibility, including limiting participation to registered dissertation students in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies and offering spots to students beyond course work and comprehensive examination stages, and therefore, already working on Proposals or their dissertation projects. Special attention was given to having a broad representation across the different departments and disciplinary fields. The rationale was to lessen any potential competition between graduate students working on similar projects, foregrounding a “sense of collaboration rather than competition” (Cuthbert and Spark, 2008, p. 86). While there is no inherent competitive aspect to discipline-specific writing groups, diversity helps reduce any potential issues that may arise and exposes students to contrasting expectations and procedures among departments, programs, and disciplines.

Café Structure

The graduate writing specialist normally begins each weekly Café writing session with an informal 30 minute “check-in.” This discussion centres on a topic that is either brought up by a student in advance, or one that the instructor introduces based on what the research and experience show are common problem points or other habitually voiced concerns of dissertation writers. This is followed by “pomodoro” writing periods of twenty-five minutes with five-minute breaks in-between. The “Pomodoro Technique” is a time-management strategy that helps to break-down study or work tasks into smaller units of time in order to increase efficiency. During each pomodoro, students have the opportunity to engage the instructor if they feel stuck in their writing or have a specific problem they wish to discuss. The Café ends with a “check-out,” wherein students are encouraged to speak to that day’s writing experience. While the “check-in” invites students to view their particular experiences in a larger light, the “check-out” allows for a deeper dive into their individual process. The first few weeks tend to be defined by a reticence to share but as the Café progresses, the willingness to speak openly becomes almost ineluctable.

Much of the success of the Café may be ascribed to its participatory nature. In order to deepen a student’s belief in their own ability to become an active participant in their formative process,

students collectively determine the timing of particular discussions at any given week of the Café, and may initiate discussions that they feel are pressing. Likewise, while the graduate writing specialist facilitates discussions, the objective is to progressively step back and have the group members autonomously problematize, empathize, and strategize with each other. Building new capacities and reaffirming those that students already possess is essential to the program's success during the life cycle of the Café and throughout the dissertation writer's career. Without student buy-in, the Café would not register a sufficient level of engagement and recognition of the struggles involved in writing a dissertation. We are working towards arranging a welcoming and productive environment that promotes cooperation and prioritizes each student's conception of progress. This spirit of cooperation and diffuse learning allows the facilitator to bring in research on pertinent issues and supplement organic conversations driven by student engagement. The more students learn to direct and guide the conversation, the more able they are to integrate this reflective practice into their dissertation writing process.

Prompts delivered during the "check-in" process are meant to enable, to the greatest degree possible, the agency of all assembled. For instance, in dealing with the question of missed deadlines and lessons learned from that experience, a sample prompt would read as follows: "Over the course of longer-term projects it's not uncommon to fall behind on our goals. Recognition of feelings of having 'fallen short' can leave us with negative emotions about ourselves, our abilities, and our projects. What ways have helped in recalibrating expectations to recover momentum again? What ways could help? What doesn't help?" In another discussion on the genre expectations of chapter writing (a discussion normally defined by both initial shyness yet intense interest), students learn to recognize their considerable agency in structuring their work and feel better prepared to negotiate the structures, norms, and requirements within which they are operating. The prompt reads as follows: "Often, dissertation writers embark on projects not fully cognizant of what's involved in writing a chapter. What are the chapter writing genre expectations in your field? What are the expectations around length, tone, purpose, etc.? How long is a chapter draft, for instance? Do you conceive of chapters as fully integrated or (mostly) stand-alone works?" When topics of an especially emotive nature are broached, they are reserved for the end of the Café. For instance, a particularly complex issue is navigating supervisory relationships. Often, the group consensus will reinforce a student's ability to marshal their self-advocating practices and move towards establishing a supervisory relationship grounded "in an understanding of the doctoral writer's own approach to writing" (Cayley, 2020, p. 8).

From the General to the Specific: The Café and Dedicated One-to-One Sessions

With the weekly Cafés, students are automatically enrolled in four one-to-one appointments with the Café facilitator spaced out across the term. Initial discussions are largely focused around onboarding, getting to know the student's project, and discussing any writing issues that the student feels comfortable enough addressing. The final three discussions are pronouncedly student-driven, and often include goal setting and project management, working through recurring writerly problems, and in-depth writing or rhetorical analysis of dissertation proposals or chapters. During these later appointments, students generally chart significant progress in their proposals and dissertations, in no small part due to the structure of accountability established throughout the Café meetings and the opportunity that the one-to-one meetings afford the writer to see how their specific writing issues often relate to those of their colleagues. The combination of these two forms of support reduces the sense of isolation dissertation writers often experience while also challenging burdensome and debilitating misconceptions about the necessarily "solitary nature" of the writing process. When thus challenged, students exercise more agency over their own work, and are subsequently better equipped to have their writing needs met in a manner that works for them.

Writing centre efficacy is tied to the potential of one-to-one mentorship to address motivational issues and learner attributes that correlate with learning, such as attitudes toward study skills, writing, self-efficacy, and the institution itself (Babcock, Day, and Thonus, 2012). Studies of writing centre impact on student performance (dating back to early iterations of writing centre pedagogy and often viewed through the admittedly not unproblematic prism of course grades) show a clear correlation between one-to-one mentorship and enhanced student performance, over and above the impact of writing courses and other forms of group instruction (Tiruchittampalam, Ross, Whitehouse, and Nicholson, 2018).

As part of the writing centre's pedagogical orientation, we, as writing mentors, aim at building affirming relationships with dissertation writers, "supporting....students to develop themselves" (Lindsay, 2015, p. 185), relations that heighten their sense of agency over their projects and ability to articulate and advocate their cause when gaps in support occur. One-to-one mentorship seeks to support writers who may need assistance in finding order or ideational coherence in their draft, and even recognition and affirmation in the complex writing process of long-form work. The goal is to

develop skills for self-advocacy and diagnosis, engendering a sense of capability in weathering the ups and downs of their writing projects.

Conclusion

While there may be some hesitancy to openly share in the Café setting, this tends to dissipate when students begin to feel more comfortable engaging with their peers in structured conversations. The one-to-one session often bears the stigma of a remedial pedagogy (Schrecker, 2008), particularly for graduate students who may have been identified as “struggling” and pointed in the direction of the Centre. This is generally a problem quickly overcome when students are assured of their place as the main drivers of their own academic formation. The Café gives them the opportunity to voice the anxieties that occupy the day-to-day world of doctoral life and to better distinguish between external pressures and their self-fulfillment expectations. For graduate student writers working under the pressures of high-level programs, the writing centre can serve as a non-intimidating learning space because of the distance from evaluation. Outside of the supervisory committee, writing specialists are well positioned to provide constructive reader-response feedback, helping graduate writers identify potentially overlooked perspectives and opportunities to refine and emphasize their intellectual contributions outside of the sometimes-fraught supervisory relationship. A writing mentorship can be particularly helpful between meetings with supervisors, especially if supervisors are difficult to reach or reluctant to read anything but completed chapters. Writing specialists, however, understand well their role as mentors rather than as supervisors of student work; their teaching strategies place the student writer in control of all authorial decisions. While they defer to the authority of supervisory committee members and program requirements, writing specialists work with students to bridge the gaps between the perceived and real needs that graduate students express.

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