

Writing groups: the basic model

Basic principles

1. Dialogic and collaborative learning
2. Noticing
3. An iterative active learning process
4. Exploring writing in a systematic way

1. Dialogic and collaborative learning, not adversarial

Group members need to feel comfortable to explore each other's writing without fear of negative judgement. We recommend a dialogic learning circle approach, which means that you focus on asking genuine questions about texts in order to develop deeper understanding of the writer's perspective and intention.

It is important to focus on meaning first and then decide if the grammar is working to deliver the intended meaning.

SLC's Annalea Beattie (2011) reflects on her writing group as follows:

Students join a group in which they assume responsibility for their own learning but also for the learning of others. As difference and diversity is acknowledged, as points of view are rehearsed and ...positions justified, peer learning builds identity, and opens up new spaces of inquiry.

Along the way, opportunities for identifying criteria for self-assessment occur and are applied through a range of circumstances. This self-reflexive element of assessment is part of lifelong learning (Boud 2000).

Beattie, A. (2011) How artists write in a doctoral writing circle. *Doctoral writing in the visual and performing arts: Challenges and diversities* Symposium, Sydney College of the Arts, November 2011.

Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education* 22(2), 151-167.

Read the Suda article below. Its focus is on writing circles for teachers and dialogue about ideas in text, but you can easily apply it to your situation.

Teacher learning circles: reading theory in practice through dialogue

By Liz Suda (modified by Jen Anderson)

David Bohm (1992) has highlighted the importance of dialogue as a collaborative approach to achieve common ground as compared to the traditional forms of debate, where one person seeks to convince another of the rightness of their position. Dialogue, he argues, involves listening to understand the others position rather than finding flaws in their argument; enlarging one's position; remaining open; living with complexity by not seeking 'rightness' or 'wrongness'; and, most importantly, seeking to reach a common understanding. The concept of egalitarian dialogue can thus be understood and described in a variety of ways, but its purpose is very clear in developing a community of learners who trust, respect and listen to the other.

Suda, L. (2007). *Teacher learning circles: Reading theory in practice through dialogue*. Education Foundation Australia. Retrieved from: http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/publ/research/publ/LizSuda_TeacherLearningCircles-paper.pdf

2. Noticing

The idea of noticing is borrowed from the language acquisition research of Schmidt and Frota (1986), and Schmidt (1990). By becoming conscious about how language is used in particular contexts, we can **notice** how language is used in specific texts and then apply it to our own writing and speaking. This process is termed **discourse analysis**. The way towards deciding on a structure and a writing voice is to **notice** how others do it, evaluate their success and measure the structural 'fit' with our own research.

Check out *Text Analysis: Noticing* in this section and any recommended references.

Schmidt, R. & Frota, S. (1986). [Developing basic conversational ability in a second language: A case study of an adult learner of Portuguese](#). In R. R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to learn: Conversation in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House. pp. 237-326.

Schmidt, R. (1990). The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning, *Applied Linguistics* 11(2) Oxford University Press, Retrieved from: <http://apllj.oxfordjournals.org/content/11/2/129.full.pdf>.

3. Active learning is iterative

We learn by observing and doing - repeatedly; we learn by repeated observation and application. We learn by observation and application in different settings; we learn by 'testing out' ideas and skills in a range of contexts. Be patient with yourself and with other group members. Be prepared to meet the same issue over and over again as if it were the first time. Be prepared to remind group members about conventions you have already discussed in detail. Where possible, don't just talk about an idea or a writing convention – DO it. APPLY it. Do not be surprised if certain skills take a long time to acquire. Just NOTICE what is happening, again...and again.

4. Exploring writing in a systematic way

If we are to *notice* how text works to tell the story, we need a system to help us focus on various writing elements. A useful system for this is to see text at three levels:

Macro level focuses on the ‘big picture’—the broad organisation of the text.

Middle level focuses on how the paragraphs function to let the reader see the ‘big picture’

Micro level focuses on the smaller elements such as sentence structure, style and grammar.

When we’re critiquing or revising our writing, it’s usually more effective to focus on the macro level first because that’s where we can fine-tune our ideas. Polishing writing at the micro level is pointless if it doesn’t adequately tell the story of your research.

The following page lists some specific elements your group could focus on.

Macro	Text structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the purpose of the writing?• Does the writing structure match the purpose (the genre, e.g. thesis chapter, research article, etc.)• Does the title reflect the content of the writing?• Are the sections and sub-sections logically organised?• What is each section trying to achieve?• How is it doing this/not doing this?• Is the broad argument obvious?
Middle	Paragraph structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there clear topic sentences in each paragraph?• Do supporting sentences all relate to the topic sentence?• Is there clear linking within and between paragraphs?• Does the purpose of each paragraph clearly relate to the overall section?
Micro	Sentence structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is the style appropriate?• Are all sentences well-written and easy to understand?• Is the writer’s ‘voice’ coming through when discussing the literature?• Are all tables and figures labelled appropriately; has the text referred to tables but not merely repeated the information in them?)

Check out Learning Lab for many resources on organisational structures, paragraphing and style and grammar that you can use with your group.

The basic model

Now we're together, what do we do?

- The key focus of the group is writing. You need a routine, especially if you are meeting fortnightly or monthly.
- The group negotiates the approach and techniques that will ensure productive writing and discussion. Be open to any suggestions for changes in session format during the year.
- This **base model** works well with most groups.
- Your group can supplement this with other techniques that are presented here.
- If your group uses a technique that is not described here, please let us know. You can share it with other groups by adding it to the kit.

A basic session plan

1. Students email pieces of writing (no more than one or two pages) to each other one week in advance.
2. Students read each other's work and think about it, making comments or writing questions in the margin (Printouts: Big margins, wide spacing between lines for comments; on PC: use Track Changes with Comments).
3. At the face-to-face session, students discuss the texts. They ask genuine questions and make suggestions or explain their interpretation of the text's meaning.
4. Writers listen carefully to suggestions and take notes. They explain and re-explain what they mean.
5. After the session, the writers rewrite the text based on the reviews. Then they email them to the group members for a more feedback. Some writers may wish to bring the revised text to the next session, especially if the ideas and the relationships between the ideas are complex.

Facilitator role

The facilitator needs to constantly reinforce the principles of dialogic learning, and needs to remain open to the views of others rather than impose an idea. Setting and reinforcing such ground rules is essential to effective and productive dialogue that builds a sense of community. For the dialogue to be smooth, free flowing and naturalistic, facilitators must ensure that:

- the basic dialogic principles (ground rules) are adhered to
- anyone who wants to speak is able to
- everyone is aware of the content of the readings

- the topic/text is referred to in order to maintain coherence of content
- the discussion stays on topic, without imposing or breaking the flow of conversation
- they do not impose a particular reading of the text or their own ideas
- they mediate any conflict within the group
- they sustain and redirect conversation when it flags by referring back to the text
- they draw out those who may be shy to speak
- all views are treated with respect
- no individual dominates proceedings.

Given these guidelines, the facilitator must therefore understand *some* of the issues in the text in order to make the necessary connections. Experienced facilitators agree that:

- facilitation is a learned skill.
- teachers often find it harder than non- teachers to facilitate without imposing or seeking resolution to the discussion.
- open-ended dialogue without too much direction or structure creates a stronger sense of solidarity among participants. *The text and what it says* should provide the structure and flow of the dialogue. The facilitator must try to resist the urge to draw grand conclusions to the discussion.
- the learning happens on an individual level within a collaborative environment. Dialogue is a dynamic process of relationship-building, and through the exploration of ideas, meaning and understanding is created that can lead to transformation in one's actions and view of the world.
- facilitator training is important for the success of learning circle models...The best training is to be a participant in a circle and observe and reflect on the process. Discussions with other facilitators also help to tease out issues that might block a free-flowing egalitarian dialogue. In a professional learning context, one could argue for an explicit structured training program for facilitators.

Bohm, D (1992). *Thought as a System* (transcript of seminar series held in Ojai, California, from November 30 to December 2, 1990), London: Routledge.