Write(ing)(ers') Support Group:
Stories of Facing "Publish or Perish"

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People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories...lived and told, educate the self and others, including the young and those, such as researchers, who are new to their communities. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415)

As five junior faculty women in teacher education, we came together to navigate the perilous waters of higher education. Among us, there were four women who entered the university in autumn 1997 and one woman who had been at the university for three years. One of the aspects of higher education that we knew we must confront with a "sink or swim" attitude was the requirement that we publish. With that in mind, at the beginning of fall semester, we formed a group called the Writing Support Group to assist our journey toward promotion and tenure, a

journey previous research has documented to be somewhat daunting for female faculty (Harris, Thiele, & Currie, 1998; Riger, Stokes, Raja, & Sullivan, 1997). The original focus of our group was to provide a forum where we could safely examine our writing.

When we came to the university we already had some awareness that the enculturation of junior faculty, particularly women and people of racial and ethnic diversity, "does not seem to socialize them to survive and thrive in a community based on difference" (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996, p. 36). We knew that women face special challenges in the promotion and tenure process (Bateson, 1989). We had heard stories of the edict "Publish or Perish," and we also knew that for many women the search to find their own identity and voice in scholarship was a challenge (Gallos, 1996). We began shaping our own lives and stories, and for us that involved facing the culture of higher education and of our Department of Teacher Education together.

In the midst of our first Writing Support Group meeting, it occurred to us that we had an opportunity to research ourselves and the writing support group process. We were, in many respects, beginners, or novices, as teacher educators and scholars. Researching ourselves as beginners would help us reflect on our own development as women, scholars, researchers, and teachers (Pinnegar, 1993).

From the beginning, we agreed that the qualitative paradigm would be the most appropriate lens with which to enhance our understanding of the Writing Support Group. Our initial focus was on narrative and personal experience methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). The methodology employed in our research is evolving as we grow into the process. The stories presented here are initial representations of our first year as women, colleagues, and members of a writing support group. What the Writing Support Group meant to us in our first year can be seen as the stories unfold.

The Context of the Stories

Since all stories take place in a setting, having a sense of the context is inherent in being able to connect with stories. The setting for our experiences and stories is a midsize, comprehensive university located in the midwest. The institution is unique in that it was founded by and continues to be guided by a Roman Catholic order, the Marianists. The Marianist tradition encompasses commitment to scholarship, service, and community.

The School of Education and the Department of Teacher Education, like most schools, colleges, and departments of education, are in the midst of considerable turmoil. The University has moved from a predominant focus on teaching to an expectation that faculty demonstrate excellence in teaching, research, and service. This increasing pressure to publish is even more keenly felt among teacher education faculty, where research and publication have historically been uneven (Ducharme, 1993) and where a struggle for identity and status in the profession is

paramount (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990). Furthermore, the current social and political context is placing pressure on teacher education programs, and our department is feeling those pressures as well.

One important element of our experiences is that we received support from our department last year to conduct research on the Writing Support Group. Perhaps the fact that we formed a critical mass of junior women faculty may have brought more strength to our presence and to our voices (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). How our voices re-present the context is part of the story itself.

We also asked another voice to represent our stories, not through written language, but through visual representation of his interpretation of our narratives. Willis "Bing" Davis joined the School of Education as artist-in-residence in August 1998 after retiring as chair of the Art Department for Central State (Ohio) University. He expressed interest in what we had done as a group of junior faculty, and we asked him to read our narratives and represent his interpretation of our stories in visual art form. His representation and interpretative comments frame our stories that follow (see Figure 1).

Shauna's Story
The Dance of Higher Education:
Not a Solo Performance

My first and second years in a tenure track position as assistant professor were anything but typical; a new dean, a new chair, new state teacher licensure standards, and the responsibility for developing a new program. The paradigm

Figure 1
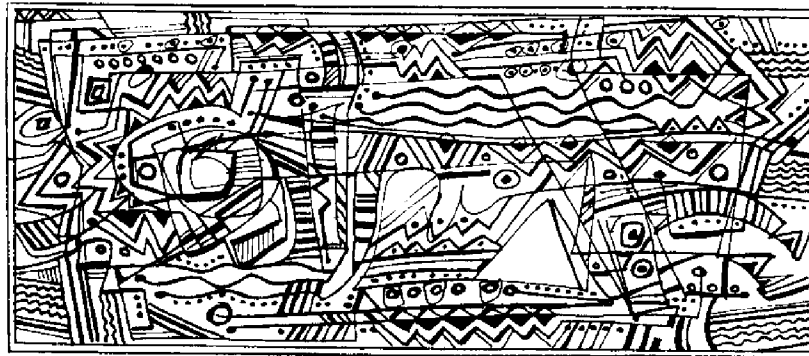
The first thing I did was to hear voices. I thought of conversation. You can see the open mouths and the long hair flowing. The lines and design are flowing. That's what I saw when I read the stories.

—*Willis "Bing" Davis*

went beyond "shifting," it was breaking apart. Like a melting iceberg, the faculty in the School of Education was floating in separate directions. Like deer in headlights, they were unable to act, disabled by the wave of change that flooded the School of Education. As with any new job, it was important for me to develop an understanding of the culture; however, the change process had created such upheaval that the culture was disrupted.

In an environment with great disequilibrium, I set out to make sense of the world of higher education. While the faculty were busy sorting through the major changes that they faced, I was creating a new program and a place in academia. When the dust settled, I felt confident in what I had built. I had been given power and the freedom to create my own version of higher education. All was right with the world. Then came the Writers' Support Group.

The "Supposed-to-Be's"

Higher education is saturated in tradition and bound by the rules of those who have gone before. There are rules of order, of process, of seniority, of regal dress, and most importantly, of office size and parking privileges. Being one who enjoys stretching the boundaries, I stretched. When I found no resistance, I pushed the limits even further. I started by developing a graduate program in Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education. I was the only full-time faculty member associated with the new program, so I had only myself to convince. I studied the best practice literature, received input from adjunct instructors and practitioners, and designed a program that was approved by the faculty of my department. In the end, I designed it and I owned it. Good or bad—it was mine. The true implications of this "ownership" did not hit me until my third year, a year that saw the formation of the Writers' Support Group. It was during this year that I learned that there are some valid "supposed-to-be's" buried in the traditions of higher education.

A Team Emerges

The Writers' Support Group started with an open invitation to all non-tenured faculty in our department but solidified into a group of five women, four who were new to the University and me. We came together with a need to support and be supported. We thought at first that our sole purpose was to support scholarship. We quickly learned that the bond became both personal and professional, and transcended teaching, service, and scholarship.

During our first two meetings we established a set of norms to guide us throughout the year. The rules were well thought-out and provided a framework for the relationships that ensued. In the past, I found rules to be cumbersome. These rules, however, created a freedom to express opinions, offer constructive criticism, and set clear expectations for professional behavior. The entire team participated in establishing the rules and in turn demonstrated a sense of ownership for the Support Group.

The rule that most impacted my world was the conversation rule. This rule

stated that the decisions that were made in the Department of Teacher Education and the School of Education in the past without much fuss, now had to be discussed. This Support Group had created a cocoon of trust where first-year faculty could ask the tough questions: "What are the criteria for being graduate faculty?" "How are student teachers placed?" "Who decided that this research course sequence made sense?" "Merit pay is determined how?!" Questions that many new faculty members would find answers to through painful experience were free game with this Group.

These questions and conversations were not limited to Departmental procedures. They quickly moved to my domain. The Group started questioning the graduate Early Childhood Program as well as the developing undergraduate program. They wanted to have "conversations" about courses and field placements, mentor teachers, and portfolio assessments. "What do we believe in?" they asked. I found myself asking these questions, too. "What are our core beliefs and values?" "What are the faculty's core beliefs and values?" We let nothing slide. And finally, gently, my Writer's Support Group colleagues challenged me to create a more equitable balance in my professional life. My passion for teaching and program development had displaced focus on scholarship. Now, in my fourth year at the University, this Group has helped me to better understand that I must balance all three areas and create healthier professional boundaries. These are difficult challenges for me and I will continue to need their support as I move through the promotion and tenure process. I am learning to do the dance of higher education and now realize it is not a solo performance.

Connie's Story
The Long and Winding Road to Tenure

Writers' Support Group? What is it? Accountability to publish?... Road to tenure...?

As a junior faculty member I had the same problems that entry-year teachers in public schools have: I kept taking on more responsibilities. I wanted to prove that I could do anything that was asked of me. In the process, I found myself overwhelmed.

Co-coordinating a preservice program...writing a new curriculum to meet new standards adopted by the state. attending numerous meetings about state licensure program proposals...consulting with five other program chairs and departments on their respective state proposals...being a liaison with one of our partner districts.supervising six student teachers...supervising twenty-two preservice students...teaching two new courses.

At a faculty meeting in October, I chuckled to myself when the department chair mentioned that our new faculty members had lighter loads but that next year they would be on full loads. I could not imagine what a full load would be like and how I was going to manage it all.

Anxiety...questioning...hyperventilating...overwhelmed... HELP!!!!

Our Writers' Support Group began to meet in late October. We established ground rules, talked about philosophies, core beliefs, values, and visions. This became my oasis, my hiding place away from everything else that seemed to be stealing my joy and purpose for being at the university. I now carved out time in my overburdened schedule to meet with others once a month who shared similar beliefs and to begin to establish an *esprit de corps* with colleagues, friends and confidants.

Confidence...encouragement...interaction...suggestions...clarification... confirmation...support....

It was through the Writer's Support Group that I was able to get acquainted with individuals who were tired of standing on the sidelines and watching me sink. Prior to the Writers' Support Group, these individuals would inquire as to how classes were going, and I would respond "fine." At this point in time, I was not ready to admit that I needed help, especially from junior faculty who seemed to have it together. I began to think that I was the only one having problems and perhaps I was not cut out for this position.

Perceptions...beliefs...outlooks...misconceptions...superficial responses....

The Writers' Group offered me the opportunity to vent my frustrations, express needs, and brainstorm for solutions. We discussed my second semester schedule and brainstormed possibilities for survival. One solution explored was to move to a team approach to supervision in the schools. This was the same model we were using in the Writers' Group: empowerment. From this new model, a true partnership was beginning to emerge. The collaborative model envisioned for student teachers by the Writer's Support Group really mirrored the support and collaboration provided by members of the Group.

What started out as a writing accountability group for me turned out to be my lifeline. The Writers' Group gave me the opportunity to build friendships, to develop trusting relationships, and give/receive support in numerous ways. I not only received feedback for publications which were submitted and published, but:

...the Writer's Support Group was much more than writing...it became true collaboration...valuing individual needs...my beginning to living and enjoying academia.

Laurice's Story
Struggling to Maximize Productivity:
Personal Reflections on the Process
Working in a collaborative fashion with others is more challenging at times than working alone. It is more challenging with respect to producing outcomes in a timely manner due to varying perspectives about what those outcomes should be.

My personal/professional goal for the Writing Support Group was to work vigorously at seeking and providing feedback on written manuscripts that were produced by individuals in the Group. My way of maximizing productivity in an efficient manner consisted of providing the Group with sections from drafts of my manuscripts with which I experienced "mental blocks."

I can remember eliciting feedback from the Group about some ideas for how a specific emergent literacy instructional approach could be applied to a general education classroom setting. The Group generated some great ideas, and I was able to reflect upon those ideas and generate further ones. My thought processes needed a boost, and the Writing Support Group members' ideas scaffolded my thinking. I was comfortable with other sections of my draft which I revised considerably over time. I had hoped that the majority of our Group meetings would consist of members bringing forth sections of their writing which were most troublesome.

The Group gradually took on a different focus. Many members used the time to discuss other issues concerning them as junior faculty members. Although these issues were certainly critical ones, the discussion surrounding them left me feeling frustrated about what I had perceived our mission should be–feedback on our scholarly endeavors. I felt the Group at times was becoming reactive rather than proactive toward our present condition as junior faculty. Despite these moments of frustration, the feedback I received and provided on our writing has been very beneficial. Many of us have landed a publication or two. I still ponder on the level of productivity. Could we have achieved greater outcomes in producing published work if we remained completely focused on that endeavor?

Until I wrote this narrative, I had not shared my concern explicitly with the entire Group although I had with one other member. My discussions with her encouraged me to reflect on other members' professional needs and their perspectives about the mission of the Group. I am currently engaging in introspective thought about why I believe the Group should be about supporting each other in "traditional" products of scholarship (peer-reviewed journal articles). I have learned that my perspective of what the Group should be about comes from the academic culture in which I was "raised."

I stepped into the life of an assistant professor immediately following completion of my doctorate degree. I was a traditional doctoral student, meaning that I was in full-time residence for three years aside from graduate research and teaching assistantships. The university from which I obtained my degree is known for being a top research university. My mentors at that university were mainly rewarded and or respected for their scholarly productivity. Their roles as service providers and teachers were especially respected if they were scholars first. It is difficult, if not impossible, to "shake off" the former academic culture that transformed my beliefs and actions about what it meant to be called "professor." I am discovering that there is a broader picture of what it means to be a respected professor at a mid-size institution that values individual student attention, service,

and teaching in ways that are somewhat different than the academic culture in which I "grew up."

My conflicting thoughts have led me to ponder that perhaps the mission of the Writing Support Group should not be solely about products, after all. Instead, it may be about a more complex professional endeavor: being actively involved in the process of helping each other grow more fully in an academic community. I plan to entertain this discussion with the Group and learn about their previous academic cultures in subsequent meetings and see where the road meanders.

Mary Ellen's Story

The Journey into Higher Education:
Can a Woman Who Never Intended to be in Academia Find Happiness?

Life is full of twists and turns, and in 57 years I have encountered many. Serendipity? Fate? Blundering? Probably all and more have played their part in the blended landscape I have called my life. The journey into higher education is no exception. Witness:

August, 1992: Looking for a career opportunity in clinical evaluation and diagnosis of young children with developmental disabilities, I approached a professor at the University of Cincinnati to talk about taking just a few courses. Result: An offer of full scholarship and clinical internship if I would agree to become a full-time student.

January, 1993: The traineeship and courses were going well. I applied to the doctoral degree program in Early Childhood Special Education at the University of Cincinnati.

1993-1996: It felt right. It went well. Degree in hand, I continued to make my place in the world of clinical diagnostic teams and classrooms for young children with disabilities.

April, 1997: A discernible shift took place in the leadership and mission of the diagnostic center where I had been happy. I wondered: Do I belong here now? At a conference in Salt Lake City, I was approached by several University of Dayton staff and faculty who wanted to discuss a new tenure track position in the Department of Teacher Education, Early Childhood Programs. I had never considered the possibility. At age 55, could I crack the code of higher education and make a successful career for myself?

May, 1997: The interview process began. First stop was the administration building and an appointment with one of the senior administrators at the university. After 20 minutes of lively conversation the declaration was made:

"You are obviously a bright, capable woman and have been successful at what

you've done, but I don't see you on faculty here at the University of Dayton."

"Why is that?" I asked, startled and curious.

"You have not been prepared for academia," came the answer. "That wasn't your track."

I continued the day-long interview process, pondering the question of preparation within a track. At the end of the day, I met with the department chair who said,

"I have spoken with everyone, and they are all impressed."

"Well," I replied, "not everyone." I accepted the position with some trepidation and an "I'll show you" attitude.

August, 1997: The administration hosted an orientation for all new University faculty members. The senior level administrator, upon encountering me, said with a genuine smile,

"You know, Mary Ellen, I often think about our discussion."

I, too, often think about that conversation. And concerns about my preparation for academe were justified. As I started the academic year, the realization of the very different cultural demands of university life (teaching, advising, service, and scholarship) became abundantly clear. Add to that the importance of establishing professional friendships and learning how to access a variety of resources within and outside of the University, and the task of acclimating to higher education becomes complex and demanding. Of the five junior faculty in the Department (four of us new to the University), everyone except me had prepared themselves for careers in higher education. What we had in common was our mutual need to understand the culture of the university.

With that common need, we established the Writing Support Group and in the process of our meetings have uncovered many individual needs. I, for example, had never published but had a solid record of presentations. I had taught graduate courses but not undergraduate. University-speak needed to be understood and explored. Major issues of program redesign, relationships with elementary schools, and new state requirements for teacher licensure needed to be mastered. And then, of course, there was the matter of meeting classes and advising students, a strongly held value at our university.

During the early phase of the Writing Support Group it became clear that all of the individuals in the Group sought support in a variety of areas. Writing and scholarship were frequent topics, but the cultural web in which we found ourselves was intricate, sometimes sticky, and often a challenge. We all needed encouragement, praise, and constant reinforcement for understanding the culture of this university. What I received was friendship, a constant flow of information, and productive critical analyses of my own work. I also received definition of myself

as a woman in higher education who brought with her a variety of strengths, but who also needed to understand how to apply them in a new and unfamiliar culture.

Who belongs in higher education? Does the membership reside solely with the ability to publish? We need to explore ways to enrich our higher education community that expand the frame of current preservice preparation programs. We will only perpetuate the myth of who does and does not belong if the university society cannot open itself up to changing its boundaries. The Writing Support Group has provided a support structure that can allow the stretch to happen and, at the same time, provide an avenue for cultural transmission of deeply held university values.

Katie's Story
Rejection Hurts:
The Role of A Critical Friend

At long last, the reviews and the letter from the editor arrived.

We regret to inform you that we will not be able to accept your article for publication.... The decision is based upon reviewers' evaluations (enclosed) and our own editorial considerations.

How was I going to tell Dodie and Marie, my co-authors? We had been so confident, so sure that the manuscript portrayed clearly the literacy program we had developed as well as the research addressing its impact. We felt that teachers reading the article would find new ways to think about helping young readers struggling with those early attempts at reading and writing.

How was I going to tell Laurice, colleague and fellow Writing Support Group member, knowing that her article submitted to same journal had been accepted just weeks before? What should I have done to make sure that the article was ready for review? How could the reviewers have questioned the authenticity of our data? The statement of doubt regarding the authenticity of our research findings is what frustrated me most. These questions haunted me for much of the summer. It was not because this was my first rejection. I have submitted articles before that were rejected. It was just that I was so confident about this article. I finally called Dodie, colleague, co-author, and a teacher in an elementary school in Georgia. She, of course, was disappointed; but her disappointment was secondary to her anger that the reviewers had questioned the data. We talked about that issue for some time, and made plans for revising the article to send to another journal. We also decided to respond to the editors and voice our concerns about some of the comments. I wrote about my communications with both Dodie and Laurice in my journal dated August 13, a few days after I had talked to both of them.

First, about the Writing Support Group. It struck me when I finally had the courage to talk to Laurice about the rejection from [the journal], how much responsibility we are feeling for one another's writing. I was devastated by the rejection letter....

> *First, I was so sure that it was just the right article.... Second, they questioned the*
> *validity and accuracy of our statistics and findings. That infuriated Dodie. Third,*
> *the very premises upon which we based our grounding for Reading Express was*
> *questioned in a most closed-minded way. Gosh, how disheartening.*

As I reflected on the journal entry, it occurred to me that I was pondering an element of our Writing Support Group that I had not thought of before; that is, a sense of responsibility we have to one another. Group members have often been the final people to see a manuscript or a proposal before going out for review. Laurice shared with me that she felt she should have seen some of those points about which the reviewers were so critical. It was during that conversation, and in my ensuing reflections, that I began to think differently about the role that the members of the Writing Support Group must play for one another as critical friends.

During this same period, I spent some time with Mary Ellen, another Writing Support Group member. After Mary Ellen and I finished our work on course planning, she asked me if I would review an article she had been working on. I read it, and offered substantial comments on how the conclusions might be reworked. It was a little uncomfortable for me to suggest a major overhaul but I was looking at the article, not as Mary Ellen's friend and colleague, but as a reviewer. When I reflected on what had transpired, it occurred to me I made a conscious choice to assume a different role than I had assumed in previous reviews for Group members. My journal entry of August 13 continues:

> *I can recall Laurice talking about feeling badly about the article—not just because*
> *it was rejected, but because she had been a part of the process in getting it sent out.*
> *I think we have to talk about this sense of responsibility and what does it mean to*
> *really critically review each other's work. I know that influenced me when I read*
> *[Mary Ellen's] article when I stayed overnight in Cincinnati—I probably read*
> *with more care—read with more of a critical eye—since I had the experience with*
> *RT. This will be an interesting topic when we meet again this fall.*

The conversation between Laurice and me about the responsibility we have to each other was not the first time this topic had come up in Writing Support Group. When we were just forming our Group and establishing Group norms, we agreed that our comments should be honest. Connie, another member, said at the time that being a critical reviewer would be difficult for her. This may be an issue we will have to discuss in future meetings. What does it mean to be critical friend? How can we be friends, colleagues, and peer reviewers? What does it mean to both give and receive support in a Writing Support Group?

We started to talk about these questions as the 1998-99 school year started, even before our Group met formally for the first time. My journal entry of August 27 captures some of those thoughts:

> *The conversation has continued about the role we take for one another in our*
> *Writing Support Group. Laurice and I have had several more conversations about*

the article that I had rejected.... She mentioned again how badly she felt—given the comments from reviewers—that she hadn't had more to offer to improve. Connie and Laurice and I talked about it Tuesday night—after the opening School of Education meeting. I think we all agreed that the [Writing Support Group] will have some very specific purposes this year—brainstorming, helping each of us think about an article in a certain way. Laurice commented on our way over to the retreat that she thinks it is more helpful in our Group when we have a specific problem for the Group to address—like she did with her piece that asked for classroom ideas for the word boxes. So, I wonder if our Group is evolving—last year we were very much an open forum for support for one another in our first year. That was most important.

So, I think our challenge this year will be to refine the purpose of our Group— Laurice and I already have some writing ideas that we are working on individually. We'll see where that goes.

We came together as a writing support group to create a safe space to think and write. One aspect of that safety is knowing that every piece that we write and send out for public scrutiny will have benefited from the collective mind of our Group. That is what writing support is all about.

Learning From Our Stories

Women today read and write biographies to gain perspective on their own lives. Each reading provokes a dialogue of comparison and recognition, a process of memory and articulation that makes one's own experience available as a lens of empathy. We gain even more from comparing notes and trying to understand the choices of our friends. When one has matured surrounded by implicit disparagement, the undiscovered self is an unexpected resource. Self-knowledge is empowering. (Bateson, 1989, p. 5)

Reading and sharing our stories with one another has helped us to gain perspective on our own lives, as well as the lives of each member in our Writing Support Group. When we first read each other's stories, we wondered if we were talking about the same group. Two of us referred to the Group as Writer's Support Group, three of us called ourselves the Writing Support Group, an indication that we all needed different things from the Group. The stories were more like a patchwork quilt than a cohesive representation of one group of women over the course of a year.

Just as each story is unique, the stories as a collective say something about the common struggles and frustrations we faced. The Group offered a safe place to work through these struggles while affirming our integrity as scholars and as women. We have been able to reflect on the challenges of our first year and recognize how we helped one another grow personally and professionally. We formed our Group in a conscious effort to define for ourselves how we would

approach "publish or perish." Each member of our Group defined that process for herself, thereby establishing unique orientations to how we are situating ourselves in the world of research and scholarship.

New faculty in higher education often engage in research and publication isolated from colleagues. We chose to bring a collaborative and supportive dimension to our scholarship and have found that this stance has challenged the competitive, individualistic culture that has traditionally dominated higher education.

Furthermore, we found that supporting one another in our research and scholarship is but one facet of the multi-dimensional relationship that evolved as part of our collaboration. Researching ourselves brought new meaning to the research process for all of us. Our conversations about methodology were often as lively as the conversations about making sense of a new place and an unfamiliar culture. Cynthia Sullivan Dickens and Mary Ann D. Sagaria (1997) explored the collaborative relationships among women faculty who were identified as feminists in their scholarship and pedagogy. We have extended the research on collaboration among feminist faculty to include faculty members who are women, but who have not situated themselves formally within the context of feminist pedagogy and research. That is not to say our feminist consciousness has not been raised by our experiences; only that we approached our research from the lenses of female junior faculty and teachers educators.

Each of us brought to the Write(ing)(ers') Support Group different needs. But it was also evident that no need was more important than any other; no request heard was devalued. We know that we must be researchers and scholars if we are to remain in higher education, but we are women first. Our engagement in and reflection upon the Writing Support Group suggests that researching ourselves could serve both our scholarship and our professional selves as women and teacher educators.

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