Research Circles: Supporting the Scholarship of Junior Faculty

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ABSTRACT: This article describes and assesses "Research Circles" as a mechanism for enhancing faculty collegiality and research. Recently established on our campus, these circles, composed of three to four faculty members, have had a particularly powerful effect on the new faculty members' adjustment to their tenure track positions, especially since they entered a context that might otherwise have been challenging: a new interdisciplinary upper-division campus with high expectations for teaching excellence. Based on the end-of-year evaluations, journals, and focus groups, the co-authors described themes that emerged from their participation in these circles. Circle participation not only facilitated faculty writing throughout their first year, but it also fostered the development of an interdisciplinary community which nurtured creativity and risk taking in writing.

KEY WORDS: junior faculty; faculty development; research circles; research productivity; collegiality.

Ask assistant professors about their first year in a tenure-track position, and one is likely to hear, "It's been overwhelming." Although such a characterization might be typical of any first-year experience

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in any profession, recent studies on the socialization of junior faculty indicate conditions far from ideal. In their interviews with 300 tenure-track assistant professors, Tierney and Bensimon (1996) found that untenured professors across institutions of higher education often felt isolated and frustrated in an organizational culture that is very hard to read, even in the best of economic times. Tierney and Bensimon showed how an ambiguous organizational culture produces pressure to work all the time. As one assistant professor stated during his interview, "My work is never-ending here, and the pace is relentless" (p. 61). Throughout institutions of higher education, Tierney and Bensimon argued, the tenure and promotion system has "gone awry" (p. 5) and is in need of a "dramatic overhaul" (p. 125).

Wilson's (2001) article "The higher bar for earning tenure" indicated that Tierney's and Bensimon's call for reform has not yet been heard: "Whatever an institution expected 10 years ago, it now expects more" (p. 1), especially "more published research—either articles or books, or both" (p. 1). In addition to increased pressures to publish articles and books, the recent attention to teaching and learning outcomes has also contributed to increased workload. New professors are often required to keep extensive records for teaching portfolios and to display evidence of student learning as part of the documentation process for promotion and tenure, even at major research institutions. One scholar argued that such pressures on new faculty do not allow them to develop an authentic professional identity (De Simone, 2001). To earn tenure, they often feel forced into behaviors that benefit neither their students nor their scholarship, such as writing to build quantity rather than quality publications or having to use standardized teaching evaluations that do not fit their teaching philosophy.

Other scholars (e.g., Boice, 1992, 1995, 2000; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Menges, 1999; Sorcinelli & Austin, 1992) have examined the effectiveness of acculturation strategies, such as mentoring and faculty development programs. Bode (1999) argued that both mentoring and collegiality have been found to be effective in increasing the success of the new faculty. In addition, she found that collegiality is more important to new faculty than mentoring (p. 141). Many institutions have responded to Tierney's and Bensimon's call to re-imagine the socialization of assistant professors by developing a range of programs for the new faculty. These include, for instance, access to resources designed to increase teaching effectiveness. Boice (1995) argued that focusing either on writing or teaching is counterproductive, as such a bifurcation in a faculty development program fails to connect both teaching and writing as good practices. He proposed that faculty

development efforts need to encourage junior faculty to engage in writing so that they can apply the processes of good writing, such as getting feedback, on their teaching.

This article describes an institutional practice that was designed to make visible and enhance writing and scholarship on a young, interdisciplinary campus, the University of Washington, Bothell (UWB). Starting in fall quarter 2002, The Chancellor's Office and The Office of Academic Affairs sponsored "Research Circles" for all interested faculty. Research Circles consist of groups of three (at most, four) faculty members who meet every two weeks to share three pages of their current academic writing, usually research and conference papers or grant proposals. Organized by Diane Gillespie, one of this article's co-authors, the circles included two-thirds of all UWB faculty. In end-of-year reports, all participating members at all ranks described the circles as extremely valuable for their research efficiency and productivity. All the new assistant professors commented that the circles also facilitated their acculturation into university life and helped them link their scholarly practices to teaching and learning.

This article describes the experiences of the co-authors, who, except for Gillespie, a senior professor on campus, were all new to their rank as assistant professors on the UWB campus during the 2002–03 academic year. All six participated in three different Research Circles (with additional senior members) during the 2002–03 academic year, and all continued to participate during the 2003–04 academic year. Using the junior co-authors' end-of-year evaluations submitted in spring of 2003, their narrative self-reflections over the summer, and the findings from focus group sessions on the emerging themes of the narratives, we show how the circles reinforced important work practices during a critical career juncture: the first year on tenure track. Specifically, participation in the circles helped us realize and embody ideals of an interdisciplinary community of scholars, spurred us to hone our personal practices of writing, sharpened our abilities to listen to others' and our own voices, and encouraged us to take risks in our writing. We conclude the article by briefly describing our campus context and the process by which the circles were successfully implemented.

Emerging Themes: Reflections from Participation in Research Circles

Before turning to the themes that emerged from our study of our participation in Research Circles, we note that the personal narratives

also revealed, outside the space of the Research Circle, tensions and uncertainties about how to adjust to the various demands being placed on us as new faculty. We were still settling in at home, missing our old and familiar scholarly communities, getting young children and/or our spouses and partners used to new routines, meeting new colleagues, creating new courses, revising old courses to fit new contexts, ferreting out expectations, and taking on new committee assignments. Such adjustments were compounded by the fact that UWB is a new, interdisciplinary campus; and most of us came from older, more discipline-based degree programs. Thus, our ability to identify with a familiar disciplinary home was not as easy. In the midst of all these adjustments, the Research Circles provided an important catalyst for professional socialization and collegiality. Part of their success was that the process of sharing our research re-invigorated our original motivations to work in the academy and in an interdisciplinary context.

Finding and Building One's Own Scholarly Community

Perhaps no one has written more movingly about "the perverse but powerful draw of the 'disconnected' [academic] life" (p. 35) than Parker Palmer (1998), a well-known social critic of education. Faculty life, he argued, is a sharing-impaired profession where individualism and isolation are the norm. Although he described how isolation and fear erode authentic teaching and learning, much of what he said applies to writing authentic scholarship as well. Traditional images of scholarly activity have often assumed that isolation and perseverance were the only keys to research productivity. Such isolation can foster specialization and disciplinary boundaries. Ironically, young professors are often attracted to university/college teaching because of its potential to offer lively, collegial, interdisciplinary exchanges.

Ideals about work life in the academy appeared in all of the co-authors' self-reflections and/or evaluations of our participation in the research circles. For example, in her self-reflections about her Research Circle experiences, Elizabeth Thomas noted:

> As a young person preparing for college, I entertained romantic notions of higher education as a protected space where people of various ages, experience, and station sat under large shade trees on pleasant, sunny afternoons and shared ideas, wondering out loud about the universe together... [My Research Circle] did not meet under the canopy of a

large shade tree, but we did meet routinely to share ideas and wonder about the universe with one another.

Because the Research Circles focus on participants' writing, circle members quickly learn what their colleague's research projects entail. Through discussions over time, the research projects are contextualized, so that participants can comment ever more meaningfully on the writing. Faculty also become interested in and excited about the future development of everyone's papers.

The circles also awakened the ideals embedded in interdisciplinary exchanges—connections to other scholarly efforts, real world implications of scholarly projects, and stimulation through exposure to new fields of study, to name a few. At a first meeting when the circles were forming, circle participants shared their research interests and got a sense of the diversity of research interests across the campus. Nives Dolšak discussed how helpful that initial session was for her:

> I could identify potential collaborators for my current and future research projects. For example, I learned that one of my colleagues is interested in environmental ethics, another is struggling to scale-up lessons on biodiversity from an ecosystem to a landscape level, yet another is studying provision of public goods at the local level. I quickly learned about the research "capital" of my new intellectual home.

Even as the diversity of the circles revealed potential, it also made us a bit uncertain at the start. Anne Peterson wrote:

> I did not know initially whether we would make a likely group or not. We are in different fields of study and take different approaches to issues we think and write about. One of us tends to approach topics through economic reasoning, to tackle big policy issues, such as global commons; I deal with urban policy, focusing on parks in cities in the United States; and another (the senior member in our group) tends to engage in personal philosophical reflections about the assumptions people bring to environmental questions. Naturally, our topics differed, but what struck me was how our writing styles set us apart—as if we were speaking from different planets. Nonetheless, after sitting around the table a few times, we found that our different styles strengthened our writing as we considered different options and began to take more risks.

The formation of the community in the midst of such differences benefited us as we had to learn quickly how to navigate in our new interdisciplinary context where only two of 26 faculty hold the same degree.

Once our circles became comfortable with the interdisciplinary nature of the writing and feedback, the differences among us created a

synergistic effect. As Ron Krabill put it, "Participation in the research circles led to a qualitative shift in the theoretical sophistication of my work. My group helped me to reconsider the very procedures through which I produce academic knowledge." Our circle members not only responded to our writing; they were also learning about the subjects about which we were writing: we were both scholars and teachers. Excited by the interest our colleagues took in our work, we wrote more thoughtfully. We envisioned new courses, and we had intellectual connections upon which to draw when we worked on service projects together. Krabill noted how the circles helped integrate teaching, research, and service:

> The Research Circles at UWB are a profoundly humanist experiment. They encourage, through a deceptively simple process of writing, reading, and responding, an integration of the faculty member as an individual into a community that is scholarly and cross-disciplinary. The experience of integration in the research circles prepares faculty to integrate their teaching, research, and service. This process arguably leads to a more humane (in the truest sense of the word) education, for scholar and student alike. Research, teaching, and institution-building come to be a naturally complete whole in this context, rather than competing demands which split a faculty member's energies and affinities into fragmented, hostile elements.

Connections among different aspects of one's work life can lead to a sense of integrity; out of that sense of integrity a real community can be formed. The sense of being part of a supportive community is important since institution building on a new campus increases faculty workload significantly. And this workload could easily have fragmented and overwhelmed us as new professors.

We were all surprised by the service demands necessary to build and sustain a new campus with an interdisciplinary mission. In the midst of demands for our time, the circles kept us experientially grounded but enacting our ideals about participating in a community. Bruce Kochis noted how young institutions

> put enormous demands on everyone to sit on committees, attend meetings, re-invent a thousand wheels, hire new faculty; at young institutions innovation becomes routine. Some jump at this opportunity to create new possibilities, to avoid the errors of other institutions, to leave a different kind of legacy. It turns out this compensates for the lack of an intellectual cohort around one's discipline; it provides the camaraderie, the esprit de corps when it's difficult to excite your colleagues about the latest political developments in Moldova. But such participation in the life of the campus also eats up one's research time.

In the face of such demands, the consistent expectation of the three pages for each meeting helped us sustain the writing, sometimes three hours before the group met. Steadfast in our commitment to meet regularly over the year, we brought into existence an intellectually stimulating, interdisciplinary community, one that helped to keep the potentially fragmenting demands on us at bay.

Developing Personal Writing Practices

All the co-authors discussed the challenges of developing what Kochis dubbed "a personal culture of writing." The task of writing three pages for the group took on what he described as a kind of "brute force in that it drives out other, less essential, tasks from one's schedule. The meeting notes have to wait; no, one cannot meet on Friday at 1:00 as that is the reserved time for writing group." He described the process further:

> One's personal culture of writing has a vaguely ascetic, even grim feel to it. The regular, almost daily practice brings home the truth that you cannot really write in your head, only on paper (or computer screens). The practice of writing is like the practice of anything—trumpet, chess, bocce—some every day. That is what builds the fingering, the habits, and the muscles that change the body and mind in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, changes that linger in the personality. A personal culture of writing contains the promise of re-making ourselves.

Part of developing a habit of writing includes learning to share drafts of one's work as it evolves, in sometimes not so finished forms. The Research Circle works by putting pressure on the member to write three "good" pages for their group at the same time that it sanctions draft versions as legitimate for feedback. Everyone brought three pages; everyone lamented not having more time to get the three pages "right." In the process of writing and telling, however, the author's thoughts about the section, the example, or the argument become clearer. Peterson noted:

> I sometimes presented the very first draft of an article, something I had never done before. But presenting my work in its most nascent stages allowed me to walk away with ideas and feedback that I would not have otherwise anticipated had I worked on it alone. Some of the feedback was actually fruitful later, after I had put together a tighter, more coherent argument.

We all felt like returning to our papers, revising what we had read and then forging ahead to the next "three pages." Mostly, as all of the participants noted, we just kept writing.

Listening and Hearing One's Own and Others' Words

Not surprisingly, when interdisciplinary teams first start working together, members strain to understand what others are saying and meaning. Dolšak stated:

> Even providing feedback on the language itself was an exercise of discipline. I remember I had to remind myself that this was not going to be a jointly authored paper or a book chapter. My initial reaction was to try to hear my colleagues' work and make sure that it fit my vocabulary and my paradigm. I had to remind myself that our goal was not to translate our colleagues' work into our language, but to provide each other support to continue writing. We did that. But I believe we accomplished something more. We learned how to appreciate scholarly work in other disciplines.

Listening without preconceptions itself was a powerful learning experience. One wants to offer good feedback to one's peers in a writing group. As Peterson noted,

> Offering good responses forces you to stop and really listen to the argument the other is presenting; and, if you did not understand what was being said, you would ask the member to go step by step through the argument. Often this was very helpful to both parties because it clarified the line of reasoning.

In listening closely to our colleagues we began to build trust and over time took more risks so that we were testing out our "hardest-to-express" ideas. Members also found commonalities in their work and got exposed to new sources and connections.

Writing Beyond Traditional Audiences

As the Research Circles continued over time, we found ourselves shedding old audiences and replacing them with the new ones. For example, two of us realized that we still had our dissertation committee members (or the chair of our committee) in our heads as our primary audience. Although all of us had published articles, most of us had been student members of research teams. The members of the circle provided an intermediary audience—they were not peers in our disciplines, but

they were peers who wanted us to write clearly about our topics so that they could learn from us. And as we learned from each other, each of us pushed the other to imagine our topics more broadly. Kari Lerum wrote,

> My writing group consisted of three colleagues from a variety of disciplines, training, and perspectives, including English, American Studies, History, Sociology, and Psychology. Sharing my writing with this diverse group brought several benefits, some of which surprised me. I joined the group expecting that it would, at the very least, provide some structure and friendly pressure to write regularly. I knew that the biweekly meetings with my colleagues would motivate me to squeeze in some writing in between the demands of starting a new tenure track job and teaching six classes a year. The group did provide that incentive, and more. Surprisingly, after several meetings, I found myself writing for audiences even broader than those represented in our collective disciplines. For example, in discussion of one of my papers, my circle members encouraged me to investigate my topic from a legal perspective. My subsequent incorporation of legal literature strengthened the entire foundation of my paper. Today my writing remains geared toward an audience of sociologists, but I find that I am writing with a more nuanced perspective.

The continued pressure to write three pages cogently for our colleagues became less of a pressure and more of an invitation to think more deeply and imaginatively about what we were writing.

By the end of the year, the circles were also helping us with what Boice (1995) called resilience or "working through obstacles" (p. 426). One circle member's article was rejected; another member was told by a journal editor that a submitted article did not fit the mission of the journal; another needed to revise and resubmit. Others were asked to put presentations into conference proceedings and had to weigh whether or not to do that or prepare the article for a refereed journal. Circle members processed the meanings of these experiences and helped authors plan "next steps." And from the collective experience in the group (and with guidance from senior faculty members), junior members could see the different parts of the publication process—from writing for a particular journal by studying articles published in that journal to responding to rejections and revision requests. They also learned that senior professors' articles get rejected. Over time the circle's experiences with writing, publishing, and presenting helped authors demystify the publication process. And, when members had their articles accepted, there was genuine joy because the group had watched the article evolve over the course of the year.

Our study confirms the findings of Bode (1999) and Boice (1992): collegiality increases the effectiveness and productivity of the new faculty. The Research Circles initiated us, as new tenure-track faculty, to an interdisciplinary scholarly community where we were not just scholars representing different disciplines but where we came to see our research projects through the perspectives of each other's disciplines. The circle process is iterative; the more one listens and understands the more one feels part of a shared intellectual community, and the more one feels heard and understood the more one feels valued. Participation in the circles has helped reduce the ambiguous nature of our work and lessened the isolation we might otherwise have felt as new tenure-track professors. We now recommend these to our colleagues in other institutions of higher education; circles are a project that individuals and/or institutions can undertake.

Implementing Research Circles: Useful Practices from Our Campus Experience

The Context of our Campus

Opening in 1990, The University of Washington, Bothell (UWB) campus was built to enhance The University of Washington's mission of excellence and access and to foster innovation, interdisciplinary studies, and the integration of teaching and research. In autumn 2002, with 66 full-time faculty and senior lecturers, about 1,350 undergraduate and 250 graduate students were enrolled. According to UWB's mission statement, "We hold the student–faculty relationship to be paramount. We provide access to excellence in higher education through innovative and creative curricula, interdisciplinary teaching and research, and a dynamic community of multicultural learning." In highlighting its commitment to interdisciplinary research, the campus embraces "scholarship that is innovative and rigorous" and "encourage[s] intellectual contributions that transcend the boundaries of conventional disciplines." Such a vision reinforces the value and necessity of research excellence but defines the nature of research differently, especially from research characteristic of traditional disciplines.

The UWB campus, then, is neither a teaching dominant campus as is The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington; nor is it funded as a research-intensive institution as is the Seattle campus of the UW. For example, the teaching load and the expectation to

document teaching effectiveness on our campus are higher than they would be on a research campus. In the largest program at UWB, for example, the expected teaching load is six courses per year. Further, the new campus has demanded inordinate amounts of service from faculty members as everything must be worked out—from local grievance procedures for students to hiring to faculty governance—and then coordinated with the other two campuses. Even though certain aspects of academic culture might be different on our campus, it is probably no different than other campuses in producing sources of anxiety for new tenure-track faculty trying to figure out how to balance their working lives and not burn out. The Research Circles were designed to integrate new faculty into the campus and help them achieve balance.

Setting up Research Circles as an Institutional Practice

In August of 2002, all full-time faculty members on campus received a letter from the Chancellor's office and the Vice-Chancellor for academic affairs inviting them to participate in a Research Circle during the 2002–03 academic year. The letter briefly outlined the purpose of the circles and how they operated and announced the time and date for an introductory meeting, held the week before school started, where circles would be described in more depth and then actually formed. (Or groups could form in advance and attend.) Circle participants could use a $300 stipend for buying supplies and materials or to cover travel expenses to research conferences. At the end of the academic year, all circle participants met to share experiences; each group submitted a two-page report on the outcomes of the group, including specifics about papers/presentation/grants written. Diane Gillespie, a senior faculty member with years of experience in writing groups, served as an organizer and coordinator of the circles.

In announcements about the circles, it is helpful to distinguish them from other faculty research activities, such as a colloquium where faculty present entire papers which the audience is encouraged to read in advance. Research Circles are designed to provide useful feedback on work that participants are in the process of writing. All members are expected to bring and share writing at each meeting; advance reading is not required. The group devotes 30 min to each participant's writing, about three double-spaced pages. A group of three, thus, sets aside an hour and a half for a meeting. In the 30 min allotted, each writer discusses the larger context of the three pages, tells the group what kind

of feedback he or she needs, reads the pages slowly so that listeners can make notes, and receives reader-response feedback. Individuals commit to meeting with their circle at least four times during each quarter, about every two weeks, a condition for receiving the stipend. Circle participants were trained in the opening meeting in descriptive reader-response feedback, a technique outlined by Elbow and Belanoff (1989) in *Sharing and Responsibility*.

Descriptive reader-response feedback sustains writers as they develop their ideas. It includes nonjudgmental responses, such as summary and say-back, the identification of powerful words or phrases, connections made by listeners, and the exploration of implied meanings. For example, when good listeners summarize what they have heard, writers can see how their ideas come across sequentially. Responders can point to "powerful" words or phrases and explain why they had such power; sometimes listeners can identify "a center of gravity" in the piece, a place where the writer's meanings seemed vital. Or when listeners explain what they take to be implicit meanings behind the actual words, they often bring out ideas that might have been hidden or operating below the surface, even to the writer. Listeners can also say what they wanted to hear more about. Such descriptive feedback stays centered on the actual words of the writer, a focus very helpful in the development of a paper.

Group members can develop their own norms for feedback, which might, on occasion, include evaluative responses. But participants need to be cognizant of creative, noncritical ways of responding to writers, so that writers are working from their strengths and not trying to address a series of criticisms when they return to their papers. The purpose of the group is to sustain writing and increase productivity. As we noted in our earlier description, after the circle was over, we were excited to go back to our paper and revise and write more.

Although formation of Research Circles is not difficult, two problematic circumstances could arise. First, faculty members might have had unpleasant experiences or exchanges in the past, so the coordinator, preferably a senior faculty member, has to manage formation with an eye to that history. Second, the coordinator must also be aware of power dynamics; that is, tenured professors must see these groups as formative for all participants. Often new faculty members do very well with each other or with one senior member who is interested in mentoring and cares about the well being of the new faculty. It could be intimidating for a new faculty member to be placed with two senior professors, for example. On larger campuses, one could

create interdisciplinary circles where members would not be directly evaluating members for promotion and tenure.

Since our campus programs are interdisciplinary, the interdisciplinary nature of the groups was not an issue. In fact, in the assessment of the first year, the interdisciplinary component of the groups was highlighted as one of the best features of the experience. On more traditional discipline-based campuses, faculty might need to be convinced of the value of participating in an interdisciplinary group, or, if the campus is large enough, faculty from similar disciplines can be paired together.

Creating research circles is well worth the investment (a small stipend for participants) and the effort it takes to organize and nurture them. For the new faculty, especially, the circles strengthen scholarly identity in the context of collegial interaction and engagement. And the same reflective process—preparation, feedback, revision—can be used to strengthen teaching and service (Boice, 1995). Research Circles are not a "dramatic overhaul" of the tenure and promotion process called for by Tierney and Bensimon (1996). But they are, in the words of one UWB circle participant, a "profoundly humanist experiment," one that stimulates an integration of work life in the face of otherwise daunting institutional demands.

Acknowledgments

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