

The Role of Community in Working with Faculty Writers: Response to “The Supplementary Clerk”

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In his article, “[The Supplementary Clerk: Social Epistemology as a Vocation](#),” Thomas Basbøll invites us to consider how a writing consultant, which he defines as a writing specialist who works individually with faculty to advance their scholarly writing, might best advise faculty on both their writing process and the quality of their work. As a writing consultant for the Copenhagen Business School, Basbøll functioned as “supplementary clerk” within his department, “[his] services were always offered as . . . a *supplement* to the ongoing work of the scholars in the department” (10). Both a “language editor” and “process coach,” Basbøll worked with faculty to “improve their impact on the journal literature” (2). His model, similar to that of an academic writing tutor in a [university writing center](#), seeks to advance the production of faculty texts: “It hardly matters what suggestions you make, just as long as, in an effort to implement them, scholars sit down and write, conscious of the practical problem of writing and the craftsmanship this implies” (14).

Basbøll observes two primary barriers impeding faculty writing, and more specifically faculty publishing, at his Danish institution: 1. Lack of confidence due to publishing in a second language (English); 2. Poor time management skills (4).

As someone engaged in similar work at [my own](#) institution, I appreciate Basbøll's earnestness and entrepreneurial spirit, his adaptability, his keen eye for identifying opportunities to expand faculty beliefs about the work of an academic, and his ability to raise expectations for faculty support: If the university values publishing in English, then he can support faculty as they work to communicate their ideas in a second language. If faculty struggle to find time to write or don't know how to manage their time well, he can help them set deadlines and schedule writing sessions on a regular basis.

His approach seems to value these three dimensions of the faculty writing life:

1. **The writer as individual**
2. **Productivity**
3. **Publications**

These dimensions are important. As faculty we work in a publish or perish culture that has increasing demands for productivity, publications, and higher workloads (Gappa, Austin and Trice 2007). And yet writing — critical to our success as academics — tends to be an isolated activity: Faculty often write alone in their offices, but rarely share their works-in-progress with colleagues. This last point reveals a critical missing dimension in Basbøll's model: *community*.

Community, working collaboratively with other faculty writers who also are advancing their scholarly endeavors, is both about connecting to other people in meaningful ways and participating in a rigorous community of practice (Etienne 1998) in which participants learn from each other, evaluate ideas, and contribute knowledge to the group. Just as our individual scholarship is reviewed, validated, and understood in communities of practice within disciplines, a scholarly writing

community of practice within a university can build a local knowledge base that cultivates and acknowledges high level faculty work.

Let me take each of Basbøll's writing life dimensions and show how adding a community dimension to faculty consultancy offers a more comprehensive and sustainable model for advancing faculty as scholarly writers.

1. The writer as individual

In Basbøll's entrepreneurial efforts to minimize barriers to faculty writing, he developed a consultancy model that put him at the center of the work. He scheduled individual appointments with faculty to discuss their writing, helped them assess in some cases how they'd work with feedback from editors, insisted on strict writing deadlines to ensure timely feedback from him, and offered advice on how to make writing a regular part of one's professional life. He led workshops and taught classes. He diagnosed faculty writing problems. By providing faculty with an interested reader (himself), supporting them in organizing their schedules, and building their confidence with writing, he not only helped faculty get published, he also prompted a shift in their attitudes toward writing (to "just doing the work"). But if the linchpin of this model is Basbøll himself, is this really a sustainable model? What happens if the consultant's position is de-funded? What if faculty writer demand exceeds consultant capacity? What if the consultant does not have the particular expertise that a writer needs?

If a consultant works to build a writing *community*, she can support faculty in the long-term by building strategic structural support within an institution rather than relying heavily on one person's efforts and leadership. What this looks like in practice at my institution, for example, is an [annual multi-day, multidisciplinary writing retreat](#). Faculty from a range of disciplines gather in a shared writing space for three full days to focus on their scholarly writing. Faculty bring materials related to one specific scholarly writing project, and each spends time working individually on that project during the retreat. In addition, faculty also exchange and get feedback on their works-in-progress in small groups; they receive individual consultations on their writing and writing process from workshop leaders; and they spend time discussing writing strategies and writing challenges with each other. In informal and structured conversations throughout the retreat, faculty discuss their intellectual works, exchange ideas, and get to know one another through a shared enterprise. This experience helps build a community of writers with shared values and commitments, creates mutual respect and support with the exchange of their works-in-progress, and enhances collegiality by offering an opportunity for faculty from different disciplines to discuss their work, when they are unlikely to do so otherwise. Twice during the academic year I also offer one day writing retreats to allow faculty to reconnect with each other, to prioritize writing amidst competing academic life demands such as teaching and committee work, and to remind faculty that they are part of a collective university enterprise.

This shared experience builds a knowledge base within the university that extends back to their home departments (faculty are asked to talk with their colleagues). In addition, and perhaps more importantly, this writing experience extends beyond the summer into the academic year because faculty feel invested in each other's work and want to continue to support each other. Many of these faculty initiate writing exchange groups and "write on site" sessions, in which they agree to meet on a regular basis and write together, sustaining their momentum. When a writing consultant designs

collective training and structures that spark faculty writing discourse and place the onus on faculty (with some structural support and guidance by the consultant) to create and sustain groups that keep their work moving forward, the program leadership base broadens. They invite members from their departments to the next faculty writing retreat. They form writing groups within their departments. They spread the effect of the writing retreat by sharing what they learned with colleagues.

2. Productivity

We want to be productive as academic writers, and for many of the faculty I work with, productivity often means building writing into their lives in a routine way, much as Basbøll describes. His “16-week Challenge” invites faculty to plan their semester scrupulously and work to break their semester down into smaller units of time (writing three hours each day; at the very least 30 minutes per day if teaching or administrative work interferes). This approach builds writing as a daily practice and so seeks to address the problem of faculty not having time to write. In addition to helping faculty build writing into their schedules before the semester began, Basbøll also asked them to think about the writing they’d like to complete by the end of the semester, and break those into smaller goals and tasks. (A journal article, for example, is “about 8000 words, roughly 40 paragraphs, each about 200 words . . . you will have to make and support about 40 claims in order to write a paper” [13]). The goal is to help writers think of their writing as just work, a series of small goals (like writing 40 claims) and tasks to be completed as part of the larger work of the day. This approach encourages faculty to see drafting as a manageable task and so can in Basbøll’s view reduce “the many torturous delays and deferrals” (14), and allow writers to get on with the work of writing.

In Basbøll’s model, writers come to him for help because he is the resident writing expert and so has knowledge to share about how to get things done as a writer. Although he reminds writers that they ultimately need to make decisions on content and style (9), he also positions them exclusively as *recipients* of writing advice without offering opportunities for writers also to share their writing advice with other faculty. This is a deficit-based approach to faculty writing and affects faculty confidence. If faculty are not confident writers, they are not likely to be productive writers either. Basbøll admits he has become a “luxury” for faculty in his department (9), with faculty relying on him as a specialist, with expertise they do not have.

When consultants add the community dimension to faculty consultancy, they encourage collaborative environments — faculty gather together in small group discussions and workshops to share strategies and try them out and expand their repertoires, capitalizing on what faculty know about writing. Adding a community dimension to faculty consultancy is inherently an asset-based approach, with expertise coming not just from the consultant, but also the faculty themselves. This approach increases intellectual exchange within and across departments that may inform one’s research or writing and fosters collegiality. Faculty at my institution lead some of the writing workshops I offer (both within retreats and as stand-alone workshops), sharing strategies they have found successful such as keeping writing logs, using a specific software to manage large research projects, or sharing a list of copy editors. This approach can build confidence in faculty writers — they become resources for each other — which is a capacity building endeavor. In addition, faculty also work together to plan workshop dates throughout the semester to accommodate as many people as possible, they suggest writing resources and local writing events (such as book readings or [Story Slams](#)), and they help select retreat topics as well.

To model this community dimension among the faculty writers I work with, I also position myself as a peer in a different way than Basbøll does with his faculty. He is an embedded writing advice expert with a PhD from the same department who predominantly supports other faculty scholarship. At my institution, to be seen as a peer, I also need to be in a faculty position and researching and writing for publication. Like other faculty, I am a fellow writer with writing blocks and anxieties, with ideas to share and strategies to learn. I share my own writing in faculty writing groups. I experiment with strategies other faculty suggest. I demonstrate my investment in the community as a shared enterprise.

Besides participating in the writing community, the consultant's role in all of this is to offer best practices in scholarly writing strategies and writing groups (including the most recent scholarship), to facilitate the exchange of ideas and communication across disciplines, to create spaces (and structures) that allow faculty to teach each other and to hold each other accountable for writing, and provide assessment mechanisms so faculty can evaluate their own progress toward a goal as well as the community's.

In short, the consultant works to promote and encourage high level faculty work that extends beyond just writing a lot as individuals by creating opportunities that value:

- Peer accountability and leadership (example: writing groups)
- Writing environments that are motivating, supportive, practical, and rigorous (example: writing retreats)
- Collaboration to promote intellectual exchange (groups discussions about writing strategies/challenges/contexts)

3. Publications

A key marker of success in Basbøll's model for consulting with faculty is “helping them to improve their impact on the journal literature” (2). Publications definitely matter for faculty writers. In Basbøll's model, he works with faculty typically one text or one semester at a time in the 16 week challenge. Although he asks larger questions about writing practice in some of his meetings with faculty, he focuses predominantly on the products faculty produce, not necessarily the experience of writing them.

By expanding a product-focused approach to include the dimensions of a writer's experience (in all its complexity), we may be able to help faculty cultivate both productive and sane, satisfying, and sustainable writing lives as academics. By working with a community of other faculty writers (thus normalizing the experience of scholarly writing) and also having the ability to participate at various entry points in the program faculty can choose what works best for them and when along a writing continuum: writing retreats that are immersive; writing sessions where faculty simply write together in shared space; writing groups that extend across a semester or academic year; writing workshops held throughout the year on topics faculty suggest — such as goal setting, style, managing multiple writing projects, staying productive on sabbatical. A multi-faceted approach that considers publications in the context of a faculty life over time helps faculty enhance their capacity to assess what they need and when as they write for publication.

This community approach values faculty sharing works-in-progress on a regular basis, and in so doing shows the value of writing [that may not be published](#). Sometimes, what writers need is not just to write a lot, but to figure out what *not* to write or how to make choices in their writing. Before investing 16 weeks/ 20 hours on a journal article that just doesn't have a strong thesis (or the writer perhaps doesn't feel engaged with), she can get feedback on an early draft to test the waters, both reader interest and writer interest. For Basbøll, the primary issue impeding production of publications is time management and the “primary effect of writing consultancy . . . lies in the self-discipline (and reflexivity) that the mere presence of someone (the consultant) who is taking an active interest in the writing products and processes of researchers can occasion” (13). To that end, expanding the interested reader pool to a community of interested readers would only increase the writer's productivity in writing for publication. Timely feedback on writing builds momentum toward publication because the writer makes choices about where to invest time and energy sooner rather than later, which can reduce anxiety and writer procrastination.

Perhaps one of the reasons academics are “unlikely to accept the idea that the real trick to writing is as Dorothy Parker is to have said, ‘putting your ass to the chair,’” (14) is because for some academics, it's not that simple. While breaking the semester and writing projects down into manageable time units and tasks may work for some faculty on some publications, “putting your ass to the chair” is not just about time management. We are all busy and balancing competing teaching/research/service/family/personal commitments. Scheduling time is not the only challenge; it's trusting in the process that sitting down on a regular basis, to show up for your writing as a routine practice, will not only help writers produce writing on a regular basis, but also increase the capacity to work through writing blocks as they arise. That kind of trust in the writing process does not develop in one project or one semester, nor independently of other writers.

Although the community dimension focuses on building the collective knowledge and leadership of faculty, the consultant's role still is critical: connecting faculty to one another, managing the evolving needs of individual faculty and faculty groups, and continuing to create spaces (such as retreats and workshops) and interesting occasions (such as invited writers) to keep the momentum going and to keep the ideas and experiences innovative and relevant for those who are veterans to the program, accessible and relevant for those new to the program.

In Basbøll's faculty consultancy model, he prioritizes the individual writer, faculty productivity, and publications in his efforts to help them advance as scholarly writers. When we add the dimension of community, which prioritizes the relational and our interdependence as writers within an institution, we capitalize on faculty assets — as writers, as thinkers, as colleagues. This emphasis means we can offer a more comprehensive approach to faculty consultancy that increases the likelihood of sustainable support for faculty--beyond one consultant, one publication, one semester. Perhaps most importantly, by positioning faculty writers in rigorous communities of practice within an institution — building a broad collective knowledge base about scholarly writing that is shared, evaluated, and made public to the broader university — we lay the foundation for a more productive, supportive writing environment for all faculty within the institution.

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