

## Review of *Introducing Teachers' Writing Groups: Exploring the Theory and Practice*

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**Smith, J. and Wrigley, S. (2016) *Introducing Teachers' Writing Groups: Exploring the Theory and Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp.150, £95.00, 9781138797420**

*Introducing Teachers' Writing Groups: Exploring the Theory and Practice*, by Jenifer Smith and Simon Wrigley, is co-published by Routledge and the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) as the latest offering in a collaborative series. The Association is the professional body in the UK for all teachers of English in primary and post-primary schools and their series with Routledge is intended to promote 'standards of excellence in the teaching of English' by disseminating 'innovative and original ideas that have practical classroom outcomes', as well as supporting teachers' own professional development. In this latest addition to the series, Smith and Wrigley address a key underlying question – indeed challenge – for English teachers: how can you teach students to write if, as a teacher, you can't, or don't, or won't, write yourself? The authors introduce us to teachers' writing groups as one compelling way to meet this challenge; such groups, the book demonstrates, encourage and support teachers as writers. Similarly, writing groups can also be of value in higher education settings for colleagues (Grant 2006, Badenhorst et al. 2013 and Geller and Eodice 2013), and for students (Aitchinson 2009), and it is the application of the book's theory and practices in these contexts that may prove most useful for readers of the *Journal of Academic Writing*.

Drawing on their own experiences, and acknowledging their gratitude to the many teachers with whom they have worked, the authors outline the theory, tone and practicalities of teachers' writing groups at various levels and in various guises. Their work synthesises the significant general research that exists in this area and traces, in particular, teacher writing developments in the UK in the last decade. The book clearly captures the authors' intellectual and practical commitment to writing groups, a topic which has its origins in Jenifer Smith's 'pattern' for the work (2016: 12), which she had developed from the early 1990s. The authorial voice is enthusiastic, the book's style uncluttered and accessible, and its content a balance of theory and pragmatic advice on the formation and operation of teachers' writing groups; while the text is research-informed in nature, it could easily be adopted as a handbook for writing groups generally.

In the opening chapters of their work, Smith and Wrigley give us both a brief history of, and an apologia for, writing groups, and they describe their approach as one which values 'ways that are fluid, open, exploratory and celebratory' (2016: 15). As they expound on their methods in these chapters, they reinforce the necessity for teachers who are supporting student writers to become writers themselves, while they also acknowledge that writing is not done to order and that the blank page can be daunting. Though the dynamic, recursive, non-linear, and hard-to-contain nature of writing can be seen as intimidating, the authors suggest that, among other interventions, writing groups can gradually build confidence as teachers discover the

exhilaration of writing. The comprehensive description of their approach leads from theory to practice through various ideas including a consideration of writing processes and writing histories.

Chapters 6 to 10 describe the practicalities of setting up a teachers' writing group, getting started, and conducting meetings and writing sessions. There are several useful 'how-to' tips about ideal participant numbers, desirable venues, meeting frequency, who might facilitate the group and how, and what the ideal structure, shape and pattern of meetings should be; they also include useful ideas for getting people started, and various tools, devices, techniques, writing prompts and activities. Notebooks get a special mention as does sharing writing and responding, where the authors make direct reference to the work of Elbow and Belanoff (1989) and Elbow (2012). Finally, in Chapter 10, we are reminded of the circular link between reading and writing and why this matters. These four chapters in particular provide great advice for any higher education colleague considering establishing a writing group for undergraduates, postgraduates and/or amongst themselves.

Chapters 11 to 13 privilege teachers' words and reveal the impact that learning to enjoy writing, particularly in groups, can have on teachers. Growing confidence is noted, as is the welcome recognition that our writing does not have to be perfect. One teacher is memorably quoted – 'That tension between wanting to write and the fear of being mediocre has haunted me for a long time' (Smith and Wrigley 2016: 83). In these three chapters, reflection is also highlighted. This is explored as reflection on writing and reflection on teaching where both processes could contribute to continuing professional development for participants and/or research in this area.

Chapters 14 to 18 have, in the authors' own words, 'a greater emphasis on classroom practice' (Smith and Wrigley 2016: 6). Although the main focus of the book is teachers' writing groups, chapters 14 and 15 deal enthusiastically with the formation of children's writing groups, and show, in a parallel manner, how such groups can serve the interests of both students and teachers. While chapter 16 addresses the potentially thorny area of assessing writing, chapter 17 considers the interplay between what happens in the writing group and what happens in the classroom. This chapter widens the participation net still further, showing the benefits of writing sessions for parents, and how the whole movement may extend beyond that to an even broader community. Chapter 18 addresses the strategically significant question 'What's in it for my school?'; chapter 19 is a succinct afterword that captures lessons learned and ponders outstanding questions, while chapter 20 provides an annotated bibliography.

In terms of contribution, Smith and Wrigley's book maps, in an evidence-based and practical manner, how writing groups can infuse confidence and enthusiasm through teacher and student writing. Successful groups can provide professional benefits and personal fulfilment; the groups do this by allowing participants to develop their own writing skills, and encouraging them to cascade their learning and motivation with regards to writing to their students. Aside from the comprehensive overview, and indeed detail on, teachers' writing groups which the book offers, Smith and Wrigley's work also emphasises the necessity of reflecting on writing and on teaching. This feature of our work in higher education, and of student learning, is frequently neglected under the pressure of summative assessment and indeed in the fragmented nature of modularisation. Smith and Wrigley note the value of reflecting 'on development over time' (2016: 81) which by its longitudinal nature will provide wholly different perspectives than those which are captured in the often rushed end of module or end of year evaluation.

With regards to style, the book is straightforward and direct, whereby the central tenets are revisited and reinforced in a relatively short text (c. 140 pages). The authors draw to great effect on the persuasive, personal testimony of writing group members which give legitimacy to the idea of writing groups and to the publication itself. The celebration of teachers' writing is a welcome feature seen most clearly in the inclusion of the modest anthology of work by teachers in chapter 12. Equally, the focus on the complementarity between how our writerly identity develops when we write by ourselves and how it is shaped when we write and share

our work with others is a vital inclusion. The exploration of writerly identity in this manner reminds one of the essential nature of this topic and resonates with another recent publication by Thomson and Kamler (2016), *Detox Your Writing*, in which the authors remark that text work and identity work are inseparable. The qualities for participating in a community of writers are also noted in Smith and Wrigley's approach, which is collaborative, built on trust and respect, various, experimental, experiential and companionable. The rhizomatic tendency of writing work, which is reflected in the variety one can observe in writer group make up, is noted in the 'paradigm shift' that occurs when we write alongside our students and share our work with them. Similarly, the need to honour 'the principles of professional autonomy and partnership' (Smith and Wrigley 2016: 43) is reinforced in the text, as is the message of allowing space in writing for a variety of approaches and across a myriad of cohorts; the guidance for teachers' writing groups could be largely applicable across a range of collectives including creative writing groups and children's writing groups.

In terms of areas for further exploration, multimodal writing and indeed digital composition remain largely untapped in this text. Equally, the authors identify that whereas '[m]ost teachers are skilled readers' and that '[t]heir first, and sometimes inhibiting, love is of the written word' (Smith and Wrigley 2016: 74), they observe how much we still need to discover about the links between reading and writing.

In conclusion, though Smith and Wrigley have written about teachers' writing groups, their publication would be a very useful resource for anyone working in academic writing in higher education who is keen to either begin a writing group or who wishes to repurpose or revitalise current offerings. Aside from this practical application, perhaps the most profound contribution of the book is noted in the Afterword, which acknowledges that writing requires courage. In a feed-forward approach, Smith and Wrigley finish with wishes for the reader that we will find time to write, to share writing, to 'have fun and think hard' (2016: 140). They invite us to join with them in challenging the status quo. In their commitment to authoring this text, which is the result of years of indefatigable effort, Smith and Wrigley have generously laid strong foundations for the writing and action to come. Their text could well be interpreted as an urgent, determined manifesto for what writing in schools could, or indeed should, much more closely resemble.

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