

Tools for Creating Support Strategies for your Writing Journey

Big Ideas

Setting expectations: Not everyone thinks about, associates, or experiences emotions in exactly the same way, so the first time you try some of these exercises in a writing group allow a bit of time to openly discuss expectations and comfort levels. Recognize participants will not all approach the conversation in a similar manner. Setting expectations, guidelines, and practices that are functional for everyone will help the group to advance their writing process by identifying how emotions influence personal routines and achievement.

Meta-communication allows the group members to discuss how they want to talk about emotions connected to their writing. It is a healthy and mindful tool when used respectfully.

5 Coaching/conversational strategies to deepen the conversation from the procedures of writing to the inner processes of writing

1. The “And What Else?” question

When checking in with general questions (e.g., What’s the challenge for you this week?) follow up with “And what else?” (a few times!). Coach Michael Bunjay Stanier calls this the A.W.E. question. Used multiple times, it has a deepening power. Typically, the first answer one arrives at is low hanging fruit, such as: *My challenge is time*. But if you continue to ask, A.W.E., the conversation can shift to the underlying causes of that can actually be addressed such as: *A challenge is not setting limits with my students and then I am not having time for my own work*. It may sound awkward to keep persisting, yet “and what else” can help a writer reach important insights that are undergirding a longstanding challenge. By not accepting just the first answer, we are communicating that there is likely more to be explored.

2. Intuition/Blurting out

In a conversation in which a writer is describing what is happening (or not happening), if you get a sense that there is an emotion attached to the phenomena, simply share your intuition and see if it resonates. For example, one member may observe: *I may be totally off here, but I am feeling a lot of fear as you are approaching this final chapter. I don’t know what the fear is about but I just sense it. How does that land for you?* Even if one’s intuition is not accurate, the observation may cue the writer to reflect on what you may be noticing. For example, they may respond. *No, it’s not fear, it’s actually avoidance from fatigue at this point. I could think about how to get more energized.*

3. What would be a metaphor for this project?

To shift the conversation out of the analytical, moving to visuals and other non-verbal ways of thinking (e.g., emotional) can help writers consider their work through a new lens. In cognitive science this is referred to as the Dual Model of Cognition with the two types of thinking being Verbal and Non-Verbal. We tend to over rely on verbal thinking and not benefit from the non-verbal cognition. You can pose to the group – What would be a metaphor for your writing project right now? If someone has trouble coming up with one, just ask them as to what images pop into their mind, and then follow up with the imagery. Then lean into how that metaphor feels. If it is a negative metaphor (e.g., falling off a treadmill) challenge a writer to come up with an alternate metaphor to that their project *could* be. Then lean into the possibilities that the new metaphor opens.

4. Leaning into the feeling of the project

Have each member of the group do a rating task. For example, if you were going to rate this project on a scale of 1-10 where do you rank this project, this week? If people seek clarification, you can assign values such as 10 = *Progress is moving steadily and swiftly*. 1 = *Nothing is moving forward*. Then after members come up with a number, further query, what does a “5” feel like to you? This process allows writers to really check in with where they are at.

Then move the conversation to: Where do you want to be? (Not everyone wants to be a 10!). So, if someone responds an “8” then query: What would an 8 feel like? At that point, you can get some real insight as to what would make the process more joyful or meaningful for them. For example, someone may say that “*An 8 would feel like I was satisfied almost every day with my writing*”. Then members can lean into that as a goal. For example, someone may respond: “*Ok, so I hear that you want to feel some satisfaction at the end of a day. That would really motivate you, right? What could you do to build in more chances for that feeling to happen today?*”

5. Mind-body-Connection

This exercise can really engage/entertain or energize a group. It may turn out silly and/or insightful but it will change the energy in some way! Have all members of a writing group stand up (and yes, this can be done over Zoom), and represent their writing project with a posture. It can be a posture that depicts how it feels to be working on this project. Once people have determined a posture or motion, have everyone reflect on how their body feels in that position. Where do they feel good? Where do they feel tension? For example, someone may depict their writing project as pushing a boulder up a hill and experience tension all through their body as they

strain against a heavy weight. Challenge people to adjust their body to a more comfortable position/motion where their body feels energized but not tense. Then connect this new position back to the project posing a question of: If you brought this into your writing project, what would that mean? For example, it may mean to slow down, or it may mean to bring in grounding practices, or it may mean to do things “one at a time”.

Guidelines to navigate writing group talks about emotion and the writing process:

- Set some guidelines for how to proceed (conversation management)
- Encourage everyone’s participation, and enable each to decide what works for them personally
- Review how much time you want to spend discussing how emotions might be impacting the writing process
- Discuss some disclosure boundaries – what might they look like? Are they necessary? If so, how will they be navigated?
- Would a confidentiality agreement be helpful? Is everyone willing to respect that what is discussed in the group, stays in the group.
- How will the group manage turn-taking? Is everyone expected to have to participate equally – or depending on need?

Practices for healthy discussion and writing:

- Tell your own story, don’t attempt to tell other people’s stories
- Take space, and be respectful to make space for others (don’t dominate discussion)
- Avoid “you” and speak from “I” – for example, “I hear you saying [insert interpretation], is that correct?”
- Don’t interrupt, actively listen (often this is mainly what we need, rarely are we actually looking for advice)
- Ask questions – this is a good coaching strategy, and it assumes we each have our own answers
- Only disclose what you are comfortable sharing or having others know about your life and writing process
- Maintain a positive focus on the writing process – emotions can be confusing, scary, debilitating, and yet identifying them can be cathartic, healthy, freeing
- Include a debrief, focus it on the “process of writing” (not on emotions, as these are being discussed as factors that impact