



2017

Two Views of a Writers' Group: Reflections on Writing with and for Others

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Recommended Citation

Tipton, Roberta and Bender, Patricia (2017) "Two Views of a Writers' Group: Reflections on Writing with and for Others," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 6, Article 34.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol6/iss1/34>

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Two Views of a Writers' Group: Reflections on writing with and for others

by Roberta Tipton and Patricia Bender

The reflections here are from two members of the Dana Writers Group, formed to help mentor Rutgers University-Newark colleagues through the writing and publication part of their tenure work. The lunchtime series offered as informal professional development was organized and directed by Roberta Tipton, Faculty Librarian. Patricia Bender served as a writing coach and co-lead. Both created a number of writing prompts and recommended readings very specifically responding to the needs of the group. All members of the group shared best practices as well as writing in this supportive context and efforts are underway to build capacity for a long-running series that would support faculty and graduate students in a variety of disciplines based on the success of this first launch.

The Dana Writers Group: Creativity and Scholarship

By Roberta Tipton, The John Cotton Dana Library

The Dana Writers Group grew out of an urgent need. The John Cotton Dana Library at Rutgers University-Newark had a brand-new crop of library faculty in the tenure stream with the clock ticking. Writer and writing teacher Patricia Bender and I had been speaking for years about starting some kind of reading group or writing group on our campus. If there was anything that could be done to help mentor my colleagues through the writing and publication part of their tenure work, we had to do it now.

My immediate inspiration was *Demystifying Dissertation Writing* by Peg Boyle Single. Single's book is not just about dissertations; it lays out methods of writing from research which are well-organized and highly effective for any academic work or long form nonfiction. Single's work then led us to Robert Boice, Single's mentor. Among Boice's many insightful books on writing process and overcoming procrastination is *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*. Boice and Single both offer suggestions for writing exercises that work well in academic writing groups; both of their books are affordable paperbacks currently in print. We also drew inspiration from many other writers on writing, including Peter Elbow, Betty Friedan, Ann Lamott, and Natalie Goldberg.

We began in the fall of 2014, at first meeting weekly as the Dana Writing Group (with exceptions for scheduling conflicts) during the fall semester and then continuing about once per month in the spring of 2015. We had three to five regular attendees. The meetings were arranged as brown bag lunches that included either a round-robin discussion of our current projects, an exercise from Patricia or me, or a guest speaker. Our guest speakers included writing instructors from the campus and people we knew who were very productive scholars in librarianship. The exercises and discussion topics ranged from strictly academic to creative writing, reinforcing Patricia's refrain that "writing is writing." At one point we even teleconferenced with library faculty at another Rutgers libraries unit with good results. After about 10 months the group was suspended because of personnel and scheduling changes, but it was later reinstated locally as an occasional lunch-discussion-writing event. We could not get together at all last summer, so we sent inspirational messages and "DIY" writing exercises via email to have our group members continue to write and to think about writing.

Some of our significant "wins" included: encouraging one of our number to turn a rejected book chapter into a published, peer-reviewed journal article; having another member plan a successful conference presentation during one of our exercises; and discovering the "Pomodoro Technique" of

structuring work time and writing time through one of our group. Whatever one's writing or research issue, someone else in the group had an idea for solving it. The value of having a writing coach and an academic librarian working together on a project like this cannot be overemphasized. Our different perspectives gave solid support to the process of writing this very specialized kind of nonfiction.

Inspired by Writing Alone and with Others

by Patricia Bender

I have been a writing teacher for more than 25 years, and fortunate to work with writers from 5 to 85 years old in a variety of settings that included high school classrooms (as tutor and mentor), college classrooms (as teacher, tutor and mentor) and workshops around the world with teachers and community writers. My work through the Rutgers - Newark Writing Center and the Faculty Alliance for Education, where I worked as a team member in interdisciplinary efforts, took me around the city of Newark and state of New Jersey and, eventually, to South Africa.

I am a writer. One of my many mentors, Pat Schneider, titled one of her books *Writing Alone and with Others*, and her philosophy and practice displayed in that book make absolute sense to me, including an emphasis on listening. So when my longtime friend and writing partner Roberta Tipton, Rutgers University faculty librarian, asked me to join her in the Dana Writers Group, I was glad for the invitation and looked forward to the meetings, and listening and learning.

I am not a librarian. I was invited to join the Dana Writers Group because Roberta sees me as a coach who is able to help hesitant writers and confident writers alike. Professional development opportunities present themselves in many ways and in many moments. We learn from peers and near-peers alike (sometimes even what we do not want to know), from books, from formal workshops and classes. The Dana Writers Group series was a rich resource of advice, encouragement and hands-on writing. Yes, we wrote regularly in the workshops and shared our very raw work. This is a gift: to write with others who know the vulnerability of early drafts and how to respond with kindly but rigorous advice.

One of the sessions I designed included writing letters to the academic journal editors (real and imagined) who we imagined sending an article to or who might have rejected an article of ours in a harsh way. The goal of the exercise was to address the strengths of the articles as we had written them or to outline the strength of articles we would indeed write. And to share the realities of rejection including our responses to it. The prompts are included at the end of this reflection in case you want to try them yourself. We can report that one of our writers looked again at a rejected book chapter and after noting in her fictional letter to the editor all the great things he had missed, revised the chapter (slightly). That chapter is now a published article in a peer reviewed journal in the writer's field.

As we strive to grow as teachers and writers there is wisdom in turning off the harsh editor in our head and resisting completely some of the many obstacles that keep us from writing. Rather than struggling alone, let's continue to trust, and support each other and to develop professionally together.

Dana Writers: Where We Are Now

At this writing, Roberta and Patricia have applied for a small grant that would bring capacity building resources to the Writers Group. Whatever the grant proposal response, both co-leaders will continue to work with writers interested in enriching their writing practice and enlarging their publication portfolio. While it is often a challenge to find time to devote to developing our writing and offering it

to others to consider, including sending it out for publication, our efforts, especially when communal and collegial, and let's include too, compassionate, result in support for our professional lives and more, as the Dana Writers can attest.

DEAR EDITOR PROMPTS:

<p>LETTER #1</p> <p>Dear most critical (and not in good way) editor:</p> <p>Before you thoughtlessly criticize and then casually and callously reject my new article about _____, please know that you will be missing an opportunity to bring your readers' attention to a most worthwhile and unique perspective which can only be provided by me based on my expertise and experience. Here is a list of what you will have missed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. . . . 	<p>LETTER #2</p> <p>Dear esteemed editor:</p> <p>Attached please find a prospectus for an article I would very much like to publish in your esteemed journal. The focus on _____ includes my unique perspective as a _____.</p> <p>The finished article will address _____ in the following ways:</p> <p>. . .</p>
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Roberta Tipton, MLS, MBA, has worked in academic, corporate, medical, and government libraries. She has written or presented on information literacy, collaboration, reference process, online library guides, and information about business. She is currently Business Librarian, Information Literacy Coordinator, and Librarian, School of Public Affairs and Administration at the John Cotton Dana Library at Rutgers University - Newark, New Jersey.

Patricia Bender, MALS, Research Grant/Contract Specialist Rutgers University-Newark, has taught writing, and offered community writing workshop for more than 20 years. A National Writing Project consultant, she founded and directed the Rutgers, Newark Writing Center (1998-2008), earned workshop leadership certification through Amherst Writers & Artists and serves as Assistant Editor of the NJCTE Journal.