

**Title:** **Not a community of practice? Reading and writing groups as safe spaces for promoting and developing collaborations**

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### **Session Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- gain an overview of the purpose, functions and benefits of such groups;
- reflect upon how they construct and enact their roles as academic developers outside of what is strictly expected of them in their day-to-day roles;
- consider what groups may enable them to pursue what they truly value in their academic practice;
- begin to question the often held assumption that such groups are communities of practice;
- develop an understanding of the shared characteristics of safe spaces as sites for collaboration and creativity.

### **Session Outline**

The roles, job titles and functions of academic developers vary across the sector (Sutherland, 2015). Within our roles as Academic Practice Advisors – we are primarily teachers on a PCAP programme on an academic-related contract. We teach modules on the PGCert so that our participants can meet their probationary requirements. However, how we orient ourselves to our teaching and what roles we construct outside of our classroom varies depending on our own values. Fundamental to us is the need to be part of open scholarly knowledge-building communities (Brew, 2006)

Our core belief is that our own teaching, and the teaching of our participants should be deeply steeped in scholarship. How then, sitting within an administrative function of the university (Academic Services) and outside of the academic structures (schools and departmental) can we enable our own growth and development? How can we ensure we are not on the margins but within a space accessible and useful to others?

The Academic Practice Reading and Writing Groups as ‘sites for action’ allow us this. Our groups are characterised by a multitude of audiences, functions and benefits. In this session

we will explore our groups and examine how they may compare with other reading and writing groups. As such, this session will offer an opportunity to share ideas and practice.

We will also attend to theory. Groups like ours are often conceptualised as *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991). We will consider whether we are one community of practice or do we represent a multi-dimensional space where a number of communities of practice intersect? Is there any other way to conceptualise our groups and our roles as conveners? Are we creators and guardians of 'safe spaces'; where academics can enact a multitude of chosen identities or 'identity projects' (Trowler and Knight, 2000)? We will share how our conceptualisation of 'safe spaces' allows us to offer a more structured approach to designing effective interventions and collaborations.

## **Session Activities and Approximate Timings**

The outline of the workshop is as follows;

### **0-15 minutes: What are writing and reading groups?**

We will start by capturing the experiences of those in the room. Have delegates been part of reading or writing groups? Have they attended/facilitated/organised such?

- We will try to capture the purpose and benefits of such groups as experienced by the delegates. Our approach will depend on the size and nature of the audience.
- We will share our own reflections, linking back to the experiences in the room. We will highlight in particular the values and identities we try to enact through such groups.

### **15-30 minutes: Are these groups' communities of practice?**

Looking back at the work of Wenger et al. (2002) we will highlight some key characteristics of communities of practice. Participants will be given a communities of practice handout and asked to discuss to what extent such groups can be seen as communities of practice.

### **30-45 minutes: has our thinking shifted?**

We will share our thinking of these groups as 'safe spaces'. We will discuss the multitudes of audiences, purposes, functions and benefits of such spaces. We will also consider, in an open discussion, if our conceptualisation of these groups has evolved. Would our new understanding allow us to develop a more structured approach to designing effective collaborations?

## **References**

Key texts mentioned in the outline, please use the Harvard referencing system.

BREW, A. (2006) *Research and Teaching: Beyond the divide*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Lave, J. and E. Wenger (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

Sutherland, K. A. (2015). Precarious but connected: the roles and identities of academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 20(3), pp. 209-211.

Trowler, P. and P. T. Knight (2000). Coming to Know in Higher Education: Theorising faculty entry to new work contexts. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 19(1), pp. 27-42.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R and Snyder, W.M. (2002). *A guide to managing knowledge: cultivating communities of practice*, Boston, Massachusetts, Harvard Business School Press.