

**Developing a Community of Academic Writers: Using Social Media to
Support Academic Accountability, Motivation, and Productivity**

Chyllis E. Scott
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
chyllis.scott@unlv.edu

Nicola L. Ritter
Texas A&M University
nicolaritter@tamu.edu

Rhonda M. Fowler
Texas A&M University
rfowler@tamu.edu

A. Dean Franks
The University of Southern Mississippi
d.franks@usm.edu

Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the use of Facebook as an online social network site as a support tool for graduate students' and faculty's writing accountability, motivation, and productivity. The purpose of the study was to explore writing practices while using a Facebook group as a physical and virtual place to provide support and accountability. Data came from the Facebook group's postings and responses from group members to an online questionnaire. Through a sociocultural lens, the research team explored the social environment of the community, and the results suggest that the Facebook group offered participants a platform to support one another, while providing peer accountability and building a community for their academic writing. Overall, the qualitative data analysis showed evidence that group membership allowed for building a community, including face-to-face contact, with fellow academic writers.

Keywords: *academic writing; writing communities; writing groups; Online Social Networks; Facebook; writing accountability; writing productivity*

Introduction

There is a large table in the back corner of a bustling coffee shop. The table is covered with six laptops, coffee, endless water bottles, binders, journal articles, highlighters, snacks, and other supplies to help those present be productive writers for many hours. This was a common occurrence for members of the writing group. Members would work and write at local coffee shops or restaurants to work individually and as a group on projects, class assignments, research papers, data analysis, manuscripts, and dissertations. It is the story and research of the authors and other members of an accountable writing group that serves the purpose for this manuscript and the research focused on: How do informal writing groups provide accountability and support for graduate students and junior faculty?

The previous vignette sets the scene of graduate level schoolwork and the demands of completing a graduate degree. Whereas, completing a doctoral degree is an arduous task on its own, and challenges are further compounded when writing and publication expectations are added; however, graduate students and writing often go hand in hand for students at the doctoral level. According to Golde in 2005 nearly 40%, while more recently Cassuto (2013) stated nearly 50% of all students who begin a doctoral degree never achieve it. Part of the attrition may be attributed to the fact that graduate students are engaged in a number of different competing systems: completing required coursework, teaching, researching, fulfilling dissertation requirements, and ultimately completing their degree. Finally, they reach the next step in the process, the job search (Lundell & Beach, 2003).

Despite the numerous expectations placed on graduate students, the expectation to write with the intention to publish remains a paradox. With an increased emphasis on academic writing

and the expectations to publish in higher education, essentially in the frame of the *publish or perish* mantra, there is a need for writing productivity through accountability and collaboration. Throughout the process of earning an advanced degree, students are faced with trials and high expectations, which may be met with anxiety (Beaz, 2005), lack of motivation (Bandura, 1989; Teranishi Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011), stress, and work overload.

Given these demands and the important role that academic writing plays in degree completion, many graduate students seek support that can be provided by writing groups. Writing groups are social media platforms provide students with additional support, in this instance graduate students had a place (virtually and physically) to give and receive support for their writing, but often it is much more than that. Therefore, the present study examined the use of an online social network (i.e., Facebook) to provide a “place” or third space that provided support for graduate students in their academic writing. Specifically, the current study investigated how an online Facebook group (virtually and physically) offered participants peer support and accountability for their academic writing and the demands of their graduate programs through the use of social constructivism, when the learner is interacting with another person or persons (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wells, 1999).

As we illustrated in the opening vignette, writing and writing with others was an important component of this group. The group was a community of graduate students working toward a common goal, and the goal of completing their graduate degree. Fortunately, either purposefully or accidentally this group formed and provided many of it’s members with a place, either face-to-face, virtual, or a combination of both to work and write with others.

Therefore, members of the group saw the value of this group and from there the project evolved. We evaluated discussion posts from the Facebook group wall and open-ended questionnaire responses completed by members of the group to explore the participating graduate students experiences and to develop an understanding of their unique use of social media sites such as Facebook as a tool to support writing accountability and productivity. Through qualitative methods, we were interested in the meaning people have constructed, that is “how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Specifically, the research questions guiding this study were: (a) How do graduate students perceive their writing experiences through the use of a social networking writing group? and (b) How do informal writing groups provide accountability and support for graduate students?

Review of the Literature

While research on writing and writing groups is broad (Catterall, Ross, Aitchison, & Burgin, 2011; Page, Edwards, & Wilson, 2012; Maher, Seaton, McMullen, Fitzgerald, Otsuji, & Lee, 2013), there are several specific areas of related research we will use as our focus. First, we discuss writing and writing groups. Next, we review published research on the role of writing groups in higher education. Last, we use research to make connections between writing and writing groups to 21st century literacies and social media and how social media in higher education.

Writing and Writing Groups

Writing is a complex and challenging cognitive process (Elbow, 1998). Because it is so complex, learning to write is not an easy process or task and is a unique mode of learning (Emig, 1977). Often academics, both students and faculty, feel overwhelmed by writing tasks that may

impact an individual's productivity and results in low writing productivity (Belcher, 2009; Boice, 1990).

The action of writing may be considered an individual task, that of the writer, but “writing is constructed as a social practice” (Catterall et al., 2011, p. 1). In their study, Maher Fallucca, and Halasz (2008) used their writing group “as a place where social and emotional support [were] shared” (p. 265). In relation to the current study and other related writing groups, often they are communities of students and/or faculty that have been implemented to provide members with additional support, accountability, feedback, and to be with a group of individuals that understand the situation and the process.

Boosting Productivity Through Writing Groups in Higher Education

Writing and writing groups are two elements of importance to success in higher education and academia. It is no surprise that researchers are interested in researching how writing groups’ help with writing productivity. Formally or informally, writing groups, physically or virtually provide a space for writers to write with other writers. As a form of communication, writing has been influenced by technology and according to Yancey (2004) this influence has increased.

Researchers (Larcombe, McCosker, & O’Loughlin, 2007; Maher et al., 2008; 2013) suggest that for writing groups to be effective they need to provide a safe environment, which allows participants to both share their experiences and express themselves freely. Writing groups or writing support groups (Kinnucan-Welsch, Seery, Adams, Bowman, & Joseph, 2000) are a necessity for making the journey toward completion (e.g., degree). In addition, writing groups need direction, ground rules, values, and visions. According to Aitchison (2009) writing groups

promote an academic literacies approach and provide opportunities for active engagement and participation.

Academic literacy is a perspective that views reading and writing as a social practice that varies within the “context, culture, and genre” (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 386). Likewise to this study and the integration of an informal writing group’s use of social media, Lea and Street (1998) posit that academic literacy allows individuals to learn and adapt to “new ways of knowing” and view literacy “from a cultural and social practice” (pp. 157-158).

Davis, Provost, and Clark (2012) stated, “supportive writing groups establish shared goals and values, while maintaining individual members' interests ... Writing groups not only provide communities of support with like-minded individuals, but may also be a means of acculturation into academe for junior faculty” (p. 446). Writing groups help acclimate budding scholars, either graduate students or junior faculty, by developing into the new role as a writer.

Whether it is a writing group or a survival group, there is a necessity for a community of individuals who are under similar paralyzing pressure during graduate school, with similar levels of stress, who are financially burdened and struggling to live and face loneliness, working to juggle all aspects of employment, teaching, family, in conjunction with “academic and personal worlds” (Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007, p. 166). Communities, face-to-face or virtual, can provide support and scaffolding needed for successful completion of the journey.

To illustrate this point, in a student-led doctoral group, Hadjioannou and colleagues (2007) found the benefits of an academic writing group supported many facets of the academic endeavor. Such areas included: Peer advising, editing, and revising as writers with the foci for

developing necessary skills to become successful academic writers. The group developed a process that was equitable for all members. In addition to writing, the group also provided emotional support.

Social Media Research in Higher Education

In recent years researchers have become interested in the role social media plays in education (Aydin, 2012; Khine, 2015; Ritter & Delen, 2013; Tess, 2013) and technology and social media “infiltrating the educational arena” (Chen & Bryer, 2012, p. 88) that have yielded conflicting results.

For example, the research teams of Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, and Leveritt (2012) and Ophus and Abbitt (2009) investigated topics looking at student perceptions and use of Facebook within the context of classroom instruction. According to Irwin and colleagues (2012) their participants initially had positive perceptions of Facebook as an effective learning tool; however, post-questionnaire results indicated slightly less positive responses. Similarly, research by Ophus and Abbitt (2009) reported like results to Irwin et al. (2012) stating that students’ perceptions were positive toward the use of Facebook in higher education courses.

Additionally, research by Sánchez, Cortijo, and Javed (2014) stated that Facebook provides connections and builds “academic communities” (p. 142). Such modes of communication and organization provide a common place for members to communicate, ask questions, and share resources and materials.

In other recent work, Guy (2012) conducted a review of literature on the use of social media for academic practice. In the review, she synthesized research technology use and other “social media by students of color, and potential inequities in the use of social media for

academic practice” (Guy, 2012, p. 2). Guy concluded that, “social media holds promise for academia’ and ‘many of the studies reported a willingness among students to incorporate social media into their learning experiences” (2012, p. 15).

Whereas, research by Manca and Raniertit (2013) questioned Facebook’s educational value. In their critical review, they evaluated the studies that researched “Facebook as a learning environment” (p. 490). Their systematic review of 1,383 articles regarding the education value of Facebook yielded only 23 studies in the final analysis. Of those 23 studies, 17 studies used a private closed group, allowing group members to “share resources, post a comment, write on the wall, discuss” (p. 491), working in much the same way as the group in the current study. However, none of the final studies in higher education were directly related to writing or writing groups. Also, the majority of the studies in the Manca and Raniertit (2013) systematic review of Facebook focused on classroom, teacher initiated, settings rather than an organic student initiated setting such as this study.

Recently, Tess (2013) published a much-needed comprehensive literature review on the role social media (i.e., Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Blog, Twitter) plays in higher education courses. He found that technology is being used in educational situations to support teaching and learning; however, by conducting this review he has uncovered “more questions than it has answered” (Tess, 2013, p. A66).

As evidenced by the research and reviews, social media and technology quickly became a part of education. Thus, it is important to have a foundation on the research that has been previously conducted and the statistics connected with technology, particularly Facebook. For example, according to digital information websites (e.g., Digital Information World, 2015; Pew

Research Center, 2019), as of the third quarter of 2018, there were nearly 2.271 billion monthly Facebook users worldwide, up from 1.65 billion the previous year, which has nearly doubled since we started this project in 2013 (The Statistics Portal, 2019). With so many users, it is not surprising that Facebook is increasingly visible in education (Tess, 2013).

As researchers we know that this is not an exhaustive review of literature in this area, but acknowledge that an thorough search was done in for published research in the area of writing, writing groups, writing accountability, and social media outlets, and these searches yielded no new or current research, thus our conclusion is that writing accountability and writing groups is new and still developing. It is a phenomenon that is making traction, but the gap in the research is still prevalent.

Methodology

This project and group came about when students in a graduate program sought to establish a support system that would help them navigate the demands of their graduate program. The result of this support system was the formation of an online Facebook group that offered accountability and support for graduate students' writing. Ultimately, the writing group developed out of necessity, but further developed through the multiple uses of social media as an essential part of life, which has made its way into the educational realm (Tess, 2013).

Context and Participants

The initial invitation for the Facebook accountability writing group was sent out by the first author to 19 peers and graduate students at the local university. Over time, the group grew to 31 members, with 30 females and one male. During the time that serves as the focus of this study, the participants' ages ranged from 26 to 62 years, and their areas of study included

Computer Science, Education (e.g., Bilingual, Curriculum and Instruction, Literacy, Mathematics, History, Science), Educational Psychology, Human Resource Development, Higher Education, Health and Kinesiology, Rural Public Health, and Sociology. The majority of the group's members (n = 28) of the writing group were pursuing their doctoral degree (and were either at the beginning or nearing the end), one member had recently completed her degree and was working as a visiting assistant professor at the same university, and two other members were completing their master's degree at a large research institution located in the southwestern United States.

Out of convenience and the first author's need for writing accountability while completing the research and writing for her dissertation, during the summer of 2012 an online "closed"¹ Facebook writing group was formed. Similar to many graduate students taking on research projects, particularly dissertations, the lead author of this project, Chelsea (all names are pseudonyms) had difficulty staying motivated, finding a place to work, and retaining a sense of purpose for her writing and productivity. To alleviate these challenges, she created a closed Facebook group titled, "writing accountability group!!!" Once she made the group, she shared and posted the following introduction to peers within her university network:

[Hello] fellow grad school friends ... My plan was to start this at the beginning of the summer, but [time] just got away from me. I made this group and invited you for these reasons: 1. You're in grad school, 2. We need accountability, 3. No matter what level,

¹ An administrator or member manages a closed Facebook group and additional members must be approved prior to joining. Also, only group members can post and/or see content posted by members of the group.

stage, or year you are at, we all could use a friend in a similar situation-who is working!
So my thoughts are to work at specific locations 3 to 4 times a week. These are not gab sessions, but a time to work (write, read, edit) where you might be able to ask for help or might just like having the accountability of someone working near by! Tuesday –Bakery² (11-3) Wednesday – Crush (4-8) and Thursday – Books (11-3). (Facebook description, July 8, 2012)

Once the post and invitation was made, the Facebook group was formed. The group was used as a platform to meet and check-in with peers. The majority of the time, members would use the group's wall as a place to post where they were working and writing, share what they were planning to work on, or to communicate with the group by posting comments or asking questions. The authors of this particular piece were members of the Facebook group who entered with no foresight of conducting a research project; rather they used the group message board and the face-to-face writing opportunities as a tool to help with their academic writing and accountability while completing their degrees. At the time of the research the four authors were all full-time doctoral students at the same large research university. The first author, Chelsea was in her final year of her program working toward completing her dissertation in literacy education. Ann, the second author was working on her dissertation proposal, followed up data collecting. Misty, the third author was also analyzing data and writing her dissertation. The final author, Oliver was new to the program and taking courses. Since completing this study all four have graduated and teach at the university level.

² Pseudonyms have been used for all locations used in the study.

Data Collection

The authors quickly realized that using the Facebook group for academic writing and accountability was unique in the context of research. Through qualitative methods the authors were able to engage multiple-perspectives of academic writing and writing accountability via the online Facebook group and an online questionnaire.

Data sources for the study consisted of the group members' posts and responses from the closed Facebook group and an online questionnaire. Although data were collected from the Facebook group posts, other factors may have contributed to the accountability and productivity of these novice scholars including face-to-face group writing opportunities, phone calls, and other online platforms (e.g., Facebook chat, email, text, Skype, Google Hangouts). However, the establishment of the Facebook group was the precursor and instigator to any other outlets of writing accountability.

The primary data for this qualitative study consisted of: (a) Facebook posts from a closed writing group titled "writing accountability group!!!"; and (b) an online post-questionnaire with open-ended questions. Posts on the Facebook group's wall varied, which included where members were working, how long they would be working, and what they were working on. The posts and threads from the group's wall for the duration approximate 13 months (July 8, 2012 through August 13, 2013) totaled 1,478 posts and threads. The posts ($n = 1,478$) were retrieved from the Facebook group wall and then downloaded into an excel file for itemizing and analysis.

The post-questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics and disseminated at the end of the academic school year (June 2013) to the group by posting an invitation to participate on the

Facebook group's wall. The questionnaire included descriptive and demographic details (e.g., age, year in program, area of study) and open-ended questions that pertained to the group, writing practices, and the member's perceptions and experiences as a member of the Facebook writing group. Examples of open-ended questions include: (a) Describe how you used the Facebook group, (b) Did you check in or participate in the group?, (c) When did you check in or participate in group discussions?, (d) Did the Facebook group support your productivity?, and, (e) Did the Facebook group hold you accountable for your work?

Data Analysis

For this qualitative study our data analysis was focused on the data from the postings, threads, and questionnaire responses. The Facebook posts and threads obtained from the online platform totaled 1,478 responses. Data analysis consisted of a two-round coding process (Saldaña, 2009). During the first round of analysis, the first and third authors independently conducted open coding of the postings and threads. The same process was completed for the questionnaire responses. After the first round, the same authors met and discussed their findings of the coding. Nearly 30 codes emerged (e.g., announcement, update, accomplishment, needing encouragement, giving encouragement, asking a question, posting location, etc.). These codes were narrowed to the most prevalent themes from the data, which are discussed later in more detail. Next, we re-analyzed the data to ensure credibility of the analysis. For example, the first and third author discussed the individual coding, compared codes, and clarified interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Upon completion of coding, all discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

A total of 1,478 postings were coded and categorized from all 31-group members. After the first round of coding and discussion, seven possible themes were identified from the codes: (a) Updates and location of where member is working, (b) Announcements and information, (c) Giving encouragement, trying to motivate group members, (d) Needing support and encouragement, having difficulties, (e) Asking questions, could be work, location, or personal in nature, and (f) Other information, new members, invited members, group goal setting. Upon further coding, analysis and dialogue among authors, themes were negotiated, resulting in three cohesive themes: (a) Accountability: Encouragement, motivation, and support, (b) Accomplishments: Making progress and productivity, and (c) challenges.

In addition to Facebook posts, the same two authors analyzed the online questionnaire responses developed from Qualtrics that was posted with a hyperlink invitation to participate on the Facebook group wall. Of the original 31 members in the accountability group, 18 members began the questionnaire and 13 participants completed the questionnaire. In order to provide anonymity for all members of the group, self-selected pseudonyms are used for members, those that did not provide a pseudonym one was provided. The same analysis process was used for the data obtained from the questionnaire, the authors performed coding separately, then examined and discussed the coding schemes together until agreement was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The questionnaire data represented similar themes and findings as the Facebook wall post. The questionnaire data are represented in five themes: (a) Facebook utility, (b) Accountability, (c) Motivation, (d) Productivity, (e) Writing groups (face-to-face and online).

Findings

As previously stated, the goal of this study was to learn about graduate students participation and experience in a writing group that was supported through a social media site such as Facebook. Through the coding and analysis several themes were identified from the data sources. The analysis revealed codes that encapsulate the themes, originally there were seven themes and after further aggregation there were a total of three emergent themes are depicted in Table 1. Therefore, the following themes guided our analysis: (a) Accountability: encouragement, motivation, and support, (b) Accomplishments: Making progress and productivity, and (c) challenges. An additional theme is included from the data analyzed from the questionnaire: (d) Writing groups (face-to-face and online). The following sections will review the results from each of the themes.

Table 1

Facebook Group Research Themes

Themes	Descriptions
Accountability: encouragement, motivation, and support	Facebook group members made posts that influenced or motivated the individuals which included posts from other individuals that either supported or encouraged other graduate students who were part of the accountability group
Accomplishments: making progress and productivity	The Facebook group members post reflect areas of productivity and making progress as well as encouraging their fellow classmates

Challenges

The Facebook group members expressed the difficulties and challenges they experienced while writing.

Accountability: Encouragement, Motivation, and Support

This theme focused on how the participants used the writing group as a form of accountability. These posts included types of encouragement and motivation, throughout the posts, participants expressed the factors that influenced, pushed, or supported them to complete the various graduate school tasks. For example, Chelsea posted “After a morning of ‘me’ time ... the writing resumes. Thank you Hannah for your excellent work and help on one of our proposals.” Other similar posts reflect members’ productivity, Kyle writes, “I just want to announce, 37 pages, 9583 words later, I finished Dr. [Davies’] question. On to the last professor's question and hoping to get these all turned in by 11:59 PM Thursday! Here Kyle directly addressed the group, “Thanks for the support!” Other constructive posts consisted of: “how’s the writing?” or a statement like, “Have a productive day!”

Other comments posted by members of the group included, “thank you to everyone who keeps checking in ... I hope your reading, writing, and research is going well?” Another way members would offer motivation would be to ask how a friend/group member was doing. Many of the posts included words of encouragement and support for those who had deadlines approaching, or included a quick shout out to the entire group to keep pushing or sharing with the group tips and/or advice. Smita used the accountability group as a form of self-accountability, “it held me accountable to myself more than it did to other group members. I learned to set goals and achieve them.”

Members also used the group for checking in and appreciated it when others from the group would do the same. Supported by Chantel's response, "having people call for check-ins and knowing that I wanted to be able to do it helped make me feel like I needed to actually be productive." Similarly, Oliver used the accountability as an internal and external motivation, "I didn't want to slack off if I felt others would know!" Other posts provided both accountability and updates; for example, Toni responded to a thread "I can't make it tonight ... thanks for your efforts! Looking forward to next Wed!!"

Accountability comes in all forms, and this group was no exception. Although there was a lot of work and writing being completed, there was also the need for fun and jokes. Jokes included, memes from *Grammarly*, referencing the character Daenerys Targaryen from the hit HBO television series *Game of Thrones* stating—"where are my edits?" Other members shared pictures that visualized the changing looks of a graduate student (as an Owl)—first semester all bright-eyed and ready to learn and at the last semester the owl is exhausted, with eyes that are red with bags under them and in clothes that are far from clean. These satire visuals often served as a reminder to the group that we are working hard, but we are not alone in this process.

Although the majority of this research focuses on the posts and the use of the Facebook group, the virtual group often brought the members together physically. By positing where they were working, other members in the group would regularly check the group's Facebook wall to find out where members were working. Oliver posted, "the Bakery is full of awesome today - way to rock!" One early morning, Ann posted "headed to Bakery...where is everybody?" About an hour and half later Oliver responded, "Samantha and I are here too now!" The Bakery was a popular spot among the group because food was a helpful resource. However, face-to-face meet-

ups did not only occur at restaurants and coffee shops; often members would open up their home to members of the group. For example, Samantha said, “Working at home today! The kitchen table has been taken over by books! If you know my address, feel free to stop by!” The next day, Chelsea posted, “Working at the [home of] Samantha!!!! Feel free to join us!”

Proximity and location was a key tool of this group and the members. Regularly, members could check the group’s wall to see if and when members were working. Smita posted, “I’m working at Crush.” Chelsea responded, “me too!” To their surprise, they were both there working, but had yet to see one another. On another occasion, Smita and Erin checked in that they were working at Crush, a few hours later Erin posted, “still @ Crush,” this was often a theme – one afternoon Smita posted that she was working at the Bakery, when Hera replied to the post, “Smita, I’m here too [smiley face].” At other times members would post in advance; for example, Samantha wrote “I’m headed to Crush around 10” and Hannah replied to the post, “I’ll be there in the afternoon” *(posted at 6:35 a.m.), and a follow up post from Oliver stated “I’m headed there as soon as I get some stuff printed.” Often posting where members were working was seen as motivation. One morning Chelsea and Samantha checked in at Crush, when Hannah replied to the post, “FINE! I’ll shower and head over! Stop guiltting me [smiley face].” But on that particular day the group at Crush continued to grow and other members such as, Oliver, Roger, and Erin joined the writing session.

These conversations and posts are examples of how group members’ communication held each other accountable for their writing and allowed for the building of relationships.

Accomplishments: Making Progress and Productivity

Accomplishments and making progress, the second theme from the data, were important components of working toward individual and group goals; this is particularly important when the goal is to graduate. Participants' posts about productivity were expressed through shared statements and accomplishments; for instance, Samantha posted "Minor victory - I've finally adapted to the "energy model" and have written every day for the past week! [Wow] to a minor success!" Other statements include when Ray-Ray shared, "Dissertation submitted!!! Signed, sealed and delivered!"

Posts included both small and large accomplishments. Kyle shared, "Finishing a session at my desk ... getting up early is so much easier when you go to bed early!" However, there were the larger celebrations to consider, "article is accepted! Thanks for all the encouragement along the way. I'll share the article once it is published." This was a huge feat for Ann. The announcements that rallied the members were posts like, "Congrats to Dr. Ray-Ray." The announcement of a group member successfully defending her dissertation was celebrated several times over the course of the year.

Members in the group indicated that without the support of their peers they would have not been as productive. Productivity was also demonstrated in the open-ended responses from the online questionnaire. Pink wrote, "I wanted to move forward, so when I saw others move forward ... I wanted to be where they [were]."

A particular question from the questionnaire directly asked members: "How did the Facebook group support your productivity." Seven group members shared their perceptions. Misty wrote, "Yes, I finished my dissertation within the timeframe I had set aside ... if I did not

meet the individuals and friends in the Facebook group I would have not finished my dissertation in the timeframe that I wanted to.” While Oliver shared that they “wrote more often” and Smita said, “I often shared with a few friends in the group what my progress was and they helped me remain motivated and encouraged me when I was weak and felt like giving up,” Stevie acknowledged that she was not always active in posting, but often read the posts of other members and the posts “encouraged [her] to get busy [and be] productive.” Another perspective rather than productivity was that of Pink’s, “I saw [the group] more as a support group emotionally.”

Members also stated how accomplishing these tasks allowed for them to make progress on other graduate school tasks and the completion of tasks was a motivator for others. For example, Pink shared, “Trying to finish the last course review for Phase 2. Not the end of data collection but a pivotal step and I want to wake up tomorrow WITHOUT it on my back.” Productivity is essential for completion, as related by Misty: “I was able to set aside some time to write each day” and “primarily ... my peers encouraged me ... it was a tough year and I needed the accountability of friends.”

Challenges

Although members of the group demonstrated productivity, motivation and support from their peers, there were also individual challenges along the way. For example, Ann needed support: “feeling very unmotivated today, but I'm working at home with two screens! Trying to keep up this momentum” and Chelsea expressed “Okay, I will admit it, I am completely unmotivated. Maybe someone can Pomodoro [a timing techniques to assist productivity (Cirillo, 2006)] with me tomorrow?” And Pink said, “Did someone say holiday? I'd give anything for a

real holiday. Collecting data and realizing that qualitative is so much harder.” Other members indicated that they were unmotivated (e.g., finishing their data analysis or writing on their projects), but with support from members were able to push through.

External variables were also part of the struggle, such as Internet issues and overcrowded coffee shops prompted members to express frustrations, but also provided other members with updates. For example, Samantha, Oliver, and Hannah were trying to work but issues ensued—so Samantha shared with the group, “Alright, we’ve migrated to The Bakery on Main because [Planet] failed at the Internet and [Sunrise Coffee] had no seating.”

Other challenges were related to time and whether or not the Facebook members should use their time to post on social media. These conflicts of interest were acknowledged in both the questionnaire and online posts. However, posting in general or reading the posts was used as a form of communication. Smita expressed “I wish there was more contact but that was my fault, for not being more available when the group would meet to write.” On the other hand, Pink expressed that the group “can be an amazing support system and keep you from feeling alone in your frustrations.” Whereas Hera said using Facebook can become “more of a distraction rather than a functioning tool.” Members expressed that depending upon the situation, posting and using the group’s wall was a good resource, whereas other times it was a gateway to distraction.

Writing Groups (Face-to-Face and Online/Virtually)

This theme represents the findings specifically from the questionnaire, directly signifying additional questions asked of the members about how they used or would recommend the use of writing groups for others. As a research team and members of the group, we felt it was important to find out if members were active participants in other writing groups in addition to this

Facebook writing group. Of the 13 questionnaire responses, nine indicated that they were a member of at least one other online writing group or face-to-face writing group. Though the number is not representative of the entire group, it is important to acknowledge that having multiple resources, such as a writing group, can provide additional support and accountability. Members of this writing group acknowledged that they were involved in other writing groups, Ann said that she was in “another Facebook group but the participants were not as active in posting, so [she] didn’t use it as often.” While Misty wrote that she was in a “face-to-face group ... that met at a local coffeehouse,” Oliver extended the connection, that this “Facebook group was a way to get a face-to-face group.”

Writing groups come in many forms such as face-to-face, virtually, informal, and formal. According to members, this informal writing group afforded the members valuable experiences. Additionally, another question asked in the questionnaire sought to find out if members of this group would recommend an online writing group to other graduate student(s) and why. Eleven of the thirteen members responded that they would recommend an online writing group, supported by the written rationales in the open-ended portion of the question one member elaborated: Chantel said, “I would suggest that having someone who is going through the same types of things and understands the pressures he/she is experiencing is a major benefit.”

Being part of a writing group is not just about writing, but also becomes a type of network and support system. As Misty shared, a writing group can “hold you accountable and it’s motivating, especially when you feel as though you can’t make it or write anymore.” Similarly Chelsea wrote, “It is nice to have another form of accountability and individuals to

work with.” Oliver, Smita, Toni, and Ray-Ray concurred that the group and members were a form of accountability and motivation.

On the contrary, a few members admitted that they were not in favor of an online writing group. Mary recommended that graduate students seek out “various writing support services/groups, [but] some students may respond to electronic groups [and] other may not.” Hera said that she “would not start [an online writing group] because I get distracted.” Additionally, Oliver prefers “the face-to-face contact, but [can] see how the online group [facilitates] that.”

Discussion

As an informal space for writing, many members of the Facebook writing group perceived that the group supported their writing accountability and productivity. Members found the strategy a positive use of social media that contributed to a professional community. For the purpose of this research we sought to examine (a) How do graduate students perceive their writing experiences through the use of a social networking writing group? and (b) How do informal writing groups provide accountability and support for graduate students?

In general, we observed that this Facebook writing and accountability group provided members with additional opportunities and resources to write, work with others, get support, and produce academic writing. As a group of diverse individuals with various needs and backgrounds, this group provided members with a place to build personal and academic relationships. Many of the group members perceived that the Facebook group was a tool, as suggested by Pink who said it was used “to meet others who were working on their Ph.D.

regardless of stage. I used it to tell others where I was, what I was working on, share good and bad days and solicit and give advice regarding the process.”

Members were able to gain more insight about their own personal work habits, for example Smita shared that “It held me accountable to myself more than it did to group members. I learned to set goals and achieve them.” While, Ann learned that she was not alone in the writing endeavors and Hannah expressed that the group showed her how much others were doing and motivated her to focus on her work. Misty didn’t know she needed or wanted to be apart of such a group, but shared that “they were my accountability partners either online and sometime we met in person.”

The Facebook group was also a place to provide support and get motivation. Samantha thought “posting successes [were] helpful.” Ann said “the posting and comments were the most informative” and Oliver liked “the casual check-ins.” Of the 13 members of the group that responded to this question in the questionnaire, 12 believed the group was a source of motivation. While writing and learning experiences were perceived and constructed differently by each of the members, many acknowledged the group was valuable for various reasons. Toni said she “appreciated the social aspect of being with a group that understood what I was doing and could relate to my work, my success and my frustrations.” Ray-Ray expressed that the group was a “great motivator” and Pink thought that the experience and group was “very valuable.” Additionally, Stevie said the group motivated her “to be productive [and] get busy working.”

Members also conveyed their experiences about support and accountability. In the open-ended responses, Hannah shared that she was new to the town, school, and program, and “being shy made finding people to keep me motivated difficult, but the group helped me overcome some

of that shyness and really feel part of a community of writers.” Oliver shared an example of being part of the group virtually, “If I knew others were working, I would want to be productive too, even if I couldn’t work with them.”

However, we found that not all of the members of this group saw it as an effective tool for motivation and/or accountability. According to the findings, this was a small minority of the group. For example, Hera said that overall the group did not motivate her “because goals were being met and I focused on what I didn’t accomplish rather than what was.” Whereas Liz wrote that the group did not motivate her because she was “not close with other participants and the conversations [were] not always connected to [her] own work.” While Roger contributed, “I did not use the group for motivation. [But] I did not post to it or intentionally use it.”

Additionally, some members did not find or seek accountability from the group. Samantha stated that, “I am I already am part of two accountability groups that meet face-to-face and email my writing log to an accountability partner. Ray-Ray shared that she “didn’t give [the group] the opportunity to hold me accountable.” We also understand that everyone has their own need and preference and some of the members found the use of a social media site to be more work or distracting. However, the majority of the active members found the use of the group and the members were helpful and supportive in their writing and academic productivity.

Limitations

Limitations are a part of every study and this one is no different. First, is the limitation of the chosen methodology for this study. As researchers we selected the methodology in which we thought would best help us investigate the research questions and evaluate the data for this study. But we understand that there may be other viable options for conducting this research and

analyzing the data. Additionally, in this study, we do not discuss the frequency of which member's posts and how often, albeit interesting data and information, this was not conducted and we believe that is another study in itself.

Another limitation is the validity of the questionnaire and the open-ended questions. As members of the group, they were asked to self-report. However, since the study was evaluating the members' perceptions of the Facebook group and their personal experiences, we felt this was a reasonable form of data collection.

Next, as participant researchers, we acknowledge our positionality and roles as members and researchers. First, we were members of the group; second, we were the researchers that analyzed the data generated from the group in which we (the authors) were contributing participants.

It also must be acknowledged that we, as researchers believe this research is relevant to current trends in academic research. However, we note that the limitation of published research in the area of writing, writing groups, writing accountability, with focus on social media outlets, such as Facebook over the past few years is minimal. Thus, the research on this phenomenon is necessary and the gap in the research albeit a limitation is important to future research.

Finally, as members have graduated or moved on, the group and the needs have also changed. Although many of the members remain friends, colleagues, writing partners, accountability partners, and continue to see the value in online writing groups, the group is no longer an active entity. It is acknowledged that other factors influence graduate student's and faculty's writing accountability, motivation, and productivity in academic writing. For example, other support systems such as face-to-face writing groups have previously demonstrated an

increase in writing productivity (Aitchison, 2009; 2010; Davis et al., 2012; Maher et al., 2008; 2013). As such, it is ambitious to suggest that this Facebook group was the sole factor in motivating, producing, and holding the members accountability in their writing. Nevertheless for the purpose of this study, the findings demonstrated that this particular Facebook group was an outlet to organize offline support systems as well as serve as tool to motivate members of this group to produce and hold one another accountable.

Conclusion

In this study we examined the online group's members' posts and threads from the Facebook writing accountability group's wall and looked at their experiences to further our understanding of the use of social media sites such as Facebook in helping graduate students and junior faculty develop as academic writers. We investigated the use of Facebook for this research as support for the group members' writing accountability, motivation, and productivity, for academic writing. In order to do so, our study analyzed themes through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From these themes, the findings continue to support the need and the importance of writing groups, whether they are face-to-face or online, such as this study evaluated. Our research provides evidence that writing groups support students' academic writing and a place for structured writing (Maher et al., 2008). According to Aitchison (2010), "writing groups have long been a part of the educational landscape" (p. 83); however, that landscape is shifting and the virtual writing group is gaining in popularity.

The added dimension for this study was the online Facebook group. Our findings suggest that social media, particularly Facebook as a tool, provided writing group members with additional support for motivation and productivity. Likewise, Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin

(2010) found that students who participated in the Facebook group increased “their motivation and positive attitude towards learning” (p. 185). Whereas Irwin et al. (2012) posits students have demonstrated their openness to “using Facebook for educational purposes” (p. 1228). While many members of this writing group expressed a connection between group membership and their writing motivation and productivity, others found the group distracting. Although Facebook was not originally designed or intended for educational settings (Sánchez et al., 2014), its uses continue to grow. As Schwartz (2009) explains:

I now see Facebook as part of the larger commons, a space in which we stay connected. Facebook, instant messaging, and the like keep my metaphorical office door open. And that increases the potential for real time, face-to-face conversations that are rich with connections, depth, risk-taking, and growth. (p. 5)

Therefore, our goal was to contribute to the scope of research that not only focused on writing and writing groups, but also the use of social media as a tool to support academic writers.

From its inception (e.g., idea) to the present, the group has expanded from a local and virtual Facebook community at a large research institution in the southwest United States to *virtually* all over the world. Of the original members or still part of the Facebook group, we are proud to share the many accolades and accomplishments attained by the members, some as recent as March 2019. Such titles and positions include: 24 members have completed their doctorate degrees and are either teaching or working at a national or international institution; three have advanced to candidacy or ABD (all but dissertation) status; two that have completed their coursework and passed their comprehensive examinations; and two completed other degrees.

Although these academic accomplishments presented in this study cannot be solely attributed to the member's participation in this writing group; however the group's members continues to be a support system for the members since many are no longer in the same vicinity and have moved thousands of miles away to start new academic positions upon completing their graduate degrees.

References

- Aitchison, C. (2009). Writing groups for doctoral education. *Studies in Higher Education, 34*, 905-915.
- Aitchison, C. (2010). Learning together to publish: Writing groups pedagogies for doctoral publishing. In C. Aitchison, B. Kamler, & A. Lee (Eds). *Publishing pedagogies for the doctorate and beyond*. (pp. 83-100). London: Routledge.
- Aydin, S. (2012). A review of research on Facebook as an educational environment. *Educational Technology Research Development, 60*, 1093-1106.
- Bandura, A. (1989). Perceived self-efficacy in exercise of personal agency. *The Psychologist: The Bulletin of the British Psychological Society, 10*, 411-424.
- Belcher, W. L. (2009). *Writing your journal article in 12 weeks: A guide to academic publishing success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers: A self-help guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- Cassuto, L. (2013). Ph.D. attrition: How much is too much? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/PhD-Attrition-How-Much-Is/140045/>
- Catterall, J., Ross, P., Aitchison, C., & Burgin, S. (2011). Pedagogical approaches that facilitate writing in postgraduate research candidature in science and technology, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 8*(2), 1-11.

Chen, B., & Bryer, T. (2012). Investigating instructional strategies for using social media in formal and informal learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13(1), 87-100.

Cirillo, F. (2006). The Pomodoro Technique. Retrieved from <http://1cm1.neocities.org/1.pdf>

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3-21.

Davis, J. D., Provost, K., & Clark, S. (2012). Peer mentoring and inclusion in writing groups. In S. J. Fletcher & C. A. Mullen. Editor (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of mentoring and*

Digital Information World. (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.digitalinformationworld.com/>

Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Emig, J. (1977). Writing as a mode of learning. *College Composition and Communication*, 28(2), 122-128.

Golde, C. M. (2005). The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four department. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(6), 669-700.

Guy, R. (2012). The use of social media for academic practice: A review of literature. *Kentucky Journal of Higher Education Policy and Practice*, 1(2), 1-20.

Hadjioannou, X., Shelton, N. R., Fu, D., & Dhanarattigannon, J. (2007). The road to a doctoral degree: Co-travelers through a perilous passage. *College Student Journal*, 41(1), 160-177.

Irwin, C., Ball, L., Desbrow, B., & Leveritt, M. (2012). Students' perceptions of using Facebook as an interactive learning resource at university. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 28*(7), 1221–1232.

Kabilan, M. K., Ahmad, N., & Abidin, M. J. Z. (2010). Facebook: An online environment for learning of English in institutions of higher education? *Internet and Higher Education, 13*, 179-187.

Khine, M. S. (2015). Facebook research from educational technology perspective: analysis of doctoral dissertations in US universities. *International Journal of Social Media and Interactive Learning Environments, 3*, (2), 100-116. doi: 10.1504/IJSMILE.2015.070761

Kinnucan-Welsch, K., Seery, M. E., Adams, S. M., Bowman, C. L., & Joseph, L. M. (2000). Write(ing)(er's) support group: Stories of facing "publish or perish" *Teachers Education Quarterly, 27*, 105-118.

Larcombe, W., McCosker, A., & O'Loughlin, K. (2007). Supporting education PhD and DRd students to become confident academic writers: An evaluation of thesis writers' circles. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 4*(1), 52-63.

Lea, M. R., & Street, B. V. (2006). The "Academic Literacies" model: Theory and applications. *Theory Into Practice, 45*(4), 368-377. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4504_11

Lea, M. R., & Street, B. V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach, *Studies in Higher Education, 23*(2), 157-172.

doi:10.1080/03075079812331380364

- Lundell, D., & Beach, R. (2003). Dissertation writers negotiations with competing activity systems, in C. Bazerman and D. R. Russell (eds) *Writing selves/writing societies: Research from activity perspectives, perspectives on writing*. Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse and Mind, Culture, and Activity.
- Maher, M., Fallucca, A., & Halasz, H. M. (2013). Write on! Through to the Ph.D.: Using writing groups to facilitate doctoral degree process. *Studies in Continuing Education, 35*, 193-208.
- Maher, D., Seaton, L., McMullen, C., Fitzgerald, T., Otsuji, E., & Lee, A. (2008). Becoming and being writers': the experiences of doctoral students in writing groups. *Studies in Continuing Education, 30*(3), 263-275.
- Manca, S., & Ranierit, M. (2013). Is it a tool suitable for learning? A critical review of the literature on Facebook as a technology-enhances learning environment. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 29*, 487-504.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ophus, J. D., & Abbitt, J. T. (2009). Exploring the potential perceptions of social networking systems in university courses. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 5*, 639-648.
- Page, S., Edwards, S., & Wilson, J. (2012). Writing groups in teacher education: A method to increase scholarly productivity. *SRATE Journal, 22*(1), 29-35.
- Pew Research Center. (2019). Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>

- Ritter, N. L., & Delen, E. (2013). Undergraduates' Facebook use: Evidence-based practice to implement social media in education. *International Journal of Social Media and Interactive Learning Environments, 1*(4), 387-387.
- Sánchez, R. A., Cortijo, V., & Javed, U. (2014). Students perceptions of Facebook for academic purposes. *Computers & Education, 70*, 138-149. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2013.08.012
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for researchers*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Schwartz, H. (2009). Facebook: The new classroom commons? *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1*-5.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Teranishi Martinez, C., Kock, N., & Cass, J. (2011). Pain and pleasure in short essay writing: Factors predicting university students' writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 54*(5), 351-360.
- Tess, P. A. (2013). The role of social media in higher education classes (real and virtual) – A literature review. *Computers in Human Behaviors, 29*, A60-A68.
- The Statistics Portal (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986 [1934]). *Thought and language*. (A. Kozulin, Tran. & Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wells, G. (1999). The zone of proximal development and its implications for learning and teaching. *In dialogic inquiry: Towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education* (pp. 313-334). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yancey, K. B. (2004). Using multiple technologies to teach writing. *Educational Leadership*, 62(2), 38-40.