

Writing & Community

Many of us believe school is something we do alone. After all, each of us completes our own assignments, receives our own grades, and the degree each of us receives upon graduation bears our name alone.

The belief in the individual nature of graduate school—or any form of education—can, subsequently, tempt us to compare ourselves to our peers. We might see them keeping up with coursework, or hear them saying something smart during class, when we are struggling just to get by. Worse still, their papers might seem so much better written than ours.

It is in the arena of writing, however, where the myth of academic individuality—or, perhaps, of individual “genius”—most readily falls apart. In this guide, we will discuss how understanding the entanglement of writing and community can open up new, more caring approaches both to writing and to education at large.

Writing as Dialogue

One of the most common questions asked in Writing Center consultations is: “Am I making sense?” Behind this question lies a fear that we have explained an idea or an argument poorly, as well as the worry that we will receive a bad grade. But, if we bracket the matter of grades, then the question—“Am I making sense?”—is a question concerning the dialogue between a writer and one or more readers.

When we ask “Am I making sense?” it is because a paper cannot be written alone; it requires at least one writer and one reader. In other words, writing is always a dialogue between a writer and a reader. Growing as a writer means growing in our consciousness of this dynamic.

The goal is not to become a completely independent reader of our own writing (though the more we can be our own first readers, the more editing we can complete on our own). Rather, the point is the inverse: Writing always involves other people, real or imagined; it is never undertaken alone. For this reason, writing is always communal, and, knowing this, we can choose to practice it communally.

Writing Life Together

It is likely that we have made friends in our classes. Perhaps, we have discussed course content or even formed study groups together. But what about forming a writing group that meets regularly?

When we write together, and share our writing, we learn our own writing habits—our strengths and weaknesses, our idiosyncrasies. We also learn the habits and skills of others, and we can experiment with new techniques and practices we learn from others. We can hear more perspectives and hone our inner reader.

Most of all, we build relationships. Academia is built on the myth of individual genius, and people in grad school often suffer in isolation because of this myth. But writing—and all forms of knowledge production—involve other people. Amid the gruelling process of earning a graduate degree, the peer relationships we build while studying and writing together can also become systems of care and support.

As we learn about ourselves in writing, as we learn about others, as we share our past and present experiences, our struggles, our hopes, our goals, our wisdom and knowledge—the hope is that we can learn to support one another. That, together, we make one another better, more whole people—conscious of our limitations and always seeking to grow.

Will forming a writing group change the culture of academia at large? Probably not. But it might help us get through grad school a bit more healthily and, perhaps, with relationships that will persist, in writing or not, beyond our time here together.