

Women's Writing Groups: How Social Writing Empowers Women's Work

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INTRODUCTION

Female writers, as an original minority in the writing community, have long supported each other in order to bring great visibility and credence to their work: from monastic communities to feminist conventions, women have historically reviewed, critiqued and promoted the work of their fellows (Lutz.) Though writing is traditionally viewed as a masculine and isolated exercise, the work of women has through history and into the present day been supported and encouraged by their fellows, questioning the very definition of writing as an individualistic practice (Stanley). This study combines literary reviews of work pertaining to women's writing, writing as a social activity and the development of writing groups with interviews with members of a local women's writing groups to explore the function that groups hold in women's writing.

BACKGROUND & DEFINING A WRITING GROUP

Although writing is often viewed as an isolated, individualistic activity, writing groups have throughout history been used to review, critique and support the work of writers, from monastic work to the salons of the Romantic period to contemporary digitized groups (Gere). Early literature groups of the twentieth century contained all the diversity of the institutions and the eras that their literature reflects; a contrast to the very first writing groups of the 7th century, which were monastic and homogenous in both their writers and their readership. Thus, while earlier groups were better able to provide a woman-only space that allowed women's writing to originate in the face of oppression, contemporary groups have made way for diverse women's groups that allow for unique written perspectives and the evolution of new ideas within the community, as is the case with the various waves of feminist writing (Lutz). This allows women's work to reach a more vast and more diverse readership, building up a stronger voice for women in writing, although some levels of diversity and equality in the writing field have yet to be achieved (Stanley).

What Defines A Writing Group?

Gere, who has engineered much of the study of writing groups, such that it is, keeps the definition of such groups as broad as possible so as to allow for some scope of study: membership can range from three authors to forty or more, and suggests that they may manifest as egalitarian or hierarchical, depending on the source of their authority. She abstains from defining a group of two authors as a 'group'; this, she says, falls in the realm of tutorial and editing, although, as will be shown later in my research, authors seem to use some combination of single-person reviews for both formal and informal feedback (that is, both paid authors and other writers and laymen). Gere demonstrates favoritism towards the egalitarian or 'autonomous' model, which allows for an exchange of concepts and work between authors, rather than a more formal review and approval by a board of authors on a singular piece -- this more casual style, in her historical research, is demonstrated to be a somewhat recent phenomena. The tradition of writing groups in America originates in the university system; groups can be traced back to self-help writing groups, literary societies, women's social clubs and associations for the 'improvement of young men' in revolutionary America. Such groups worked without publication as the primary goal; review focused primarily on the exchange and critique of ideas rather than on the content or style of the writing itself, similar to the salons of Europe in the same period. Finally, Gere indicates that a writing group must work with review and support as the purpose, rather than education -- hence, a classroom does not qualify as a writing group.

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Two contemporary studies -- 'Feminist Praxis: RLE Feminism' and 'Navigating the Lonely Sea: Peer Mentoring and Collaboration Among Female Scholars' -- explore both the frequency with which women collaborate upon and evaluate the work of other women and the benefits of doing so. The former study, studies individual writing as a mode of production attributed to masculinity, and suggests that many women in academia that struggle from under-employment while overqualified have adapted to a lower point in the social hierarchy of academia through a lessening in the absolute terms in which they approach their own work and the work of others. In other words, women have adapted, in modern academia, to review and challenge one another's work to create validity that is ensured to men in similar spaces merely through existence (Stanley). 'The Lonely Sea', an ethnographic study, follows groups of female scholars in a university setting, concluding that the presence of writing groups on a campus with a peer-mentoring format allows for the development of a scholarly identity for the individuals within the group. When framed within the context of the previous study, 'The Lonely Sea' suggests that women, a sociological minority in academic settings (not a physical minority; minority in this sense is denoted via sense of oppression) naturally form into groups to validate and create scholarly identity, leaving university and becoming individual writers, whilst men pursue education in an individualistic fashion and turn to writing groups during employment, through peer-review and editorial systems. 'The Lonely Sea' cites evidence of the success of writing groups in the employment opportunities of graduating group members, as well as heightened understanding of the self, others and environment that allows for career advances and superior writing ability (although the study neglects to mention how career advancement or writing ability is quantified, as neither are viably quantifiable things).

WOMEN IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Catherine Lutz, in 'The Erasure of Women's Writing in Sociocultural Anthropology' quotes Modleski on the subject, that 'one of the tasks of feminism is to continually insist upon recognition, as well as the priority of its work'. In review of these studies and histories of women's writing groups, the feminist strength that powers much of the work is the ability of women to fight oppression both through individual excellence and the power of a unified female voice: throughout history, as single feminine voices have spoken over and blotted out, it has been the attempt of groups of women in any form to support and strengthen the voice of single women so as to get some work -- any work -- into the world (Lutz).

Lutz refers to the process of academic gatekeeping as a primary tool in the oppression of the female voice, through which editors, publishers, and reviewers (those people who, in a writing group, serve so well to build up the work of women) marginalize or fail to publish the writing of women, particularly those that are feminists. In academic situations, female voices are further erased through a lack of citation -- arguments that could be assigned to specific female authors, therefore giving their work recognition and extending their readership, often entirely omitted from citation, with arguments instead being attributed to common knowledge or a research center, rather than the women herself (Stanley). This creates the implication that women lack citable work, and therefore original work, and disproportionately represents the amount of academic writing created by women, as the lack of citation implies the lack of existence, suggesting that lack of representation of women in academic fields is the fault of women (lack of interest/productivity in the field) rather than a fault of the system in which their work exists and interacts (Behar).

HISTORY

The Earliest Women's Writing Groups

'The Earliest Women's Writing? Anglo-Saxon Literary Cultures and Communities' expands Gere's historical study of writing groups to early medieval history whilst narrowing analysis to writing groups in their aid of women's writing: the convent is suggested as the earliest form of women's writing groups, dating to the 7th century. In such establishments, women worked to, as a collective, illuminate past manuscripts and create sermons, prayers and hymnals, many of which were not attributed to the creative effort of a single woman but to the collective as a whole, or, in some cases, to a supervising monk. This form of early writing groups in one way contradicts Gere's definition of a writing group: there is no analysis of individual work present in the convent, rather, work is from the beginning attributed to the group, without the presence of the opinion or ownership of the individual. Such a process may have served to establish the validity of writing produced by women a period where many were illiterate and women seen as virtually incapable of academic work; sexism of the period provided that a collective of women was required to validate writing that could otherwise be published by a single man. Men often appropriated the work of said collectives and published it under their names due to the presence of male 'supervisors' in women's writing spaces.

The first female authors in Britain also represent its earliest recognized writing group: a trio of abbesses are depicted in a later history by Bede as creating theological texts in keeping with the longstanding Saxon tradition of women's religious prophetic ability; Bede seems to have overwritten much of the women's work out of discomfort at their considerable power and autonomy in comparison to many women of the time. Bede adapts each of the abbesses to represent different feminine virtues -- purity, chastity, etc. -- and in doing so draws the women away from the strength of their collaboration, the autonomy of their work and their accessibility to readers, who encounter women stripped of their humanity and brought to a single characteristic. Women -- sponsors and authors alike -- focus on the linguistic skill, devotion and social power of their compatriots, a clear contrast to the idolatry and heavy focus on virginity made by the male editors. The earliest record of women describing other women depicts roles within a convent, basing the description of a woman on her social standing and academic quality, although later relations of the same text, once overwritten by Bede, interpret 'virtue' and 'devotion' not as additive adjectives to a description of standing within the convent but as indicators of virginity and purity, which he uses to form an idealized, de-humanizing interpretation of femininity. Indeed, a sign of overwriting by a monk or deacon is the presence of a verse alluding to the virginity of the nun, something that was taken for granted by her sisters and/or seen as irrelevant to her identity as a woman, both of faith and of writing. Although early evidence of women criticizing the work of their peers, the very presence of criticism, as opposed to erasure, overwriting and appropriation, demonstrates an intention among early women's academic communities to preserve and unify the voice of women, such that a voice could be heard in the period.

From Bede's adaptation onwards, much of women's work in the medieval era was produced and distributed by and among women -- abbesses commissioned work from their peers, and writing flowed through convent, and occasionally monastic, readerships. In addition, much of their writing seems to have been celebratory of the work of other women -- hymns celebrating virtue and strength in women, or the commemoration of a particular group. This may have been a form of honor or remembrance for women who would likely otherwise go entirely unnoticed in history, as their deeds were overwritten, erased and lost to time and the nature of their social standing. Although the absence of a wider readership for women's texts is partially due to the illiteracy of many people of the time, the reticence of many preachers to adapt the writing of women into church teachings is demonstrated by the clerical habit of the adaptation of women's texts as overwritten by men, as well as the adaptation of long-dead women's texts, as said texts could be attributed to virtuous feminine martyrs or an entirely ambiguous source, rather than a collective of empowered, devout women. The recuperation of many early women's texts indicates female patronage and female readership, as well as an almost unanimous association with religious houses and a focus on collective production.

What Can We Learn From Early Writing Groups?

The nature of early women's writing groups suggests a trend of collectivity and defensiveness of other women towards the work of the peers -- presenting work to a world that viewed the woman authors as lesser creators incapable of producing work as valid as their male counterparts, women seemingly instinctively fell into the habit of writing in groups and supporting the quality of the work of other women, a practice that their privileged and competitive male counterparts had to work for, rather than naturally achieve, later on in written history (Behar). It can be inferred that the remaining tradition of women supporting the work of women writers stems from this natural inclination to band together in competition with privileged male individuals and as a way to defeat many of the lower expectations surrounding the quality of women's work; expectations that can be seen to mar today's publishing world, contributing to the continued lack of female representation in academic disciplines.

Fig 1.



Fig 2.

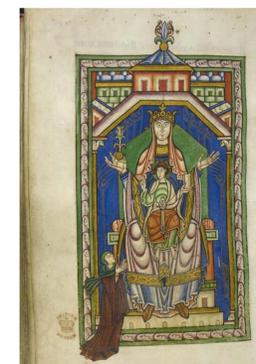


Fig 3.



Fig 1. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* describes some of the first recorded women's writing, communal efforts by nuns and abbesses in pre-medieval England.
Fig 2. *Shaftesbury Psalter*, 2nd half of the 12th century. A manuscript made for a female sponsor, who is depicted supplicating the Virgin on the opening page. Works sponsored by women were rare during the period due to lack of financial independence and literacy.
Fig 3. Christina de Pizan works on the 'Cent Balades' in her study in France, c.1410-c.1414. Miniature from the *Book of The Queen*, France.

INTERVIEWS

Jana McBurney-Lin

Jana McBurney Lin, author of *My Half of The Sky*, a contemporary fiction novel, is a member of the WOMBA writing group, as well as the California Writer's Club and a small writing critique group, which she cites as the most influential of the three. Lin began her journey as a writer rather spontaneously; her intention was to work in advertising, but after a term of study in Japan, was inspired to begin writing, particularly after illuminating discussions with Japanese women in politics, who chronicled their struggles with being the lone representatives of being the female voice in various congresses. Further inspiration came from a trip to China, where she learned of attempts to preserve the lives of girls due to the trend of infanticide that followed the One-Child policy. Lin's novel *My Half of The Sky* was her debut contribution to the fabric of women's written experiences around the world, and it was her first writing club -- the California Writer's Club -- that 'held her hand' and encouraged her work.

Meg Waite Clayton

Meg Waite Clayton, author of 'The Wednesday Sisters' and 'The Race To Paris', among other historical fiction novels, is also a member of WOMBA. She, like Ms. Lin, chose to pursue writing after pursuing a mainstream career (law) for a period of time; much of her early writing career was shaped by informal writing groups, including teachers, fellow students and authors. After forming several of her own informal groups, Clayton joined several formal writing groups, with whom she continues to share manuscripts with. Today, Clayton is supported primarily by friends with whom she share the 'writing life and the writing struggle', fulfilling the purpose of writing groups as a way to maintain interest and review work.

CONCLUSION

This collection of sociological studies, interviews, historical sources and feminist writings suggest the presence of writing groups that has helped to sustain and distinguish the voice of the female writer in the face of oppression through history, contemporary studies, early Western history and the testament of modern writers suggests an inclination for woman writers to group together to support and improve the work of their fellows. Interviews with contemporary authors suggest that community is hugely influential in women joining the field of writing; both cited that while specific groups were not their reason beginning to write, support from others was necessary to maintain their interest and investment in the subject. Both women did, however, cite groups as intrinsic to their current communities and work, both in formal groups (i.e. WOMBA) and smaller review groups of friends, family members and co-workers.

Contemporary research (Behar, Driscoll, Lutz, Stanley) and my own interviews suggest, beyond the assumed purpose of the writing groups -- to review and to teach (Gere) a second purpose: writing groups, particularly those that aim to support the work of women, provide a community that teaches confidence and sustains interest in writing. As the voice of women still struggles to find a hold in the realm of academic writing (Lutz), writing groups help to provide a space in which women can receive feedback that supports their experiences as women in the writing community and creates a peer-support model that allows women to see and communicate with others that have been successful in their field, therefore creating a chain of woman-supported woman writers, a progression that can ultimately be used to support the representation and voice of women in academia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / REFERENCES

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