wl**L**n

Understanding the Structural and Attitudinal Elements That Sustain a Graduate Student Writing Group in an Engineering Department

Cory Hixson, Walter Lee, Deirdre Hunter,
Marie Paretti, Holly Matusovich

Virginia Tech | Blacksburg, Virginia

Rachel McCord

University of Tennessee | Knoxville, Tennessee

Doctoral writing groups have become a staple on academic campuses, as reflected in Claire Aitchison and Cally Guerin's collection *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond*, which highlights scholarship on these groups. But as those authors note, "[the field's] understanding of when, how, and why writing groups operate in academic scholarship is still fragmented and under-theorized" (6). We address this gap by exploring one such group, the Virginia Tech Engineering Education Writing Group (EEWG), using qualitative interviews with EEWG members and non-members to help writing center staff consider how they might support similar efforts.

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION
Separate from the Virginia Tech Writing Center, which provides coaching for students across all majors and academic levels, the Virginia Tech Engineering Communication Center ("the Center") is a research/outreach center focused on teaching and learning communication in engineering. Housed in the Department of Engineering Education, the Center also hosts the self-sustaining graduate student writing group, the EEWG. Once a week, graduate students (mostly in engineering education) meet in the Center and write primarily dissertation-related texts. No professional staff or trained tutors attend these meetings; the only resource the Center provides is space. Yet the EEWG has become a persistent, highly productive presence, supporting doctoral students from the proposal through the dissertation. Given the low resource investment and high productivity of the EEWG, we sought to explore the practices that have sustained

the group in order to identify practical implications for writing center staff seeking ways to support graduate student writing. The study authors include current and former EEWG members (Hixson, Lee, Hunter, and McCord), the engineering education faculty member who initiated the EEWG (Matusovich), and one of the Center's co-directors (Paretti); thus multiple stakeholder perspectives are represented in this article.

HOW THE GROUP EMERGED

After watching herself and her graduate students struggle to find time to write, Matusovich created a local full-day "writing retreat" to provide dedicated time and space in which her engineering education research group (6 graduate students) could focus on writing and hold one another accountable to personal goals. Because these initial sessions (typically 1 or 2 per semester) proved productive, she suggested that the retreats become a regular practice, and the EEWG was born. The EEWG initially met in various places, including department conference rooms and library study rooms, before settling consistently into the Center. Together, the group established a code of conduct for members:

- To limit distraction and maximize efficiency, group members agreed on beginning and ending times and to not come and go for other commitments during the day.
- Each individual's goals were written on whiteboards to make them visible to everyone. Completed goals were marked off, often eliciting applause and encouragement.
- The EEWG was limited to goal-specific writing tasks; group members were encouraged to avoid checking email, social media, etc.
- The group would break for lunch at a set time and interact socially over lunch.
- Group members could ask burning questions of one another if they needed urgent feedback, but general conversation was discouraged.

After a year and a half under the direction of Matusovich, the EEWG evolved organically as several of the graduate students assumed leadership (reflecting their growth as scholars and emerging professionals). The focus was narrowed to peer support for major doctoral writing tasks (e.g., proposals, dissertations), and students from other departmental research groups were encouraged to join. At this point, the Center, and

with it the EEWG, moved into a newly-constructed engineering academic building. This new space was designed to promote collaborative work; 2 long walls are covered with white boards and movable tables can function as individual desks or be grouped into larger worktables. At the time of the move, the EEWG consisted of 4 members (authors Hixson, Lee, Hunter, and McCord), 2 actively working on dissertation proposals and 2 analyzing data and drafting dissertations. The group agreed to meet once a week for a full day. To hold each other accountable for attending, members regularly communicated to determine who planned to attend each session. In addition, the group members also built a high level of trust. As before, the EEWG focused on individuals' goal-specific writing, but the trust the members created also included a willingness to share works in progress, to provide feedback during sessions, and occasionally to comment on others' work outside of the sessions.

The current iteration of the EEWG reflects several frameworks familiar to writing center staff. First, the EEWG easily maps to the dimensions and variables Sarah Haas identifies in her typology of writing groups: the EEWG is characterized by a discipline-specific membership, peer leadership, face-to-face contact, and a meeting place within the institutional setting. The meeting length for this weekly group, however, is longer (ranging from 4 to 8 hours) than times reported for weekly groups across Aitchison and Guerin's collection (1.5 to 3 hours). Second, although it brings writers together, the EEWG differs from traditional conceptions of writing groups as workshops where writers bring texts written elsewhere to one another to gain feedback. Instead, the EEWG resembles Neal Lerner's conception of a writing laboratory—a place where the physical act of writing happens as visible everyday work. That is, EEWG sessions emphasize physically putting words on the page as the primary activity, rather than bringing texts created elsewhere for feedback. At the same time, EEWG sessions do not exclude feedback. The current structure includes a tacit commitment to sharing work with and providing feedback to one another, reflecting an ongoing process of creating and talking about texts.

EXPLORING THE EEWG: GATHERING & ANALYZING INSIGHTS
To better understand how other writing centers might support graduate writing groups like the EEWG, we wanted to learn how the EEWG was serving its graduate student members, what kept other graduate students from attending writing sessions, and

what features could make the EEWG more useful. We therefore conducted an Institutional Review Board-approved qualitative study, individually interviewing 8 students who participated in any iteration of the EEWG as well as 4 students who had not participated in it. Interview participants were invited via an email sent to current engineering education graduate students (EEWG attendees and non-attendees) as well as to recent EEWG alumni. Each audio-recorded interview was conducted by one of the authors as researcher-participants, using a protocol we piloted by first interviewing one another. Because the pilot interviews successfully captured relevant data, we included them in the dataset. While using researcher-participants to interview other EEWG members may raise concerns regarding response bias, both the exploratory nature of the study and diversity of the research team members' experiences with the EEWG helped mitigate any potential bias.

To analyze our data, both the interviewer and another researcher listened to each interview and completed a written summary of the interviewee's description of the EEWG, his or her motivation to participate (or not), the perceived pros and cons of participation, suggestions for improvement, and conceptions of the "ideal" writing session. The full research team then analyzed these summaries together to identify themes. We used these summaries, to protect confidentiality among peers and between students and faculty involved in the study.

SELF-SUSTAINING PRODUCTIVITY: STRUCTURE, COMMUNITY, AND COMMITMENT

Our analysis identified 3 themes among EEWG members relevant to writing centers hosting these kinds of groups. First, *structure* was critical for establishing a bounded mental space in which to write and for supporting students' agency with respect to participation. Although Matusovich provided the initial code of conduct guidelines for her research group's writing retreats, she served not as an authority but as a model for setting guidelines, reflecting, as Aitchison and Guerin note, "how groups doggedly re-form themselves by establishing their own norms, routines, and behaviors" (10). Interviewees reported that the group *collectively* established morning start times and designated lunchtimes at the beginning of each semester to create dedicated time for writing. Interviewees commented on the ways in which all members respected the rules and

noted that groups would revisit them as needed. While not all interviewees agreed on the details of the "ideal" structure, all highlighted the importance of collaboratively establishing a structure that everyone could work within. This formalization provided students with agency over their schedules and helped them avoid conflicts that would inhibit participation. At the same time, it created both permission and accountability; members were expected to write during EEWG sessions, and EEWG guidelines ensured that members used the time to achieve their writing goals (Aitchison).

The EEWG structure also positioned writing days as a regularly scheduled *public* commitment similar to a meeting or class. In creating this public space, the EEWG worked against the "hiddenness" of academic writing and instead placed writing at both the physical and metaphorical Center of the Department of Engineering Education. But while the Center provided a useful physical space, the public location also created barriers when the space could not be "controlled" (e.g., other Center events occasionally displaced the EEWG) or when, as described below, the location was too distant from a student's office.

Second, interviewees described an important *communal* dimension, centered on trust, which affected their writing and their sense of belonging in both the graduate student and larger academic communities. Trust was important in building writing confidence and skill because it enabled members to seek and provide feedback. The expressed goals of the EEWG community were to help one another make progress on writing projects (and eventually graduate), to become better writers, and to produce better final products. Interviewees thus described the EEWG as a space where they felt comfortable asking for and giving candid feedback. Notably, feedback was not part of Matusovich's original writing retreats; intentional feedback emerged when members felt a need to talk about their writing—talk that required trust. This trust also provided space to commiserate about writing struggles, which interviewees said helped them overcome mental hurdles associated with writing—especially at the doctoral level. We note that the shared academic discipline may have supported the emergence of communal trust because members could provide feedback on both writing structure and content. This feedback component thus represents an area for further research, particularly for multi-disciplinary groups.

The opportunities for both feedback and emotional honesty

about writing practices helped build the EEWG into a community of practice (CoP). Etienne Wenger uses CoP to describe how organizational groups function by working on a common enterprise, engaging interdependently with one another, and sharing a language and set of tools. Typically, newcomers become part of the CoP by engaging with more experienced employees; in this case, though, EEWG members were not learning from a more experienced writer. While Matusovich's work with her research group provided an initial model for a writing CoP, the EEWG has sustained itself without regular expert participation. Though EEWG members typically receive regular feedback from their advisors individually, the EEWG is currently a place for *peers* (i.e., doctoral students in a shared discipline) to come together for support and feedback.

The third theme that emerged from the data, *commitment*, reflected interviewees' willing interdependence with respect to accountability, support, and feedback. Commitment was linked to both structural and communal dimensions. Structurally, interviewees described prioritizing the EEWG sessions, attending consistently, arriving on time, bringing realistic yet challenging goals, and checking up on anyone who missed a session. With respect to community, interviewees described respecting one another's desires to be productive, engaging in both individual writing and community building (e.g., giving feedback and participating in strictly social lunchtimes), and supporting each other outside of the EEWG sessions.

To capture the relationships among these themes, we turn to a common engineering structure: the keystone arch, which consists of two halves, each unable to stand on its own. Where the halves meet, the keystone provides connection, strength, and stability for the whole system. *Structure* and *community* represent the two half arches, independently important to each EEWG member. But while these two halves facilitate the EEWG, each individual's *commitment* represents the keystone that bridges the two and yields self-sustaining participation.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION: STRUCTURE AND TASK
Two themes emerged from interviewees who did not participate in the EEWG. First, *structure* (schedule and location) hindered participation. Several students noted that EEWG sessions conflicted with other meetings, classes, etc. While the rule minimizing entrances and exits from the EEWG motivated

students who participated, non-member interviewees cited this practice as a hindrance because they believed they would disrupt the group if they needed to leave early. Others noted that the idea of structure itself conflicted with their personal writing habits; they write when they need to or feel like writing, not at scheduled times. The location was also problematic, particularly for students located in other buildings. These students found it easier to write in their own offices rather than carry writing supplies to the Center.

A second barrier was the writing *task*. Several students cited not being far enough along in their program to necessitate EEWG participation, especially given the length of a session. Others considered certain writing tasks ill-suited to the EEWG. For example, one interviewee found it better to write alone for tasks requiring concentration, while another did not need the motivation of a group for tasks that required little concentration. Non-members also considered EEWG sessions unnecessary for small writing tasks. Interestingly, though not consistent enough to become themes, a lack of *commitmen*t to EEWG's current iteration and possible future *community* both emerged as decision influencers in the non-participant interviews. That is, some non-participant interviewees explicitly stated that they did not consider EEWG sessions as time that should be prioritized, and thus scheduled other meetings during the sessions. But some non-participating interviewees acknowledged community as a potential motivator for future participation, noting that having people to write with would be helpful.

NEXT STEPS AND LESSONS LEARNED
For the Center, as well as for writing centers in general, hosting writing groups such as those described here can be an important way to support graduate student writers. Through the EEWG, the Center functions as a place to *come together* to write and provide feedback to other writers in community. Both physical space and length of time appear critical; graduate students, particularly in disciplines like engineering, they may need longer stretches of protected time to craft the texts required for degree completion.

Notably, while the current space includes several useful affordances—whiteboards and flexible furniture—technology also emerged as a key need. Interviewees wanted dual-monitor setups to view articles, book chapters, outlines, previous writing, and data as they took notes or wrote their own texts,

and such affordances could lower barriers for students housed elsewhere by limiting what they need to carry. At the same time, space is not the only, or perhaps even the most important, thing writing centers can offer. By collaborating with campus spaces where writing sessions could occur, writing centers can initiate groups similar to the EEWG and can provide early models, much the way Matusovich did for her students. Additionally, while the EEWG meets without input from an expert, writing centers could provide expert feedback on writing, which interviewees identified as desirable. Such feedback would not—and interviewees agreed, should not—happen weekly. Instead, biweekly or monthly sessions in which writing coaches were available for part of a session could effectively support members' desires to become more effective writers. As Aitcheson and Guerin note, the field still has much to learn about when, how, and why graduate writing groups function, as well as what writing centers can do to support them. But initiating and modeling productive practices—including both structural and communal dimensions—can lay a foundation for the kind of sustained commitment that has made the EEWG productive.

◆　◆　◆　◆　◆

Aitchison, Claire. "Writing Groups for Doctoral Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 34.8 (2009): 905-16. Print.

Aitchison, Claire, and Cally Guerin, eds. *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.

Aitchison, Claire, and Cally Guerin. "Writing Groups, Pedagogy, Theory and Practice: An Introduction." Aitchison and Guerin 3-17.

Haas, Sarah. "Pick-N-Mix: A Typology of Writers' Groups in Use." Aitchison and Guerin 30-48.

Lerner, Neal. *The Idea of a Writing Laboratory*. Carbondale: SIU P, 2009. Print.

Wenger, Etienne. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Looking for more good reading about writing center work? There's the blog, "Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders" (a global connection for all writing centers). Post your news on Twitter and Facebook pages, and use WcORD to search for links to web resources on writing centers:

WLN blog:	www.wlnjournal.org/blog/
WLN Twitter:	twitter.com/WLNjournal
WLN Facebook:	www.facebook.com/wlnjournal
WcORD:	wlnjournal.org/wcord.php