

A Seat at Beth's Table

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Abstract

During our doctoral programs, the authors were provided an opportunity to join a dissertation support group facilitated by Dr. Beth Blue Swadener. The group consisted primarily of students who were enrolled in education PhD programs, as well as several students from other areas such as justice studies and other interdisciplinary social sciences. Dissertation support extended beyond addressing the challenges of developing a sustainable writing practice, to moving our doctoral dissertation processes forward. With a spirit of generosity, the space was designed in order for students to articulate goals, concerns, and vulnerabilities, as well as to discuss and process the inevitable barriers and challenges that arise when developing a long-form research piece, such as a dissertation or book. The group quickly became a space where members could share their wins and successes, as well as develop community through breaking bread together at each of the sessions. This spirit of generosity in mentorship was modeled by Beth and has become an approach the authors have brought into their own career trajectories as professors. This piece explores some of our previous experiences in the group and connects them to the mentorship practices we currently employ in our respective institutions.

Key Terms: Higher Education, Mentoring, Collaboration

Invocation for Setting the Table

1.

Imagine the scene:

Open highways. Wind blowing against well-worn leathers,
A plume of kicked-up desert dust trailed her,
smiling as the sun rises in a painted desert,
waking the world to the music of a motorcycle.
This is Beth,
riding the veins of concrete crossing the land,
taking the pulse of the wonders,
detours, side roads, and random attractions
the capillaries that mark this country's landscape.
She observes, curious about each one's unique origin story,
gathering new stories to share at the table.

When reflecting on our time with Dr. Beth Blue Swadener, the scholarship of generosity is the key to her role as a scholar, professor, and human being. She was a trailblazer in how she defined generosity and how she brought together people from a variety of disciplines. Beth's life work continues to influence the authors' current careers within

higher education. Although all three of us have traveled different paths, each of us continue to utilize strategies of higher academia combined with generous feedback. We believe this leads to better ways of living in higher education, one that nurtures people's strengths, leading to mutual growth for students and scholars alike. Beth reinforced the idea that we are always learners who should generously share our knowledge. This includes building connections and inviting the group to develop a structure and process that welcomes mutual collaboration. This encourages participants to express their goals, needs, and challenges, as well as builds opportunities for reflection and revision to adapt to changing contexts and circumstances.

While the specifics of the methods and contexts may differ for each of us at our respective universities, there are several important shared values that emerged from Beth's table which we have each strived to develop.

What a Seat at Her Table Looks Like

2.

Beware the lonely path:

“Scholarly life is a lonely journey,”

warnings whispered like ghost stories over a campfire,

“Beware, the path of writing can be dark, and dangerous.”

Heeding these warnings, we each began to mark a path,

plan the rations and plot refilling stations.

Yet we still got lost in the wilds.

But we've also always enjoyed the generosity of people on hiking trails.

working together to make it to our different destinations,

sharing warnings of hazards or better detours on our way.

We were lucky to find the clearing carved out by Beth,

well-lit, bustling energy, set up with the tools we needed,

and even better,

she gathered people at her table, working together,

to make the journey.

Beth's Scholarship and Practice of Generosity

In mentorship, teaching, service, and scholarship, Beth's generosity was embedded in many different ways. We each joined the doctoral dissertation support group to get support for the various stages of the writing process. Many of us were invited to the group by Beth herself, as she interacted with us in classes, on research projects, in community organizations, and at professional conferences. That spirit of generosity was sustained by the doctoral students in the writing support group, as they invited their friends and colleagues to join it.

The dominant culture of higher education has long focused disproportionately on individual accomplishments. This can lead to departmental and institutional cultures that encourage hierarchical, competitive, and judgmental approaches not conducive to cultivating a spirit of generosity. There are additional layers of the enduring legacies of interlocking systems of oppression that continue to marginalize underrepresented groups, and this type of institutional culture can be experienced as extremely isolating.

However, this is not the culture Beth created. Her table emphasized growing connections in a supportive environment and collaborating with others to share not just our accomplishments, but also our struggles. The group held space for graduate students to share the challenges of sustained writing by developing a supportive practice of goal-setting and regularly scheduled check-ins. The group met weekly in order to sustain the

community. During these times we also literally broke bread, the support group sharing a meal each session (a more detailed explanation of the development of Beth's doctoral dissertation writing support group and its impact is explored in the article by Beth, Lacey Peters, and Kim Eversman, 2015).

As we continued meeting over weeks and months, we began to develop connections not only with each other but with other students. An example of this is the connections we made with international students and research partners in the group. This led to times in which Beth and others brought international students to our homes for holidays, family dinners, and sightseeing trips around the state to help welcome people to Arizona. This disposition of generosity persisted through challenges and difficulties, and appeared to grow in strength with acts of generosity from her previous students. Many of her Arizona-based students joined in Beth's lead by opening their/our homes. These times were filled with laughter and fun. For example, one evening, an international student spent the evening with Amy, her husband, and four children, playing Rock Band and other games on the Wii.

As we reflected upon the question, "How did you get a seat at the table?" we realized it was easy to answer. Everyone had the opportunity to be included; all you needed was the desire to work hard, ask for support if needed, be willing to collaborate with a diverse group of scholars, and be generous with colleagues. Within our dissertation support group, the shared power created more opportunities to have seats at the current table for new and emerging scholars.

Supporting the openness of the group was a clear aspect of the structure in place, and helped keep the group accountable to one another, another key element of further building community. Beth is a person that can offer critical feedback while providing encouragement. It was in this spirit that connections were made among the doctoral students. We shared our methodologies, new approaches, and strategies for overcoming challenges that emerged in our respective research processes. The structure of regular meetings provided a sense of safety, one modeled by Beth's questions, and deepened by other group members' invitations to share honestly about our writing processes. As a result, this encouraged students new to the support group to share their own experiences as they became more familiar with it.

Whenever someone was preparing for their doctoral defense, it was imperative to receive as much feedback, connections, and resources from Beth and the group as possible. Here is an example supporting the importance of a seat at Beth's dissertation support writing group:

I want to extend my appreciation to my chair, Dr. Beth Swadener. Really the journey depends a lot on your chair and how much your chair understands what you're doing. Next, I want to thank this team. This group has been inspirational. Just simple key words and positive reinforcement. Really helped to keep me to continue even when it was hard. Different people offered different support; Sher helped me a lot with my presentation. It's hard! It is a journey worth running as you reflect back, it comes with a lot of humility, that is where you have reached and comes with a challenge about what the expectation is next about what can happen with your career. I just got some connections with folks all over the world who are emailing me and welcoming me into the community (Benson O, Paraphrased on Evernote, 2010).

Benson was a student obtaining his PhD in curriculum and instruction. He was one of many international and local students with whom Beth created connections,

collaborations, and lifelong friendships. Benson expresses the difficulty of the various challenges encountered in the PhD journey and how humbling they can be. We change as we experience the inevitable delays and setbacks with institutional review board applications and access to different research sites, as well as the challenges of communicating new research in an established discipline. This process can feel isolating. Yet the doctoral support group provided tools and frameworks for engaging in mutual support. Benson also commented on that wonderful sense of generosity and connection he felt from the academic community, one he was able to cultivate. This is just one example of how connections and family were created because of the passion and original work of one person: Beth.

3.

Gather the kindling:

Justice is not a line.

or something linear that can be plotted or mapped.

It's a fire.

One that sometimes swells when fueled and other times,
smoldering in a deep, slowly pulsing
white-hot state.

Able to sustain and reignite when given
air to breathe,

heat catching hold of fresh kindling
igniting, crackling, sparking until it's large enough
to sustain communities,

creating nourishment, heat, warmth, light
and energy to transform us.

The will of the people who have gathered around to sustain the fire.

It is important to tend it well,

lest it breaks free and spreads,
consuming everything in its excess.

Or fizzles out and dies from lack of
air and fuel.

Leaving pinprick embers and sparks,
out of which a new fire can be built:

To begin again.

Networks and Collegial Relationships

Throughout our doctoral program and into collegial life across the United States, we have taken to heart many of the lessons we learned in the group. Beth's generosity in sharing her social capital with her students gave us a model for making and sustaining many new connections, relationships, and collaborations in research and writing that we would not have otherwise made without her networks of colleagues and students. These connections have built our careers as we continue to write and work with those we never would have met without the writing group.

Beth also builds generosity through a variety of organizations and initiatives, including the [Jirani Project](#), the [Girl Child Network](#), and a variety of organizations supporting refugees, as well as clothing drives, toy drives, and marches for education. Beth has built most of these organizations from the ground up, leading and serving on more volunteer board of directors than most of us could imagine. She involves her doctoral and master's students in every aspect of these charities. We have been to award ceremonies, silent auctions, and fundraising events, and have traveled to Kenya and other amazing places with her.

When in Kenya, Beth's generosity is on overload! She provides scholarship through educational undertakings for children living in under-resourced and underdeveloped areas and difficult family situations. Through the Jirani Project, we collaborated with local community members to bring into existence the only free library in a small township, one that both children and adults patronize every day.

Beth created a table that provided an opportunity for a variety of scholars, offering an interdisciplinary space for individuals to connect. Regardless of our different disciplines, Beth's table invited people outside of her own classes and the advising commitments she took on for her doctoral and master's students. This diversity provided Beth an opportunity to create a sense of almost playfulness, encouraging students to take risks, explore multiple forms of writing, and write things that seemed impossible or farfetched, stretching the academic imagination to move beyond disciplinary boundaries to embrace knowledge from different places, to help make our work more accessible and connected to many of the communities we chose to study. Beth co-constructed and co-facilitated our support group with the creation of spaces that encouraged interdisciplinarity.

What She Gave Us From Her Table

Beth cultivated a sense of belonging for everyone who came to her table, and there was always room for *everyone*. We would say, we became like family, but families often fight, and we did not. Sure, there were people who had personalities that were annoying or intense, but Beth created a space where we all belonged and were accepted. Each of us at the table became like Beth—recognizing the good in a person, embracing their struggles whatever they were, then working together to resolve them and achieve success. As the call for manuscripts for this issue said,

Beth's great contribution has been to embody a critically underappreciated aspect of reimagined scholarship—generosity within the increasingly neoliberal, managerialist, and ungenerous academy. . . She has not only exemplified this through her applied/engaged research-teaching but also through mentoring and facilitating engaged scholarly communities.

Through establishing a strong sense of community, Beth dismissed the notion that success was achieved in isolation. Amy reflected:

I felt isolated in my PhD program until changing committee members and being introduced to Beth. [During] our first meeting, I knew she was a very special person. I felt welcomed by her and instantly knew I was no longer alone.

We were each affirmed of our personhood and reminded that academic challenges were not an indication of failure or ineptitude.

Supportive Accountability

Through Beth's guidance, as a group we supported each other in various ways while every person progressed in our endeavors to publish, finish a literature review, prepare for comps, practice the defense presentation, learn how to write a proposal. We often just sat and listened to make sense of the mystifying spaces of academia. We were held to developing an accountable practice for writing projects that included space for reflecting on current writing practices and whether they were working for us and our goals.

Beth was known as “the closer” because every student who sat at the table ultimately completed their doctorate. Another important aspect our group encouraged was

celebrating group member successes and milestones, such as conference and article acceptances, passing comprehensive exams, and job offers. This helped strengthen our relationships, as the group became a place not just to unpack struggles, but to own and celebrate our accomplishments. Beth connected us in life and to this day we all remain associated.

We also held space for imperfect efforts and mistakes or setbacks. These, we learned through the group, were normal parts of the writing process and nothing that should be a source of shame. Some of us came to the group struggling with unrealistic expectations specifically with the perfectionism that can arise when new scholars compare their first chapters in a doctoral research project to those works in their respective fields that have been refined, revisited, and revised over decades. In other words, comparing our beginning or introductory chapters to a more established scholar's *chapter 30* of their career, so to speak.

Unlearning Shame

This process can lead to a sense of shame as we attempt to achieve perfection. That perfectionism, based on shame, can also lead to a reluctance to share or be open and vulnerable about the struggles we face. Many in our group were a bit hesitant and resistant at first but eventually got to the core behind the blocks or challenges we were experiencing. For instance, Sher reflected, "I had a lot of shame connected to writing, in particular, letting go of what I thought were 'imperfect' drafts." We see only the final polished products in monographs and journal articles, while the backstage processes essential to developing and writing new scholarship are hidden from view (Goffman, 1956).

We had not seen much about the behind-the-scenes process of writing that can be messy and not at all polished, until Beth's group and Dr. Mary Romero, Dr. Eric Margolis, and Dr. Joseph Tobin's research methods classes. These scholars made plain the messiness of research, drafting, writing, revising, editing, proofing, and reviewing that make up the dissertation process. Our group welcomed this messiness in a nonjudgmental way. Beth encouraged us to provide feedback to each other, and we found new connections with our peers outside of our respective colleges and comfort zones, which helped us with developing and increasing collaborative scholarship. By using the same structures and approaches we practiced at Beth's table, we have endeavored to hold that space for our own colleagues and students.

Setting Tables of Our Own

4.

Cultivate a spirit of play:

It was when we were walking behind a giant replica of the United States Constitution carried in a parade followed by several people in an articulated polar bear costume, then a group of people dressed like individual electric train cars, and several person-sized earth globes, that we realized what education could look like when a spirit of generous and boundless play was encouraged to grow.

To watch as people came to the central campus grounds where the giant replica Constitution was staked, its linen stretched outwards on the grass, and were invited to sign their names,

adding their own signatures to those of the Constitution's founders, was to witness a spark of recognition:
This land is also our land. And we can choose to sign or not,
to accept this invitation to sit at the table.

In Beth's group, we each relied on a sense of communal efficacy to create support networks and to co-create spaces with other faculty members in order to support one another by developing relationships. We reached out to others to gather resources and create new connections. In short, Beth cultivated in us a sense of curiosity and interest in other people.

Unexpected Sparks of Connection

Beth also helped build a sense of purpose by bringing her students into extracurricular organizations such as [Local to Global Justice \(LTGJ\)](#), which connected students with organizations connected to initiatives such as food and environmental justice. The speakers at the annual LTGJ teach ins were academics, activists, community members, students, and guests from around the world who shared their knowledge and experiences concerning problems and opportunities they faced.

Furthermore, we appreciated the space held in LTGJ for equal standing between scholarly, creative, artistic, and activist work. One example is the [Backbone Campaign](#), which uses parades and spectacle to engage people in inclusive and welcoming constructive conversations about solving global problems locally. The group was instrumental in helping us develop leadership skills and engage with our communities (Fragó et al., 2018). It is that same spirit of playfulness, openness, and experimentation developed at Beth's table, those unexpected sparks of connection, that can ripple outwards into new ideas, and that we continue to cultivate in our own teaching and mentorship practices.

Cultivating Spaces of Belonging

While reflecting upon our teaching practices and the impact that our experience with Beth over the years has had on our praxis, Sher explained:

In my teaching practice, I have focused on creating spaces in the classroom where students are able to connect with each other in a context that honors and respects their experiences and multiple perspectives. By creating agreed upon ground rules for conducting class discussions, encouraging group collaborations and positive accountability practices, our students have developed mutual aid networks, community projects, art, collaborations, presentations, publications, as well as enduring friendships.

Amy added:

I have also focused on constructing spaces where students are able to engage with each other on collaborative projects while respecting each other's diverse viewpoints and experiences. This is a practice that I feel I did not have before my exposure to the philosophy that Beth lives her life. My students are both undergraduate and graduate. Both populations appreciated having spaces where they felt comfortable sharing their voice and opinions, safe with questions and trust that comments would be considered insightful and honest among all. These experiences have provided my students with a model for their own students, no matter the age.

We have each tried to replicate these supportive spaces, having this structure available as a base upon which to structure new support systems.

This desire to recreate the sense of productive and generative support led us to immediately begin to cultivate networks of our own to share with students and colleagues. This included, but has not been limited to making friends, listening to people and their interests and goals, focusing on places of overlap and connection, and preparing students for their future. These were all strategies we developed while working in the doctoral dissertation support group.

We used some of the same principles we developed in the group to support faculty writing support groups, particularly for scholars reaching milestones, such as tenure or promotion. As Sher noted:

One of the groups I have been a part of has been meeting for more than ten years on a weekly basis together to help support and work through the inevitable challenges that come up in the process of creating scholarship. We've supported each other through tenure and promotion process, grant writing, as well as personal support and connection when we experienced family emergencies or isolation. I credit the longevity of this group, in part, to employing some of the core principles of mentorship and belonging that were cultivated in Beth's doctoral support groups.

The symbolism of cultivating a garden represents Beth well. She gardened parts of herself in all of us, planting seeds of hope, love, preparedness, readiness, strength, perseverance, fortitude, kindness, love, acceptance, and the remembrance that we belonged and were capable. Beth's ways were transformational, magical, mystical, and divine. In knowing her, we were able to

- understand ourselves and scholarly work through a lens of acceptance;
- meet others;
- create spaces of intellectual rigor;
- affirm that challenges are not obstacles but normal, and an opportunity for growth;
- develop a success mindset that each step, no matter the size, was progress;
- affirm our curiosity and imagination; and
- be motivated and confident in our journey.

Having a seat at Beth's table was the opportunity to develop inter-relational agency, where we were all prepared for the demands of the academy and became positioned for our own success through collaboration, and personal and collective agency through the capacity to engage with others in the social practices of kindness, love, and understanding.

Lasting Thoughts

As we step back from the happenings in our lives and wonder about the direction they would have gone without this support, our reflections reveal a fundamental difference in higher education faculty. One perspective is the everyday one, in which you continue to do task after task until your project is complete. The other is less linear, more closely aligning with how we think about actions in our professional and personal lives. We found through our discussions that we shared multiple broad goals that lead us day-by-day. These included being healthy, spending time with family and friends, expanding the

breadth of our knowledge, and proliferating generosity. In addition, we learned the following:

- Be simple. Actions do not need to be complex in order to make a difference or get something done. The most important detail—*just do it*.
- Continue to learn.
- Do not undermine yourself.

These ideas come from Beth's influence during our dissertation processes and early career years. Her support, personally and professionally, continues to have a footprint in our lives. Given how much we have said her name, you may think this was about Beth's table. However, in reality, this was never just about her, but about how she opened her home, her heart, and the vast collections of resources, ideas, energy, and people all around her. Thanks, Beth. We are indebted to you for life.

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