Writing groups are used regularly in the academic arena, but they are also used in the non-academic community. This paper is an exploration of the use of non-academic writing groups in Salem, Oregon. In Chapter 2 I discuss the theory behind writing groups--what it is about writing and responding that is beneficial and useful. Chapter 3 explores the roots of writing groups in Salem including some self-improvement groups, which were the precursors of writing groups. Chapter 4 then includes detailed descriptions of the groups which are currently meeting in Salem, including their formats, purposes, and some examples of their processes. Based on this information, the paper discusses the educational and social benefits of writing groups and the role of these groups in the community of Salem, Oregon.
A Descriptive Study of the History, Growth, Development and Value of Non-Academic Writing Groups in Salem, Oregon

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE HISTORY, GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND VALUE OF NON-ACADEMIC WRITING GROUPS IN SALEM, OREGON

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Writing groups. Writing and groups. It takes two words to describe the subject of this exploration. And the very fact that the two words have equal weight in the subject reveals that writing groups are a blend—a combining of two processes—one an individual process, and the other a social process. It’s the combination of these two ingredients that makes writing groups so unique—and so complicated.

The questions

I was introduced to writing groups as a graduate student when I began to meet with fellow classmates to critique our papers before submitting them to our professors. At that point I viewed writing groups as an academic exercise practiced largely by intellectuals and English majors. It was not long, however, before I found that being part of a writing group resulted not only in better grades, but also resulted in a better understanding of the course material. And as these groups became more regular, meeting week after week, I also realized that there was a further benefit—I had formed some deep and lasting friendships.
This experience led me to wonder about what writing groups might be meeting in the town where I lived—Salem, Oregon. I asked myself a series of questions:

- What processes are involved in a writing group?
- How long have writing groups existed in Salem, and how did they develop?
- Who is using writing groups in Salem today? And how are they being used?
- What role do writing groups play in the city of Salem?

The methodology

Answering these questions required approaching the subject of writing groups from several directions. My studies in rhetoric at Oregon State University led me to a number of authors, including Janet Emig, Peter Elbow, and Anne Ruggles Gere, who have offered valuable insights into the processes and benefits of writing and getting feedback. I began with Gere’s basic definition of a writing group in her book *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* as simply "writers responding to one another’s work" (1). Chapter 2 gives a brief analysis of these two processes which define a writing group.

Chapter 3 then traces the roots of writing groups in Salem. The spade work of Gere provided a foundation for my exploration. Her division of groups into academic and non-
academic helped me to define my subject further, limiting it to non-academic groups. Her research on the emergence of writing groups in America and specifically in the Seattle, Washington area widened my vision of these writing groups, encouraging me to look for writing in self-improvement or enrichment groups, literary clubs and women's organizations.

Through research from the Oregon State Archives, the Hugh Morrow Collection of the Salem Library, scrapbooks from some clubs and organizations in Salem and conversations with writers, I have tried to piece together a picture of some of the early writing groups in Salem. Some of these groups may test the flexibility of Gere's definition of a writing group, but that is because these are precursors to writing groups. They are the beginning signs of people in Salem trying to use writing and trying to get some kind of feedback from others on what they were doing.

Chapter 4 builds on Gere's method of tracing the history or writing groups and turns to a description of writing groups which are meeting in Salem today. While there are some fairly detailed descriptions of what occurs in a writing group, these descriptions are not intended to be an ethnography--a thick description--of the groups. Rather, it is a broad description that attempts reveal the tremendous diversity in writing groups today. These groups
were discovered through a variety of means—organizations
and simply following trails that began with "I have a
friend who has a friend who has done something like that."
Then, through telephone and personal interviews and visits
to as many groups as possible, I tried to piece together a
picture of what is currently happening in writing groups in
Salem.

Chapter 5 includes my findings and conclusions based
on this research on the past and current groups. It
revisits the question of how the processes of a writing
group are adapted to a variety of non-academic uses and
considers both the benefits of writing groups and role they
play in the life of the City of Salem.
CHAPTER 2

THE THEORY BEHIND WRITING GROUPS

Before looking at the specific examples of past and present writing groups in Salem, it is important first to take a look at the components of a writing group. Based on Gere's basic definition of a writing group as "writers responding to one another's work" (1), there are two things that must be happening in a writing group. First, its members must be writing, and second, they must in some way be responding to each others' work. This chapter will focus on what happens during each of these two processes.

Writing

People in writing groups are people who write. This seems like an obvious statement, but one of the main comments I heard from people in these groups is that their group helped to discipline them to keep writing. They encourage each other to continue writing—to continue developing their ideas. Writing releases powerful forces for learning and creativity. Research into the effect of writing on learning has shown that the processes involved in putting one's thoughts on paper results in learning. In "Writing as Mode of Learning," Janet Emig analyzes some of the research on this subject by describing what happens when people are forced to slow down and write down their thoughts:
...This slower pace allows for--indeed encourages--the shuttling among past, present, and future. Writing, in other words, connects the three major tenses of our experience to make meaning. And the two major modes by which these three aspects are united are the processes of analysis and synthesis: analysis, the breaking of entities into their constituent parts; and synthesis, combining or fusing these, often into fresh arrangements or amalgamans. (77)

One of the reasons why writing groups are both helpful and exciting is because the people in them are writing--they are processing ideas and building ideas as individuals. When they commit to bringing a piece of writing to their group, they are committing to this process of writing which ensures that they will be developing ideas. By the very nature of writing they will be engaged in analysis and synthesis. The benefits of the writing process are even more obvious in the groups of senior citizens who write their life stories. In "Literacy Through Lifewriting," Sydeny Butler and Roy Bentley discuss the value of writing as a medium for learning. It is through the actual writing that the authors learn who they are. "Through lifewriting," Butler and Bentley maintain, "the writers learn to compose themselves (and the pun is deliberate)" (4). What makes writing groups even more powerful and interesting is that they combine these benefits of writing with the dynamic of group interaction.
Groups

The existence of writing groups is not an odd phenomenon, it is a natural outcome. As a person writes and develops ideas and perspectives, they often find they need feedback. In Writing with Power, Peter Elbow sees this need as inevitable:

No matter how productively you managed to get words down on paper or how carefully you have revised, no matter how shrewdly you figured your audience and purpose and suited your words to them, there comes a time when you need feedback. (237)

Elbow is saying that writers need to see their work through someone else's eyes. The reader and the text can exist together only so long before they begin to beg for an audience.

This audience may be sought for a variety of reasons. Some readers may be seeking assurance that their piece is grammatically correct. Others may be wanting to know if what they have written is logical, makes sense. Foremost in another writer's mind may be the question, "Is it marketable?" Still others may be looking for an emotional response, some sort of "connection" between their writing and the reader--or between themselves and the reader--affirmation that our thoughts or experiences are common to others. Writing groups can offer help for writers in any of these areas.

A writing group offers a chance to step back from being the writer and look at your product from the point of
view of the reader. That's why they are so helpful to people who want to make their writing better. As Linda Flower explains in "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," the factor that makes writing good is the ability to escape from the writer-person and see things through the reader-person. "Good writing," she says, "is often the cognitively demanding transformation of the natural but private expression of Writer-Based thought into a structure and style adapted to a reader" (20). The reader’s perspective is one of the things writers are seeking when they share their writing with others and ask for feedback. The reader’s response can help writers find out what works and make their writing better.

Another way writing groups improve writing is by helping the thinking of its members. As we’ve seen above, the very act of writing improves our thinking. Hearing a response to our writing forces our thinking to go even another level deeper. In Writing Without Teachers, Elbow sees the interaction that happens in a writing group as the way the members’ thinking can "get somewhere" (49). The group interaction is not just part of making writing better— it’s part of making ideas better. It’s part of the "cooking" (49) process through which ideas are developed. Elbow explains:

Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one usually can. It’s why brainstorming works. I say something. You
give a response and it constitutes some restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said. The process provides a continual leverage or mechanical advantage: we can successively climb upon the shoulders of the other's restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little farther. (49-50)

By allowing themselves to be part of a writing group, writers are not simply improving their writing, they are generating new ideas by brainstorm with others. They are, in fact, creating new knowledge.

But apart from the help a writing group can give with the quality of a person's writing and thinking, there are other reasons why people seek feedback to their writing, reasons which are linked with the "group" part of writing groups. On a personal level, writers want to read their stuff out loud and have someone say, "Yes!" And often they want that encouragement so that they will have the nerve to continue writing--even to continue thinking.

Audience is particularly important in groups in which the writers are writing about themselves. The focus in these groups is not so much on the quality of the writing, but the content of the writing. In "Whole Language--Writing: The Critical Response," Julie Jochum describes the importance of getting feedback, particularly to personal writing such as life stories:

Writing unleashes unseen and unspoken bits of a writer's inner being. The writer deserves the sense of an active audience who receives those declared thoughts and recognizes the voice of the writer. (5)
Jochum says that writers in these groups not need an audience, they "deserve" one. Because the writing in these groups is so personal, the response, in turn, needs to correspond to the purposes of the writing--and the writer.

What makes writing groups uniquely helpful is that they combine two very powerful learning tools--writing and group response. Both of these processes promote learning and growth in the people who use them. The two chapters which follow trace the history of writing groups in Salem and describe the groups which are meeting in Salem today. These groups are examples of how these two elements, reading and responding, can be mixed in to meet a wide variety of needs in the community of Salem, Oregon.
CHAPTER 3  
THE HISTORY OF WRITING GROUPS IN SALEM

Since the first settlers arrived in the 1830s and founded a mission school for the Indians, Salem has been a city that values writing and education. Among the first to settle in this part of the Willamette Valley were Jason Lee, his wife (Anna Maria Pittman Lee) and Cyrus Shepard. All three of them were involved in writing—Jason Lee, as a missionary and Bible teacher, Pittman Lee as a poet, and Shepherd as a school teacher to the local Indians. Considering the interest these settlers had in writing, it's not surprising that this city should be friendly to writers and, over the years, develop groups where its citizens can share their writings.

Because of the informal nature of writing groups, it is difficult to uncover evidence of groups which may have been active in early Salem history. The city library offers the valuable Morrow Collection of books on Salem history, including an early history of Salem by H. K. Hines. Also, the library's vertical files include several folders on Salem Clubs which contain scattered articles about a variety of self-improvement and literary clubs. Pro-Poets, one of Salem's oldest groups of writers, has donated its scrap books, which are kept in the reference librarian's office. Of further help were the state archive's records of clubs and organizations in Salem. The
YWCA uncovered a stack of old scrap books on the floor of a closet in one of its meeting rooms. Many of the news clippings and programs in the scrapbooks are undated and unidentified, but they provide some information about how this organization helped to meet the needs of Salem writers. The American Association of University Women also allowed me to browse through its scrapbooks, which included some of its early newsletters. All of these were valuable resources in trying to track down some of the early opportunities Salem writers had to share their work.

**Salem’s first writing group**

Probably one of the first writing groups in Salem was a collaborative effort, in 1838, to prepare a letter urging the Congress to recognize the Oregon Territory. That document was "prepared by Jason Lee and P.L. Edwards, doubtless assisted by David Leslie" (Hines 136), and had to satisfy a diverse group of farmers, French fur trappers, and missionaries. Lee hand-carried the document to Congress, and Salem's first collaborative writing project was a success when Congress recognized the Oregon Territory in 1848.

**Early Clubs**

In her book *Writing Groups*, Anne Ruggles Gere points to the connection between early mutual improvement groups
in America and the development of writing groups. These groups, she writes, "shared many common features, chief among them ...a considerable interest in writing" (32). A number of early mutual-improvement groups offered opportunities for the settlers of Salem to share their writing. The Salem and Marion County Directory of 1891, includes a list of organizations in the city at that time which includes the Alka-Hesperian Literary Society, several Chautauqua Circles, and both a Philodorean Literary Society for men, which met at Willamette University, and a Philodosian Society for young ladies.

The men's club met on Friday evenings, when the members held debates, read original essays, and gave orations. An account of those early meetings reports that the presentations were followed with lively discussions (Salem History Files, Clubs, Salem Public Library). For example, the files note that on May 30, 1862, the Hesperians sponsored a debate on the issue Resolved: That women be educated to an equal extent as men. The Hesperians met until the 1870s. Meanwhile, another group, the Philodorean Society, began sponsoring similar events. An article in The Capitol Journal Annual Edition of July 2, 1938, gives this agenda for the Philodorean meeting of Sept. 11, 1869:

Following its literary programme rendered by the Philodorean Society last Friday evening:
F.M. Anderson, composition; T.W. Atkinson, oration; Levi Magee, declamation; N.M.
Newport, lecture. Question: "Resolved that the mental faculties of men are superior to those of women," with [seven speakers identified by initials and last names] on the affirmative and [eight names] on the negative. Decided in favor of the affirmative (Sec. 6, p. 13).

These clubs worked as a form of writing group. Those who participated must have received feedback from their community, if not before the actual program night, certainly afterwards. The society provided a place for early Salemites to have their works "heard" and to get a response from others--two basic characteristics of writing groups.

State incorporation records also reveal the formation of similar clubs in the early twentieth century. The Agenda Club was formed in 1926; the Salem Art Center Association (which then encouraged not only painting and musical art, but also written art) was founded in 1938, and in 1944 the Salem Oration Society was formed. The 1930s and the pre-World War II years appear to be a time of literary and cultural growth in Salem, with many clubs and organizations forming to focus on self-improvement and education.

1900-1950

Women also had opportunities to practice and share their writing with others. The Salem Women's Club, formed early in the century, took an active role in encouraging
self-improvement. In 1928, the club sponsored a series of book reviews on a local radio station, and "all club women were asked to write a 400-word report on the book they enjoyed the most" (McKay, n.p.) The club then selected one report to be printed in the club’s statewide publication. Another Women’s Club group formed in the South Salem area and produced a collaborative writing project in 1930—a booklet to promote the prune industry, which was vital to their community. The late 1930s or early 1940s is also when Salem’s first Toastmaster’s Club was formed. Although these groups are not considered writing groups because the presentations are oral and not written, the meetings are run much like a writing group, with several people at each meeting delivering a speech (an oral composition), and receiving specific feedback about what was expressed well and what elements could be improved.

Libraries have served as a resource and encouragement to such reading, writing, and self-improvement groups. With the prompting of Hugh Morrow, head of the public library in 1947, Salem was among the first cities to establish a Great Books Club. David Stall and David Duniway (former state archivist) began the first club. Both of these men were also involved in a free-wheeling discussion group called the Flat Earth Society. As the group’s name indicates, it provided a non-intimidating
place for presenting ideas and receiving responses from others.

1950-1960

In the 1950s, the YWCA sponsored a Writing Club as part of its mission to improve education in Salem. An old scrapbook stored in a meeting room closet at the YWCA says that eight people, including two men, were part of the club, which met in the parlor of the YWCA. Several sessions were dedicated to the art of writing poetry, and one member, Margery Graves, was considered a bit of a heroine because two of her songs had been published and broadcast over the Columbia Network (YWCA scrapbook). The club must have been a success, because by 1954 a scrapbook entry described it as a "creative writing" group, and in 1956 an "intermediate creative writing" group was offered. A 1957 club announcement indicated that the class covered all types of writing and gave the encouraging news that several members of the group had articles and short stories published in a magazine. Because the YWCA scrapbooks are incomplete and many years there seems to be no record of activities, it's difficult to determine how long this writing group continued. The next scrapbook reference to a writing class is in 1972, when David Duniway (mentioned above in reference to the Great Books Club and Flat Earth
1960s-present

The 1960s saw a surge of interest in writing and in groups. During this decade, a group of poets formed a writing group called Pro-Poets, and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) began a writing group. The 1960s also saw the birth of both Chemeketa Community College, with its focus on adult education, and of Salem's community education program, which has provided a spectrum of writing group experiences for adults in Salem over the past twenty-five years. Community school adult education classes have included creative writing, writing-to-publish, story-telling, "letters to my children," and journal workshops. The format of some of these classes was similar to a writing group, and some of them led to a less formal but more long-term commitment.

One example of a class-turned-writing group is The Elbert Berry Writing Club. In the early 1960s, a retired English teacher named Elbert Berry offered a creative writing class through the community schools. The class was called "Writing to Sell." Members were so enthusiastic that when the class was over they decided to continue to meet as a "writing club" (Wright. Personal interview. 7 May 1992). About ten people began to meet regularly. A
year later, when Berry died, the group decided to call themselves the Elbert Berry Writing Club. It continued to meet for almost a decade. While the majority of the members were women (eight), there were also two men in the group. In a telephone interview in May of 1992, Katy Connecl, one of the members, recalls what the group meant to her:

I suppose it was the awakening of the housewife who wanted to do something besides change diapers. I had taken a sewing class and felt like a fool. When it was over, I said, "Now I'm going to do something I like." It was a great ego trip. It was the sociability of it. We loved reading our stories. Jean had us rolling in the aisles. She wrote funny stuff. But we probably should have been tougher on each other.

Even today, thirty years later, interviews with members of this group revealed an immediate sense of comraderie, shared secrets, deep friendships. As Katy's comments above reveal, the real value was not in what she learned about writing, but in the social experience--what she learned about herself and others--the very exchange of their thoughts and lives.

The group also had some extrinsic advantages, however. Connecl was one of the few who actually had some success as a writer. She won a typewriter and a tape deck in a short story contest and sold an article to Golden Magazine for $100, but the magazine folded before her story actually got into print.
In a personal interview on May 7, 1992, Marge Wright, another member of the Berry group, remembers the club and the times well. As a college graduate home with small children, she says the group was "a way of getting out of the house and getting some intellectual stimulation." She recalls setting up a card table in her basement and typing up numerous drafts of short stories which she brought to the group and then sent off to magazines such as Redbook, The Ladies' Home Journal, and Calling All Girls. "I suppose you could say we weren't successful," she evaluates today. "Not much got published. But it was good incentive to keep going. The criticism was upbeat and it helped our self esteem." The club served as an encouragement to keep writing and also provided a psychological boost to its members.

At about the same time, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) began a creative writing group. The first mention of such a group was in the 1965 club bulletin, and the group met under various leaders until 1982. The meetings were held in the middle of the day, and members would bring a sack lunch and copies of something they'd written--everything from poetry to Christmas letters. Meetings were monthly and would usually draw about six to seven people. The group folded when some members, who were specifically interested in writing to
publish, broke off and formed the Salem Fiction Writers Guild.

Some of the writing groups of the 1960s had an evangelical purpose, too—they wanted to reach out and encourage other writers. Wright remembers that the Berry Club sponsored a writing contest with a grand prize of full tuition to a writing conference in Portland. In a similar fashion, ProPoets, the poetry group begun in the 1960s, has periodically offered contests for adults and children and published a quarterly booklet which has received entries from all over the country.

The 1960s also saw the beginning of the Writing-Your Life-Story classes in the local community colleges. In 1968, a Salem English teacher, Ellen Marshall, was visiting the home of her neighbor, Joan Galbraith, and noticed the manuscript that Galbraith’s father had written for his family in 1959, inspired by Oregon’s Centennial celebration. Marshall was immediately captivated by the story, and the two women agreed that day that it would be a wonderful thing if more older people would write their life stories. Five years later, in 1973, Galbraith was working at the newly opened Chemeketa Community College, and Marshall, at that point retired from teaching English, was drafted as the first life-story instructor. In only one year the college was offering fourteen classes in churches, schools, and senior citizen centers throughout the city.
Today there are twelve of these groups and a total of 120 people who write each week and come together to share and discuss their writings.

In response to increased interest in classes for adults, in 1971 the school district developed an adult education program, and one of its first classes was a workshop in "Writing for Fun and Profit," taught by John Nagle. The class description indicates something similar to the Elbert Berry group: "a course designed for the beginning writing, and for those who simply enjoy writing and would like to improve their skills and submit their work for publication" (1971 Class Schedule for Community Schools).

Whether part of an organized effort, or a casual meeting among friends, writing groups have been a continuing part of Salem life since its beginnings. The examples in this chapter show that over the 150 years of Salem's history, writing groups have met during every era—from the early self-improvement groups like the Philodorean Society to the Women's Club and to today's Fiction Writers' Guild and numerous life story groups. These groups met and continue to meet because they address real needs. For some people, writing groups fill a gap between formal education and solitary study. For others, particularly senior citizens, a writing group may provide the opportunity to process events whose significance might otherwise be lost not only to their families but even to themselves. For
still others, a writing group may be the encouragement that keeps them working toward finishing the novel that has lived in their minds for years. And for still others, writing groups are the chance for friendship, for contact with other people, and for confirmation that they are part of a community. Writing groups continue in Salem because they meet a variety of intrinsic needs. They provide a sounding board, an audience, a sense of accountability, and a sense of community. Writing groups have been a vital and flexible part of the continued growth, learning, enrichment, and fellowship in Salem since its founding.
CHAPTER 4
CURRENT WRITING GROUPS IN SALEM

Who is using writing groups in Salem today? How did they find each other? How do they function? To answer these questions I began researching, networking, visiting, and talking on the phone to writers and would-be-writers in Salem. This list was compiled over a period of about a year and a half--from November 1991 through March 1993.

Discovering these groups was not an easy task, and the result is not a tidy package. Because of the ad hoc nature of some of these groups, it was difficult to find them. Once a group was found, I would interview a member or members of the group and ask if I could visit the group. All of the people I contacted were eager to discuss their groups, and most, but not all of them, were open to having visitors.

In visiting these groups, another difficulty arose. Because writing groups are built on a delicate web of trust, it was difficult to step in as an observer and not upset its natural dynamics. It was hard to know if a group is acting the way it normally does. Also, one visit may not reveal a "typical" session. I visited one group (the Heritage Room group), several times, but then discovered that my continued presence seemed to change the dynamic of the group--I had become an additional audience for these writers to deal with. Of the sixteen groups listed here, I
visited nine, and interviewed someone involved in every group listed.

As my list of groups developed, some natural categories emerged. The groups are divided into three categories according to their purposes: writing-to-publish, writing your life story, and "other." Some of the groups in the third category may challenge the traditional definition of a writing group. They may not meet consistently or for an extended length of time. Some of them do not focus on "writing," but are groups that use writing for healing or creating community, or for collaboration in the workplace. More than examples of writing groups, they are included to show the variety that can be created by combining "writing" with "groups."

As I write this, one of the groups (The Heritage Room) is in the process of coming to a close, and another group (The Arbor Cafe Group) is just beginning to form. This chapter is like a snapshot, catching a picture of the groups that are meeting at this point in time, and giving a small account of what is happening in writing groups in Salem today.
Writing-to-publish

The Salem Fiction Writers Guild

Statues of two lions flank the entrance to the Spanish-style old Salem home where the Salem Fiction Writers Guild is holding its meeting. The lions could be symbolic. This is a serious writing-to-publish group (and they will tell you so). They meet at Miriam Bednarz’s home once every three weeks. The sessions last for four hours, giving plenty of time for lengthy sharing and in-depth response. I attended the group’s meeting on May 12, 1992.

Once past the lions and inside, the setting can best be described as "dusty artistic." In the music room of the spacious old home, the members arrange their papers and books around a worn, stuffed couch and hard, wooden chairs. Some of the talk is friendly chatter, but some is more intense, as the writers discuss the progress they’ve made since the last meeting and anticipate the day’s work.

The group has been meeting for ten years. Bednarz talked about the group in a May 5, 1992 telephone interview, and I visited a group meeting on May 12, 1992. There are five writing members—four women and one man—and a sixth attender, the husband of one of the writers, who acts as moderator. His job is to keep things moving and to direct (in a low-key manner) the critique time. All are working on novels, and all are experienced writers.
Because of the length of their meetings, members are able to read entire chapters and get feedback. Since they have been meeting together for so many years, responses are based on a long-term perspective of the writers' works. The quality of the writing is high, even though not all of the members have been published. There's a sense of old friendship in the group, which allows for some blunt criticism.

The manuscripts are shared orally. Each member takes a turn reading his or her own work. The rule is that the writer is not allowed to defend his work during the response time. On the day I visited, one of the members shared the first chapter to a new book she is writing on. During the response time, another member suggests the chapter moves too quickly. He adds a grammatical suggestion about dividing a particularly long section. Another member takes issue with a description of one of the characters during a fight scene. "You describe him as having eyes that are 'round shaped, they snap darkly, white-ringed mouth. He sounds like a raccoon. It sounds clownish. I know you didn't mean that. Also you say, 'She spent her life in the garden with her grandmother.' If you take that literally, it's silly." Another woman suggests that she add a description of the pregnant woman watching the fight. "During the fight you could have her hugging her stomach."
She's holding her stomach, her secret, protecting the baby during the argument."

After the verbal responses, all the member pass written comments to the writer. As she gathers them, she responds, with a hint of touchiness in her voice, "I just want you to know I'm not going to change anything in the first six pages." The group appears not to be offended, and the moderator moves the session along.

The next writer is in the middle of what she describes as a romantic mystery. The discussion centers around the relationship of the two main characters. The feedback shows that the group is confused. They can't tell how the heroine feels about one of the characters. Does she trust him or not? Why isn't she more reserved with him? They are looking for more information. But about another character they are all in agreement: the eccentric Aunt Phoebe is a hit.

After lunch, a third member shares a chapter from the book he is writing about a saxophone player who is searching for his daughter. At first the group is too caught up in the story to respond, but gradually they begin to share the sections they liked. Several members share the opinion that the main character gets frustrated too soon in his search. He's too impatient. They point to the good parts of the chapter--the strong action verbs, the phrase "something scratched at his memory," the way he
reached over the desk and grabbed the desk clerk’s arm at the hotel.

The next to share is the newest member. She had been sharing short stories, but the group is encouraging her to try a longer work. One of the men in the group helped her develop an outline during the week. She shares this and the first chapter. The response is favorable, especially on her characterization. The only negative criticism is that her main character is supposed to be an educated school teacher, yet she cuts off her words, like gettin’, goin’, comin.’ Someone else suggests a physical description of the character.

The last member to share reads a short story that she has revised. "One of my crazy ones," she says. The group has heard the piece before and responds minimally. They are still confused about the piece and it’s clear they don’t think it’s been changed much. "It’s a heavy allegory," the author explains.

Pro-Poets

Organized in 1964, Pro-Poets is probably one of the oldest continuing writing groups in Salem. It meets once a month at the library and attendance is usually about half a dozen. Scrapbooks stored in the reference librarian’s office at the Salem Public library hold newspaper clippings about the formation of the club that describe it as a
prestigious group, with membership limited to published
writers and by invitation only. Tucked in the group’s
scrapbook are a few copies of poems that members shared
with the group, some with peer responses pencilled in the
margins, including one anonymous comment which complained,
"It doesn’t rhyme." That comment is a good description of
the reputation of this group for being very traditional and
conservative. Even today there is a strong thread
connecting this group with its past. One charter member is
still active in the club. But with dwindling membership,
the group is trying to be open to freer forms of verse and
to younger writers. In an effort to be more inclusive and
more helpful to newer writers, the group has been open to
the public for two years. It is a tightly bonded group.
Most have been members for ten to fifteen years, but there
are new faces--when I visited the group for its regular
meeting on October 12, 1992, one woman was there for just
the second time, and another had been there only one year.
There are threads among them of mutual interests--several
of them have worked as journalists and several of them are
photographers, so the discussions are not limited to
poetry. Six (four women and two men) attended the October
meeting, which featured a discussion of magazines that
publish poetry. The members commented that the number of
publications that printed poetry used to be a lot longer.
Maybe it's not just their group; poetry just isn't as popular as it used to be, they reason.

Every meeting includes a time for sharing the members' own current works and getting feedback. In this session, readings included a modern verse, a vilanelle, a limerick, and a political cinquain. Responses to the works were almost entirely positive. There was one comment about an awkward phrase ("streets of city"), but all other comments were complimentary, particularly of imagery and pace. I could sense the enjoyment they had in the diversity of their styles, subjects and forms. A workshop on sonnets, led by one of the members, was planned for the following meeting, and a session on Chaucer was planned for January.

The group extends itself to the community by sponsoring a poetry contest and publishing a booklet of poems. The booklet, entitled Archer, was published four times a year for three years, but has become sporadic recently, partly because of some internal disagreement about its format and appearance. A new edition is in the works, but this may be the last edition unless more interest is generated. In the 1960s, members participated in a local television program which featured readings and discussions with local poets; and in the 1980s, the group included a children's division in its poetry contest, involving many of the city's schools, teachers, and students. These activities reveal the evangelistic nature
of the members of Pro-Poets, people who love poetry and want others to enjoy it too.

Pro-Poets reminds me of a person who suddenly looks at herself and realizes she has, somehow, gotten old. She thinks it odd. She doesn’t remember getting old. She feels young inside, and yet people look at her and treat her like an old lady. She feels flexible, she wants to be open-minded and flexible, but somehow she finds she is in this other, old body. Pro-Poets meetings are fun and invigorating, yet the group is threatened with death through attrition, and Salem may lose one of its oldest writing groups.

**Christian Writers I**

This is another serious writing-to-publish group. Eight people regularly attend the twice-a-month meetings. In separate telephone interviews on October 9, 1992, leader Marion Duckworth and member Joyce Roner explained how this group and the second Christian writer’s group were formed and how they function. Christian Writers I was formed in 1986 by the Oregon Association of Christian Writers, which had received several requests for a critique group in the area. All of the members have had books or articles published, and each piece is discussed in terms of its marketability and readership, besides help with the actual text. Members bring six to seven pages of manuscript to
read at each meeting. The leader, Marion Duckworth, has published several books. She is paid to lead the group and takes a strong leadership role. The group is not taking new members at this time.

Christian Writers II

When the first Christian writers’ group in Salem became full, the Oregon Association of Christian Writers called Joyce Roner and asked her to form a second group. Roner was in Duckworth’s group and had taught senior life story classes through the local community college and had experience leading such groups. Unlike Duckworth’s group, this group’s leader is not paid, and Roner takes a more low key position (getting people down to business, moving the discussion along, and occasionally smoothing over disagreements). Members are less experienced than those in the older group, but the focus still is definitely on writing-to-publish. Members are working on a variety of projects including fiction, non-fiction, articles, opinion pieces, personal experience, and people profiles. While their are eleven names on the role, about six to seven usually show up for the monthly meetings, and Roner says there is definitely the need for a third group for Christian writers, but Roner says no one is willing to provide the leadership for one yet. Most of the members
have come through requests at the state organization and by word of mouth.

The Heritage Room group

Every Tuesday night for the past two years, this small group gathers in the Heritage Room of the public library. There is a conspiratorial feeling--they are not formally a part of the library program--they just come and commandeer the Heritage Room every week. The four members met in 1991 at a creative writing class taught by Sue Pinkerton through the Community Schools program. When the class was over, three of the members came to Pinkerton and suggested they keep meeting on a less formal basis, but continue to pay Sue to be their leader. I was able to attend three meetings of this group in April and May of 1992. It's hard to classify this group because of the variety within it. It's not entirely a writing-to-publish group, but neither is it a "life story" group. It is formed from a mixture of motivations, subjects and styles.

There's no order for the meeting--whoever feels ready to begin simply starts. Responses are generally concerned with plot development, voice, and the accuracy of details. For one story, there is a discussion on whether or not the ice cream that appeared in her story was credible. How did they keep ice cream then? Another writer is concerned about how his two main characters, who had finally met,
would be able to communicate—since one of them spoke English and the other spoke a native American dialect. Several alternatives are discussed. The third writer gets some help mostly with some wording which isn't consistent with the rest of her piece. Her writing is authentic, refreshing, but she is not confident, and the group is what keeps her writing. She worries that she won't be able to keep going if the group stops for the summer. Her characters are getting older, having children, the Korean War is looming. She says she's getting frustrated, needs help on where to go from here. Should she just go back and revise? "Just keep going," say the others.

This spring, two of the members have taken on jobs out of town and the group has ceased meeting, although they will probably have one more meeting for "closure." The group is in the enviable position of quitting while it is still ahead—while the members would still like to continue to meet. All of the writing projects are well underway, and one of the members who is staying in Salem is looking for another group to work in.

Romance Writers of America—Mid-Willamette Valley Chapter

This group was formed in 1987 and used to rotate its monthly meetings from Salem to Albany and Eugene, but in 1990 a group decided to meet regularly in Salem. It is a chapter of the larger, national organization, Romance
Writers of America. Around a dozen writers attend the meetings, some coming from as far as Portland, Pendleton, and Eugene. In a personal interview at the group's meeting on March 9, 1992, group president Sharon Morris says usually a guest speaker or one of the members gives a presentation on subjects such as character development, dialogue, or synopses. One of the major purposes of the group is to share information about publishing houses. Any news about which editors are in or out at the Romance publishing houses is considered a gem in the sharing time, since much of the focus is on helping each other to get published. Many of the members also belong to the Portland chapter of the organization, too, but find that the smallness of the Salem group allows it to offer more personal help. A "critique night" is scheduled every third meeting. The last time they did a "critique night," Morris says, everybody read something and got a short response from the group as a whole. At the October meeting of the club, only a few people had brought manuscripts, so everyone got a chance to give feedback, both orally and in a short, written note. Because the group includes some novice writers and others who are widely published, Morris says it can be scary for the newer writers to share their drafts, so they try to give lots of positive feedback. For many, critiquing is a new idea, and comments can vary from pointing out spelling errors to changing the point of view.
While the group is made up largely of Romance writers, some of the members are working on historical fiction and one woman is working on a screen play. In addition to the critiquing sessions, at each meeting Morris makes available a variety of articles on writing. At the October meeting, handouts were available on "creating heroines," a list of 36 fundamental dramatic situations, another list of 10 keys to publishing success in the 1990s, a quiz to identify self-defeating attitudes for writers (and encouragement to avoid them), and an article entitled "Love's Raging Conflict (Or love scenes vs. gratuitous sex, and what's the difference?)" All of these were copied from publications by the parent organization.

Salem Writers and Publishers (SWAP)

SWAP was begun informally in July 1988 by a group of Salem area publishers who were interested in sharing information about their business. According to early club reports, twenty people showed up for that first meeting--a number of them local writers who got wind of the group and thought it would be a good place to learn about how to sell their work (SWAP Newsletter file, Salem Public Library). SWAP was more formally organized two years ago and now puts out a monthly newsletter. The November 1991 copy of the SWAP newsletter describes the purpose of the group: "We continue the focus we've had from the beginning, i.e.
marketing. This continues to be the most difficult part of the writing process (for most of us.) Monthly meetings usually cover topics such as query letters, critique groups, and marketing short stories. Attendance at the monthly meetings usually runs just under twenty. What this group has to offer is variety. Members include people who write hunting and fishing stories and people who write children's articles for magazines. Some members are novelists and some are technical writers. This mix offers a variety of topics for the meetings with the common thread being the link between authors and publishers—the link between the writer and the audience. At the SWAP meeting that I attended on May 28, 1992, two members of the group brought in sample query letters for discussion.

In the summer of 1991, SWAP offered a monthly critique group for its members. After a popular and well-attended first meeting, interest waned and after the third meeting the group was discontinued. Mickey Bellman, who helped organize that group, told me at the May 28 meeting that he thinks the busy-ness of the people and the variety of their interests made it difficult to sustain the group.

Changes are afoot in SWAP this year. In a telephone interview on March 9, 1992, the new president, Susan Henry, said she has implemented a new format designed to meet the needs of both professional and beginning writers and to help the group clarify its own identity. Meetings will be
divided into three sections. The first half hour will be set aside for any business decisions and for news about who has been published since the last meeting. The next hour will feature a talk by a professional. (The next four topics will be Children’s Writing, Science Fiction Fantasy, Writing Non-Fiction and Finding A Market, and The Novel—Creating Characters.) Non-members may attend this part of the meeting for a minimal $1 fee.

The last hour of the meetings will be closed to all but members (yearly dues are $15). Henry sees this as a time when networking and mentoring can happen. Three to four experienced writers will be available to help and encourage younger writers. Henry also sees this as an ideal time for writers of the same genre to find each other and form their own critique groups. Recently, she remarks, they discovered a small group of poets in the SWAP membership, and this last hour of the SWAP meetings will be a chance for them to talk together and exchange manuscripts and information about publications, poetry readings, or other items of mutual interest. "We’re trying very hard to serve both the professional writers and the beginning writers," Henry said. As a member of a children’s writing group and a real believer in the value of such groups, she believes the new SWAP format could be a catalyst for several new writing groups in Salem.
Children's writers

Members of this group met through the Salem Writers and Publishers (SWAP). After SWAP’s monthly meetings, these four women found themselves gravitating toward each other to discuss the particular issues involved in writing for children. Critique groups are discussed during SWAP meetings and in May of 1992 these women met in a restaurant to set up the guidelines to begin a critique group—but "you really don’t know what you want until you get going," said member Gretchen Olsen in a telephone interview on September 7, 1992 Olsen described the group’s format. The four women meet every other week in the home of one of the members. They begin at 6:30 and try to finish by 9:30. There is no appointed leader, according to Olsen, and after the first meeting it was determined that each writer would bring copies for everyone. Each piece is read aloud by someone other than the author. Olsen said this was difficult to do at first, but now she says she always "learns something from someone else stumbling over my words." Two of the members had previously been in other critique groups which weren’t geared specifically towards writing for children. Both found that the variety of genres was too distracting for them.
Chuck Haggerty's group

Some people might surmise that the success of a writing group would depend on its members writing in similar genres, having similar goals and writing abilities, and meeting regularly. None of these things are true of this group. SWAP member Chuck Haggerty started this group three to four years ago. He talked about the group in a telephone interview on March 4, 1993. One of the group's members is on an extended trip, so the group is temporarily "on vacation." Even during this hiatus, however, some of the members exchange manuscripts and feedback through the mail. Usually the group meets once a month, the week before the SWAP meeting. The members (two men and two women) range in age from thirty-eight to fifty-five, but all of them are free to meet during the day, so they plan four-hour sessions from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. with a break for lunch. Usually only two readings are completed each time, allowing time for long sections to be discussed. During the winter months, the group doesn't meet at all because one of its members goes to Arizona for several months. But that doesn't stop the group from functioning. Letters and manuscripts are exchanged through the mail and responses and publishing possibilities are offered and discussed.

No two of these writers are working in the same genre. Haggerty has been working for five years on a history of
the San Juan Islands from 1850-1873. Another member writes fantasy fiction. One man writes children’s stories, and another woman writes magazine-type articles about her flying experiences.

Members of this group are also writing for different audiences and purposes. Haggerty writes for self publication and then peddles his own wares. An early book about his youth on a cattle ranch in Eastern Montana sold 1,600 of the 2,000 copies he had printed. "I made about $400 plus a free trip to Montana," he figures. "If I break even, I’m happy as a lark." The children’s writer writes mainly for his grandchildren. The fantasy writer will probably one day submit her work to a publisher, and the flier looks for a magazine audience.

The skills of the members also vary greatly, as some of them have had lots of experience in writing and others began with very little skill in terms of grammar and punctuation. Consequently, responses vary widely in this group--from editing and proofreading comments to more global concerns. Members bring copies of their work, and as they read aloud, the other members mark on their copies any corrections or changes they would make. But editing isn’t all they offer. For example, Haggerty tells of a point in his book where he got involved in telling the story and forgot to include his main character for several chapters. "Wait a minute!" his writing group told him.
"What happened to your character?" Haggerty was then able to go back and rewrite the chapters from his character’s viewpoint. "It helps keep you on edge," says Haggerty. "It makes you produce something, and you do your best so you don’t get too much criticism."

The Arbor Cafe group

The newest writing group in Salem began in February, 1993. John Rude, who writes an twice-monthly column for The Statesman Journal was inspired by a writing class taken at Lewis and Clark College and offered an open invitation in a Sunday column in late January. He invited anyone who had a writing "habit" to meet him for coffee at the Arbor Cafe on Saturday morning at 10:30 a.m. Thirty people showed up. In a telephone interview one month later, on Feb. 27, 1992, Rude says the response was "overwhelming. I envisioned a cozy group of six sitting around a table sharing their manuscripts."

The group has met every week since that first Saturday, gathering at the Arbor one week and in a member’s home the next. About ten people have continued to show up for the meeting of Feb. 27, which included freewriting to "prompts" and sharing ideas and manuscripts. Rude says he can visualize the group developing into several smaller units which meet regularly for critique sessions. Periodical meetings of the larger group could focus on
guest speakers or special discussion topics, Rude suggests. At this point, the group is a mixture of beginning writers, published writers, poets, columnists, children’s writers, and the curious.

**Life story groups**

**The College for Older Adults**

Approximately 120 senior citizens in Salem are writing their life stories through groups organized by the College for Older Adults at Chemeketa Community College. The purpose of these groups is twofold, according to Joan Galbraith, one of the founders of the program. In a personal interview on November 9, 1992, Galbraith explained that the first goal of these groups is to help their members get their stories into writing; the second goal, however, is to have them experience the therapeutic value of the writing itself and the friendships and discussions which come from sharing the stories. They meet in local churches, retirement homes, and schools. One of the earliest groups to form is a group which calls itself "Possibilities" and began as a group of grandparents who volunteered to help at the Fairview Training Center. That group still meets at Fairview today, and some of its members have been writing with the group since the early 1970s. There are 12 groups meeting in the area this year.
The following examples and observations are based on visits to the class which meets at the Jason Lee Retirement home on June 8, 1992, a visit to the class that meets at the Senior Center on November 4, 1992, and a visit to the Possibilities class, which meets at the Fairview Training Center, on November 17, 1992.

While these groups are designed particularly for the needs of senior citizens, some younger students find the classes useful and/or fun to take, even though they are not offered for college credit. The leaders of the classes are selected by the college and are paid. While there is no formal training for the leaders, each one has participated in one of the classes. The classes follow a textbook, *Deep Down Things*, which was developed by several of the class leaders and combines discussions of writing style and techniques along with motivational ideas for writing topics. Feedback in the groups is almost entirely positive. Some of the leaders tell their groups that no negative criticism is allowed, just encouragement. The personalities of the different groups still vary--some use the textbook very sparingly, others working through the lessons and more focused on a final project. In all of them there is a spirit of freedom and friendliness, a sense of learning from each other.

During the session of the Possibilities class that I visited, one woman shares a story about how she was
publicly humiliated by one of her teachers in elementary school. The incident happened in 1915. She describes the scene and her shame vividly, as if it were a recent event, although it took place almost 80 years ago. When she finishes the group members are chagrined that this injustice was never dealt with—never even spoken of—until today. "I've thought about it for years and guessed I'd better get it out," the writer says, breathing a sigh of release at having finally told the story.

Each year in December the college publishes a booklet of stories from these classes. Members from all the classes come and autograph their stories in the booklets. It's a celebration of what they've done, and the books are a valuable library of the history of the people of Salem.

St. Paul’s writing group

This group began as a Chemeketa Community College Writing-Your-Life-Story Class, but in the past year has decided to operate independently. They use no textbook; members just come each week with some writing to share—not necessarily a life-story installment. They meet for three hours in a room at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. The gatherings are orderly but relaxed and informal, with a break for coffee and cookies. The writing topics vary. During my visit to the group on 8 May 1992, one man shared his experiences in a CCC work camp, full of strong
characters, realistic dialogue, and vivid descriptions of logging camps on the Oregon Coast. He ended with a tease for his piece for the next week--a description of the CCC boys' first weekend trip to town. The next woman had written about her feelings as she has watched her street become what the newspapers call a "neighborhood in transition." She began, "I don't remember when I became afraid of people of color." She described the incidents over the years that have forced her to see the changes in her neighborhood. The sense of helplessness mounted until the piece ended: "I'm just an old woman who can neither fight nor run." Her story hit a chord, and the other members talked about feeling the same way--of knowing her neighborhood the way it USED to be. Of being afraid. The responses were compassionate, empathetic, but did not take over the morning, and the group moved on to the next story, about an automobile trip over Pacheco pass in 1925. This was followed by a riddle. The variety in this group gives it a special energy. There is an eagerness, not only to share, but also to hear what the others have written.

Other

Writing for healing and recovery

Kay Lorraine believes in the power of writing and reading out loud. Because of this she offers writing-to-
heal workshops through a variety of organizations in the city. Information about this and the next group is from a telephone interview with Kay Lorraine on January 24, 1993. Because of the sensitive and personal nature of these groups, Lorraine felt it would not be appropriate to have a "guest," but she was eager to share about what happens in the groups.

The purpose of these groups is to help women deal with loss, anger, poor self esteem and unresolved issues. They are offered as a series of four sessions, but Lorraine will do one-day workshops, too. Lorraine stresses the importance of using writing to bring closure to difficult issues in your life. The groups act much as a writing group. After some teaching about the value of journaling and writing, silencing the inner critic, and viewing writing as play and exploration, Lorraine is a guide through a series of exercises in sentence completion, dialogue, writing a litany of losses, and letter-writing. Later, people are asked to read out loud, or have someone read their stuff aloud to them. Although there is usually some reluctance at first, most people end up sharing their writing with the group. "It is amazing how empowering it can be to hear your words out loud," says Lorraine, who says she doesn't think she would be alive today if it weren't for writing and journaling. "It's important to put it out there so you know what you're dealing with." Her
comments echo those of Jane Cunningham Corly 100 years ago, who said women's writing groups helped women "not to fear the sound of [their] own voices" (59). Lorraine has offered these writing groups through the YWCA, the local community schools, Alcoholic Services for Women, and at a battered women's shelter.

A group of friends

This group is very informal and has no official name. It was begun by a few women who like to write, including Kay Lorraine, who teaches the Writing-to-Heal classes in Salem. Three of the members are published writers. They began getting together to discuss their writing, and for the past year they have met regularly to share and critique their work. They found each other by word of mouth, as friend mentioned it to friend. Members include a lawyer, a therapist and an investigator. The group now tries to combine their critique time with readings from other writers and poets, and even an occasional field trip to hear a poetry reading. Lorraine says that in some ways this has become a support group and a social gathering, as well as a writing group.

Nurses In Touch

In Touch is a collaborative writing project—a magazine written by nurses for nurses and published by
Salem Hospital. Contributor Ann Alway, in a personal interview on October 10, 1992, said the purpose of the magazine was to provide a forum for nurses to express themselves about some of the issues in their profession and to help build their self esteem. Sometimes these issues even involve language issues. For example, nurse Robert Herzog writes about his difficulty documenting a case he was working on in psychiatric nursing. "Why can't I just write suicide attempt instead of possible, potential, or potential possibility for self (or part of self) inflicted (or ingested) injury, or attempted injury--related to, I mean, as evidenced by...Ah, nuts!" (Herzog, 4). The writing this nurse was doing at work confronted him with a deep frustration in his job. The second step, writing and sharing his experience, was the beginning of an ongoing conversation among other nurses, a conversation which could bring about constructive changes in procedures.

Funding for the magazine has been discontinued, but one of the side benefits of the magazine has been that some nurses have gained new confidence in their own thinking and writing--and in the value of sharing that writing.

Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development

In some ways, Mitch Rohse, communications manager of the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development (ODLCD) considers his department a writing group (Rohse.
Personal interview. 15 July, 1992.). It’s Rohse’s job to see that the materials put out by his department are readable. Interviewed in his Salem office on July 15, 1992, Rohse said that although all staff members are encouraged to run their documents through a computer program for a readability index, he finds that a writing group offers help that a computer can’t duplicate. He encourages department members to get peer response to their work informally (put a copy in someone’s box, have them offer feedback and then revise), but for documents that will be widely distributed to the public, Rohse likes to use more of a writing group format. Because of the number of people and the time involved, this is saved for large, important projects. Then he calls together a roundtable of planners and they go through the document page by page, offering feedback, especially in terms of readability. Their biggest challenge is in translating the technical language into something that is accurate and yet still understandable for the lay person. One planner who has sat in such groups says that the atmosphere is very "collegial"—there’s a mixture of a down-to-business attitude and friendly comraderie. "Most planners don’t see themselves as writers," Rohse says, and yet, he adds, they spend the large part of their day sitting in front of a computer writing. Many other state departments have communications managers who encourage similar collaboration
in their departments, Rohse says, and in fact, a study of these groups would be an interesting research project.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

People in Salem are meeting at the library, in homes, in churches and in schools to read what they've written, hear what other have written, and talk about their writing. They are encouraging, critiquing, revising, beginning, discovering, questioning, and learning--about their writing, their readers, and themselves. Writing groups are thriving in Salem, Oregon. While there has been a constant thread of writing groups in Salem over its 150-year history, the role of writing groups has changed over the years. From the cultural and social gatherings of the Philodoreans to today's writing-to-heal workshops, writing groups have filled an expanding role somewhere between formal adult educational offerings and social clubs.

Findings

This study maintains that writing groups are no longer solely the domain of English majors--they have become a public resource. The effectiveness of writing groups and writing-to-learn programs in academia has been well documented. What this study adds to that knowledge is a variety of examples of how these same processes are used as an effective tool to encourage learning and growth outside the community.
By encouraging people to write, writing groups have provided a vehicle for adults in Salem to continue learning. The early Philodoreans wrote about and discussed the controversial issues of their day, causing themselves and the community to reassess and revise their ideas. Today, members of SWAP are learning about what is marketable and how to write an effective query letter. Writers in the Fiction Writers Guild, Romance Writers, Children’s Writers, and Heritage Room groups are improving their writing skills, learning how to construct a plot, develop characters, and use active verbs. Members of Kay Lorraine’s group are learning to identify their feelings and express their thoughts. Seniors, writing their own life stories, are defining their own generation and learning through processing the events of their own lives. Writing groups have provided a place where people can learn—about their writing, about themselves, about the world around them.

The success of writing groups in Salem is based on the fact that they meet real learning and social needs. But there is one further factor that plays a big role in the continuation of writing groups in this city—the people who believe in them. One of the most rewarding parts of working on this project has been the opportunity to meet people who believe in writing groups. Over the past year
and a half, some names have echoed in conversation after conversation.

Miriam Bednarz, founder of the Fiction Writers Guild, has been working with and encouraging writing groups in Salem for over 30 years. By the time I actually got to meet and attend Bednarz’s group, she had become a bit of a legend to me. The lions at her front gate confirmed most of what I’d heard, but what I was unprepared for was the energy and focus with which the group worked. Bednarz takes writing very seriously, refuses to let it be treated as an airy little hobby, and encourages others to buckle down and get on with the job of helping one another to write well. Consequently, the group gives thoughtful responses to each others’ work, refusing to let it fall into the vacuous "I liked it" pit. By its very name, the guild indicates that its members view their writing as a craft and that they consider themselves skilled craftspeople. While she apologizes for the number of grey heads in her group, showing an obvious irritation with the lack of younger writers, Bednarz is vigorous in her writing, and a wonderful example of determination and commitment—both to her own writing and to the value of writing groups.

Marge Wright and Katy Cornecl made me wish I could have been part of the Elbert Berry Writing Club. There is still a sense of stolen adventure in their stories of
typing away in their basements while the children napped, remembering the names and stories of the other writers, and the growing urgency of women in the 1960s who didn’t want their intellects and creative urges to get lost in housework and diapers. It was a pleasure to run into Wright’s name as co-author of a recent League of Women Voters research project. She is still writing with others. Even now she is helping a shelter for the homeless to write a lease agreement. Wherever she is, she will be writing.
The enjoyment these women received from their writing group experience is an inspiration to future groups.

Mim Hollen, the effervescent member of the Heritage Room group, continues to encourage me with her love for the story she has to tell and her enthusiasm for her writing group. "Be sure to tell them how encouraging it is," she would tell me almost every time we met. She is delighted to bring out a huge diagram which plots her complicated family story. She loves to bring pictures of the people she is writing about--curling prints of bearded men with wire-framed glasses and newspaper clippings about the train that took the whole family with all its furnishings to Colorado. Hollen comes from a family of storytellers and is brimming with details that make you think she was actually a first-person witness to the westward movement. She brings smiles from the group each week when they discover she’s managed to weave her recurring themes--cats
and delicious-smelling food—into yet another segment of American-history-by-Mim. Hollen is a convert to writing groups. "Writing without an audience is like talking to the walls!" she moaned in a telephone interview on March 19, 1993, evaluating her time with the Heritage Room group. Although this group will be ending, Hollen and the three other people in that group have the vision for what a group can do. I see in these people the seeds of several new writing groups—in Salem, or wherever they go.

Kay Lorraine is a believer in the power of writing and sharing. She applies that belief to her workplace, helping abuse victims to come to grips with their lives. It is writing-to-learn at an intensely personal level, and then that new knowledge and insight is turned into a learning tool for the group. Lorraine is always pushing the outside of the envelope, looking for the next application. Her creativity is infectious as she talks about her next venture, connecting art, drama, and writing into a unified healing craft.

Joan Galbraith, founder of the life-story groups with the College for Older Adults; John Rude, with his writing "habit" and his new-found vision for writing groups; Marion Duckworth, with her dedication to developing Christian writers—Salem is filled with people who are sold on the value of writing groups.
Conclusions

The flexibility of writing groups is what makes them so versatile—and it’s also what makes them so difficult to define and to analyze. When I began this study, I intended to come away with a set prescription for a successful writing group. As my concept of a writing group expanded, the topic of the paper expanded and the commonalities among the groups became less specific. Each of these groups has adapted the two essential ingredients to fit their needs. Leadership styles varied from strong leadership (Christian Writers I) to none (Children’s Writers). Membership varied from four to 25. Response varied from the mechanical to the psychological. Purpose varied from improving a product at work (ODLCD) to writing a love scene, from improving marketability to writing a riddle. Any evaluation of the effectiveness of a writing group would need to be situational—suited to the unique needs and purposes of the individuals in that group.

While this study has helped to establish the breadth of writing groups in Salem, there is still much more work to be done if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the value and usefulness of these groups in the non-academic setting. I cannot say that Salem is representative of what is happening in cities all over the state or nation, and it would be interesting to learn how writing groups are being used in other towns. A parallel study in a different
community might provide insights into the factors which either encourage or discourage the formation and use of writing groups. As mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 3, the use of collaborative writing in the workplace is exploding as more and more offices adopt the "quality group" or team concept. The corporate world is applying the principles that the writing community has discovered. Businesses have discovered that the responding and revising of ideas that occur during the group process result in a better product. The work of Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford in collaborative writing in the workplace provides a strong backdrop on which the picture collaborative writing in Salem--or any town could be drawn. And finally, a comparative ethnographic study limited to two or three writing groups could provide help in evaluating the effectiveness of some of the many variables that occur in writing groups. The diversity of writing groups today opens up an ever growing number of possibilities for comparative studies which could add to our growing understanding of the value of the writing and sharing processes and how they work.

Implications

Non-academic writing groups form a genre of their own; they differ from the product-oriented writing groups found in academia. Because non-academic groups are usually self-
sponsored, they are also self-correcting. If they aren't effective and don't meet real needs, they won't continue. In that sense it can be said that all of these groups, by their very continuation, prove that they are successful. Perhaps some lessons can be learned from these groups that can be applied to the classroom. Two of the main values of being part of a non-academic writing group are the members' heightened understanding of their own thoughts and feelings and their development in social interactions. This study has helped me, as a teacher, to be more attentive to those aspects of writing groups in the classroom.

The role of writing groups in Salem

Writing groups in Salem form an underground network that provide support and encouragement for a large number of people in this city. The number and types of groups have shifted over the years, but they have continued to hold a unique role in the community somewhere between formal education and social clubs. From the serious writing-to-publish groups to the sometimes-hilarious gatherings at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, people in Salem are using writing groups. They are using them to improve their writing skills, to heal their hurts, to produce better documents at work, and to simply explore ideas.

Apart from the benefits of learning through writing (and they are many), writing groups fill another role in
Salem by helping to build a sense of community. Though writing groups usually begin in order to meet a specific, personal need, there is an additional, often unexpressed social need that is discovered after the group has been meeting regularly. We may join a group because we want to share and learn about our writing, but there are other reasons why we want others to hear our writing--reasons which are lined up with the group part of a writing group. We want to read our stuff and hear someone say "Yes!" We need to know that our experience is common to others and yet valuable and unique.

As week after week goes by and people in a group share not only their manuscripts, but their thoughts, ideas, and struggles, a bond is developed which makes the group more than just a "writing" group. People begin to come not just to get feedback on their own writing, but also to hear the others. As one life-story writer reminded me, "We do it for the fun of sharing!"

Far from an exercise in "critiquing," these groups become small communities--secret clubs with a history of shared successes and struggles. It's why one member of the Heritage group says she hates to see the group end because she "wants to find out what happens to Mim and Mike." Or why another member says when she is writing at home she now visualizes how the people of her group will respond--even as she is writing. From correcting grammar and sharing
lists of publishers to insightful comments about a piece's tone or a simple chuckle of appreciation, writing groups meet real needs in the lives of the people who attend them. If they didn't, the groups would not have continued to meet and flourish as they have over the past 150 years in Salem. Whether it be a group of hopeful authors working on their novels, senior citizens trying to preserve and understand their past, or a group of abused women struggling to describe their hurts, writing groups are a friendly medium for continuing adult education and enrichment. Writing groups work because they are founded on the old and human needs to learn and to be part of a listening, responding community.
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