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Workshops on Writing Blocks Increase Proposal Activity

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In many universities, research and published scholarship have traditionally been the deciding factors in tenure and promotion decisions. Now many smaller universities and colleges are also requiring evidence of research productivity. Faculty members faced with this reality need help if they are to be retained and promoted. Workshops directed towards removing writing blocks have been shown to help faculty members achieve tenure and promotion by eliminating many of the impediments that keep them from writing journal articles (Boice, 1990). The workshops also appear to help them win research grants.

Robert Boice, a psychologist who has studied writing blocks among university professors, has shown that getting the requisite writing done for tenure and promotion is not as difficult as it often seems. Lack of productivity results more often from an inability to begin writing than from a lack of anything to say. Boice has developed an effective way of helping professors eliminate writer's block. The method has been demonstrated to work with faculty at California State University, Long Beach, and at the state universities of New York at Albany and Stony Brook. In a series of workshops, Boice has shown professors how to manage their time and address their fears so they can accomplish significant writing within the constraints of the daily demands of university life. His follow-up studies have indicated that if faculty members set reasonable goals, write regularly in short periods of time, and establish reasonable expectations for them-

selves, they can easily meet their institutions' objectives for research and scholarly productivity.

Boice's premise is that most people have already done, or will gladly do, the research needed for solid journal articles. In many cases, they have just not written up the results. In his workshops, he dramatizes this reality. He begins by exploring the participants' reasons for not writing, which typically include unrealistically high standards, a lack of time, and a fear of failure. Boice then reviews myths about writing and discusses the research that explodes the myths.

Participants practice breaking through their blocks by doing 10-minute exercises in focused freewriting and discussing their scholarship and writing interests in small groups with others in the workshop. Boice then explains the proven components of successful writing and describes a regimen for scholarly production that has at its core a commitment to writing regularly in short periods each day and to sharing those efforts with colleagues. The key to the plan, which is referred to throughout this paper as "the system," is acceptance by workshop participants that if they are to write with facility, they must be willing to ignore negative self-talk, start writing immediately, and commit themselves to sharing their efforts with others. The system has produced significant results, which are described below.

At California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly), San Luis Obispo, we have given workshops modeled on Boice's system with similar success. Most faculty members who complete the six-hour series leave with a new commitment to serious writing. The majority report that whenever they need to write a paper, they use the methods taught and acknowledge that the system works much better than their previous writing methods. In short, their scholarly productivity increases significantly, an outcome consistent with Boice's findings.

Workshops on Writing Blocks Produce Increases in Proposal Writing

In addition to increasing their writing for journal publication, however, those who took our workshops also completed proposals for fellowships, external grants, and internal seed grants at a rate that surprised the workshop leaders. Almost twice as many of those who completed these workshops wrote proposals as did faculty members who completed another set of workshops designed specifically for instruction in grant writing.

These are the data. About a fourth of all professors at Cal Poly (260 of 1100) write proposals each year for internal and external grants. If the faculty members enroll in a seminar on proposal writing, the chances rise to one in three that they will complete a proposal. This slight increase in rate was noted in a series of workshops on proposal writing offered from 1984 through 1986. Of 44 participants, fifteen (34%) later wrote proposals for grants. But of 30 faculty members who completed seminars on scholarly writing given in 1987-88, which included information on strategies for combating writer's block, nineteen (63%) have since written proposals for internal or external grants.

The dramatic increase in proposal activity seemed astonishing until we compared the elements of the proposal writing workshop with those of the scholarly writing seminar. The typical proposal writing workshop covers the following topics: types of grant-worthy activities, characteristics of sponsors, tips on contacting program officers, elements of a proposal, and effective budgeting (Drew, 1983). A longer workshop or proseminar may include exercises in drafting a concept paper. Although these workshops cover the basics of grantsmanship, they generally include nothing about the psychological impediments that keep many professors from writing proposals.

In contrast, Boice's seminars focus on the critical importance of the participants' overcoming their procrastination by starting to write immediately in small periods as brief as thirty minutes on a regular basis. Boice believes that since faculty members already know most of what they need to know to write, what they do not know will become easier to identify and supply as they write. Controlled studies show that professors who write in short, frequent periods significantly outperform faculty members who wait for inspiration and large blocks of time. Faculty members who wrote regularly produced 3.2 pages a week of usable copy, but those who wrote only when they had a full morning or an afternoon and were in the right mood produced much less, just 0.9 pages of typed copy per week (Boice, 1990, p. 80).

As it turns out, the techniques that help a person write a journal article also help a person write a proposal (Rose, 1985, p. 232). Participants in the journal writing workshop who heard us say, "Write before you are ready, or you won't write at all!" applied this clue to proposal writing. Some faculty members even wrote proposals before they wrote articles for publication because a proposal deadline was the first writing opportunity that presented itself after the workshop.

Fear of Failure Is a Major Impediment to Proposal Writing

The workshop on scholarly writing appears to work better than the traditional workshop on proposal writing because it addresses the fear of failure, which is especially immobilizing to the potential proposal writer (Tringo, 1982, p. 19). Professors appear to have a more difficult time handling proposal turndowns than they do the rejection of scholarly articles. On our campus, for instance, for years only a few professors out of a hundred would revise and resubmit rejected proposals. Most accepted turndowns as final verdicts. It was not until our president began sending personal letters to faculty members assuring them that many others had experienced similar disappointments and encouraging them to consider rewriting and resubmitting their proposals that they began to do so in appreciable numbers.

The tendency to take the turndown of a proposal hard exists, we believe, because there is a significant difference between levels of confidence in a finished research article and in a research proposal. Once a research article is completed, the author knows that it will be published sooner or later. It is simply a matter of finding the appropriate journal. But a research proposal offers, by definition, an untested enterprise. What it proposes may or may not be valid, and no one will know until the research is completed. Thus, the turndown seems more meaningful because rejection is likely to be viewed as a judgment that the idea is not even worth trying.

The writing workshop helps counter this fear by reducing the emotional content of the writing process. If one labors five hours a day for three weeks to complete a proposal that is rejected, the pain of failure is proportionate to the stress involved in creating the proposal. But if writing the same quality proposal requires perhaps only twenty-five to thirty relatively stress-free, half-hour writing sessions spread over a five- to six-week period, the emotional involvement in the final product is lessened, and rejection can be viewed with more objectivity. In a detached frame of mind, proposal writers can recognize peer review as part of the writing process, view failure as an opportunity to receive meaningful consultation from experts in the field, and accept negative comments as helpful clues to future success.

The increase in grant writing activity is an unexpected and welcome addition to Boice's findings. Boice has not reported similar findings, probably because his workshops did not include information about grant

writing. By contrast, each of our seminars contained a twenty-minute segment on the key elements of successful grant writing. The addition of this material to the workshop was accidental, inserted largely because one of us had previous experience in grant development. It now appears that if the application of the strategies for eliminating writing blocks had not been made to proposal writing, the carryover might not have occurred.

Achieving the Effect Requires Conscious Application of Strategies to Counter Writing Blocks

Since we have noticed the effect described above, we have explicitly encouraged faculty to apply the techniques for overcoming writing blocks to proposal development. In October of 1989, for instance, in a writing workshop conducted for a department of nursing at another state university, the participants were specifically urged to use the techniques to write proposals for a new university internal competition. Seven of the nine participants subsequently wrote proposals, and two of the proposals were successful.

We had similar results with two workshops given in June of 1989 to a total of 40 professors enrolled in the Teacher/Scholar Institute sponsored by The California State University system. In a follow-up mail questionnaire returned by 17 of the participants, eight reported they had already written proposals for an internal grant, and five said they planned to do so as soon as the deadline occurred. Thus, 77% of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they had applied the new techniques to proposal writing. This level of activity correlated positively with their overall reports on writing. Eleven of the 17 respondents said they wrote regularly in small periods of time rather than in binges, and another four stated they used the system whenever they were under the pressure of writing deadlines.

Writing System Significantly Benefits New Faculty

Boice has noted that faculty developers should help new faculty members with their professional writing (1984). It now becomes clear that to do so is to help them twice. In the sciences particularly, new teachers need to write proposals early in their careers to initiate their research programs. Receiving internal or external grants is crucial to the healthy

beginning of an academic profession. Those who wait until their teaching loads are settled may find themselves left out.

Probationary faculty members at teaching institutions may well argue that while they are establishing their course repertoires, the demands of preparing three to six new lectures a week are so great that they cannot find time to rewrite their dissertations or apply for grants. Such objections underline the need for the workshops. New faculty members who used the method of writing demonstrated in the workshops report that although they had planned to write in their early years of teaching, they had no idea how productive they could be until they used the system. Their enhanced productivity relieved considerably the stress that typically accompanies the start of academic careers.

For example, one new faculty member at Cal Poly took our seminar in her first year. While she was teaching the following summer, she wrote from one to one thirty every afternoon except Fridays. In that time, she was easily able to draw a fifteen-page article from her dissertation and to complete it before the summer was over. This success encouraged her to write a proposal for an internal grant, and the proposal was also funded. She reported deriving exceptional satisfaction from finishing her proposal well before the early Fall deadline and watching experienced professors scramble at the last minute. Both successes have been enabling ones for her. She now feels that she can meet the requirements of her department and the university for scholarly productivity without undue stress. For her, the question of teaching or research no longer presents a dilemma.

Inexperienced Faculty Have Special Access to Internal and External Grants

Some new faculty members are unaware that in competing for grants, their inexperience may be an advantage. Many sponsors limit eligibility for certain grant and fellowship competitions to those who are assistant professors. The earlier the new researcher or scholar applies in his or her career, the easier it is to win the first grant. For instance, at Cal Poly, one faculty member in his first year of teaching wrote a six-page proposal for a two-month summer fellowship shortly after joining the university. He had already planned to do the research whether he received the fellowship or not, but he wrote the proposal because he thought doing so would be good experience. He was, therefore, pleasantly surprised when he won the award. The minor effort to write the proposal generated a gift of \$1000 per page on his application.

New faculty members have a variety of grant opportunities. The most common is the internal seed grant. Many universities freely offer assistant professors support for released time, equipment, or money to hire graduate assistants. In some cases, awards for new faculty are almost automatic. Grants may be available from the department, the school dean, the dean of the graduate school, the vice president for research, or the vice president for academic affairs. At some institutions, these proposals are reviewed by a faculty committee; at others, awards are at the discretion of an administrator.

Federal sponsors also restrict eligibility for some grant programs to new faculty members. One example is the Office of Naval Research, which has a Young Investigator Program for people who have received their PhDs within the last five years. When applications are made, principal investigators compete only with others who are within five years of the completion of their doctorates. The peer reviewers evaluate promise rather than track record. Other programs cover new faculty in certain categories. The National Science Foundation, for instance, has a Research Initiation Award for women who have not previously served as principal or co-principal investigators on individual federal research awards.

But the beginner's advantage does not last long. If untenured faculty members put off taking advantage of the minimized competition, they will soon lose their eligibility for starter grants and have to compete with established researchers.

Conclusion

Many professors do not write proposals because they do not have the time to meet short deadlines, they cannot write to their own high standards, or they lack the confidence to begin. The Boice seminar on scholarly writing addresses all of these concerns, whereas proposal writing seminars generally do not.

In a series of workshops we offered following the Boice model, twice as many faculty members who completed it wrote proposals for internal and external grants as did those who had attended seminars specifically designed for proposal writing.

A faculty development office can provide valuable tools for professors committed to research and creative activities by sponsoring workshops on effective ways of eliminating writing blocks. These workshops can have a double benefit: they can motivate faculty members to write scholarly articles and can remove the impediments that keep them

from writing proposals for grants, summer research appointments, and fellowships.

The workshops can benefit untenured faculty members especially. Assistant professors will launch their careers smoothly if they receive help balancing the demands of their teaching and their research duties. Because the competition for research grants becomes stiffer with each passing year, new faculty members must start writing proposals as soon as they enter their academic careers. Writing techniques of the kind taught by Boice can help them write proposals and satisfy campus requirements for both journal articles and grant support.

Faculty development officers should be aware of the important role that scholarly writing seminars, which address eliminating writing blocks, establishing new writing habits, and tackling grant writing, can play in helping faculty members initiate and build academic careers.

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