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**COMING OUT AS COMPLEX: UNDERSTANDING LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY
WRITING GROUPS**

by

HILLARY E WEISS

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2020

MAJOR: ENGLISH (Rhetoric and Composition)

Approved By:

Advisor

Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit individuals—those who are out and proud, those who are not out, those who are questioning, those who are transitioning, those who refuse to transition, those who are at odds with family, friends, and the world, those who have been bullied and violated, those who were murdered.

Family, if you'd hadn't already guessed due to my research, I am pansexual—I'm attracted to people, not genders. I dedicate this project to you as well so that you may take this opportunity to learn.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to teachers and professors at Siena and Bowling Green who supported me along this very long journey, including Mrs. King, Mrs. McCormick, and Mrs. Chryst, Dr. Barst, Matt and Karin Barbee, Ian Bell, and Bill Albertini. All of you saw potential in me and encouraged me. Thank you eternally.

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Thank you to Jeff Pruchnic for your advice and feedback, your empathy, listening ear, and reassurance, and your humour. I think you may appreciate this quote in terms of my dissertation: “Sometimes I’ll start a sentence and I don’t even know where it’s going. I just hope I find it along the way.” – Michael Scott (Season 5, The Duel).

Thank you to committee members for your feedback as the project progressed. Simone—you think you give too much feedback, but it is SO helpful! Ellen—thank you for agreeing to be on my committee so late and offering your support.

To Amy, Adrienne, Thomas, Joe, and countless others—thank you for your hard work and constant support to graduate students.

To Mariel, Bruno, and Cooper—just thank you for your kindness.

To Stacey, Tank, and Princess—I miss you.

Thank you to my original cohort at Wayne State for being brilliant, challenging, and supportive.

To my family: Mom and dad—thank you for your encouragement that I can do anything. Cody—Mmmp. Mine—I love you. Andrea—I’m excited to see you, Chris, and the boys again. Thank you to Copper for all of the sweet snuggles and Modi for her support from afar.

To my current writing group, especially those members who continue to attend—you are the greatest.

To Blue. Hey, you’re going to see me graduate, just like you dreamed. I can’t wait to walk those trails in Ontario, search for rocks by Lake Superior, and pick apples.

“I’ll be the Earth that grounds you from the chaos all around/I’ll be the home you return to/I can be your middle ground/I can serve as a reminder/If you jump you will not fall/Go on and spread those words of reason/We are water after all.” – Nahko and Medicine for the People

I love you, my sun and stars.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures	vii
Chapter 1: Piecing together LGBTQ+ writing and writing groups.....	1
LGBTQ+ identity and literacy	3
LGBTQ+ identity in Composition Spaces	5
Writing Group History	7
Theoretical Frame	13
Methods	15
Writing group descriptions	15
Overview	17
Chapter 2: Methods and methodologies: Reducing the distance between participants and researchers.....	21
Introduction.....	21
Decolonial and Feminist Methodologies	21
The Process of Finding Writing Groups	25
Interviews.....	31
Analyzing Data	32
Feedback from Participants.....	35
Reciprocity.....	36
Limitations	38
Conclusion	40
Chapter 3: What’s the Purpose?: LGBTQ+ Community Writing Groups and their Identities	41
Introduction.....	41
Improving Writing and Educational Purposes	44

Educating the Community	47
Writing Groups and Publishing: Traditional and Non-Traditional Methods	49
Emotional Support	52
LGBTQ+ Writing Groups: Queer Writing Spaces, Spaces for Queer, Writing People, and Spaces for Writing Queer People.....	55
Conclusion	62
Chapter 4: “Everything is Sex, Except Sex, which is Power”: LGBTQ+ Writing Groups and the Hierarchies and Conflicts Within.....	63
Introduction.....	63
Facilitators Distributing Power	69
Conflicts and Power.....	71
Institutional Influence	78
Power through Attendance.....	80
Rhetorical Listening for Conflicts	81
Conclusion	88
Chapter 5: Where Do We Go from Here?.....	89
Introduction.....	89
Rhetorical Listening in the Classroom.....	89
Rhetorical Listening in other Writing Spaces	92
Rhetorical Listening Guidelines for Writing Spaces	93
LGBTQ+ Writers and Rhetorical Listening.....	96
Where Do We Go from Here?	98
Appendix A.....	99
Appendix B	100
Appendix C	101

Appendix D.....	103
Appendix E.....	105
Appendix F.....	106
References.....	107
Abstract.....	117
Autobiographical Statement.....	119

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Demographics of Survey Participants	30
Figure 2: Infographic for Rhetorical Listening	102

CHAPTER 1: PIECING TOGETHER LGBTQ+ WRITING AND WRITING GROUPS

Land Acknowledgement: I would like to acknowledge that while I wrote this project and conducted surveys and interviews, I occupied the stolen land of the Meškwaški·aša·hina, Peoria, Anishinabewaki ᐱᑦᑳᑦᑎᐱᑦᑎᐱᑦᑎᐱᑦ, Bodéwadmikiwen (Potawatomi), and Miami. In addition, the writing groups that participated in this project occupy Catawaba, Anishinabewaki ᐱᑦᑳᑦᑎᐱᑦᑎᐱᑦ, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Lenape land, according to Native-Land.ca. I hope that you will take a moment to honour these groups, learn more about current land reparations, donate to land return struggles, and respectfully study and include decolonial theories in your research. I also urge you to support Two-Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ Indigenous peoples through activism and learn more about how to support Two-Spirit Youth.

This chapter offers an overview of the history of writing groups as well as LGBTQ+ identity and writing. Through this overview, I will highlight the absence within the literature on community writing groups and LGBTQ+ writers/writing that this project seeks to fill. Since community writing groups and LGBTQ+ writers/writing have not been analyzed together before—and since both have large bodies of literature—I will outline both areas of study as they are relevant to this project. Within this pilot study, I interviewed and surveyed four LGBTQ+ writing groups that I will detail. This group information was provided by current and previous facilitators who filled out facilitator surveys, which were separate from group member surveys.

This research into LGBTQ+ writing groups began as I was planning how to facilitate my own LGBTQ+ writing group with a metro Detroit non-profit organization in Summer 2018. This project and the group I facilitate were borne out of my own curiosity as to why people joined these groups. A few months after my group began, a question about hierarchies and power within these groups formed in my mind and pestered me until it became another research question. In addition,

this project was motivated by my desire to continue to expand research about queer bodies and spaces into LGBTQ+ composition research, as other composition scholars have done in the classroom (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014; Goncalves, 2005, Larkin & Kitchens, 2005; Malinowitz, 1995), online spaces (Alexander et al., 2004; Peters & Swanson, 2004), and in other communities (Driskill, 2011; Pritchard, 2013). I hoped that queer people would take an active role in this project, as I will explain in the methods section, rather than make them abstract, disembodied, tokenized, or objectified.

One other source of inspiration that does not ostensibly relate to this project is Brandt's (2014) *The Rise of Writing*, which analyzed how people engage with writing in the 21st century. Through interviews, Brandt found that there is an emphasis on writing in the workforce, and this caused reading to become more of a tool to shape writing rather than having importance on its own. However, there were still many people who wrote for personal purposes. In one interview, Brandt recounted how Tracey Copeland, "a 25-year-old lifelong fiction writer, was the youngest member of a collective for gay and lesbian writers, where she said role models were helping her find the resolve to write non-fiction pieces about lesbian experience, something she had avoided as a younger writer" (p. 107). This was the only interview (as well as the only text!) that mentioned LGBTQ+ writing groups or collectives that I have found. But I hypothesized that Tracey was not the only person out there who sought out LGBTQ+ writing groups for this reason and other reasons. As I did the initial research on finding LGBTQ+ writing groups across North America, I found that face-to-face writing groups are indeed one-way LGBTQ+ people engage with writing in the 21st century. Thanks to the internet, I was able to find and contact these groups easily.

LGBTQ+ identity and literacy

Before I delve into LGBTQ+ writing spaces, let us briefly establish the connection between LGBTQ+ identity and literacy. Although this project does not focus on the content these LGBTQ+ writers are producing, LGBTQ+ community writing groups discuss and produce literacy. Thus, understanding the long relationship between LGBTQ+ identity and literacy demonstrates one reason why LGBTQ+ writing groups exist. I view literacy through Gee's (1990) point of view of always being socially and culturally situated; therefore, LGBTQ+ individuals will have a different relationship with literacy compared to non-LGBTQ+ individuals. Latinx, disabled, LGBTQ+ communities will have a different relationship with literacy compared to Black, disabled, LGBTQ+ communities, and so on. Nevertheless, through a myriad of mediums, LGBTQ+ communities overall have depended on literacy to communicate "and construct our experiences, intimacies, and desires" (Alexander, 2008, p. 2). LGBTQ+ organizations produced underground texts in the 1950s through the 1970s, but the 1980s onward permitted many more individuals to use literacy to tell stories through the availability and advances in technology.

Though there is little research LGBTQ+ writing groups, we might point to LGBTQ+ organizations like ONE (which eventually turned into a pro-gay magazine), the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB, a lesbian group), and consciousness-raising (CR) groups (some members identified as lesbians) in the 1960s as the beginning of well-known groups who acknowledged and unified under LGBTQ+ identity, conversed, and wrote together for a reason besides improving writing—specifically, to gain rights for people with marginalized identities. ONE and DOB created newsletters that attempted to attract members. In these newsletters, they published interviews, articles, and short creative writing pieces by members, while CR groups inspired single authors as

well as collaborative pieces. In these instances, literacy had a hand in striving for and succeeding in change.

It is unimaginable to recall LGBTQ+ history in the 1980s without discussing the stigma and stories of AIDS; gay men were too often the target of blame and hatred. During this time, groups like ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), founded by Larry Kramer, created literacy to educate the public, to share stories of people with AIDS (PWAs), and to dispel the myth that gay men were the cause of AIDS. ACT-UP “materially transformed with bodies and words and graphics the definitions and meanings and visibilities of AIDS, development of and access to its treatment and prevention, its policies and politicization” (Morris, 2012, p. 50). In addition to groups like ACT-UP, individuals also used literacy to counter popular AIDS myths. According to Treichler (2012), “the 1980s brought the rapid expansion of low-cost video equipment and local cable television stations that enabled AIDS advocates and activists to create their own representations of the epidemic and counter the conventional wisdom” (p. 250). These alternative forms of literacy—compared to traditional forms such as popular television and print news—provided these individuals an avenue to share their realities with the public.

In the 1990s, zines grew as a method for LGBTQ+ communities to document LGBTQ+ history and writing and communicate issues within these communities (see The Queer Zine Archive Project online, created by Milo Miller and Christopher Wilde in 2003). Zines are a way to “publish” work, especially non-traditional work. Glover (2017) stated in an online article that zines are there to create art that isn’t “restricted by industry rules.” In other words, zines do not necessarily discriminate in the ways that literary magazines do. If you wish to create a piece with mixed media, you can do that in a zine (obviously, as long as the person piecing together the zine agrees). *Gender Trash from Hell* (GTFH), for example, was an early 1990s Canadian zine that was

dedicated to issues of trans* individuals. This zine published the trans* communities' writings, drawings, and photos. One piece, dubbed, "Trannies Speak Out," gathered opinions of various trans* topics, specifically reclaiming words like "transie" and "tranny" at a Toronto nightclub. This piece would most likely have been unavailable in traditional forms of publication and print due to its language and topic. For LGBTQ+ communities, it seems as though it is tradition to use alternative forms of publishing. However, since overall LGBTQ+ communities are more accepted today in North America, they may be able to publish in more traditional venues.

Today, the internet continues to yield many LGBTQ+ stories and projects through videos, blogs, social media, and numerous other spaces. For LGBTQ+ individuals, literacy practices ostensibly are "a way to create identity, critique discourses that deny the possibility of intersectional and complex personhoods, and create community, as well as a way to make and participate in culture" (Pritchard, 2016, p. 21).

LGBTQ+ identity in Composition Spaces

Alexander and Wallace (2009) affirmed that while gender, race and ethnicity, class, disability, and religion are identities within composition studies that are published about frequently, "attention to sexual identity within rhetoric and composition has been spotty at best" (p. 302). Looking at rhetoric and composition scholarship over ten years later, I posit that LGBTQ+ identity and writing has not been ignored by any means. But most scholarship on LGBTQ+ identity and writing examined classroom writing and discussions about LGBTQ+ topics, LGBTQ+ students feeling welcome in the classroom, and queer pedagogy (Alexander, 2005; Alexander, 2008; Alexander & Rhodes, 2014; Alexander & Wallace, 2009; Goncalves, 2005; Larkin & Kitchens, 2005; Malinowitz, 1995; Monson & Rhodes, 2004; Nichols, 2013; Peters & Swanson, 2004; Rhodes, 2015). Below, I will describe some of the studies that particularly look at LGBTQ+

identity and writing, and how they affect classroom spaces. This will be vital in understanding this present study.

Before Malinowitz's (1995) groundbreaking study on LGBTQ+ discourses in the writing classroom, sexual identity was rarely touched by composition teachers and students alike. As Malinowitz argued, "Leaving sexual identity out of the classroom is not an accident; it is an expression of institutionalized homophobia, enacted in classrooms not randomly but systematically, with legal and religious precedents to bolster it and intimidate both teachers and students" (p. 23). Thus, the writing classroom was not exactly a welcoming space for LGBTQ+ students; there may not have been explicit homophobia, but there were not open discussions about sexuality. Malinowitz considered the writing classroom as a space where LGBTQ+ studies could expose "unexpected ways...of making meaning and the ways systems of signification structure our thinking" (p. 43). Malinowitz's students built "queercentric"—meaning, focused on LGBTQ+ experiences, but not only involving LGBTQ+ students—discourse communities that created meaning from texts and personal experiences. In this way, Malinowitz's classroom became a space that could explore, question, and express sexual experiences and identities as well as consider the rhetorical hoops that LGBTQ+ writers may have to jump through to be considered as credible.

Building from Malinowitz's foundational piece, Marinara et al. (2009) analyzed nearly 300 first year composition textbooks to determine how many included LGBTQ+ authors or perspectives and found that two-thirds of texts did not include LGBTQ+ authors or perspectives, and the ones that did focused on gay marriage. These authors argued that even when queer authors were included in these texts, their queerness was not made known. And, "little attention is paid to narrations representing multiple or intersectional identities. Similarly, there is little attention paid to bisexuality or trans lives" (p. 280). Due to the lack of intersectional identities and overall

LGBTQ+ variety of topics, “queerness is frequently disembodied, an abstract identity as opposed to a corporeal reality” (p. 281). LGBTQ+ identities, in other words, usually occupied an abstract space in the classroom, and if they do hold any space, they are tired stereotypes without nuance.

In addition to face-to-face classrooms, composition scholars—as well as scholars outside of composition—have analyzed LGBTQ+ identity and online spaces (Alexander, 2002; Alexander et al., 2004; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Pritchard, 2016; Taylor, Falconer, & Snowdon, 2014). To read further on this topic, Alexander & Banks (2004) provided a comprehensive review of research on LGBTQ+ identity and the internet. These studies proffer us information on how LGBTQ+-based spaces function (or do not function). Pritchard (2016) in particular discussed webnographic work from blogs and a few popular social media sites. He found that restorative literacies—literacy practices “that Black queers employ as a means of self-definition, self-care, and self-determination” (p. 24)—are developed in these online spheres. But some participants enact literacy normativity, or literacy that inflicts harm. While these spaces provide these individuals a place to come out, to find love, to build community, to restore themselves in a multitude of ways, sometimes destructive behaviors are bound up in these writing spaces as well, which may drive people away from these spaces and groups. This research suggests that face-to-face LGBTQ+ writing group members may share similar reasons as to why they join these groups: to build community, to practice self-care, to define themselves.

Writing Group History

To begin, it will be useful to define writing groups since, as Gere (1987) explained, writing groups go by many names, like writing labs, workshops, and collaborative writing. Like Moss, Highberg, and Nicolas (2004), I consider these writing groups as “literacy events,” which Heath (1983) defined as “occasions in which the talk revolves around a piece of writing” (p. 386). This

term, though, like the term “writing group,” is amorphous and dynamic. The groups that I center in this study all gather at least once a month, usually face-to-face, to write and/or read their work, and provide some sort of feedback. But these groups meet in a variety of places. The type of feedback given as well as the purpose of the group can vary. Since I am concentrating on “composition’s extracurricular,” or writing groups that occur without direct connections with schools or universities, in most of this project, I will mainly focus on literature about community writing groups (Gere, 1994). However, it is vital to demonstrate the work inside the academy in short, since composition in and out of the academy influence each other.

Writing groups in the academy. Elbow’s (1973) *Writing without teachers* was one of the first texts to outline how college students can successfully give feedback on any type of writing in small peer groups. In addition, Bruffee (1984) marked another change in composition that encouraged students to work together in the classroom. As Bruffee (1984) explained, in the 1970s, minority students who were not previously accepted to college began attending, but they needed extra help. Some colleges turned to peer tutoring and small groups within the classroom, dubbed collaborative learning, where students discussed the assignment and the subject, offered how their peers could improve their writing, and learned how to use “kinds of conversation valued by college teachers” (p. 642). Overall, students’ work improved due to their peers’ feedback. This work clearly influenced Gere (1987), who demonstrated that U.S. extracurricular writing groups, since the 16th century, were focused on improving their education.

In the 1990s, scholars began exploring the possibilities of using writing groups in university writing centers. Lunsford (1991) argued that collaboration in writing, although not monolithic, leads to “problem finding” and “problem solving,” learning abstract concepts, and interdisciplinary thinking (p. 94). This sort of collaboration “rejects traditional hierarchies” since

everyone—tutors, professional staff, and students—must engage equally to create goals (p. 95). Harris (1992) agreed that setting the agenda for collaborative groups in the classroom and the writing center is helpful, but she also outlines the differences between peer response groups in the classroom and tutorial—or, with writing center tutors—collaboration. For instance, tutors typically have more training in what questions to ask students compared to their peers, which leads to better revision practices. Lunsford and Harris both promoted writing groups within writing centers due to their conceivable benefits for students.

Thomas, Smith, and Barry (2004), in Moss et al.'s edited collection on writing groups, signified another shift in composition studies: using writing groups in classrooms other than English classrooms. In this instance, these writers received a grant to establish writing groups within Natural Science, Engineering, and Agricultural and Natural Resources graduate departments. These groups overall worked well for students because “the writing groups spawn a cyclical pattern in which the experience of writing up their results for an audience of peers begins to have an impact on the way they design and record their research” (p. 164). Since this study, research on writing groups for graduate students, especially in doctoral programs, has become increasingly popular (Aitchison, 2009; de Caux et al., 2017; Wegener et al., 2016). These writing groups were found not only to help graduate students with their writing, but they also supplied emotional and professional support, as contemporary community writing group research indicates.

Purposes of community writing groups. It is important to note that while older scholarship on writing groups mainly considered writing groups in the classroom, recent research has focused on community writing groups. Gere (1987) was one of the first to publish about writing groups outside of the classroom. She explained that writing groups, historically, “both within and beyond academic institutions, exist as vehicles for learning, for helping individuals improve their

writing” (p. 55). Though this may be true, recent research suggests that there are other benefits of writing groups, and that there is more of a focus on identity-based community writing groups. I define identity-based community writing groups as groups that advertisement and/or name the group around a certain aspect of identity, such as race, class, disability, a career, or, as this project highlights, sexuality and gender.

Current studies about face-to-face writing groups suggest that while members do often look to improve their writing skills, they also receive emotional benefits from the groups (Heller, 1997; Schell, 2013). Heller (1997) observed the Tenderloin Women’s Writing Group in San Francisco and found that these members “buil[t] skills as writers,” but also “boost[ed] identity and self-esteem—as people, as writers, and as public presences,” “buil[t] an internal community of varied and broad-based relationships,” and “support[ed] each other to take action in the world” (p. 17). Furthermore, Schell (2013) studied veterans’ writing groups. Many of these members wanted to begin discussions within their communities about the “consequences of warfare,” and to begin to document veterans’ oral histories. But, in addition to these more pedagogical and archival goals, many members of these groups realized that their gains from the group were personal as well. Maxine Kingston, the founder of the Bay Area Veterans’ Writing Group, contended that writing allows these members to “write the unspeakable,” to process “chaos through story and poem...[to change] the past and [remake] the existing world,” and to connect with other veterans. Schell clarified that expressive writing should not be seen as a “fix-it strategy” for veterans who have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although this may not be a solution to PTSD, it is undeniable that these veterans have benefitted emotionally—from being able to process these experiences to building community with others who have similar experiences—in these writing

groups. These studies suggest that face-to-face writing groups provide overall positive “emotional release” and support (Padfield et al., 2017, p. 328).

Moss et al.’s (2004) edited collection about writing groups provided more experiences of community, identity-based writing groups. These various authors discuss what people get out of these groups, how the groups function, and the history of the group(s) they write about (Thomas et al., 2004; Beckstead et al., 2004; Mathieu et al., 2004), and how writing groups function as a contact zone (Westbrook, 2004). The work of Mathieu et al. (2004) and Beckstead et al. (2004) in particular is important to consider when asking why people join groups and what they attain from these groups. For example, Mathieu et al.’s (2004) writing group for homeless vendors in Chicago, *StreetWise*, changed its mission several times to try to meet the member’s needs, ranging from “a news-writing workshop to a meeting place for camaraderie and support where people share personal writing or poetry just because they want or need to do so” (p. 154). This philosophy, however, creates some conflict, and sometimes group goals overshadow individual goals. In addition, Beckstead et al.’s (2004) writing group made up of educators seemingly had academic goals in mind, but people within the group, like Dale Jacobs, expressed that this writing group “was helping [members] to write and make sense of their worlds” (p. 193). These two authors demonstrate that while members have certain goals for the writing group, they may (or may not) complete these goals and may receive other benefits or detriments because of the writing group.

Power and conflict within community writing groups. Another common concern in community writing group research is power dynamics and conflict. Gere (1987) wrote that writing groups typically were “non-hierarchical” because people could “give and accept authority” (p. 50). Unlike the classroom, Gere (1987) explained, people can easily leave these groups and disregard the writing suggestions from members without being penalized. Other writing group research

(Brooks, 1997; Cotich, 1995;) also suggested that community writing groups were only positive, affirming spaces, providing “ a sense of commitment, security, structure, collaboration, affirmation, and discipline” and “changed lives, made them [group members] whole” (Brooks, 1997, p. 7). Even Heller (1997), who highlighted writing group members’ struggles with homelessness, poverty, and addiction, emphasized how the Tenderloin writing workshop was a “group of ‘sisters’ who forge bonds through individual and collective performance” (p. xiii).

Until Westbrook (2004), who argued that community writing groups are contact zones and studied “the role that conflict plays in community writing groups,” no other writing group research hinted at the conflicts or struggles of power within these groups. However, though Westbrook maintained that there are conflicts in these writing groups, she still perceived community writing groups as democratic, non-hierarchical, and existing “outside the hierarchical power structures of university” (Westbrook, 2004, p. 232). But as a facilitator of an identity-based writing group, my experience differs from what research suggests. In my group, although I attempt to create a non-hierarchical space, the writing group still is affected by my privilege (being educated, white, and queer) and other members’ privileges. As Pritchard (2016) explained, literacy (and bookishness as a trait) has conventionally been tied to whiteness—white individuals usually have had the privilege to engage with literacy—and therefore queers and marginalizes the Black subject who participates in literacy. The power relations tangled up with literacy are particularly important to note for identity-based writing groups, where anyone may join, in contrast to writing groups in university and college classrooms and writing centers, who may not include as many marginalized groups. Research from Westbrook and Pritchard indicated tensions between people who interact in these writing spaces, so I sought to find if there were conflicts and power struggles—and what these looked like—in these groups.

Theoretical Frame

In this project, I am not examining the writing and composing that occurs within and due to these LGBTQ+ community writing groups; rather, I am examining these groups as spaces—what occurs within these groups. I use Massey’s (1994) definition of space. Like her predecessor de Certeau (1984), Massey asserted that space—which she coupled with time—is made through social relations. Space-time, as she referred to it, is

a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial...[it] may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity. Moreover, since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification.” (Massey, 1994, p. 3)

In other words, all spaces contain power relations, but as Massey demonstrated to readers through essays about class and gender, these power relations can be altered and may change (note: an example of this is how women’s mobility has disrupted traditional roles in 19th century England by working—in “A Woman’s Place”). These spaces, though, as Massey argued, are “experienced differently, and variously interpreted, by those holding different positions as part of it” (p. 3). LGBTQ+ writing groups are spaces that are constructed through human interaction, and, as I argue in Chapter 4, are steeped in power relations and experienced differently depending on the person. However, we must understand: because these groups are spaces, they are ever-changing; by now, the agendas, the goals, and attendance in these groups may—and probably have—transformed. The date and time in which people completed surveys and interviewed with me was a moment’s look into these writing groups. I attempt to look at the history of these writing groups within this introduction, but then again, this is only a partial history: what facilitators deemed important enough to tell me and what they knew of the group (if they did not found the group). There were also a small number of people who could complete the survey and interview. In short, these are only partial stories of these spaces. However, these partial stories provide an

understanding of why people choose to interact in these spaces and how power functions within these spaces.

In addition, I built this project around Kirsch and Richie's (1995) feminist framework for composition studies, decolonial methodologies, including Tuhiwai Smith (1997) and Haas (2012), and Cushman (1997) and Powell and Takayoshi's (2003) notions of reciprocity. These frameworks urge us as researchers to be as reciprocal as possible with the communities that we research to "reduce the distance between researchers and participants" (Kirsch & Richie, 1995, p. 22) and fight against the colonial influence on research, specifically the "observation, classification, and codification" that is present in much research (Kirsch & Richie, 1995, p. 16). To take steps toward decolonizing this research project, I formed relationships with participants and asked participants to collaborate with me to create research questions, negotiate interpretation of data, and provide feedback in general about the project. Reciprocity is one of the steps that I take to decolonize research as well. In typical Western research on communities, participants may not directly benefit from studies at all, and they may never be able to read the studies they participated in. In the vein of Powell and Takayoshi (2003), I adopted the idea of reciprocity: "researchers interested in building reciprocal relationships might need to shift their thinking to include ways participants might benefit from their relationship with the researcher outside the confines of the research study's focus" (p. 396). In other words, reciprocity is context-based—it will be different in each situation, and it may involve the research aiding in ways that are not a part of the study directly. In this present study, I asked each facilitator what I could do to help their LGBTQ+ writing group and will be sending this completed project to each member who participated.

Methods

This project uses a mixed methods approach to study four LGBTQ+ community writing groups to find out why people choose to join these groups and how power and conflict function in these spaces. I use a combination of surveys and interviews in order to further understand participants' motivations for attending and conflicts and power dynamics within these groups. To achieve this goal, I established research relationships with each contact member of the groups I interviewed. Through these relationships, I conducted a survey and follow-up interviews with members of these writing groups. 5 members who took the survey agreed to 45-minute follow-up interviews, which gave them the chance to expand on their answers, since surveys, while helpful, can be limiting. Participants were offered the opportunity to provide feedback on chapters of this project, and 3 participants supplied feedback.

Writing group descriptions

In order to better understand and provide readers with a place that they can differentiate between the writing groups centered in this project, I include brief descriptions of these writing groups:

Dr. Stephanie Allen's Black lesbian/queer writing group, organized in 2016 by Dr. Allen and another facilitator, originally met face-to-face through video conferencing with seven members from four different U.S. states. This "group" now meets informally, often in pairs, about once a week or so. However, since 2018, Dr. Allen hosts an in-person writing group a non-profit LGBTQ+ center in a larger U.S. southern city that meets once every other month. Dr. Allen shared that the group began because "the organizers both resided in cities/regions (e.g., the South) where welcoming, queer-friendly writing groups with a majority Black queer/lesbian membership was limited, inaccessible, or non-existent." In other words, this group filled a gap: there may be queer

groups, or black women's writing groups, but these groups may not meet the needs of these writers. Dr. Allen also explained that this group's purpose is to help these writers improve (they often have group writing activities, writing assignments, and homework) and to publish. This group collaborates in publishing a bi-annual print and online publication together and recording podcasts that feature black lesbian/queer writers. The writing group that meets face-to-face currently has "a steady stream of maybe 3 or 4 folks who come in and write."

Noah's group, who is facilitated by Andrew and two other facilitators, is a monthly writing group for trans* and gender non-conforming youth between 14 and 24 years old on the U.S. east coast in a large city. This group was founded in 2016 by a nearby literary and arts center and university so that trans* youth "can express themselves openly and freely, without the burden of having to explain themselves to non-trans identified individuals." This group received a grant last year, hosts several guest writers as well as a reading and writing party every April, and they have also published chapbooks as a group. According to Andrew, the group's attendance fluctuates; there may be "seven youth one month and 19 the next."

Milo's group, which is located in a suburban area in eastern Ontario, Canada, began in 2011 at a coffee shop by a former facilitator, Sarah. After participating in a research study about LGBTQ+ youth, Sarah and another facilitator founded this group for "likeminded queer people" to "share interests and make friends." Members included young adults in their late teens and early twenties. In 2013, the group received an Ontario government grant. This grant helped the group grow and make space for LGBTQ+ youth in this region, and they then moved to a public library. This group, now mostly teens, meets weekly but also hosts open mic nights, invites guest speakers, and creates zines that are available at these events. Due to the "spread of population" of group

members, attendance for events and writing group is small; the writing group has about 3-6 members. Milo has been the facilitator for 3 years.

The group that I named “Daphne’s group” was the most responsive to the surveys and interviews (six surveys and two interviews were completed). Daphne’s group is located on the U.S. east coast, just outside of a large city, and takes place in an LGBT non-profit center. Daphne has facilitated this group since 2012. Members include Marsha, and core members who I call Maya, Carol, and Josh, since they were not interviewed, only surveyed. This weekly group, as one will find in Chapter 4, is described by its members as “more of a social group” than a writing group: the group first shares writing they have worked on outside of the group, and then they socialize and play games after. This group’s attendance fluctuates; according to Marsha, “I think most weeks there is one new person or two new people, and they disappear all the time,” but there seems to be 4 to 5 core members who attend regularly, including Daphne.

Overview

In this chapter, I outlined the relationships between LGBTQ+ identity and writing and recounted the history of writing groups. This history also included major issues that writing group scholarship takes up (and has not examined), including the purpose of these groups and conflicts and power structures within these groups. This introduction demonstrated the gap within the literature on LGBTQ+ writing groups that this project seeks to fill. I also provided an overview to the feminist and decolonial methods that I base this study upon.

Chapter Two: Methods and methodologies: Reducing the distance between participants and researchers

In the second chapter, I narrate the mixed-methods approach I used for this project as well as why this project will benefit from using feminist (Cushman, 1997; Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995;

Powell & Takayoshi, 2003) and decolonial research methods (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Donelson, 2019; Driskill, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 1997). Though this project does not involve Indigenous individuals nor studies how colonialism affects the LGBTQ+ community writing groups, I am following Driskill and Arvin et al.'s call to integrate indigenous/decolonial methodologies into non-Indigenous projects because these methodologies are extensive, flexible, and invaluable. I used surveys to begin to understand the experiences and relationships within the various LGBTQ+ writing groups. There were two separate surveys: one survey for writing group facilitators, and one survey for all writing group members. Facilitators were asked to complete both since the surveys' questions did not overlap. After 4 facilitators (one from each group) and 11 group members completed these surveys, I interviewed 5 participants—at least one from each group—to expand on the survey questions but also provide them the chance to alter answers and even add research questions to this project. After their interviews, participants were asked to provide feedback on the following chapters. Moreover, to encourage reciprocity, I asked the facilitators what I could do to help their LGBTQ+ writing groups. I delineate how this reciprocity varied between groups. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this project, including participation and location of the researcher.

Chapter Three: What's the purpose?: LGBTQ+ community writing groups and their identities

The third chapter argues that LGBTQ+ writing groups improve writing and offer emotional support, friendship, and community as previous writing group research suggested, but these groups also provide group members with opportunities to learn things about one's self, publish, and educate the community. I also find that these LGBTQ+ writing groups provide some different aspects compared to non-identity writing groups. I call these aspects queer writing spaces, spaces

for queer, writing people, and spaces for writing queer people. Overall, LGBTQ+ writing groups have many different purposes for the individual, the group itself, and the community around them.

Chapter Four: “‘Everything is sex, except sex, which is power’: LGBTQ+ writing groups and the hierarchies and conflicts within

Chapter four recounts power struggles and conflicts between facilitators, group members, and the institutions with which these groups are associated to assert that writing groups are not wholly harmonious and non-hierarchical as writing group research indicates. I found that the facilitators within these groups attempted to equally distribute power in their group, but when conflicts occurred, facilitators were generally expected to resolve them. In these situations, facilitators receive arbitrary, or temporary, power. Arbitrary power is needed in some groups—especially youth groups—to protect members and sustain the groups’ interests and agenda. However, if the group is interested in being as equitable as possible and for facilitators to be relieved of sole responsibility in conflicts, I argue these writing groups should use Ratcliffe’s (2005) rhetorical listening as a basis to navigate conflicts. In order to achieve the “intense trust in the other members” that is necessary for writing groups to thrive and remain sustainable, I find that members must make every effort to understand all points of view in conflicts (Beckstead et al., 2004, p. 194).

Chapter Five: Where do we go from here?

Chapter five, the concluding chapter, details how the present study of LGBTQ+ writing groups lends two ideas to composition studies. I offer an infographic that details rhetorical listening, and I expand on how we can use rhetorical listening in writing group spaces—not only community writing groups, but also classrooms and writing centers that use writing groups—to understand conflicts and why rhetorical listening especially benefits LGBTQ+ writers. I also

suggest future research that may be done on LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ community writing groups. I remind us that we can no longer ignore that gender and sexual identity, particularly at this moment, has a distinctive connection with language, and that we must study this to “produce rhetorical histories...that will warrant and arm our queer scholarship, pedagogy, and activism” so that LGBTQ+ research and individuals persist (Morris, 2006, p. 147).

CHAPTER 2: METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES: REDUCING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCHERS

“One of the supposed characteristics of primitive peoples was that we could not use our minds or intellects. We could not invent things, we could not create institutions or history, we could not imagine, we could not produce anything of value, we did not know how to use land and other resources from the natural world, we did not practice the 'arts' of civilization. By lacking such virtues we disqualified ourselves, not just from civilization but from humanity itself. In other words we were not 'fully human'; some of us were not even considered partially human” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1997, p. 25).

Introduction

My vision for this research project was threefold: to combat dehumanization and objectification in this research project; to create realistic, collaborative and reciprocal relationships with the participants; and to narrate the complexities, failures, and successes. After reading Tuhiwai Smith’s (1997) *Decolonizing Methodologies*, I was determined to help dismantle the idea that there was objective research. Every researcher makes decisions that affect the research process, and sometimes these are not recorded or treated as normal. I decided that narrating this journey—giving as much of the story as possible—was a way to be truthful to the participants, readers, and myself. Therefore, I use decolonial and feminist methods and methodologies to resist dehumanization of participants and to discuss the reciprocal relationships and narrate this research project. There are many overlaps between decolonial and feminist research, such as power relationships between researcher and participant and looking beyond academia for valuable knowledge. However, decolonial methodologies particularly remind us that, unfortunately, knowledge is still heavily understood through a Western context.

Decolonial and Feminist Methodologies

Before I delve into the meanings of decolonial, I need to acknowledge my use of decolonial methodologies as a white, non-Indigenous settler with non-Indigenous participants. White settlers “must hold [themselves] responsible” and “hold accountability” when using these methods (Donelson, 2018, p. 11). Dr. Christina Cedillo, one of the interviewees in Donelson’s (2018)

dissertation about decolonial pedagogies, “references Tuck and Yang, and cautions readers against using decolonial as a metaphor, as too often the ‘absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization [becomes] yet another form of settler appropriation’ (2012, p. 3)” (p. 42). Within this project, my goal of using decolonial methodologies is to break down research methods that serve to hurt, deceive, or silence marginalized groups like LGBTQ+ communities. Though I will acknowledge the Indigenous and Latinx scholars who created and continue to develop decolonial methodologies within this chapter as well as any time I may discuss this project, I understand that their use in this project may still be interpreted as settler appropriation. I hope to use my privilege as a white, educated person to discuss why decolonial methodologies are important; I believe that these methodologies are necessary to not only projects involving Indigenous and Latinx communities, but also other communities who have been and continue to be marginalized, as long as the origins of decoloniality are honored through citation and listening.

There are few studies on non-Indigenous LGBTQ+ communities that use decolonial methods within their projects. My concern, as well as Donelson’s (2018) concern, was, as a white settler, repeating the pattern of colonization within the research done. However, Driskill (2010) explained, “I don’t think that scholars need to change the focus of their work, I do expect scholars to integrate Indigenous and decolonial theories into their critiques” (p. 78). Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill (2013) also argued that non-Indigenous researchers “need to reassess what Indigenous theories are actually concerned with” and that “such theories are much more expansive than many non-Indigenous peoples have been led to think” (p. 27). Arvin et al. (2013) urged scholars to address settler colonialism and indigeneity in conjunction with other subjects and identities. These authors presented what Indigenous feminist theories can offer gender and sexuality studies. For scholars to find connections between subjects as well as disjuncture and disputes, Arvin et al. and Nichols

(2013) agree that scholars must study and theorize colonialism and heteropatriarchy jointly. This could “produce liberatory scholarship and activism for Indigenous women, non-Indigenous women, and, ultimately, all peoples” (Arvin et. al, 2013, p.17). Though this project does not involve Indigenous individuals nor studies how colonialism affects the LGBTQ+ community writing groups, I am following Driskill and Arvin et al.’s call to integrate indigenous/decolonial methodologies into non-Indigenous projects because these methodologies are extensive, flexible, and invaluable. For projects with non-Indigenous participants, using decolonial methodologies, such as centralizing participants’ knowledge, building research relationships with the participants, and inviting participants to edit and comment on the writing I did, may afford knowledge and outcomes different from those methodologies that encourage researchers to stay “objective.”

Broadly, decolonialism can be understood as a “de-linking” from colonial practices and ways of thinking (Mignolo, 2011, p. xxvii). Colonial practices of knowledge include understanding Western knowledge as superior and belittling and even destroying non-Western forms of knowledge (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000). As Māori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (1997) highlighted, “the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices” (p. 2). Due to this reason, Tuhiwai Smith wrote, Indigenous communities in New Zealand are overall dubious of research, especially anthropological research because of its ties to the racist classifications—uncivilized and unintelligent—of their people. Tuhiwai Smith extended this argument to “the Other” in general (see scholars such as Freud and Hegel).¹

These classifications are passed off as objective, and these clearly harmful portrayals of the Other were and are often believed by not only the West, but also the Other. However, Tuhiwai Smith also noted that research done by Indigenous scholars can be a source of resistance and hope

¹ For instance, “Hegel's master-slave construct...has been applied as a psychological category (by Freud) and as a system of social ordering” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1997, p. 32).

for Indigenous communities, and provides a guide for Indigenous researchers wishing to decolonize research methods, including sharing this research and having Indigenous researchers work within Indigenous communities to decolonize research and find answers to their own questions within those communities (p. 193). I follow some of Tuhiwai Smith's practices, such as sharing this research with the participants.

In addition, this project embraces Maldonado-Torres (2017) understandings of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's work as a turn toward a decolonial attitude in psychology. According to Maldonado-Torres, though the academic movement of decoloniality was before Fanon's time, Fanon always privileged his patients and the complexity of racism, coloniality, and trauma over the "right" methods in research. Maldonado-Torres explained that Fanon had "the questioning attitude of the psychologist who seeks to 'understand' rather than to punish...through the critical engagement with psychology and psychiatry, for the entire range of the human sciences" (p. 439). To add to Maldonado-Torres' characterization of colonialism, it also has a history of not only punishing, but labeling and naming without understanding. The basis of this current project was to seek to understand these writing groups and allow participants to explain their groups rather than entering these spaces to label them.

Moreover, this project recognizes that gender and sexuality have become a central focus for colonial/decolonial research. Colonized communities were, Lugones (2007; 2010) described, perceived as "non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful" (Lugones, 2010, p. 743). These very descriptions still relevant today since they are often imposed on LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. However, there are ways to decolonize and rewrite these harmful understandings of colonized people, LGBTQ+ colonized people, and non-colonized LGBTQ+ people. Kusnierkiewicz's (2019) online piece about decolonial feminism recommended that we

shift “‘the geography of reason’, meaning opening reason beyond Eurocentric modernist understandings of knowledge, as well as producing epistemes beyond and outside of the strict frameworks of the academia. This includes paying attention to questions arising in spaces of struggle for liberation from domination, as well as embracing what is often considered epistemologically irrelevant.” This project seeks to go beyond typical epistemological frameworks by privileging LGBTQ+ individuals’ knowledge, whose ethos has historically been critiqued, in community writing groups, which may or may not have ties to academia.

In addition to privileging participants’ knowledge, I also consider my own positions within this research as feminist researchers have done previously. Kirsch and Ritchie (1995) acknowledged that it is no longer enough for a researcher to simply introduce their identities at the beginning of a project. Instead, these scholars take up Adrienne Rich’s call for women to “investigate what has shaped their own perspectives and acknowledge what is contradictory, and perhaps unknowable, in that experience” (p. 9). What assumptions and histories do we carry with us into projects? What don’t or can’t researchers know due to limits of a project? In addition to my background with the LGBTQ+ writing group I facilitate and my assumptions I already expressed, I will also track contradictions in the research and the “unknowable” to me. We as researchers, of course, cannot fully step outside of our experiences and know the participants or research fully, but we can reflect and “approximate an understanding” of what we have studied and value “the individual and local” (Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995, p. 10). This means simultaneously privileging participant’s voices while also recognizing the researcher’s part in this project.

The Process of Finding Writing Groups

This project began by searching through Google and Facebook for LGBTQ+ writing groups, and these groups I found were recorded in an excel spreadsheet. Terms used included “LGBT writing groups,” “gay writing groups,” “lesbian writing groups,” “trans writing groups,”

and “queer writing groups,” since not all groups may categorize themselves under the acronym LGBT/LGBTQ+. I wanted to ensure that I was including *all* LGBTQ+ writing groups; I found during my research that there were not many LGBTQ+ writing groups which had an online presence. Even with the most frequently used phrase in these groups’ names, “LGBT,” there were only seven groups that had this phrase. I initially found 20 groups that used “LGBTQ+,” “queer,” “lesbian,” or “rainbow” within their name or the description of the group. Out of those groups, 15 were located within North America (two in Canada, 13 in the U.S.), three were online only, and two others were located outside of North America (one in China and one in the United Kingdom). I decided to only contact the 15 face-to face groups in North America because I felt there would be more commonalities between face-to-face groups in terms of the research questions, and the other two groups did not seem to be active anymore. I e-mailed the groups’ listed facilitators with a brief description of the project (see Appendix A) and sent follow-up e-mails about a month later (see Appendix B). From the groups contacted, I received six “interested” responses and one “not interested” response. One of the “interested” responses needed me to obtain IRB approval of the project before they agreed to be a part of the project. In total, four groups committed to this project. During this time, I realized that this would be a useful pilot study to test my reciprocal methods and expand on in the future.

I decided to use two open-ended, online surveys: one for the facilitator, one for group members. The facilitator survey was centered around the group’s history, while the group member survey focused on the individual; therefore, facilitators would be asked to take both surveys. Surveys are a longstanding practice in composition studies that answer a range of research questions, as recognized by North (1987). Overall, surveys are ultimately more popular through classroom-based and writing-program research projects rather than other populations (see

Anderson et al. (2006); Hartzog, (1986); Miller et al. (1997), particularly a series of three surveys, because surveys can “provide a means for teachers to learn what others are doing, thinking, or feeling about a particular subject” and how this data changes or does not change (Anderson et al., 2006; Lauer & Asher, 1988). But this sentiment can be applied to other populations studied in composition studies, such as LGBTQ+ writing groups. I ultimately decided to include only one survey for a few reasons: it would provide a basis for a research relationship that I develop more through video chat or phone call (something concrete I could reference back to since I remember things better if I can read them) and, much like Hartzog (1986), the “interview questions grew out of the survey, giving the survey respondent an opportunity to clarify answers” (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 62).

Though many of the interview questions were drawn from the survey answers, the interviews and the way they were included in this project was inspired by Driskill (2011). Driskill allows their Indigenous, LGBTQ+ and/or Two-Spirit participants’ interviews to fill the majority of their essay; instead of conducting an ethnographic study, which would focus more on the ethnographer’s experiences, these in-depth interviews allow readers to get to know participants who live within these communities through their own words.

For both the survey and interview, I did not want participants to feel constrained by ready-made answers or felt as though I was “talking over” them; I wanted genuine answers that demonstrated the participant’s knowledge. Additionally, I wondered if open-ended surveys could inspire other answers—it was possible that participants may provide information that was different than what writing group literature suggested previously. In addition, online surveys provide more freedom: participants take as little or as much time as they would like without the pressure of filling out surveys in a room with others. After I received IRB expedited approval and the four

facilitators agreed to participate and ask their writing group members to participate in this project, I asked if any facilitators or group members would be interested in looking over the survey questions and providing feedback. I wished for participants to lead the project to ensure that they would not be objectified.

One facilitator, Sarah, made many suggestions that helped shape the survey questions for both facilitators and group members of these writing groups, especially with unclear phrasing and how this project was being perceived. Sarah sent me a follow-up e-mail asking more about the project because she did not feel like she had a good grasp from the survey questions, which compelled me to re-write a description of this project. Sarah also helped me consider *why* I was asking certain questions during the interviews versus the surveys: “If this is a follow up, are the questions below meant to check for differences in time between the first survey and this survey? Is there a reason to ask certain questions here and not in the first survey?” In this moment, I decided to build on questions that I asked from the survey. After I read Sarah’s comments and met with my mentors, I drastically changed the survey questions. These survey questions helped me answer both research questions. I then input these survey questions on the Qualtrics website and sent the facilitators two hyperlinks: one for a group member survey and one for a facilitator survey. Facilitators then distributed the first link to writing group members who took the survey in their spare time.

In addition to Sarah and my mentors, the group member survey questions were based on writing group research as well as my own experiences with my writing group. As I discuss in the introduction of this project, community writing group research (Beckstead et al., 2004; Gere, 1987; Heller, 1997; Mathieu et al., 2004; Schell, 2013; Thomas et al., 2004) described the history of these groups, what members do within these groups, and what benefits people receive from these

groups. I also asked participants to disclose demographic information because Westbrook (2004) argued that because community writing groups are diverse, they are contact zones (see Figure 1). In the group member surveys, I asked about the relationships in the group: did people get along? Were there any conflicts? I also asked what they felt the purpose of the group was, what they liked about the group, and what they would change (to see a full list of the questions, please go to Appendix D). In the facilitator surveys, I wanted to gain an understanding of the group, and typically, facilitators are individuals who have been with the group for a while and attend every session. Therefore, I asked questions about the history of the group, if members share their work publicly, and how authority functions in the group (see Appendix E).

Figure 1. Demographics of survey participants.

	Gender	Sexuality	Race and/or Ethnicity	Age Range	Practice Religion (Y/N; which)	Disabilities (Y/N; which)	Last level of education	Work and/or attend school (Y/N; which)
P1	Female	Bisexual (much closer to lesbian than heterosexual)	White, Greek	35-44	Largely pagan with some Christian practices	Yes; Major depressive disorder	Masters of Art	Yes, finishing up a certificate for Paralegal Studies. I work around 20 hours a month.
P2	Male	Homosexual	White	18-24	I am an atheist	No	High School	Yes
P3	Female	Bisexual	Hispanic/Latina	18-24	Roman Catholic/Peruvian Catholicism	N/A	Some college- five years undergraduate college	Yes, studying for undergraduate/bachelor's degree
P4	Female	Lesbian	White	35-44	No. Atheist	Yes. Schizoaffective, PTSD, anxiety	MA/jd	Work part-time. Research assistant
P5	Female	Heterosexual	White, Caucasian	45-54	Jewish, but not actively practicing on a consistent basis	No	Grad School	Yes, work
P6	Male	Gay	Caucasian	35-44	No	No	Bachelor's Degree	I work
P7	Transgender Male	Pansexual	White/Caucasian	18-24	Yes, Unitarian Universalism	Yes, Mental Illness	Some College	Yes, school
P8	Agender	Bi	White	18-24	No	Yes. Tourettes, OCD, learning disability.	High school	No
P9	Female	Lesbian	African American	35-44	No	No	Graduate school	Work full-time
P10	Nonbinary	Panromantic asexual	Taiwanese American	18-24	No	Chronic pain: PMDD, depression, scoliosis	Bachelor's/college degree	Yes
P11	Woman	Queer/Bisexual/Pansexual	White (French Canadian/Dutch)	25-34 years	Pagan-ish? Former Catholic	Yes, ADHD, Persistent	Masters Degree	Work

Finally, one of my initial research questions for this project was about the space and the place of these groups: (how) are these groups affected by the space and place? Thus, I also included survey questions such as, “How would you describe the city/town in which the writing group takes places?” and “Do you think that the city/place in which you are influences the writing in the group? If yes, how so?” These questions were based on research about online LGBTQ+ writing spaces. For instance, Pritchard (2016) found that black LGBTQ+ online spaces can be both healing as well as harmful to those who do not fit beauty, body, and gender expectations—Black trans*, femme, and fat individuals in dating online spaces are especially persecuted and marginalized—and that participants enacting literacy normativity in these online spaces is, as Pritchard labeled, a “major concern” now (p. 193-194). Since online LGBTQ+ spaces, as Pritchard described, can be harmful, I wished to understand how face-to-face LGBTQ+ writing groups affected members and facilitators alike.

In total, I received 12 group member surveys and four facilitator surveys. Only two facilitators completed both the facilitator and group member surveys, even though these two surveys asked different questions. Out of the 12 surveys, one person was under the age of 18, which means I was unable to use this survey because of IRB restrictions. Since only one person under 18 completed a survey, I did not update my IRB. These surveys overall provided faster, succinct responses from group members and facilitators. But I also conducted follow-up interviews with these members to give individuals the chance to expand on their answers, since surveys, while helpful, are limiting. Eight participants agreed to participate in a follow-up interview based on their responses to the survey. As I will discuss later, this pilot study could be expanded into a larger study.

Interviews

After I analyzed survey data, I designed interview questions based on the survey answers; I believed this would indicate that I had “listened” to and appreciated their answers, and that I wanted to know more. These interview questions would also help further answer the research questions. Of the eight participants, only six responded to the initial query for Skype or phone interviews. My goal was to have interviews from at least one person in each group. Interviews were no longer than 60 minutes.

Interview questions were based on survey answers and the patterns that I found from the surveys (see Appendix F for Daphne’s interview questions). During interviews, I first asked participants if they had any questions about recording or anything else, and then I ensured I was using the correct pronouns and asked them to choose a name to be called throughout this project for anonymity purposes. Allen & Wiles (2016) acknowledged this “‘tension between maintaining anonymity and yet producing adequately nuanced ‘thick’ description of a given phenomenon, especially amongst a small, unique group (Bickford & Nisker 2015)”. Some argue that “pseudonyms confer ‘external confidentiality’ (Tolich 2010, p. 1606), masking identities only from general consumers of the research, but not from those who know the participant or their online personae well (Kaiser 2009; Roberts 2015; Thompson & Russo 2012)” (Allen & Wiles, 2016, p. 151). This anonymity was a concern of mine, especially since some members were a part of the same group, and some members chose to use their real or even full names, which means readers could easily look participants up online. Participants, however, did not appear concerned about this issue.

I then began with a question that specifically mentioned the participant’s survey answers not only to demonstrate that I read over their surveys carefully, but also to help the participant think back to the time and place when they took their survey so they could remember the questions

and their answers. For instance, I asked Daphne about the other writing group that she was involved in before this group began. These questions allowed me to get to know the participants more and developed our research relationships. However, there were some questions that I asked all participants. These included:

1. Do you feel like you receive any benefits from this group (emotional, educational, etc.)? Does this group ever bring you any negative emotions?
2. Could you tell me a bit about your writing experiences (school, work, and outside of these places)?
3. Do you think your identities (race, sexuality, etc.) appear in your writing? Why or why not?
4. Have you ever used online LGBTQ+ spaces? If so, what types of websites? How do you feel about these spaces?
5. Have you ever inhabited other LGBTQ+ “friendly” places? If so, what were they, and how do they compare to this group? Have you experienced unfriendly LGBTQ+ places?

All of these questions provided helpful answers to both research questions.

The final two questions I asked all participants were about LGBTQ+ spaces. I hoped to compare participants’ face-to-face writing group interactions with their online and face-to-face experiences. However, many interview participants did not use LGBTQ+-specific online spaces, and a few participants described the writing group as one of their only interactions with LGBTQ+ individuals.

Analyzing Data

To analyze the data, I adopted lite grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2006) and Kirsch & Richie’s (1995) feminist framework for composition studies. I use grounded theory because of its attention to the data in which the researcher collects. But this theory also seems to place importance on the researcher’s views and is interested in making “generalizable theoretical statements that transcend specific times and places and contextual analyses of actions and events” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Though I gathered themes from data to build Chapters 3 and 4 and the three terms I create in Chapter 3 (queer writing spaces, spaces for queer, writing people, and spaces for writing

queer people), I also wished to show the nuances within these groups and share the research process with the participants; my goal was not to persuade readers that these groups could be generalizable nor to claim to be the all-knowing researcher. This is where Kirsch & Richie come in: I did not wish to build “master narratives” or to “risk speaking for and essentializing others” (p. 8). Instead, I involved participants within this project. I highlighted similarities and differences within these groups and, as much as I could, did not ignore examples simply because they did not “fit” within the research.

The grounded theory analysis that I conducted went as follows: after all interviews were conducted, I created transcripts that maintained participants’ anonymity and were safely saved on my computer only. These transcripts allowed me to easily locate, read, and use parts of their interviews within this project. Since I learn and can make sense of data more comfortably if it is written out, I began reading over the surveys and interviews again and mapping out on several pieces of paper what patterns I was finding and how they connected (or did not connect) to the scholarship. As Charmaz (2006) stated, “qualitative codes take segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytic handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segment of data” (p. 45). I listed holistic ideas that each interview or survey included that may or may not have connected to the scholarship. For instance, one benefit that continued to show up in interviews and surveys was the educational aspect of groups; these participants received feedback from other members, and some groups even offered other ways for members to improve their craft. On the other hand, I found some ideas were specific to these LGBTQ+ writing groups, such as queer writing spaces, spaces for queer, writing people, and spaces for writing queer people. These terms were based on the data that I collected. Due to the smaller data set, participants’ diverse

identities, and the data did not suggest many patterns, I did not group the themes or chapters by and/or compare participants' age, race, work status, or so on.

The next steps in this project were to piece together how these themes connected to each other and the project as a whole, which is what Charmaz (2006) called "memo-writing" and "clustering." Memos "give you a space and place for making comparisons," to outline ideas and initiate discussion between them, and clustering groups ideas together (p. 72-75; 86-87). Early on, I recognized the varying purposes of these writing groups and the variety of benefits that participants received from their writing groups. These themes became the foundation for the third chapter. However, I had difficulty grouping together ideas for the fourth chapter. In my memo-writing, I considered revising my second research question, "how does power function within these writing groups?" to include something about harmony and conflict within groups. This topic is discussed widely in writing group scholarship, and my data demonstrated that the groups were not always harmonious, as most community writing group research suggested. Instead, I framed this idea through the power that people held within these groups; I wrote about the conflicts within these groups, but I analyzed these conflicts through who held power during these events.

After analyzing this data, I used Kirsch & Richie's (1995) framework to think through reducing "the distance between researchers and participants" (p. 22) and fighting against the typical "observation, classification, and codification" that is present in much research (p. 16). To take these steps, participants must have the chance to negotiate interpretation of data and provide feedback in general to create an "ethic of care" and collaboration. Therefore, in this project, participants were welcomed to interpret and analyze the data (albeit after the data chapters were written). The typical observation, classification, and codification in research that Kirsch & Richie referenced include referring to participants as "subjects," which they argue distances the researcher

and dehumanizes participants and assumes the researcher knows best. I understood and made it known that participants knew much more about their writing groups (and perhaps even more about writing groups in general) when I contacted them, and I attempted to emphasize this value as we communicated.

Feedback from Participants

Feedback from participants on the project was key to authenticity and preventing participant objectification in this project. As Tuhiwai Smith (1997) noted, “Research has not been neutral in its objectification of the Other. Objectification is a process of dehumanization. In its clear links to Western knowledge research had generated a particular relationship to Indigenous peoples which continues to be problematic” (p. 39-40). Although Tuhiwai Smith was focused on the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples and their relationship to Western research, the LGBTQ+ community also has a long history of dehumanization through research, or research being used to dehumanize these individuals (see, for example, the history of conversion/aversion therapy). Requesting these LGBTQ+ participants to comment on how I interpreted their interviews and maintaining an open line of communication is one solution to misinformation and dehumanization.

I sent participants drafts of the data chapters, and although I purposely wrote this project with a less formal tone, I realized that both chapters were more than 20 pages long, which was asking a lot of the unpaid participants. This is why I included the following verbiage in my e-mail: “If you have any sort of feedback at all (this can be for the whole chapter, parts that you are included in, etc.), feel free to add comments to the document or send them in an e-mail—whatever way is easiest to you.” I offered participants a month to comment on the chapters and told them if they had any issues with this deadline, they could e-mail me.

Three out of six participants provided some sort of feedback on at least one of the chapters. Noah and Daphne had similar responses. Noah stated: “Hey, I read your chapter and it was really

good! Sorry if that isn't super helpful feedback, but I don't have anything to [criticize]." Daphne also said that everything was fine. Dr. Stephanie Allen, however, corrected some misinformation within the third chapter:

Overall, your chapter looks really good and I just have a couple of corrections:

1. On page 15 where you state "For instance, Dr. Allen wrote a crime fiction story, which was different f[or] her because she usually writes fiction..." It should state because she usually writes literary fiction.

2. On page 18 you state "Because of the lack of spaces, Dr. Allen, along with other black lesbian women, created a small publishing house, and the writing group." This is incorrect. **I started BLF Press by myself** (her emphasis), and I remain the Founder, Publisher, and Editor-in-Chief. The Black Lesbian Literary Collective, where the writing group is housed, was created by myself and [redacted], and we continue to co-direct it.

My publishing house and the writing group are two completely different entities. However, as you correctly mentioned, one of our writing group members did publish her first book with my press and earn a Lammy nomination.

Thanks again for reaching out to us for this and I'm excited for your project. (Allen, personal communication)

This information from Dr. Allen and the feedback from Daphne and Noah ensured accuracy in the information I provided in these chapters. This communication also strengthened our research relationship; as we can see, Dr. Allen was appreciative that I reached out to her group about giving feedback, and I sent her an e-mail back to thank her for this information.

Reciprocity

Reciprocal research relationships, or as Cushman (1996) defined them, "open and conscious negotiation[s] of the power structures reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of the people involved on both sides of the relationship," are what led this project (p. 16). Building from Cushman's definition of reciprocity, Powell & Takayoshi (2003) argued that "seeing reciprocity as a context-based process of definition and redefinition of the relationship between participants and researcher helps us understand how our projects can benefit participants in ways that they desire" (p. 396-397). Reciprocity is a way to challenge the generalizable theories and hierarchical

relationships that are typically produced in Western, non-feminist research. Like Powell & Takayoshi, I wanted to ensure that I did not entirely choose what reciprocity meant to the participants. But unlike these researchers' advice, I could not promise the participants reciprocity "outside the context of the research project" (p. 399).

Throughout this project and my education, I have always found reciprocity to be a tricky topic, which is one reason why I pursued it in this project. Reciprocity, in simple terms, means that both researcher(s) and participants receive some benefits from participating in the project. Researchers acquire knowledge from participants to, as Cushman pointed out, help with their research agendas or earn degrees. However, participants benefit by having access to this project when it is finished; facilitators may be able to use this project to demonstrate, for example, their group's importance. The groups may also decide to use my suggestion to use rhetorical listening to understand and solve conflicts within these writing groups, which will help writing group members understand each other and maintain good attendance. In addition, as Cushman (1996) offered, I asked the participants what I could do for them with the literacy skills I have as well as my connections to a university and other people. Unlike Cushman (1996) and Powell & Takayoshi (2003), though, I limited my help to what I could do for their writing groups instead of individual help, since this project focused on learning information about the writing groups.

So far, I have directly helped one out of the four groups. This writing group, led by Andrew and includes Noah, was, according to Andrew, "running into some funding issues" at this time, and asked if I had any resources. I spent a few hours searching for funding for writing groups, trans groups, and groups within Andrew and Noah's area. When I located a few options, I e-mailed Andrew with the information I had found. Andrew also explained that his group may do some sort of fundraising and hoped that I would be able to share this information with others. In addition to

Powell & Takayoshi's assertion of reciprocity being context-based in terms of *what role* we take and *what we do* within the reciprocal relationship, I would add that *when* we conduct the reciprocity must be context-based. Some tasks that researchers do may fall into the window of the research project, but others may not. These tasks can still be considered as a part of the reciprocal relationship. I expect that the three other groups that I reached out to may find a task I can do for them, but this may not happen until the project has been completed.

After this project has been completed, I will share its entirety with the group facilitators and the interviewees. Tuhiwai Smith (1997) asserted that "reporting back" to the community and "sharing knowledge" assume "a principle of reciprocity and feedback" that previously did not happen with research project (p. 15). However, Tuhiwai Smith urged researchers to understand that sharing this knowledge is a long-term commitment; sharing the methods that I have used, and the participant's information is a way to decolonize Western research that objectifies and dehumanizes participants, and this goal should be lifelong.

Limitations

As I stated above, one of my goals for this project is to show the nuances and discuss how this project can improve. Kirsch & Richie (1995) highlighted that when researchers use the feminist methods they purport, there may be some dissonances and resistance against these methods. But these scholars recommended to draw on these dissonances and use them as opportunities to narrate the research process so that readers may have a comprehensive view of this project.

Pay. I credit the fact that I was unable to pay participants for a few of the limitations of this project, which is why I start here. Due to time constraints and the fact that I was not travelling to these different writing groups, I did not apply for dissertation or research grants. I was conscious of this fact when I began the research, and the participants were informed of this. This is why I

expressed to participants to volunteer what they could feasibly do. I am convinced that paying participants could have expanded this project.

Number of Participants. Overall, there were fewer participants than I was hoping for. As you may recall, 12 group member and four facilitator surveys were submitted through the Qualtrics survey. One of the group member surveys was from someone under the age of 18; I did not realize until an interview that one of the groups was mostly youth-based, although some 20-year-olds attend. Three other group member surveys were missing more than five answers to survey questions. Moreover, out of the 8 completed surveys, six of these surveys were from the same group (due to the groups' range across the U.S. and Qualtrics' ability to show where the surveys were completed, I came to this conclusion). While these surveys provided useful information about one group, there was a lack of responses from other groups. Interviews played out similarly as well; I conducted five surveys (at least one from each of the four groups), and one of the groups only volunteered one person—the facilitator—for surveys and interviews. Hearing more voices about each group could have lent more to this project. In the future, this study could be expanded into a larger study about LGBTQ+ writing groups.

Survey questions. Although the survey questions that were answered provided this project a lot to consider, I heard from at least one participant that the survey was a bit long. As I went back through the survey and tried to complete it myself, I found I was having the same issue. Though the surveys were useful, the interviews seemed to be easier for nearly all participants. In my future projects involving LGBTQ+ writing groups, I think I will shorten surveys and instead make interview a bit longer. If participants wish, they could take a follow-up survey after the interview to fill in any information they did not discuss during the interview.

Involvement in Analysis of Data. Kirsch & Richie (1995) emphasized involving participants in the analysis of the data, and Tuhiwai Smith (1999) would agree that this is a major way to decolonize the research process. However, because of not being able to pay the participants, I decided to forgo this involvement. In future projects, I would simply ask participants, and continue to remind them that it is okay to say no.

More involvement in reciprocity. Powell & Takayoshi (2003) prompted readers to remember that reciprocity is a complex process that “sometimes requires that we ourselves and our relationships with our participants must shape-shift” (p. 414). Being flexible is key to beginning and maintaining reciprocity. In this same vein, I learned that I needed to be flexible and to let go of my disappointment when participants were not as involved in the project (not being able to interview, etc.). Dr. Allen, Daphne, Noah, Sarah, Andrew, Marsha, and Milo all participated in different ways and gave me a wealth of information. However, I am still trying to find the best ways to ensure participants understand reciprocity in research projects and how to best advertise it. One similarity between Cushman (1996) and Powell & Takayoshi (2003) is that they met with their participants face-to-face many times to discuss the project; participants were very familiar with the researchers. For a future study, I would recommend meeting with the groups to not only describe the project’s purpose but to be present; being there is irreplaceable.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the methods and methodologies of this mixed methods project about LGBTQ+ writing groups. The next chapter will answer my research questions involving the purposes of these groups: what are the purposes of LGBTQ+ writing groups today? Why do people join these groups—specifically LGBTQ+ groups instead of a non-identity writing group?

CHAPTER 3: WHAT'S THE PURPOSE?: LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY WRITING GROUPS AND THEIR IDENTITIES

“I think the writing group serves a lot more purposes than writing.” –Marsha

Introduction

As Gere's (1987) foundational study showed, writing groups, both community-based and classroom-based in composition studies, have historically been understood as a way to improve one's writing and to learn. But other scholarship on community writing groups recognized that these groups have many other purposes in addition to writing. Community writing groups record history and promote social justice (Mathieu, 2004; Schell, 2013), and there are emotional benefits for consistent members (Heller, 1997; Schell, 2013). In addition, recent scholarship has considered what I call identity-based writing groups, which advertise and/or name the group around a certain aspect of identity, such as race, class, disability, a career, or, as this project highlights, sexuality and gender. I define “non-identity based writing groups” as groups that do not advertise or organize around a facet of identity. These groups, which I do not explore in this project, may or may not consider identity in these groups. This distinction is important because, as this research suggests, LGBTQ+ writing groups provide benefits for members which they may not find in non-identity based writing groups, or even identity-based writing groups organized around another facet of identity.

In this project, I broadly define “writing groups,” firstly, as groups that call themselves writing groups; they may describe themselves as a writing group within advertising or include “writing group” or “writing collective” in their name. Secondly, these LGBTQ+ writing groups within this project share a commonality that Gere (1987) pointed out: members of writing groups “exchange written drafts and receive verbal or written comments, while some read aloud and receive oral response” face-to-face (p. 1). Even though the methods of sharing writing in these groups vary, all groups that call themselves “writing groups” interact with writing in some way,

during a period of time, even though the methods and length of time spent on writing vary. Writing groups that also include a facet of identity within their name, I argue, indeed focus on writing, but they seemingly have other purposes and goals in addition to sharing and receiving feedback on writing.

Though writing group scholarship has not studied LGBTQ+ community writing groups as I will do in this project, other LGBTQ+-based groups have produced work together, such as ONE (a group that wished to unify homosexual people and seek social justice) and Daughters of Bilitis (DOB, a lesbian group). To be clear, I do not define LGBTQ+ organizations that produced writing as writing groups. As far as we know, members of ONE and DOB did not claim to be any sort of writing group and their goals did not include sharing and receiving feedback on writing; they instead produced writing about LGBTQ+ identity. This is similar to some LGBTQ+ community writing groups, which publish interviews, articles, and short creative writing pieces by members. Through their writing, these members attempted to attract members and educate the public about and end the stigma of LGBTQ+ identities. Due to LGBTQ+ writing groups also identifying as an LGBTQ+ group, I posit that LGBTQ+ writing groups may be closely aligned with the goals of LGBTQ+ organizations like ONE and DOB that wish to publish, educate the public, and provide queer spaces.

In this chapter, I ask and answer the question, what are the purposes of LGBTQ+ writing groups today? Why do people join these groups—specifically LGBTQ+ groups instead of a non-identity writing group? Through surveys and interviews, I have found that LGBTQ+ writing groups do improve writing and offer emotional support, friendship, and community, but they also provide group members with opportunities to learn things about themselves, publish, and educate the community. In this chapter, I also establish that LGBTQ+ writing groups create and sustain

what I call queer writing spaces, spaces for queer, writing people, and spaces for writing queer people. LGBTQ+ writing groups have many different purposes for the individual, the group itself, and the community around them.

For this study, I first reached out to the facilitators of these LGBTQ+ writing groups via e-mail. Facilitators then completed and distributed the Qualtrics survey I created to interested group members (facilitators also completed a separate Qualtrics survey for facilitators only). Survey questions asked members about their participation in the group, how group members interact, and the city or town in which the group takes place. Within the surveys, 5 participants indicated that they wished to have a follow-up phone or Skype interview. The people who I interviewed come from four different groups, located in different areas of North America. I will describe them in the order that they appear in this chapter:

- Dr. Stephanie Allen, who identifies as a black lesbian woman, facilitates a black lesbian writing group located in the southeast region of the U.S.
- Noah identifies as a white, pansexual trans man between 18-24 years old and is working on his bachelor's degree and is a member of a trans* youth writing group located in the eastern U.S.
- Milo identifies as white, bisexual, and agender between 18-24 years old and facilitates an LGBTQ+ youth writing group located in the eastern region of Ontario, Canada
- Marsha identifies as a white, lesbian woman between 35-44 years old with a master's degree. She is a member of an LGBTQ+ writing group located in the eastern U.S.
- Daphne identifies as a white and Greek, bisexual (“much closer to lesbian than heterosexual”) woman between 35-44 years old with a master's degree. She facilitates an LGBTQ+ writing group located in the eastern U.S.

Improving Writing and Educational Purposes

Community writing groups—both identity-based and non-identity based—have a long history of being connected to education, and as I found through the interviews I conducted, one of the purposes of LGBTQ+ writing groups is indeed to improve writing. Out of 10 surveys, 9 of these surveys included that their groups' purpose was to provide feedback, to write, or to share their writing. However, in some groups, they specifically focus on writing LGBTQ+ topics and subjects, which may not appear in non-LGBTQ+ writing groups.

As Gere (1987) outlined in her text about writing group history and theory, many U.S. writing groups since the 18th century, “both within and beyond academic institutions, exist as vehicles for learning, for helping individuals improve their writing” (p. 55). For instance, 20th century men and women's writing groups, though different because of historical gender roles—men had more access to education than women, were not expected to take care of a family, could be out of the house without permission—had the similar goal of participating in public life and improving their social status through learning and writing. Although Gere discussed women's writing groups specifically—which would be identity-based writing groups—she indicated that the main goal of these groups was to educate women participants.

Members of the LGBTQ+ writing groups whom I interviewed had similar goals to those individuals in the early 1900s. As Dr. Stephanie Allen explained, “Everybody wants to be a writer, but nobody knows how to write” (personal communication, April 2019). Presumably, this is why many of these community writing groups continue to exist: to get feedback from people who also write (at no cost within these groups, at least), and to receive direction from others who have experience with writing and publishing.

One aspect of education that community writing groups provide is what Heller (1997) calls “pure and simple teaching and learning” (p. 17). This is where members learn different things from each other by attending the group. In an interview, Noah explained that he has attended his writing group for three years and has learned a lot from others in the group: “[The group has] really improved my writing. They did a workshop a couple times that taught you specific types of writing...like types of poetry, and how to do better in those... I have a mentor in the group that I go to for poetry, so I’ve experimented a little bit [with my writing]” (personal communication, April 2019). Therefore, in addition to Noah’s improvement overall in writing, he finds his writing group is a place to experiment with writing, more so than school had been for him. Noah explained,

When I first started writing poetry, it was difficult since I’m an academic, and it’s like, ‘Grammar doesn’t matter? What? I just write things? I can do it however I want? I don’t have to follow [the rules of] the English language?’...I’m trying to learn how to be more free with my poetry—I usually stick to the way that it’s traditionally taught in schools than more contemporary styles, like slam poetry or things like stream of consciousness or more modern forms (personal communication, April 2019).

Writing in this group is a much freer experience compared to school, where grammar seems to (still) be a dominant concern of teachers and students alike. In this group, Noah’s writing improved through learning and experimenting with different genres more easily than it had in his experiences in school.

Another “pure and simple teaching” example came from Milo, who learned skills about himself: “I never would have known that I’m good at networking and I’m good at facilitating groups and workshops—I never would have known that and I never would have tried it [if it wasn’t for this group]” (personal communication, April 2019). Milo explained that he is not currently in school or working, so this writing group was a “direction” for him, a constant; it was a space to learn about his skills, much like school or work. This group for Milo, as Heller (1997) explained, seems to be a way to participate in the world where he “could be, and be seen as, knowledgeable”

(p. xiv). Moving from a member to now a facilitator, Milo occupies a space of authority—or direction—that he did not previously occupy, and is seen as knowledgeable and capable, even though he does not have an extensive educational background. In other words, participating in the writing group is not only about working on writing, but they also provide experience in facilitation, teaching, and leadership.

These groups afford a space to be skilled at writing, even when other influences may contradict this idea. Although Noah has learned a lot through this group, he previously struggled with common stereotypes of what a writer is:

Before I started with this group, I considered myself not a writer, really bad at writing, not an English person. English was not my subject in school, at all, because how restrained it was, I guess. My mom kind of forced into the writing group because she wanted me to get out of the house and do something. I ended up really liking it, though, and stuck with it, and that's why I've been with it for so long (personal communication, April 2019).

As we can see through Noah's account, these thoughts—of not being a good writer—can often stall writers or even discourage them completely from writing, and can originate from images in the media, teachers, peers, parents, or the writer themselves. This stereotype of the writer is especially difficult for the LGBTQ+ writer. For so long, writing classrooms, where most of us learn about writing, has not considered the LGBTQ+ writer and has excluded queer topics. As Malinowitz (1995) pointed out, students “are told to be aware of issues of audience, subject, and purpose, and to claim textual authority. [But] consider the convoluted dimensions these rhetorical issues take on when lesbian and gay writers inevitably have to choose between risking a stance from an outlaw discourse or entering into the familiarity dominant discourses of heterosexuality” (p. 24). Depending on the audience and the purpose of the piece of writing, students may feel pressured to not disclose—or to disclose—their identity. In addition, students feel distanced from writing about certain topics and may be torn to be inclusive in their writing or to “blend in;” for

instance, students may grapple with using singular “they,” which may do not consider to be grammatically correct, instead of “he or she.” If this is the case, how can LGBTQ+ students ever see themselves as writers when they feel alienated by writing? But as Noah implied, within this writing group, he likes writing, can claim being a writer, and feels freer to write what he wishes.

However, many members within these groups who are already educated in writing and have a lot of experience. One member of an LGBTQ+ writing group, who completed graduate school, shared in a survey that she “like[s] the opportunity to meet with peers, provide feedback, and receive feedback” because she receives helpful feedback within the group. In addition, Marsha, who carries a master’s degree and has a lot of writing experience, explained that reading her work aloud helps her, and the group provides her a space to read and improve her work. Marsha’s group has people who have degrees like her, but there are also others who have no university experience. These groups contain less experienced, or younger, writers like Noah like traditional writing groups in the 1900s. But there are also more experienced writers who attend the group for similar reasons as these younger writers. These accounts suggest that people from all educational backgrounds can develop their writing in writing groups. In these LGBTQ+ writing groups, being around like-minded people who may share similar experiences and hardships makes the group more rewarding and seemingly easier to improve writing.

Educating the Community

In addition to educating members within the writing group itself, writing groups can educate their surrounding community. Historical LGBTQ+ organizations who published work, like ONE, DOB, and ACT UP, a group that sought to end AIDS, often educated the public about LGBTQ+ issues. According to Treichler (2012), “The 1980s also brought the rapid expansion of low-cost video equipment and local cable television stations that enabled AIDS advocates and

activists to create their own representations of the epidemic and counter the conventional wisdom” (p. 250). Some individuals were inspired to write print stories, including the popular New Yorker short story by Susan Sontag, “The Way We Live Now.” These publications and meetings functioned as counternarratives to a homophobic and transphobic world.

Though it is not a common practice of the group, Milo’s writing group has visited youth groups and provided workshops and other LGBTQ+ educational events for their community. Somewhat recently, Milo’s writing group functioned as a counternarrative to a hetero-centered sexual education:

We were also recently invited to a private school....The teacher at this private school wasn’t really sure who to reach out to when...they didn’t agree with our provincial government’s new sex ed policies, because part of [them] includes not learning about LGBTQ issues at all. They weren’t really sure who to reach out to, so they reached out to us, and we explained that we couldn’t really give [them] a health lesson, but they said, ‘That’s okay, you can still come to us.’ Then we gave them contacts for different people who are more health-focused, like the AIDS Society specifically (personal communication, April 2019).

Milo’s writing group, which is not advertised as a LGBTQ+ sexual education group in any way, functioned during this time as a knowledgeable source about LGBTQ+ topics and also pointed this teacher to other resources. This teacher, with the help of the internet, was able to reach out to Milo’s group and provide the students an alternative to the assumption that all schools should teach, by law, is heterosexual sex. Milo’s group in turn was able to give the teacher online resources that this class could use. Although this group’s long-term goals may not include educating the community like ONE, DOB, and ACT UP, Milo’s group acted as a broader community LGBTQ+ resource when resources were limited, something that would not occur in a non-identity writing group or even a non-LGBTQ+ group.

Writing Groups and Publishing: Traditional and Non-Traditional Methods

As I explained above, LGBTQ+ organizations published for a number of reasons and through less traditional means. Interestingly, two groups out of the four groups I interviewed indicated that traditional print publishing was a goal of their group. Other individuals, Milo, Marsha, and Daphne, indicated that they published work online or through other means. This demonstrates that publishing is very much a part of a LGBTQ+ writing group identity.

Publishing has been previously recognized by writing group scholars as a typical goal of identity-based writing groups. Mathieu et al. (2004), for instance, wrote about their Chicago writing group, *StreetWise*, which began as two editors and five homeless vendors of the *StreetWise* newspaper. One of their goals was to articulate “stories, ideas, and criticism ‘to a world that desperately needs to listen’” to homeless voices (p. 152). One of these stories covered by the group was about a *StreetWise* vendor who was washing an off-duty policeman’s car and was shot for allegedly spilling water near the policeman’s date. The writing group came together to highlight this story each week to get some sort of justice for this vendor. As we can see, sometimes writing groups organize for justice-oriented reasons. Publishing this story is a way to make sure that this truth is not erased. This is also what LGBTQ+ writing groups do, even if it is not deliberate.

Much of LGBTQ+ history and writing has been undocumented, unpublished, or not taught due to bias against queer individuals. This absence, or silence, Morris (2006) argued, equals death: if we do not “acknowledge...engage,” teach, and write about—in short, circulate—LGBTQ+ discourse, then we risk losing not only the past, but also the future (p. 149). This past discourse informs future discourse and tells us where we need to go from here. However, recent LGBTQ+ history has been documented through a variety of popular as well as underground publications, including zines and pamphlets, as I will discuss below.

Although none of the participants of these groups said explicitly that their goal was to record their voices because of fear of erasure—Dr. Stephanie Allen’s group was a bit more optimistic, in that they wished to create spaces that were not previously available—they did have a variety of other reasons why they publish. These participants publish a variety of genres, publish online and offline, and publish for personal reasons as well as, as Mathieu et al. (2004) stated, to build a “public identity,” receive funding, and gain “a measure of credibility within the community” (p. 165). In particular, the support—emotional, feedback, and knowledge—that LGBTQ+ writing groups yield encourage members to publish together and individually.

Dr. Allen’s group seems to publish for all of the reasons above. Indeed, this group was centered around publishing from the beginning. Dr. Allen began a small press that then resulted in collaboration with another member to form the writing group. Within this group, Dr. Allen and others have published collections of fiction together but also have individual pieces published as a result of meeting with this group. This group is one of the few spaces, according to Dr. Allen, that supports black lesbian and queer women. Dr. Allen affirmed that this group doesn’t “care as much getting validation from white folks, but we do care that people are paying attention to our work because that can provide opportunities for my writers” (personal communication, April 2019). One of the opportunities that one of the group members earned was being nominated for a Lambda Literary Award (a “Lammy,” which honor lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender books). This group’s goal of publishing—both together and individually—built a public identity that emphasizes the importance of black lesbian voices.

Similarly, Noah confirmed how his all-trans* writing group did a workshop on how to publish poetry, and because of this, Noah began submitting to literary journals. This group also publishes chapbooks together yearly, and they do a reading every April. Noah implied that this is

one reason why this group received funding. It is clear that publishing is central to this group's purpose and identity, and that publishing has helped grow this group.

Although Marsha's group does not focus on publishing, Marsha has written a musical and had it produced in New York for a few nights. "Actually, oddly enough...two people did [play parts in my musical]...I found my cast out of the writer's group" (personal communication, April 2019). Marsha's group helped her produce her art in an unexpected way. She is also expecting to produce another musical with her local chapter of the National Alliance of Mental Illness in October 2019. This LGBTQ+ writing group has provided Marsha a source of networking and community for her writing to come alive.

These groups and individuals have successfully built a public identity as not only a safe and welcoming space for more marginalized identities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, but also have earned community support through funding and other recognition. These groups have published through more traditional avenues and have been successful. Other members of these writing groups, however, have successfully published individually, through other means. But it seems as though publishing through popular and underground are equally respected and utilized within these groups.

For instance, Milo shared that his group creates zines that contain writing, poetry, and art made from group members. These zines are normally displayed and distributed the various events that the group goes to, including Pride, workshops they host, and open mic nights; they function as a way to attract members, build a network, and make friends. When I asked Milo if the zines were available online, he said that they weren't quite yet. Zines, which have a long history of documenting LGBTQ+ history and writing (see The Queer Zine Archive Project online, created by Milo Miller and Christopher Wilde), are an excellent way to "publish" work, especially non-

traditional work. Glover (2017) stated in an online article that zines are there to create art that isn't "restricted by industry rules." In other words, zines do not necessarily discriminate in the ways that literary magazines do. If you wish to create a piece with mixed media, you can do that in a zine (obviously, as long as the person piecing together the zine agrees). Zines can allow people to express themselves more freely, and it is clear they continue to be popular within LGBTQ+ writing communities.

In addition to zines, Milo also publishes online fan fiction and fan work written in and out of writing group on the website *Archive of Our Own*. Although this fan fiction site is not LGBTQ+-specific, Milo usually includes characters that identify as LGBTQ+. And, after a quick search, I found many LGBTQ+ threads: "all characters are LGBT," "LGBT Hogwarts," "Lots of LGBT Cats Actually." My search confirmed Milo's description of the site: "It's pretty innovative in terms of fan fiction sites...it's got a huge database and everything that has tons of different fan fiction and it's really easy to search through it" (personal communication, April 2019). Like zines, forums like this one provide a freer outlet where people can receive feedback on their writing.

Emotional Support

Unlike older studies about community writing groups in the 1980s, newer scholarship asserts that members receive emotional benefits from the groups, especially identity-based writing groups (Heller, 1997; Schell, 2013). Heller (1997) observed the Tenderloin Women's Writing Group in San Francisco and found that these members "boost[ed] identity and self-esteem—as people, as writers, and as public presences," "buil[t] an internal community of varied and broad-based relationships," and "support[ed] each other to take action in the world" (p. 17). Similarly, Schell (2013) wrote about Maxine Kingston, the founder of the Bay Area Veterans' Writing Group, who contended that writing allows these members to "write the unspeakable," to process

“chaos through story and poem...[to change] the past and [remake] the existing world,” and to connect with other veterans. These identity-based writing groups clearly offered more than simply a space to improve one’s writing.

Of 10 surveys completed in this project, all 10 individuals mentioned support in some way, whether it was “being part of a writing group” “community,” or “making friends,” the group being “friendly” and “fun,” or “safe and welcoming.” This support that these individuals receive seems to come from the connections that they make within the group. Specifically, these LGBTQ+ writing groups afford solace and hope for those who may not have an LGBTQ+ community elsewhere.

I propose that LGBTQ+ writing groups offer support like other LGBTQ+ non-writing groups, but these groups offer something more. LGBTQ+ groups, whether they are support groups or other clubs or organizations, are spaces with opportunities to feel safe and welcomed and make friends with other queer people, just as participants described these writing groups. But LGBTQ+ writing groups center writing, which means they have a different dynamic. These groups do not solely focus on their identities and realities, like a coming out support group, for instance. These writing group sessions are sometimes rooted in members’ realities, but they are sometimes based on fantasy, on hope, on goals (of writing and composing), and on topics previously unexplored. Members may write about topics that they have not spoken about before and may feel uncomfortable speaking about without a piece of writing in front of them. Writing and writing groups can provide members a vehicle to discuss LGBTQ+ issues without focusing on the person themselves.

Milo disclosed how his group was a community and even brought him hope: “I didn't realize how badly I needed a community before I joined. I was 18 and met friends who helped me get through life” (personal communication, April 2019). Milo continued,

I found out about [the group] when I went to a...PFLAG summer camp and I had only heard about it when I was 17, and in the summer I was going to be turning 18...I would have been too old to go [after this time]. I have never really had any community spaces before. The GSA at my high school was not great. So, being at camp was super, super, super cool and I was really sad that I would never be able to go again. So I found out about [the group] and I started going when it was still...at the coffee shop, and it was all people who were older than me [but a few people and I] became really good friends. I actually live with [these group members] now. It makes me really happy. [These group members] being my friends has really helped me through some of the toughest times in my life. Both explicitly by being there and being my friend when I'm having a hard time but also implicitly by being older than me...and being alive (personal communication, April 2019).

Unlike the gay-straight alliance at his school, Milo feels welcome and feels as though he belongs in his writing group. More than this, though, Milo feels he has found lifelong friends who he can depend on and provide him hope. As Mathieu (2005) argued, “Many writers have suggested that their interests in public or extracurricular writing...stem from their need for more hope and optimism for themselves...in a world of drastic economic inequity and political upheaval” (p. 13). Others have described this writing as some place to learn ways for acting in a “‘fragmented’ world dominated by ‘a culture of disconnect’ (George 2002)” (p. 13). Milo, who came to the group because he “wanted friends and to write more,” is one of these individuals who participates in this writing group to write to combat the feelings of fragmentation that Mathieu described. Milo could have easily continued to publish work online exclusively instead of seeking a face-to-face community or kept his writing private (extracurricular does not necessarily mean public writing). This is not to say that people cannot create connections online and have similar relationships—quite the contrary. However, Milo implies here that this writing group kept him on track with his writing goals, helped him push through difficult times, and made him hopeful for the future.

Because he participates in a writing group with writers who are near and queer and alive, this seems to be a way to resist disconnection from the world.

LGBTQ+ Writing Groups: Queer Writing Spaces, Spaces for Queer, Writing People, and Spaces for Writing Queer People

LGBTQ+ writing groups provide many of the same things that non-identity and identity-based writing groups do: improving writing, learning through others, educating communities, publishing opportunities, and emotional support. However, I maintain that LGBTQ+ writing groups also offer other aspects that other groups may not. I call these beneficial aspects “queer writing spaces,” “spaces for queer, writing people,” and “spaces for writing queer people.”

I define these terms as follows: queer writing spaces give people a place to try new things and go against what is normal—like trying different genres—in their writing. Writers in queer writing spaces might explore writing like fashion. They may decide they really like the tunic blouse (traditional poetry), but that they don’t enjoy the magenta feather boa (musicals). Spaces for queer, writing people are spaces where these writers feel safe coming to the writing group itself and expressing their identities, especially gender and sexuality. This is where someone may feel comfortable to wear an actual feather boa confidently to the group. Finally, spaces for writing queer people is still located within the group itself, but it takes place on a page, electronic or physical. All of these groups usually provide at least one of these three features, and some provide all three.

Queer Writing Spaces. Within all of these writing groups, members experiment within their writing. Members write in many different genres—from poetry to plays, different types of fiction, and zines—and even deconstruct these genres. While some members seem to stay within their writing comfort zone, others push the boundaries, thus providing queer writing spaces. As

Duncan (2018) expressed in an online piece about queer writers of today, “While operating in a culture that necessarily subverts what is ‘traditional,’ queer authors must find forms other than the perfectly resolved traditional novel, other than the narrative memoir, to tell their stories. These fragmented forms and unique structures allow queer authors to replicate what it’s like to exist outside of the ‘traditional narrative.’” Thus, queer writing spaces allow for experimentation, destruction, and creation.

Noah, as I mentioned above, has been experimenting with poetry and has been trying to break out of the typical expectations of writing in school—like not using Standard Edited American English. This is, of course, a constant work in progress. Moreover, Dr. Allen shared that she and the other facilitator of the group have put together an exercise for the group where they write outside of their comfort zones in terms of genres to “challenge our writers to think about craft” (personal communication, April 2019). For instance, Dr. Allen wrote a crime story, which was different for her because she usually writes literary fiction. In this sense, this group queered, or examined and experimented with, their go-to genres and the foundations of their writing. This queering resulted in writers finding something they had not before, and some even published these works.

Another aspect of queer writing spaces is deconstructing the traditional love stories of both same gender and different gender couples. Different gender couples in literature and film who still dominate how romance is defined include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Notebook*, which all have men and women fall in love despite outside forces or personal flaws. On the other hand, many same gender romances often end in tragedy, like *Brokeback Mountain* and *Angels in America*. More recently, though, films like *Love, Simon* emphasize love stories without tragic events. LGBTQ+ writing groups seem to want to break these stereotypes as well. For

instance, two writers in the writing group I facilitate have been writing young adult novels that do not end in death or devastation, which breaks away from the tragedy tradition of LGBTQ+ couples. Daphne, who was published in *Bi Women Quarterly* in 2011, wrote about her experience as a bi woman in the dating scene. In this short anecdote, Daphne recalls a man, whom she was not dating, asked her if she was seeing a “male or female” at the time. When she answered that she was seeing a man, he recoiled and said that they shouldn’t go out anymore because it was a “male territorial thing,” but if Daphne was seeing a woman, it would have been fine. This piece reflects situations unique to bisexual women in romantic relationships, which are few and far between. Daphne also works to correct people’s biases in this article: you should respect women dating women. Even people who claim to be progressive have archaic views of sexuality. Believe bisexuals. In addition to its brevity and incompleteness, which we may consider a challenge to traditional lengthy accounts of love, Daphne’s piece is situated in a more in-between subject: not tragic, not utopic. Just reality.

Spaces for Queer, Writing People. These groups provide spaces for queer, writing people that they may not have found in previous spaces, particularly the writing classroom. Malinowitz (1995) noted:

Elbow acknowledges that “it’s not just ‘mistakes’ or ‘bad writing’ we edit as we write. [But w]e also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings, as we do in speaking” (5), he rather glibly elides the whole question of how the material of this inner world, ostensibly so unpunctured by social complications, can ever *be* unacceptable, as well as how it can be transferred to the outer sphere without dire consequences for the writer. (p. 38)

In other words, the LGBTQ+ writer, in fear of judgment, may not be able to freewrite, as compositionists love to encourage students. They may not have the words to make their identity or thoughts palatable to their audience. And, as I noted above, they also may specifically exclude themselves, not disclose their identity, or feel distanced from writing about certain topics. As Milo

shared, this writing group is “a place to go where people understand being LGBTQ” and are able to share their identities in different ways (personal communication, April 2019).

Two of the groups in this study also provide queer spaces for more marginalized communities within the LGBTQ+ community: Dr. Allen’s group, which focuses on black lesbian voices, and Noah’s group, which only admits trans* youth. As I will detail below, trans* individuals have been, and are still being excluded within the LGBTQ+ community, and black individuals, particularly black lesbians, have not had the same relationship with writing as white LGBTQ+ individuals.

Historically, trans* individuals have been excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces, and trans* women have been excluded from all-women spaces. In 1973, two LGBTQ+ events occurred where trans* women were booed while onstage: folk singer Beth Elliot at the first National Lesbian Conference, and Sylvia Rivera at the New York City Pride Parade. This exclusion and transphobia within LGBTQ+ spaces has persisted; in 2016, Miriam Ben-Shalom, a gay rights activist and invitee to be the Grand Marshall in the Milwaukee Pride Parade (the committee rescinded their invitation after her comments), accused trans* women as a threat to girls and women, and has continued to speak out against trans* women.

It seems as though Noah’s writing group seems to have at least considered these issues or have experienced spaces that have excluded trans* people, because his writing group is limited to trans* youth only (all members are trans*, non-binary, or gender non-conforming), and “all the group facilitators are trans.” According to one of the group leaders’ surveys, it is important that these individuals

share exclusive space with other non-cisgender individuals. It promotes an atmosphere in which trans folks can be their whole selves and let their guard down a little. This is especially important for youth as they explore their identities and find their place in the world. As writers, the youth at [the group] can express themselves openly and freely,

without the burden of having to explain themselves to non-trans identified individuals (survey, March 2019).

What the group leader of this trans*-only writing group suggested is that trans* individuals are often marginalized within cisgender circles, including those who identify as LGBTQ+. But in these trans*-only spaces, they are unrestricted and able to focus on larger things, like writing, than having to explain who they are. These spaces, then, validate these folks' identities, which is out of the norm, which then is "queer."

Another traditionally marginalized group within the LGBTQ+ spectrum are people of color, especially the black community. Morgan (1996) affirmed that from the 1950s onward, black masculinity was tied to heterosexuality, and that to be gay was reserved only for white men. Those black individuals who identified as LGBTQ+ had to ask themselves: should I associate with white LGBTQ+ people, or heterosexual black people, both of whom may discriminate against me? As Conerly (1996) questioned, these individuals had to ask, which "identity is more important, which oppression is more oppressive, and which community is conducive to the sexual relationships [I] desire?" The answer to these questions resulted in erasure of parts of themselves.

In addition to gayness being linked to whiteness, literacy has also historically been associated with whiteness, and black LGBTQ+ history and writing have been lost or unrecorded because of this reason (Pritchard, 2016). However, Dr. Allen, pushes Pritchard's idea further: she explained that while there are spaces that publish black gay men's writing, she has found that "spaces [that publish black lesbians' writing] are still few and far between" (personal communication, April 2019). Because of the lack of spaces, Dr. Allen, along with other black lesbian women, created the small publishing house and writing group.

Dr. Allen emphasized that "one of the things that [she] make[s] clear is that the writing group is for everyone; anybody can come," but the group centers black lesbian voices (personal

communication, April 2019). This means that the group writes about and discusses black lesbian identity, and “if someone was there being disrespectful or being combative or aggressive toward black women and their writing,” Dr. Allen would ask them to leave (personal communication, April 2019). However, the group has not faced this issue so far.

As I mentioned above, one individual in this writing group has been nominated for a Lammy award, which Dr. Allen marked as an achievement:

I do think that [being nominated for an award] is such a marker for us...for validation. Even though I know what we're doing is important and valid, we can't deny the fact that getting any kind of recognition from the larger literary world, it means something for my writers because it means more book sales for them, they get more opportunities (personal communication, April 2019).

This sort of validation offers more opportunities for these writers, which then, in turn, means that black lesbian voices will become more prominent. As I noted in the previous section, however, Dr. Allen and her writers are not interested in receiving validation from white people; they are doing this for themselves. These writers, if we returned to Conerly's (1996) claim about choosing between communities, chose a secret third option: leaving both white LGBTQ+ and heterosexual black individuals behind and decided to bet on themselves.

Spaces for queer, writing people, like these writing groups, are spaces where queer individuals feel safer compared to other spaces. Within the trans* youth writing group and the black lesbian writing group, members are surrounded by like-minded individuals who understand being marginalized and have similar goals.

Spaces for Writing Queer People. All of the groups in this study, which are supposed to be safe, writing spaces for queer people, are advertised as LGBTQ+ groups. Of the people surveyed and interviewed, 9 identified as LGBTQ+ (only 1 person identified as heterosexual). But is there anything else that makes these groups specifically LGBTQ+ or queer? Each member that

I interviewed explained that they wrote about their identities, especially sexual identities, in some way.

These writers, which I briefly discuss within the section “spaces for queer, writing people,” tend to challenge traditional LGBTQ+ characters within fiction. For instance, Malinowitz (1995) reminded us that gay and lesbian characters were historically used as metaphors for “sin, sickness, criminality, bourgeois decadence, and the demise of the family” (p. 111). Even today, LGBTQ+ characters are often stuck in specific roles, from the “gay best friend,” to the promiscuous bisexual woman, to the character who is killed off. These writers seek to write full LGBTQ+ characters who are not reduced.

Marsha and Milo, who tend to write fictional accounts of LGBTQ+ characters, write characters with a variety of sexual orientations and other marginalized identities. Even though Marsha at first had to think about if she wrote about sexual identity, she shared:

As far as...my disability, that comes up...in my novel I wrote about an asexual...but there was a lot of gay moments in it...In my musical, the one that got produced [in 2013], that one had mentally ill bisexual lawyer...it featured...a transsexual...and everybody wanted the transsexual. Everybody was gay, basically (personal communication, April 2019).

Similarly, when I asked Milo about writing about identity, he responded:

Most of my writing, whether it’s fan fiction or original writing, centers on characters who are LGBTQ+, like a lot of them are trans, and pretty much all of them are gay or bi or queer...I have very limited straight characters that I work with. I write a lot about characters who have different disabilities and disorders, like Tourette’s a lot....I guess I write what is considered YA, so I write a lot about characters who are learning about accepting themselves, so it works really well (personal communication, April 2019).

These two individuals in particular not only write about sexual identity, but also include disabilities and coming of age topics. These characters are not just known as “the LGBTQ+ character or “the disabled character;” they have complex needs, desires, and roles which is very different from LGBTQ+ characters in popular media.

Noah and Daphne both write about their own personal stories and others' stories, just in different ways. Noah frequently writes love poetry and shared that he "wrote the poetry only using 'they' pronouns for both parties, so you could think of it as whoever you wanted it to be" (personal communication, April 2019). Similarly, Daphne's article about her dating experience is unique to bisexual individuals. These topics, which may not be understood in other writing groups, are seemingly welcomed and encouraged in these LGBTQ+ writing groups.

Conclusion

This chapter explores how LGBTQ+ writing groups serve many other purposes besides teaching people how to write. They also are spaces where members learn about themselves, find validation for their voices through publishing and having spaces for those marginalized within the LGBTQ+ community, connect with the community outside of the group, find emotional support, and make lifelong friends. These groups do not have only a single purpose or function, but rather take on and allow for a myriad of identities.

CHAPTER 4: “EVERYTHING IS SEX, EXCEPT SEX, WHICH IS POWER”: LGBTQ+ WRITING GROUPS AND THE HIERARCHIES AND CONFLICTS WITHIN

Introduction

This chapter tells the story of the LGBTQ+ writing group that I facilitate, a story that I continue to ruminate on due to its bewildering and troublesome nature. However, before I get into this story, I must first establish that the conflicts and power structures I will describe here are not unique to writing groups, and they are not unique to LGBTQ+ writing groups. What they mean for writing groups is important, though: many conflicts in the group could mean low participation and/or attendance. Some institutions, like the one that hosts the writing group I facilitate, provide facilitator training for facilitators to attend to conflicts. In these instances of conflicts, power structures, as seen in this chapter, become apparent. Hierarchies formed within writing groups can result in members feeling out of place and unimportant. Since both attendance (Gere, 1987) and compatibility of personalities (Beckstead et al., 2004; Brooks, 1997; Cotich et al., 1994) are often what keep community writing groups alive, examining and understanding conflicts (through rhetorical listening) such as those that emerged in my group is important for those hoping to maintain and grow LGBTQ+ writing groups of their own.

My group began in 2018, and at a meeting a few months after the writing group began, three people, whom I will call Rae, Jaxon, and Misti, were new additions to the writing group. This was typical early on for our group: people would come and go, and sometimes there would be all new members at a session. This is not how I intended sessions to go—I was hoping to build a community of writers who would return most sessions (which eventually happened later on in the group). The session that Rae, Jaxon, and Misti joined began, as always, with introductions: names, pronouns, sexuality (if they desire to disclose this information), and why they decided to join the group. Rae, who was the last person to share, began to tell her life story. She identified as

bisexual but preferred women now because of her experiences with men. She was homeless, and she was experiencing discrimination against her black identity, being homeless, and struggling with addiction. It was apparent that telling us her reality brought on painful emotions: she wiped tears from her face and held herself.

After Rae finished, I thanked her for sharing and told her we would help support her in the best ways that we could. Jaxon and Misti also reassured her that she was a strong person with all that she had endured. *This is going to be a great group session*, I thought. *Rae is going to get some emotional support, Jaxon and Misti seem excited about the group, and hopefully they will all come back and stay.* However, Jaxon and Misti's attitudes drastically changed from the beginning of the session to the end. While the group was writing, there were several other times where Rae burst into tears and held herself but apologized to us. I tried my best to ignore it, thinking that drawing attention to her tears might make her and the others uncomfortable. But as I stole looks at Jaxon and Misti, I realized that they were already uneasy. They exchanged troubled and anxious looks with each other—not with me—that became more consistent as Rae continued to sob quietly from across the table.

At the end of the group session, Rae asked if anyone had any money for the bus or could give her a ride. At that time, my car was on the fritz, and I didn't have any money to spare. Jaxon and Misti reluctantly took out their wallets and gave her some funds for the bus, but they did not seem to be bothered by this. As we were packing up, Jaxon, Misti, and I were talking about a local college near where they lived. Rae, fumbling with her wheeled backpack, grumbled about the bus to herself, and then said more audibly how "Arabs were cheap" and ruining the city (meaning the city of Detroit). The two group members froze from putting their belongings away, and I began to protest, "Well, that's not true..." but Rae was already walking toward the door. I apologized to

Jaxon and Misti for her racist comment, and they seemed to understand. But it still bothered me later after I drove home; I wanted everyone to feel welcome, and for them to understand that neither the group nor the institution associated with the group tolerated racism or any other discriminatory behavior. I texted Misti and apologized again, and she said not to worry about it. However, that was the last time I ever saw Jaxon and Misti.

This story demonstrates specific conflicts of my writing group that reflect the culture of our area. To contextualize, the group is in metro Detroit. Our writing group meets about 12 miles north of the city of Detroit, in Ferndale, a first-ring suburb that is ostensibly is the bridge between the wealthier suburbs of northern metro Detroit, like Royal Oak, and poorer neighborhoods of the city of Detroit. While Ferndale has been and continues to be gentrified, there are still fewer wealthy individuals that live closer to the Detroit side of the city (Gustafson, 2018; Hammond, 2018). In addition, this city is the beginning of the “whiter” side of Detroit: the more north one travels from the city of Detroit, the African American population decreases (see Hulett, 2012). If we branch out southwest of Detroit, we find another minority population, Arab Americans. The city of Detroit houses much of the African American population in (metro) Detroit, and Dearborn, just 10 miles away from Detroit, has the largest proportion of Arab Americans in one city. However, there is severe segregation overall between black and Arab communities. Indeed, as Janomohamed (2019) acknowledged in the online article about the divide between these communities, “interactions between Arabs and African Americans are usually only transactional and rarely social, which often leads to flash points.” Overall, there is stereotyping and racism from both communities toward the other community, and this seems more prevalent with older residents (Foley, 2016).

This brings us back to our conflict above. Rae, an older black woman, ostensibly holds some of these stereotypes due to where she grew up and what she was taught, and this is obvious

from her comments. On the other hand, Jaxon and Misti, both white, are from an area about 20 miles north of Detroit. This area is overall wealthier and has more white residents compared to the city of Detroit and Ferndale. Their behavior, along with their background, suggests that they do not regularly face the clashing of cultures, racist comments, and individuals who face mental health issues. Even though Rae, Jaxon, and Misti are all from the Detroit area and identify as LGBTQ+, they live very different lives. What is interesting is how Rae, who holds many marginalized identities, affected the rest of the group; she was powerful in this moment, even when I tried to diffuse the situation; she had power over the rest of the group members through her words and actions. As I revisit this conflict, I recall how powerless I felt. I believe this feeling is due to the intense emotions I was feeling because of Rae's crying and her story, Rae's request for money, and the unexpected racism to end the session. Even as I tried to refute or combat each of these (potential) conflicts, I did not feel like my words were enough to make Jaxon and Misti comfortable or to help Rae's awareness of the people around her. If I received more training or expressed that there are certain steps we take to understand conflicts, such as using rhetorical listening, this whole event may have been prevented or the three members may have returned.

Within this group, I function as the facilitator, meaning I organize events, bring writing activities and prompts, and prompt the group to give feedback and end our sessions. I attempt to create a space where authority is shared—group members share if/when they want and ask for the feedback that they want, which is common in community writing groups (Brooks, 1997; Cotich et al., 1994; Gere, 1987; Heller 1997). I also ask for feedback about the group structure and how we can change it to make sure it is meeting members' needs, but often people only attend once or there is no critique from regular members. I am treated as an authority in this group; one member in particular is incredibly polite and treats me as though I am a teacher—thanking me for doing

things and telling me of their progress on their work. Another person once asked me if they could use the bathroom during our group. Part of this, I believe, has to do with my identity. I identify as a white (I have ancestors from Scandinavian/Nordic countries, Poland, and Wales), femme-looking queer woman with no apparent disabilities. I look young for my age, but that does not seem to deter people from looking to me as an authority figure. Group members are aware that I am earning my PhD in English and that I have taught writing classes before. I try to be as welcoming and democratic as possible within the group, to try to break down power structures. But a combination of my whiteness and education, along with member's indifference and believing whatever I choose will be good for them, seems to overshadow the democracy within the group. But as we can see in the story above, Rae held a lot of power during that session, and Jaxon and Misti exercised their power not to come back.

After this situation, I wondered if other LGBTQ+ writing groups had similar power structures—if they strived to be group-centered but at the same time depended on facilitators to organize the group and to handle conflicts such as discrimination and other disagreements, including clashing expectations between group members. Most writing group research (Brooks, 1997; Cotich et al., 1994; Gere, 1987) suggested that community writing groups were only positive, affirming spaces, providing “a sense of commitment, security, structure, collaboration, affirmation, and discipline” and “changed lives, made them [group members] whole” (Brooks, 1997, p. 7). Even Heller (1997), who highlighted writing group members' struggles with problems like Rae's (homelessness, poverty, and addiction), emphasized how the Tenderloin writing workshop was a “group of ‘sisters’ who forge bonds through individual and collective performance” (p. xiii). Until Westbrook (2004), who argued that community writing groups are contact zones and studied “the role that conflict plays in community writing groups,” no other

writing group research even hinted at the conflicts or struggles of power within these groups. However, though Westbrook maintained that there are conflicts in these writing groups, she still perceived community writing groups as democratic, non-hierarchical, and existing “outside the hierarchical power structures of university” (Westbrook, 2004, p. 232). In my own experience with my community writing group, though, this simply was not true; although the university may not directly have a hand in writing groups’ proceedings, and there isn’t necessarily a teacher or student relationship, there are still visible, or what I call “purposeful” and invisible, or “arbitrary” workings of power that shape the writing groups. Purposeful power can be defined as something that is immediately measurable; for instance, the work that facilitators do demonstrate their power in the group. This work includes organizing writing group sessions and the space and addressing and combating conflict. On the other hand, arbitrary power that writing group facilitators and other members hold may not be easily measured and depend on certain situations (as the situation above demonstrated); this includes being given power by others, and social privileges like whiteness, which is linked to “good writing” (see Inoue, 2016; Ruiz, 2016; Smitherman, 1986; Villanueva, 1993), being a majority within the group, or being educated. Though these privileges may seem “intentional,” or well-known at least, they do fluctuate depending on the group, which is why I classify these examples as arbitrary power. Finally, I will also discuss “power” that people hold in general (which may be purposeful or arbitrary). Therefore, the question guiding this chapter is, how does power function within LGBTQ+ writing groups?

Through surveys and interviews of other LGBTQ+ community writing groups, I found that these groups are not wholly harmonious and non-hierarchical (using Gere’s (1987) definition) as community writing group research has suggested. The facilitators within these groups attempted to equally distribute power in their group, but when conflicts occurred, facilitators were generally

expected to resolve them. In these situations, facilitators receive arbitrary, or temporary, power. Arbitrary power is needed in some groups—especially youth groups—to protect members and sustain the groups’ interests and agenda. However, if the group is interested in being as equitable as possible and for facilitators to be relieved of sole responsibility in conflicts, I argue these writing groups should use Ratcliffe’s (2005) rhetorical listening as a basis to navigate conflicts. In order to achieve the “intense trust in the other members” that is necessary for writing groups to thrive and remain sustainable, I find that members must make every effort to understand all points of view in conflicts (Beckstead et al., 2004, p. 194).

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on two out of the four groups that I interviewed. The first group was located in Canada and are all LGBTQ+ teens and young adults, including Milo, the facilitator. The second group, facilitated by Daphne and including members Marsha, Maya, Carol and Josh, was located on the U.S. east coast. Members in this group varied in age (the members that completed surveys ranged from ages 18 to 54 years), but most identified as white and/or Caucasian, LGBTQ+, and lived in or near the city where the group met. In the surveys and interviews, these groups recounted the conflicts and power struggles they had faced throughout their time in the writing group.

Facilitators Distributing Power

In both groups, LGBTQ+ writing group facilitators emphasized the importance of group members’ input to shape the group. Milo’s group, which was transitioning between facilitators at the time of the study, was described as “youth-led” by one of the previous facilitators of the group: “[this] means that authority functions to ask what members want to do and find ways to facilitate those ideas, while mediating discussions and leading activities as needed” (personal communication, April 2019). In other words, the facilitator’s role in this group was oriented around

the interests of members but also appeared to be “primarily organizational” (Westbrook, 2004, p. 234). I was unable to interview any of the youth, due to the constraints of this project, so it is unclear whether members truly felt as though the group was member-led. However, Milo, who identified as white and agender/trans*, disclosed that the regular members “tell [Milo] about stuff that’s going on with their school and ways they are having to fight the administration, and things that they need help with” (personal communication, April 2019). This indicates that these members can express themselves and seek help with issues they face, which means they are comfortable with Milo and the group. The members also see Milo as a mentor and a leader, which suggests these members give Milo arbitrary power. Though we may be able to measure or “see” this sort of power—because Milo helps members with their issues—this type of power is based on special sets of circumstances that may not extend to all other LGBTQ+ writing groups.

Similarly, Daphne’s group appeared to be organized to meet the majority of the group’s preferences. Facilitator Daphne, a white and Greek, bisexual (“much closer to lesbian than heterosexual”) woman with a master of arts degree, described herself as “laid back” and “an introvert,” and explained that “core members in the group are pretty good at combating [issues] themselves...Sometimes, we have a member who wants to read forever, and I sometimes step in and cut them off and sometimes I don't. I don't like confrontation” (personal communication, April 2019). The core group members seem to either have acquired some authority because of Daphne’s personality or, as Gere (1987) outlined, the non-hierarchical framework for writing groups succeeded in this group: “group members simultaneously give and accept authority [...] Because authority originates in individual members [compared to school-sponsored groups] rather than in something or someone outside themselves, it always returns to them” (p. 50). Daphne does not

have to act as a mediator or an authority in many situations, which means, on the surface, Daphne's group seems to be equivalent to the non-hierarchical community writing group.

Nevertheless, even though many of the core members of Daphne's group felt empowered to handle conflicts, the group was not necessarily can be non-hierarchical; as I will discuss later, although Daphne described the group members as being able to "combat issues themselves," a few of these core members did not feel as though they had authority within the group. Even though this group was intentional about avoiding a structure in which one person holds most of the power, this study found that, in practice, not all members had equal authority within the group.

Conflicts and Power

As I outlined in my writing group story, there are conflicts, or struggles of power, as I describe them, within these LGBTQ+ writing groups. These struggles of power may be considered arbitrary workings of power since who holds power is dependent on the situation and the individuals who are involved. The outcome of the struggle may follow typical patterns (for example, facilitators or long time group members may have the upper hand), but it also is contingent on the group. In the following examples, struggles of power occur between a single member against another member or a single member and the facilitator and/or the group (I will discuss conflict between institutions and the group later). During the conflicts in Milo's LGBTQ+ youth writing group, recollections from Milo and Sarah, demonstrate that facilitators make decisions in agreement with the majority the majority of the group, and they resolve issues between other members or correct a member's behavior to fit the expectations of the group. However, when the group does not have a facilitator and the "core" group combats issues, like Daphne's group, members who are affected by the conflict leave the group. In these specific cases, a facilitator or facilitators seem necessary.

Some of the struggles of power between facilitators and members in the LGBTQ+ writing groups stem from the expectations of what an LGBTQ+ writing group should include or how it should function, including some members' expectations that the group might lead to finding romance or sexual relations. Sarah, one of the previous facilitators of Milo's group, shared a story about how one member, whom I will call Ryan, had the wrong idea about the youth-centered writing group:

We had an issue once where a member was a cis man in his early twenties who made an inappropriate joke about being present to find someone to ask out for drinks. We gently talked to him separately about how most of our members aren't old enough to drink in the first place, and secondly, as someone older it was his responsibility not to make younger members uncomfortable, and it was inappropriate to flirt or even imply flirtation around teenagers. He stopped. He also [stopped] coming to the group a few meets later, which may or may not have been related. (personal communication, April 2019)

Though Ryan was joking, there may have been truth to his stated reason for joining this group; his assumption that other members may be open to getting a drink with him outside of the writing group might not have been unfounded. Gay bars have been a space for people with marginalized sexualities and genders to escape persecution and to find love, romance, and sex for decades. Today, alcohol is still considered central to LGBTQ+ identity (Bendix, 2019; Emslie et al, 2017). Only recently have people acknowledged that sober LGBTQ+ spaces—like these writing groups—are needed (Bendix, 2019; Villarreal, 2019). These spaces are also needed for youth and people in sobriety who cannot participate in this aspect of LGBTQ+ culture.

The fact that Ryan expected to use this group to find someone to socialize with and then presumably hook up with directly clashed with the mission of this group. Previous facilitator Sarah founded this group because she “realized that many of [her] peers as young queer people didn't have anywhere to meet likeminded queer people and share interests and make friends,” so she and the other facilitator made a group centered around writing. In these situations, I submit that facilitators function as the “face of the group;” they represent the whole group and the interests of

the group. For this group in particular, it seems important that there are facilitators that address conflicts due to the age of the members. LGBTQ+ youth are still learning about themselves, may not have support at home, and acquiring skills on how to address conflict in healthy ways, and the facilitators can model this structure. The power that the facilitators have in this situation is ostensibly to help the group members and group overall.

Milo, the current facilitator of the youth-led group, also recalled an instance where a series of uncomfortable conversations caused conflict within his group. In this case, “one person was figuring out their kink identity and was bringing it into the space pretty much unprompted.” Milo explained how this topic made group members uncomfortable, especially one in particular. Milo and another facilitator were planning to intervene the next meeting; however, before they were able, an argument broke out between the two group members, and one of the members ended up leaving. Milo further clarified the facilitators’ stance on the issue: “even if your kink, or how you’re presenting or engaging with it right now, even if it’s not technically...sexual right now, it still is...we have minors in our group, and we are at a public library” (personal communication, April 2019).

This is a situation where a member expected to be able to express these feelings since kinks are sexual in nature and often a marginalized part of sexuality, which is at the center of the group’s purpose. But due to the members’ ages and the place of the group, and perhaps some other reasons Milo did not disclose, Milo was not comfortable fielding questions and facilitating this sort of conversation. Interestingly, since Milo and the other facilitator did not intervene immediately, the member who was uncomfortable took it upon themselves to address the issue, and there was a struggle of power between the two members. Seemingly, the member who stayed “won” this conflict since they were able to stay in the group, which was what they wanted. However, the other

member exercised their power to leave the group, so in this way, both members held some power in this situation, but the facilitator and other members did not have power. Conflicts within the group result in a member or part of the group to hold power while the others do not, which means the power does fluctuate in these groups, but they still are hierarchical and one-sided in nature. However, these examples demonstrate that having a facilitator, especially within youth LGBTQ+ writing groups, can be useful in dealing with conflict.

Similar to Milo's group, some members of Daphne's group do not have the same expectations of how the group is run and occasionally have disagreements. Daphne's group, according to the surveys, sometimes "had disputes" and "[had] an argumentative person [join]." Another person described the group as made up of "jerks," but that they all get along. This group, by many members, was described as more of a "social group that sometimes shares writing." This group first shared writing and then ended by playing games and socializing. For some members, this was the perfect group organization: out of the six members that completed surveys, five members would not change the group or only used positive words to describe the group. Some highlights include:

"We have fun, everyone makes me laugh."

"[My favorite thing about the group is t]he friends I've made."

It seems as though the majority of people enjoy the group as more of a social group. However, the emphasis on building community over working on writing has caused some tension within the group.

Two members in this group, one of whom I was able to interview, wanted the writing group to emphasize writing and feedback. Gere (1987) conceded that how compositionists have defined writing groups is ambiguous, but she found that "writing groups highlight the social dimension of

writing” (p. 3). Nevertheless, the groups that Gere and others have studied emphasized writing instead of a mostly social atmosphere. Marsha appreciated the social atmosphere to an extent:

I like [this group] because it’s a good place to hang out...[but] I feel in some ways it’s a writing group in name only, three-fourths of the time. So when it comes down to talking about our writing, I feel some people just want to rush through so we can get to the game play. I mean, the place where the group is held] attracts a lot of people for socialization. (personal communication, April 2019).

As Marsha suggested, what this place is known for and how people usually interact within this center affects how this group functions and how members understand the purpose of the group. Although this is a writing group by name and a few members wish to focus on shared writing, this is ultimately overruled by the group majority, and the identity of the group does not change: it is a social group that sometimes shares writing.

In this group, the group majority affected the group's structure, and not everyone received equal amounts of power. Power within community writing groups, Westbrook (2004) analyzed, “seems to come from being a writer...Writers have the power not only to create a story but also to assert their worldviews. And because everyone in the writing group takes turns being reader and writer, the power shifts, constantly from member to member” (p. 246). However, in this group, not everyone takes turns being reader and writer, which means not everyone may have the chance to be vulnerable in sharing their own writing. In this group, the general writer actually does not have much power due to two reasons. One, since the group majority wishes to socialize and play games, this leads to the “rushing” that Marsha mentioned. Two, other members do not provide much feedback. Marsha stated, “I think a lot of people don’t want to criticize each other’s writings, and that just leads to a lack of overall feedback” (personal communication, April 2019). Marsha clarified that some members will comment on the writing, and she receives helpful feedback some of the time. But the feedback is often only positive, and she is looking for constructive feedback. Although Marsha holds power when she reads her writing to the group and can decide what she

wants to do with the feedback, the other group members still hold a lot of power; they decide whether or not to provide constructive feedback or to not provide feedback at all. As I will explain below, Daphne's group may benefit from using rhetorical listening as a basis for these conflicts in the group.

On the other hand, there are members, whom I will refer to as Maya, Carol, and Josh, who completed surveys and felt strongly that they received effective feedback from this group. In order to understand the group better, it is important to know who these individuals were as well as who Marsha was. As with the story of my group, considering member's identities, their experiences of writing, and what expectations they have of the writing group help us as outsiders understand Marsha's frustration and other member's contentment with the group. Marsha was a white lesbian woman between 35-44 years of age, atheist, had three disabilities, used to attend the group regularly, and held a master's degree and wrote for her job. Maya was a Hispanic/Latina bisexual woman between 18-24 years of age, Roman Catholic, had no disabilities, attended the group regularly and was working on her bachelor's degree. Carol was a white heterosexual woman between 45-54 years of age, Jewish but did not consistently practice Judaism, had no disabilities, attended the group sometimes, and completed at least some graduate school. Josh was a white gay man between the ages of 35-44, was not religious, had no disabilities, attended the group regularly, and held a bachelor's degree.

At a glance, the differences in identity and privileges between these four individuals are evident. However, if we compare the three others to only Marsha, we notice that Marsha had the most formal education out of all of them. This suggests that Marsha may have been looking for feedback that others were unable to give. Marsha had been writing for a while, in many different contexts; she wrote for work, had been published, and had participated in other writing groups

outside of this one. It is probable that individuals in this group were aware of Marsha's educational and writing background since Marsha had been attending the group for a while. These individuals genuinely might not have known how to critique Marsha's writing, or might have felt like Marsha knows best, and this is where the conflict for Marsha arises. It is unclear why the other members, especially Carol, who have some graduate school experience, and Josh, who holds a bachelor's degree and attends regularly, were satisfied with the feedback they received. It could be that they do not share their writing that often. On the other hand, perhaps they appreciate the positive feedback that this group gives or they truly do feel as though the feedback they get is helpful in improving their writing. Regardless, listening to these members' experiences in the group may help Marsha get what she wants and others as well.

It is also possible that some members felt out of place themselves—that they did not hold arbitrary power—because of their minority status within the group. Maya, who was younger and had only completed some college, could have felt as though other, more experienced, members provided more helpful feedback for Marsha. In addition, as Daphne the facilitator described, the center at which this group was held was mostly white (as was the group), which is odd for their location. The largest city nearby, less than 5 miles away from where the group meets, has a large population of Latinx or Hispanic individuals; according to the 2018 U.S. Census, just over half of the population label themselves as such, and only 22% label themselves as “white only,” not Hispanic/Latinx. The overwhelming whiteness of the center and the group itself may have made people of color, like Maya, feel out of place or as though she could not speak up.

Moreover, Carol, someone who would be considered a majority in other groups, was a minority in this group. She identified as heterosexual and only attended the group sometimes. Since this was a group based around LGBTQ+ identity and had members that, as Marsha

described, “look forward...all week long [to the group],” Carol may have felt like her voice was not as valuable as other members who attended regularly and identified as LGBTQ+. From the outside, Marsha’s account and the other member’s identities can at least begin to explain the context of the group’s occasional conflict and tell us why Marsha’s feedback is inadequate to her but why other members are content with their feedback.

Institutional Influence

Although I already discussed how individual participant’s education may shape feedback and expectations of community writing groups, I have only briefly mentioned the institutions that house these two writing groups. As mentioned before, Milo’s group takes place in a public library. Daphne’s group meets at an LGBTQ+ center in a boardroom. Community writing group scholars, like Gere (1987) and Westbrook (2004), call attention to the fact that community groups are outside of university power structures. However, they do not acknowledge that other institutions may influence and hold purposeful power. As Grabill (2001) affirmed, “All literacy activity takes place *within* or *with reference to* specific social institutions, and any attempt to understand literate practices without understanding the institutions that make certain practices possible and valuable fails to account for how and why literate practices look the way they do” (original emphasis, p. 7). Though Grabill was thinking specifically about community-based adult education institutions, where the whole institution/building was based around their definitions of and goals about literacy, this can be applied to all of the spaces where community writing groups take place. The activities that take place within these groups can be understood as literacy activities, whether it be writing, reading, speaking, or listening, between group members. To an extent, the institutions, or the people within that make up this place, have control over what the writing group discusses, how the group runs, and where the group meets.

While the facilitators ultimately were the ones to quash the conversation about kink identity, if you recall, Milo mentioned the space—a public library—as a reason why he was not comfortable with this conversation, along with the group participants’ age. Previously, Milo’s group was held in a coffee shop with a slightly older crowd, 20- and 30-year olds instead of teens, but then moved to a library after they won a grant after “refocus[ing their] goals of making community for LGBTQ youth” in their area, Milo shared. Milo appreciates the library because of his anxiety. He explained, “Having conversations like this [interview] was really hard for me when we were in an open space.” But being within the library has made Milo think about what the group can and cannot do. There have been times when library staff “came to tell the group to be quiet.” This is an example of both purposeful power and arbitrary power: the warnings are meant to ensure everyone follows the rules of the institution overall, but it depends on the members of the institution (and other factors) to determine what volume is “too loud.” The space and the staff ultimately affect what kinds of conversations the group has and the volume of their activities and make members uncomfortable.

Similarly, Daphne’s group ran into some issues when the writing group held their meetings in the lobby of the center. Someone at the center’s desk said the group was “being too loud and telling sexually inappropriate stories.” In this instance, the institution decided which volume and conversations were not appropriate for the LGBTQ+ center and eventually told the group; once again, these members hold both purposeful and arbitrary power. But instead of immediately coming to Daphne with this complaint, there were conversations about her conducted without her knowledge via e-mail. Daphne was then accidentally included in the entire e-mail chain and told me, “It was a whole big thing by the time it got to me.” Daphne’s group received their own room, but there was still some tension between the center and the writing group; one participant in a

survey wished that the group “wasn’t so isolated from the rest of the center.” This, of course, changed the relationship between the institution and the writing group, but the institution continued to affect the literacy practices of this group. Marsha expressed that the center “attracts a lot of people for socialization,” which may be why the group is so focused on games and socialization. Many of the groups at this center are support groups, but they also have meetings and groups dedicated to meeting people within certain age groups, yoga, and Dungeons and Dragons. This group overall had a rather complicated relationship with the center.

Through their actions, these institutions reveal their beliefs that the appropriate types of literacy practices within these spaces are those that are not too loud or too sexually explicit. Milo and Daphne’s groups must subscribe to these literacy practices in order to continue using these institutions’ spaces. But perhaps power can nevertheless be negotiated between the groups and their spaces/ host institutions.

Power through Attendance

Thus far in my analysis of power relationships between facilitators, group members, and institutions, it may seem like group members do not hold much power within community writing groups. But if we return to the story of my own group, from the beginning of this chapter, we remember that Jaxon and Misti left the group, presumably because they felt uncomfortable. Gere (1987) contended that some of the members' power is in “retain[ing] the right to leave the group ” if they choose to do so (p. 50). I agree with Gere; power that all group members hold is through showing up, not showing up, or leaving the group for good, and attendance is what maintains many community writing groups.

Scholars have commented on the waxing and waning of community writing group attendance (Beckstead et al., 2004; Heller, 1997; Mathieu et al., 2004), but most of the time authors

chalk it up to the nature of the writing group or explain that members had conflicts, such as work, school, or taking care of their children/grandchildren. Mathieu et al. (2004) reported that two members had “either left Chicago or died (serious medical concerns cause[d them] to fear the latter)” since they had not seen the members in over a year (p. 153). In writing group scholarship so far, we do not have information about or from individuals who stopped coming to the group, who distanced themselves from groups.

Milo and Marsha each reported experiences where people had left their groups because of incompatible personalities. Though Milo was not present at the meeting in question, he described a conflict between two members who had personal issues with each other that “they brought to the space and it ended up coming to a head in one of our meetings...[the group leader at the time] said he didn’t have time to deal with it because of how it worked...the one person ended up screaming and storming out.” Although Marsha did not report any screaming, there have been members, including herself, who quietly left the group due to the negativity of a group member. “This ultimately affects the dynamics of the group, but it also is freeing for members for whom the group no longer serves.

Rhetorical Listening for Conflicts

But what about the facilitator who wishes to understand the conflicts and power within their groups and make their groups more equitable? What about the members who want to stick around instead of leaving but wish for more input and/or less conflict within the group? Do they simply disrupt the group to achieve more power? As fun as that sounds, it is not sustainable for an individual or the group overall, especially if these members care at all about the group. For LGBTQ+ writing groups in particular, Marsha admitted, “It is hard to find a gay writing group [the area where I live].” This is the same for people in my area, and I imagine that this is true for

many others. Just through my initial internet research, I only found two LGBTQ+ writing groups with an online presence in Michigan, and they are on opposite sides of the state. The same is true for Milo and Daphne's groups; their group was the only in their immediate area (at least with an online presence).

My recommendation for groups who wish to understand and address the conflicts is to use what Ratcliffe (2005) dubbed "rhetorical listening," when people choose "a stance of openness...in relation to *any* person, text, or culture" (p. 17). Rhetorical listening comprises of four actions: (1) promoting an understanding of self and others; (2) using accountability logic—or "how all of us are...culturally implicated in effects of the past...and, thus, accountable for what we do about situations now" (p. 32); (3) locating identifications across commonalities and differences (not either/or, but both simultaneously); and (4) analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function (p. 26). Rhetorical listening may not resolve all conflicts, but it will at least spark better conversations about issues at hand and both purposeful and arbitrary power. In this section, I will use the steps of rhetorical listening to revisit the conflicts and power dynamics that I've described in this chapter, offering examples of how this framework might have worked to strengthen the groups and empower their participants.

Promoting an understanding of self and others. If Rae, Jaxon, and Misti had returned to our writing group, this would have been a perfect opportunity to exercise rhetorical listening. Rhetorical listening, particularly promoting an understanding of self and others, would have encouraged what Ratcliffe (2005) explained as "listening with intent," or "standing under" the discourses of others (p. 28-29). In other words, this type of listening does not mean for others to master these ideas of others, but to be more receptive to these ideas, to acknowledge the existence of them. Rhetorical listening would have given the chance for all of us to discuss the issues that

happened and perhaps understand why Rae said these things due to her past and culture. I could have also explained how uncomfortable it made me feel, especially since I often interact with both black and Arab communities, why Jaxon and Misti were uncomfortable, and maybe Rae would have understood our reactions. As Ratcliffe argued, “By focusing on claims and cultural logics, listeners may still disagree with each other’s claims, but they may better appreciate that the other person is not simply wrong but rather functioning from within a different logic” (p. 33). We could hold the position that Rae’s statement was indeed racist. But we could then also understand Rae’s cultural logics and the clashing of these two communities as well as my logic, Jaxon’s, and Misti’s.

However, rhetorical listening is not something that is an easy fix for conflict in these groups. Even if someone is prone to using rhetorical listening in their everyday lives, it may take time to process. In my experience, rhetorical listening is something that comes naturally to me. My empathetic nature as well as my desire to understand usually results in me “letting discourses wash over, though, and around [me] and letting them lie there to inform...politics and ethics” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 28). However, Rae’s cultural logic, I admit, was difficult for me to understand. It took some reflection to understand how she may feel about her community and herself as an individual is threatened by another marginalized community. I could understand if Rae felt as though her home was threatened by rich white people gentrifying Detroit. But the friction between Black and Arab communities in metro Detroit was not something I fully understood and still do not completely understand. And, by the time I had reached this hypothesis about Rae’s point of view, she and the others were long gone from the group. To solve this issue, facilitators should inform members about rhetorical listening as a way to work on conflict within the group.

Accountability logic. The second step of rhetorical listening, accountability logic, can be demonstrated through one of Milo’s groups’ conflicts. If you recall, Ryan, who was in his 20s,

entered the group and made a joke about joining the group to ask someone out for drinks. The facilitators then talked to him privately about how most members of the writing group are not old enough to drink. Ryan left the group shortly after. To try to prevent members leaving, I argue, facilitators can use rhetorical listening. The logic of accountability in particular would be useful to both this member as well as the other group members. “A logic of accountability invites us to consider how all of us are, at present, culturally implicated in effects of the past (via our resulting privileges and/or their lack) and, thus, accountable for what we do about situations now, even if we are not responsible for their origins” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 32). In other words, accountability logic is a substitute for the guilt/blame stance that is typically acted out in situations where people have privilege. Ratcliffe’s example is between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly. Daly published a feminist research methods book in 1978, in which she argued that all women have been similarly exploited by the patriarchy. Lorde responded back that although this is important work, but Daly erased important differences between women (the “blame”). Daly apologized (the “guilt”) and then claimed that Lorde misunderstood her intent in this book. Lorde chose not to respond. This conflict resulted in what Ratcliffe called a rhetoric of dysfunctional silence, which ultimately ends the conflict and does not resolve it.

Though the guilt/blame stance is more commonly seen in examples of race, such as Ratcliffe’s example of the Audre Lorde-Mary Daly debate, there are some similarities to this example in the writing group. In the writing group example, Ryan invites others to understand his purpose of being in the writing group. The facilitators then “blamed” Ryan for this issue, Ryan apologized (the “guilt”), and then Ryan no longer came to the group (“the silence”). However, the difference between Ratcliffe’s example of Lorde and Daly and the writing group example is that no others are involved in the Lorde/Daly debate; as Ratcliffe emphasized, much of their debate

was private. Ryan, on the other hand, unconsciously invited the group to be a part of this conflict, even though the facilitators chose for some of the conflict to be private (their conversation). When more than two people are involved in a conflict, I argue, it is doubly useful to use rhetorical listening tactics. Instead of taking Ryan aside, the facilitators could open this discussion up to the group. As I mentioned previously, much of LGBTQ+ social life revolved and still revolves around spaces that serve alcohol, such as gay bars. Discussing this history would create a space where the members could understand why Ryan mentioned this on his first visit to the writing group. However, the members would also need to discuss how the facilitators were compelled to quash this behavior since there were underage individuals who attend this group. In addition, the facilitators may have addressed the great risk for LGBTQ+ teens and young adults to abuse and become addicted to substances like alcohol. This would also open up real discussion about substance abuse for other members. Here, we can see that instead of silence, accountability logic helps to solve the conflict at hand and also addresses potential future issues, establishes a space where all are welcome, and grounds the group in realities of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Locating identifications across commonalities and differences. Ratcliffe asserts that people normally “gravitate, almost by default, towards places of common ground, that is, places of commonalities with other people, texts, and cultures” (p. 32). But rhetorical listening allows for people to hold both commonalities and differences. For this step of rhetorical listening, it is easy to build off of the previous example since I have already identified the differences. I will also theorize some potential commonalities as well. Particularly, let us analyze this hypothetical situation where the writing group discusses Ryan’s comment. Using rhetorical listening to understand all points of view in this situation would mean that both Ryan’s logic, rooted in LGBTQ+ communities’ history, and the facilitator’s concern about younger members, *can* be true

in the same space. In addition, Ryan and the facilitators may discuss the commonalities and differences in their concerns and why they joined the group; they may find common ground; perhaps the facilitators and Ryan all initially joined the group to find a space where they can interact with other LGBTQ+ young writers, or maybe another older member wishes to find a partner or at the very least, a friend to go out with for drinks, like Ryan insinuated. Finding common ground is not necessarily the goal of rhetorical listening. But if the facilitators acknowledged that the group was going to address both commonalities and differences in this situation, this would allow for everyone to be included, even if everyone does not find common ground.

Analyzing claims as well as cultural logics. To address claims and cultural logics, I will use another example from Milo's group: when one of the members was exploring their kink identity in the group. If this topic was opened up to discussion with the group instead of closed off and even silenced—it was implied by Sarah that the facilitators were silent the first time the topic came up—rhetorical listening could have provoked a conversation about the cultural values of this member, other members, the facilitator, and the public library, and both purposeful and arbitrary power. Instead of shutting the conversation down completely because it was too sexual, the group could have listened to the values of the library from a staff member or Milo himself. This would also have to include Milo's stance on this situation as well as other group members. This group would have to ask themselves questions (these are based off of Ratcliffe's (2005) critique of the Audre Lorde-Mary Daly debate): Do I understand why this member wanted to discuss this topic in this group in the first place? Do I understand why the library may not find this appropriate? Do I understand the responsibility this places on Milo as the facilitator? What are my feelings associated with this topic? Why do I feel this way, especially considering my identity? Why might

others feel differently than I do? The group could then share some of the answers to these questions. This may spark a meaningful conversation about this topic and also lead to a solution for this member.

Rhetorical listening could also be useful for Daphne's group in terms of the conflict they experience around group expectations and their varying experience with writing. Daphne, or even other core members who do not mind confrontation, could prompt the group to ask themselves questions about the group, why or why not they should continue to be a writing group, what they expect from their group, why others might feel differently than the answers that they gave. In addition, they could address the issue that Marsha brought up specifically regarding feedback. This would generate a conversation about their writing experiences, race, and many other identities. Although this may not result in every group member agreeing, they could at least understand each person's point of view and move forward.

Issues of rhetorical listening. Though rhetorical listening lends LGBTQ+ writing groups a method to understand conflict and may prevent loss of attendance—if members always practiced rhetorical listening with each other—there are some aspects that may not be useful to some writing groups. For instance, as I referenced earlier in this section, rhetorical listening takes a lot of time—time that some groups may not have. This method, additionally, may not prevent conflicts from happening, but more research must be done on using this method in these writing groups. Finally, rhetorical listening does not necessarily solve all issues of power. As we can see through the examples above, introducing and maintaining rhetorical listening in a writing group heavily falls on the facilitator. The training required, too, to understand rhetorical listening may be time consuming. It does, however, depend on the group to participate in rhetorical listening. If more members are invited to voice their opinions and for others to listen to understand—instead of

listening to respond—perhaps this is a way to reach out to those who don't feel comfortable or those who create conflict.

Conclusion

The groups that I did not center in this chapter, Dr. Stephanie Allen's group and Noah's group, did not discuss any large issues within their groups. Dr. Allen's group is a space that uplifts black lesbian voices and is clear about that mission in the name of the group. Noah's group is a trans* only youth writing group, and he stated that "everyone gets along very well; its super tight knit." It is unclear why these groups do not have much conflict; it could be simply because the members who were surveyed and interviewed were happy with the group. In addition, I only gathered information from two members in Dr. Allen's group and one member and facilitator from Noah's, and it is possible that groups members who have issues with the groups left. However, if I could deduce why these groups have had success, it may be because members seem to know what to expect, and the groups have strong guidelines. But if groups wish to evoke meaningful conversations within their groups about conflict and difference, using rhetorical listening may be a path. As I will show in the final chapter, using a rhetorical listening infographic with groups to understand conflict and power may prove useful.

CHAPTER 5: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Introduction

This project has highlighted crucial aspects of LGBTQ+ community writing groups: why people choose to join, what benefits members receive, the conflicts and power structures within these groups, and perhaps one way to maneuver through and understand the conflicts and power structures—by using Krista Ratcliffe’s (1999; 2005) idea of rhetorical listening. In this final chapter, I will expand on how we can use rhetorical listening in writing group spaces—not only community writing groups, but also classrooms and writing centers that use writing groups—to understand conflicts and why rhetorical listening especially benefits LGBTQ+ writers. I will also suggest future research that may be done on LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ community writing groups.

Rhetorical Listening in the Classroom

To demonstrate how rhetorical listening may help writing group members understand different points of view they do not share, or what I call “conflicts,” I use Ratcliffe’s (2005) four steps of rhetorical listening for cross-cultural communication² and examples of conflict within the LGBTQ+ writing groups that I surveyed and interviewed in Chapter 4. I define “conflict” as moments of struggle between people or between a person and a text. These conflicts may arise internally within an individual or interpersonally. Talking about people’s writing or discussing personal issues, both of which happen within these writing groups (see Chapter 3), can stir powerful emotions. These emotions are not solely personal when they are brought into writing spaces and heard—through words or tone of voice or seen through body gestures and movement—

² Jones Royster (1996) called for scholars to create a “code of conduct” for cross-cultural communication. Ratcliffe answered this call and created her own conduct called rhetorical listening.

by others. As Micciche (2007) asserted, “Binding emotion to the personal ignores emotion’s contributions to everyday acts of communication” (p. 7). Emotions play an important part in communication between others and therefore should be taken seriously in writing spaces. These conflicts can be uncomfortable and disruptive for writing groups, but as I argue, if conflict is handled through rhetorical listening, it is generative. Ratcliffe’s four steps of rhetorical listening include (1) promoting an understanding of self and others; (2) using accountability logic—or “how all of us are...culturally implicated in effects of the past...and, thus, accountable for what we do about situations now” (p. 32); (3) locating identifications across commonalities and differences (not either/or, but both simultaneously); and (4) analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function (p. 26).

In Ratcliffe’s (2005) final chapter, she enacted rhetorical listening, or listening pedagogically, within her own classroom so that both students and teachers may become more open and “more willing to celebrate” our different stories (p. 134). Her undergraduate rhetorical theory course interrogated how gender and race permeate *all* of our lives. However, unlike some teachers who may be tempted to avoid difficult topics and conflict, Ratcliffe purposely made spaces for discussions about “not seeing race” and not understanding why we still need feminism to thoroughly explore the topics. Naturally, these topics come with resistance from both students and teachers. Ratcliffe recommended resisting this resistance against conversations about identity and privilege and that teachers “must accept failure” (p. 140). Resistance, dysfunctional silence, and defensiveness are all products of cross-cultural communication and may produce discomfort in the classroom, but Ratcliffe asserted that this discomfort should be expected and even used as “a springboard for practicing rhetorical listening” to question these emotions (Jung, 2005, p. 18).

Several scholars (Cools, 2017; Cui, 2019; Hinshaw, 2011; Jung, 2005; Reda, 2009) built on Ratcliffe's pedagogy of listening in rhetoric and composition classrooms. The majority of this research emphasized why students (for ELL students, see Cool, 2017) are silent in face-to-face classrooms, but silence in the classroom can be valuable and even a rhetorical choice (Reda, 2009; Cools, 2017). Hinshaw (2011) explored how instructors might use rhetorical listening strategies to prevent teacher resistance to student's opinions on topics like feminism so instructors don't silence students. Moreover, Jung (2005) retheorizes revision in the classroom through many feminist rhetorical theories, including rhetorical listening, so that "differences and conflicts within discourse communities can be identified, sustained, contended with, and perhaps understood" (p. xiii). Jung also showed that the multigenre text must be listened to more because of its complexity and "often contradictory identity formations" (p. 2). Using this genre may disrupt stereotypes of rigid genres, revision practices where writers are urged to reach a consensus and connect with the audience, and rhetoric and composition writ large. Rhetorical listening may be a way to make "more room" and disrupt dichotomous thinking (p. xv).

Cui (2019), on the other hand, focused on using rhetorical listening through multimodal texts. Cui demonstrated how small groups of students might practice and use rhetorical listening for multimodal final projects on underrepresented groups. After posting these projects online, these small groups "can start dialogues and communicate with real audiences who are from both dominant classes and marginalized groups, as well as those who are inclined to engage in cross-cultural communication" (p. 6). This project may help students acknowledge other discourses and question other harmful discourses, like stereotyping.

These different uses of rhetorical listening in rhetoric and composition classrooms reveal that using rhetorical listening in different ways—to attempt to understand and not assign blame, to

revise, to listen to multimodal texts—may yield fruitful composing and open up cross-cultural communication. In my own infographic outlining steps of rhetorical listening for small writing groups, I employ Cui’s (2019) application of rhetorical listening to multimodal texts and Jung’s (2005) encouragement for complex and contradictory writing, as well as exploration of complex identities.

Rhetorical Listening in other Writing Spaces

However, the writing classroom is not the only space where rhetorical listening has been tested. Anderson’s (2016) thesis about using rhetorical listening one-on-one in a writing center presented how

Rhetorical listenings moves tutors into an awareness of the issues beyond a tutee’s written essay. In writing center praxis, tutors focusing purely on the text, rather than the writer, create a dilemma in which the tutor may address the same issues in the same manner with each student, regardless of how a student reacts. When session practices become overly standardized, tutors fail to understand the needs of individual students...Rhetorical listening, however, requires tutors to addresses each tutee with a sense of openness. Rather than focus solely on structure or a thesis statement with each student, addressing each tutee separately allows for tutors to be in tune with the needs of a specific student. Tutors must be willing to change their praxis based on each tutee. (p.12)

Here again, rhetorical listening offers alternatives to standardization and binary thinking. It also addresses what bell hooks (1994) referred to as students wishing for instructors (and tutors!) to see them as “whole human beings with complex lives and experiences” (p. 15). In other words, rhetorical listening strives to understand complexity.

I suggest for instructors, tutors, and facilitators alike to use rhetorical listening as a way to structure small writing groups, especially encourage members to consider rhetorical listening when group members face internal and interpersonal conflict. In particular, I will show how rhetorical listening within these groups benefit LGBTQ+ writers.

Rhetorical Listening Guidelines for Writing Spaces

Drawing from the research above, I consider how writing groups may use rhetorical listening as a way to understand conflict. As I review in Chapter 4, although community writing groups overall are characterized as harmonious, I revealed that conflicts and hierarchies seem to be a part of (LGBTQ+) community writing groups, and these spaces are where people with differing backgrounds come together. Using rhetorical listening tactics may begin meaningful discussions and solve issues within community writing groups such as maintaining steady attendance that these groups often depend on to survive. As you may remember, these writing groups overall had a smaller number (no more than 15 people) of members, and one of the concerns I highlighted in Chapter 4 was about the time rhetorical listening may take. I suggest, however, that rhetorical listening in smaller groups like the community writing groups I surveyed and interviewed may be more productive (i.e., explore internal and interpersonal conflict in depth) and may take less time. These same rhetorical listening tactics I suggest can be utilized in small groups in other writing spaces, such as classrooms and writing centers. These tactics, I suggest, may generate deeper and more useful feedback in groups due to its thoroughness and help students, teachers, and tutors understand conflict as well.

Unlike Ratcliffe's (2005) examples of student papers, these small groups would host writers with their work who are present and not only read by the instructor and writer. I have thought that this may hinder rhetorical listening in some ways due to self-consciousness or silence because rhetorical listening can be difficult. However, this is why I propose not only allowing for silence in writing spaces like many other scholars, but also multimodal composing for rhetorical listening in these small groups. That is, if we want to "turn hearing into invention," then we must allow for all modes of communication so that writers may create (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 219). Writers could work through my rhetorical listening framework through composing online, verbal

discussions, drawing, etc., when internal and interpersonal conflict arises. During interpersonal conflict, writers may have to tell others, “Wait, I need to think this through” or some alternative and ask questions to understand what the conflict is about. As Ratcliffe identified, this will be uncomfortable. Writers will have to practice rhetorical listening to fight the urge to fill silences or to fight back. This is also why rhetorical listening should be long term so that writers will practice.

Steps to Rhetorical Listening:

Why use Rhetorical Listening?

- Provide more feedback on writing
- Understand and perhaps solve conflict with others
- Learn other points of view
- Create and build on ideas



Rhetorical Listening: SOCHIR as acronym

Sochir: close to 'sochair', which means 'benefits' in Irish

1. Self: Ask yourself why you feel this way about a topic

2. Others: Ask yourself why others might feel differently

3. Culture/History: Ask yourself/the internet/others how history and culture may affect someone's point of view of this topic

4. Inquire: Share own point of view and then talk with others to understand, not to judge or accuse.

5. Re-evaluate and compare your and others' views on this topic

1 Self: Ask yourself why you feel this way about a topic

Ask questions such as (but not limited to):

- Did you have any experiences with this topic before (childhood, recent events, etc.)?
- What might your family/community say about this topic? Do you agree?

2 Others: Ask yourself why others might feel differently

- Who do you know who feels differently about this topic than you? Do you know why? If not, can you speculate why?

3 Culture and History: Ask yourself/the internet/others how history and culture may affect someone's point of view of this topic

- Which communities feel differently about this topic compared to you?
- Which communities feel differently about this topic compared to people you know?
- How was this topic viewed historically by different communities?

4 Inquire: Share own point of view and then talk with others to understand, not to judge or accuse.

Share your point of view with "I" statements:

- * "In my experience..."
- * "I..."

Ask thoughtful questions that YOU would feel comfortable answering

- Avoid negative language. When in doubt, ask questions such as:
- * "Can you explain (that more?) don't understand"
- * "How do you feel like this affected you?"

5 Re-evaluate and compare your and others' views on this topic

- Take some time to reflect on the new information you learned: write about it, talk to someone else, draw, etc.
- Come back to the topic in a few days and reflect on it again

Figure 2. Infographic for Rhetorical Listening

Larger image: <https://create.piktochart.com/output/43194786-rhetorical-listening>

As you will find in figure 2, using rhetorical listening during internal or interpersonal conflict can be narrowed down to 5 steps: self, others, culture/history, inquire, and re-evaluate. The first step, “self,” is for the writer to ask what experiences they have had that may be causing uncomfortable feelings. The second step, “others,” the writer still asks themselves this question, but it is now about other people: who does the writer know who feels differently about this topic? If the answer is no one, they may move on to the next step, which is “culture/history.” The writer asks themselves and others, and the internet, how culture and history may affect one’s point of view about this topic. The fourth step, “inquire,” will have writers share their experiences with “I” statements and listen to others’ points of view. If the writer does not understand a group members’ position, they should avoid negative or accusatory tones. Instead, the writer can ask questions such as, “Can you explain that more? I don’t understand.” and “How do you feel like this affected you?” Finally, writers should re-evaluate their view and others’ views on this topic through whatever mode(s) they are comfortable with to thoroughly “listen” to the conflict. My suggestion is to introduce rhetorical listening not only to understand conflict within these groups, but also a way to provide useful feedback. Rhetorical listening then becomes a foundation of the group that may inform all aspects.

LGBTQ+ Writers and Rhetorical Listening

While rhetorical listening can arguably benefit any writer, I assert that LGBTQ+ writers, particularly those with complex identities, may find rhetorical listening effective. We can no longer ignore that gender and sexual identity, particularly at this moment, has a distinctive connection with language, and that we must study this connection to “produce rhetorical histories...that will

warrant and arm our queer scholarship, pedagogy, and activism” so that LGBTQ+ research and individuals persist (Morris, 2006, p. 147). As scholars have pointed out, an ongoing issue for LGBTQ+ communities is representation and discussions about LGBTQ+ identity are stereotypes or identities without nuances (Malinowitz, 1995; Marinara et al., 2009). LGBTQ+ community writing groups appear to be working to change this issue, and rhetorical listening could help aid this objective in all writing spaces. In addition, if LGBTQ+ issues are taught in rhetoric and composition classrooms, adopting rhetorical listening tactics would be useful to understand nuances in identities. As Malinowitz identified, “They [LGBTQ+ communities] are fragile not only because the multiple threads of our identities intersect in exceedingly complex and unpredictable ways...but also because the meanings of even seemingly singular parts of our identities are unstable and evade consensus” (p. 13). Listening to these multiple threads and unstable and everchanging identities provide a space where LGBTQ+ identities may be heard, explored fully, and believed.

Moreover, the nature of rhetorical listening allows for LGBTQ+ writers to be heard and believed in all writing spaces. In writing spaces where the minority are LGBTQ+ writers, rhetorical listening provides LGBTQ+ writers a platform to share their experiences and for non-LGBTQ+ writers to understand LGBTQ+ issues. Instead of perhaps choosing to hide their experiences due to discrimination, as Malinowitz (1995) mentioned, LGBTQ+ writers will consider sharing. In writing spaces where the majority are LGBTQ+ writers, writers may not face discrimination because of their gender or sexuality—though they can—but they could face other types of discrimination or other conflicts. Rhetorical listening is a way to disrupt discrimination and for LGBTQ+ writers to develop ethos.

Where Do We Go from Here?

As I was conducting this project, many other projects were formed in my mind that I was unable to address in this project. For instance, there may be other ways, better ways, to understand and solve conflict within writing groups. For future researchers, I suggest simplifying theories and presenting them in intelligible ways. Moreover, much research is to be done on LGBTQ+ writing groups, including those writing groups who gather online and LGBTQ+ youth writing groups. Finally, studying other purposes of community writing groups and the writing that is produced from these writing groups will provide us with an understanding of how these groups function and thrive. These methods, in turn, could be used in other writing spaces.

APPENDIX A

E-mail to facilitators about project

My name is Hillary Weiss, and I am a PhD candidate at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. In addition to my schooling, I am starting a writing group at a local LGBTQ+ non-profit called Affirmations in the fall. After volunteer and facilitator training with Affirmations this past year, the community resource coordinator and I discussed how Affirmations may benefit from a writing group. Not only do we believe this will benefit the community, it may be also a part of my future research.

I am contacting you to inquire if you and some of your writing group participants would be interested in participating in a study about identity-based writing groups, particularly LGBTQ+ writing groups. As part of this study, I will interview people involved in writing groups. Specifically, I am interested in the history of the LGBTQ+ identity-based writing groups, group participants' relationships with reading and writing, if your group is associated with any institution(s), and the city and place the writing group is held and how this may be/if this is central to understanding the group itself. I am in the initial stages of this project; therefore, I have not begun the Institutional Review Board process, which ensures ethical conduct in research. Before planning the study, I would like to speak with a variety of LGBTQ+ writing groups to gauge their interest in the project. Doing this will allow me to design a project that is reciprocal in that I can use the project to help groups like yours develop your capacities.

I would really like to speak with you or your group about your potential participation in this project. I welcome any questions you have. Thank you for your time! I eagerly look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

- Hillary Weiss

APPENDIX B

Follow-up e-mail to facilitators that was sent a month later about the project:

Dear Administrator(s) of the Durham Region Writing Rainbow:

I hope you are doing well. I am following up to my previous e-mail about my study to see if you were interested in participating and to update you on the research project on North American LGBTQ+ writing groups.

My first e-mail noted that I hoped to interview group members as well as leaders of the writing group. However, I now am hoping to interview leaders, have those leaders provide the information necessary to the writing group members to take a survey, and then do follow-up interviews with group members who agree to participate. I recently created these interview and survey questions. Since this project aims to be collaborative (and since you are much more knowledgeable about your group than I), I would welcome your feedback on these questions if you had the time. If you were interested, I could send the questions via e-mail.

In addition, I will be completing my Institutional Review Board process within the next month, but I need to ensure that groups confirm participation before I complete this part of the project. So far, three LGBTQ+ writing groups (not including my own writing group, which is starting September 20th!) are interested, and I would love for you to be among those groups to participate.

Thank you so much for your time, and please do not hesitate to contact me with questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

- Hillary Weiss

APPENDIX C

Survey feedback from Sarah

Appendix A: Survey Template

Group Member Survey

Please respond to the following demographic questions (all are open responses unless otherwise noted)

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your sexuality?
3. What is your race and/or ethnicity?
4. What is your age?
5. Do you have a disability?
6. What is the last level of education you completed?
7. Do you currently work and/or attend school?


Considering your **daily literacy practices**, please answer the following questions:

1. How would you define **literacy**? (open response)
2. How often do you read? (every day, a few times a week, once a month, never)
3. What types of materials do you read? (open response)
4. How often do you write? (every day, a few times a week, once a month, never)
5. **Why do you write?** (open response)
6. Do you feel that writing is ever a form of self-care for you? Why or why not? (open response)
7. Do you feel that writing is ever political for you? Why or why not? (open response)
8. Do you share your writing publicly? (open response)
9. Do you think any parts of your identity influences your reading choices? Why or why not? (open response)
10. Do you think any parts of your identity influences your writing? Why or why not? (open response)

9. Do you think any parts of your identity influences your reading choices? Why or why not? (open response)
10. Do you think any parts of your identity influences your writing? Why or why not? (open response)


Considering your **childhood**, please answer the following questions:

1. Growing up, do you think any parts of your identity influenced your reading choices? Why or why not? (open response)
2. Growing up, do you think any parts of your identity influenced your writing? Why or why not? (open response)
3. Growing up, were you encouraged to read and/or write? (open response)
4. Growing up, did you read and write? (always, frequently, sometimes, rarely, never)
5. **Did you ever have to conceal the materials you read? If so, why? (open response)**
6. **Did you ever have to conceal the materials you wrote? If so, why? (open response)**
7. How would you describe the place **that** you grew up? (open response)
8. Did you enjoy writing in school? (open response)


Sep 5, 2018
Resolve
⋮


"If yes, what is it?"

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Sep 5, 2018
Resolve
⋮


Awkward phrasing. Is there a way to make this plain language?

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Sep 5, 2018
Resolve
⋮

Is this relevant?

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Sep 5, 2018
Resolve
⋮

Consider: "What do you write about? How does it make you feel?" in addition to the why question, or instead of it, because how's and what's will get you a lot more qualitative information you can learn from and provide you with examples.

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Considering the writing group that you are currently **apart** of, please answer the following questions:

1. **What do you feel the purpose of the writing group you are a part of is?** (open response)
2. **Why did you decide to join this writing group?** (open response)
3. **How often do you participate in the writing group?** (open response)
4. **Do you feel as if you receive effective feedback on your writing?** (open response)
5. **What do you like most about the group?** (open response)
6. **What might you change about the group?** (open response)
7. **Do you live within the city/town the writing group takes place?** (open response)
8. **How would you describe the city/town in which the writing group takes places?** (open response)
9. **As other members have joined or left the group, has this changed the group dynamic? If so, how?** (open response)
10. **Do you think that the city/place in which you are influences the writing in the group? If yes, how so?** (open response)

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview? (Yes or no)

If yes, please provide your email address so that the researcher can contact you:

Please provide any general comments you would like about the writing group in which you attend: (open response)

Do you have any general questions or comments about the questions that were asked? (open response)

The screenshot shows a document review interface with three comments. Each comment is contained in a light blue box with a white background. At the top of each box is a circular profile icon, the date 'Sep 5, 2018', and a 'Resolve' button with a three-dot menu icon to its right. The first comment contains a paragraph of text discussing stigma and sharing. The second comment is a short note about a typo. The third comment is a short note about grammar. Each comment box ends with the text 'From imported document'.

Comment 1:
 I see what you're getting at -- the influence of stigma/self-stigma, but what if you asked "Did you ever share your writing as a child? Why or why not?" If someone hid it, that would likely be clear in the answer e.g. "I didn't share because I was afraid." Or possibly add it in the sentence as is, e.g. did you ever share or conceal.
 From imported document

Comment 2:
 *part (typo)
 From imported document

Comment 3:
 Grammatically awkward
 From imported document

APPENDIX D

Qualtrics Group Member Survey

Please respond to the following demographic questions (all are open responses unless otherwise noted)

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your sexuality?
3. What is your race and/or ethnicity?
4. What is your age?
5. What is your religion, and are you currently practicing?
6. Do you have a disability? If so, how would you define your disability?
7. What is the last level of education you completed?
8. Do you currently work and/or attend school?

Considering this writing group, please answer the following questions:

1. Why did you decide to join this writing group? (open response)
2. How would you describe this groups' purpose? (open response)
3. How often do you participate in the writing group? (open response)
4. Do you feel as if you receive effective feedback on your writing? (open response)
5. What do you like most about the group? (open response)
6. What might you change about the group? (open response)
7. Do you live within the city/town the writing group takes place? (open response)
8. As other members have joined or left the group, has this changed the group dynamic? If so, how? (open response)
9. How would you describe the relationships within the group (including you and the group, you and the leader, and others)? Do people generally get along? Is the group ever uncomfortable?
10. How would you describe the city/town in which the writing group takes places? (open response)
11. Do you think that the city/place in which you are influences the writing in the group? If yes, how so? (open response)

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview? (Yes or no)

If yes, please provide your email address so that the researcher can contact you:

Please provide any general comments you would like about the writing group in which you attend: (open response)

Do you have any general questions or comments about the questions that were asked? (open response)

APPENDIX E

Qualtrics Contact Member/Group Leader Survey:

1. Could you provide a brief history of the group (especially in terms of members, the place where it is hosted)?
2. What do you feel the purpose of this group is?
3. Why did you start this group/how did this group begin?
4. Do you provide opportunities for people to share their work publicly? If so, can you describe an event in which this has happened?
5. Describe how authority functions within this group. Have you ever faced any issues with members as a facilitator? If so, could you describe at least one issue? Have group members had issues with other members?
6. Is LGBTQ+ identity is discussed within this group? Are other identities discussed?
7. Do you think that the city/place in which you are influences the writing in the group? If yes, how so?
8. Would this be a similar group if it took place in a different city, or different geographic area (rural instead of urban, online instead of face-to-face, etc.)?

APPENDIX F

Daphne's Interview Questions

Interview (Daphne's e-mail):

Name in diss: Daphne

Pronouns: she/her

1. Could you describe the other writing group that you were a part of? Was it based on LGBTQ+ identity?
2. Do you feel like you receive any benefits from this group (emotional, educational, etc.)? Does this group ever bring you any negative emotions?
3. In your survey, you mentioned that people come the first session, but don't stick around after that (I also sometimes have that issue with my writing group). Have you noticed them feeling uncomfortable, or not exactly meshing with the group? Why do you think that is?
4. Is one of your groups' goals to "grow" your group?
5. Could you tell me a bit about your writing experiences (school, work, and outside of these places)?
6. Do you think your identities (race, sexuality, etc.) appear in your writing? Why or why not?
7. You described the city the writing group takes place in as interesting because "it's a mix of LGBTQ-identified individuals and Orthodox Jews." Do those identities work well together? Do they ever clash? Do you notice these identities in the writing group?
8. Does the town you live in differ from the city the writing group takes place? If yes, how so?
9. Have you ever used online LGBTQ+ spaces? If so, what types of websites? How do you feel about these spaces?
10. Have you ever inhabited other LGBTQ+ "friendly" places? If so, what were they, and how do they compare to this group? Have you experienced unfriendly LGBTQ+ places?
11. Is there anything else you'd like me to know?

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ABSTRACT**COMING OUT AS COMPLEX: UNDERSTANDING LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY
WRITING GROUPS**

by

HILLARY E WEISS**May 2020****Advisors:** Donnie Johnson Sackey and Jeff Pruchnic**Major:** Rhetoric and Composition**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Though composition studies has increasingly studied writing spaces outside of the classroom and workplace, LGBTQ+ community writing groups have received little focus in composition research. This dissertation studies four LGBTQ+ community writing groups across North America to find why people choose to join these groups and how power and conflict function in these spaces. I argue that LGBTQ+ writing groups improve writing and offer emotional support, friendship, and community, as other writing groups do, but these particular spaces also provide group members with opportunities to improve one's self, publish, and educate the community about LGBTQ+ issues. I also find that these LGBTQ+ writing groups produce spaces to write about and explore queerness, which non-identity writing groups do not provide. Moreover, I argue that these groups are not wholly harmonious and non-hierarchical as writing group research indicates. While facilitators attempt to equally distribute power within these groups, even community writing groups never can fully dissolve power structures. In this chapter, I suggest using Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening as a way to understand and even negotiate power in these

groups. Rhetorical listening has been used in the composition classroom (Cui, 2019; Ratcliffe, 2005; Reda, 2009), but through an infographic, I assert that it can be used in classroom and writing center writing groups to negotiate conflicts and even unify groups.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Hillary is a PhD Candidate at Wayne State University who has served as a writing instructor, writing center assistant, and research assistant. Hillary earned her/their B.A. at Siena Heights University, and her/their M.A. and certification in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Bowling Green State University. Hillary's research interests include community writing, cultural rhetorics, composition pedagogy, and writing program assessment. Hillary has presented their research at CCCC, CWPA, and various regional conferences. In addition to researching, teaching, and writing, Hillary enjoys playing guitar, learning piano, tutoring high school students, and snuggling with her kitties and kindred spirit.