

Academic Solidarity in the Wake of Disaster: Blueprint for an Online Writing Support Group

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a blueprint for creating online writing groups (OWGs) to support scholars who are directly and indirectly affected by disaster. Those who are living in regions affected by natural disasters face a severe psychological toll along with physical and logistical challenges. Furthermore, scholars in the diaspora who are watching their colleagues go about daily life while they struggle to meet writing deadlines can also experience detrimental psychological effects, including isolation anxiety. Findings from disaster studies research suggest that communal coping strategies can mitigate the short- and long-term challenges to mental health, including spiraling concerns about productivity that, in turn, inhibit productivity. My research builds on these studies, as well as analyses of virtual platforms used during the COVID-19 pandemic, to identify specific aspects of OWGs that can provide community and structure for scholars in the wake of natural disasters. I draw from my experience of creating and hosting a Zoom writing group for scholars from Turkey and Syria in the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes. In addition to participant observation of more than 240 two-hour sessions held over 42 weeks between March and December 2023, I draw from a survey-based assessment and email correspondence with participants to develop a best-practices model that I hope other scholars will replicate.

In the aftermath of 2023 natural disasters including Hurricane Otis in Mexico; wildfires in Hawaii; and earthquakes in Morocco, Turkey, and Syria, scholars with ties to these regions leveraged their social networks to coordinate fundraising. Donations can be crucial in meeting the immediate material needs of those on the ground. However, scholars also can provide longer-term support to a wider community by leveraging institutional resources. Individuals equipped with a Zoom link and a few disaster-informed practices can offer valuable group-based support to directly affected scholars as well as those in the diaspora. Findings from disaster

studies research suggest, for example, that communal coping strategies can mitigate the short- and long-term challenges to mental health (Afifi, Felix, and Afifi 2012). A study that was implemented following hurricanes and earthquakes in Puerto Rico demonstrated that projects designed to provide ongoing socioemotional support, academic resources, and a sense of purpose reduced attrition rates among university students (Lopez et al. 2021). Online writing groups (OWGs) designed around these insights can provide spaces of academic solidarity and task focus to assist researchers who are struggling to return to work and to find community while coping with traumatic events.

This article presents a blueprint for post-disaster OWGs that scholars can use to support affected colleagues in their own circles.

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My research builds on insights from disaster studies, as well as analyses of Zoom groups that were created during the COVID-19 pandemic, to identify specific aspects of OWGs that can assist scholars who are returning to work following a natural disaster. To study how these aspects function, I examine the Zoom writing group that I created following the February 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. I collected data from participant observation of more than 240 two-hour sessions that I hosted over the course of 42 weeks and that included more than 100 participants (Hintz 2024). I supplemented these data with anonymous responses (n=45) to a Jotform survey distributed to all who initially

Some of the OWGs that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic grew out of preexisting networks, such as PhD cohorts and region- and issue-based professional organizations. Based on the literature and discussions with participants in my group, structure and content varied widely—for example, feedback-based sessions or silent coworking with preset weekly time slots or ad hoc get-togethers. One survey participant in this study mentioned a university “virtual office” link established during the pandemic that could be joined “impromptu” at any time but expressed—as did others—a strong preference for “regular” sessions (Respondent 30). Furthermore, participants commented that initiatives that began

Writing is a daunting task in any given day...Imagine doing that while your country is going through a horrible disaster, financial crisis, and yet another historic election. And you are an ocean away. (Email 3)

expressed interest in the group (n=227), as well as email and social media exchanges with several participants who consented to the use of our correspondence (see online appendix 1). Based on my study, I developed a best-practices model that I hope other scholars will replicate.

during the pandemic had largely dissolved, and some mentioned that they had turned to fee-based, online coworking spaces such as Focusmate and Caveday (participant observation). The fact that resource-strapped doctoral students pay to work in an online group setting testifies to perennial, widely experienced challenges of

The fact that this group brought academics from Turkey and Syria [together] after the earthquake has always been very important to me. I tried two other writing groups before and...[t]hey lacked the “togetherness” aspect. (Survey Respondent 42)

I first examine the benefits of OWGs for scholars who are struggling with writing productivity in general and then focus on the specific challenges for those affected by disaster. Second, I present the context of the post-earthquake case and formation of the OWG analyzed in this article, as well as strategies used to expand the group’s reach. Third, I analyze the data that I collected to determine aspects of the group that participants found useful. Fourth, I conclude by situating post-disaster OWGs in wider solidarity efforts and provide a blueprint for other scholars to employ.

POST-DISASTER ONLINE WRITING GROUPS AS ACADEMIC SOLIDARITY

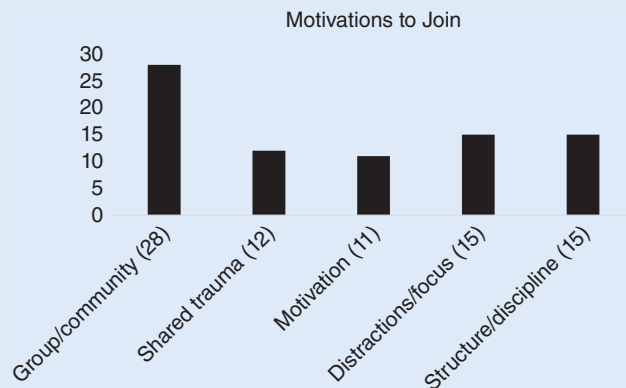
Academic writing already is a largely solitary and anxiety-inducing process. This is particularly the case for early-career researchers and underrepresented scholars (Driscoll et al. 2009; Heslop et al. 2023; Kent et al. 2017). OWGs provide a space of community and solidarity of the type that research shows can mitigate these negative emotions (Kaniasty 2020) while also providing structure and focus to enhance writing momentum. During the additional, differentially experienced stress of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ramos et al. 2022), research shows that OWGs boosted productivity and morale amid isolation, anxiety, and frustration (Elliot and Makara 2021; Freya and Cutri 2023; Saltzman, Hansel, and Bordnick 2020). Benefits also can include peer mentorship, expansion of professional networks, and reduction of “imposter syndrome” (Barham and Wood 2022; Cassese and Holman 2018; Michelson and Monforti 2021).

getting writing done and the utility of having company—even of strangers—in doing so (Kelley 2022).

Natural disasters exacerbate writing challenges in detrimentally compounding ways. Shock and grief immediately following a disaster can evolve into anger and frustration about government response, creating additional psychological obstacles to productivity. These concerns about productivity and, in turn, worries about job security due to decreased productivity can further strain mental health for those who are already experiencing trauma (Baez, de la Fuente, and Santos 2010; Beaglehole et al. 2018; Saeed and Gargano 2022). A survey respondent stated that the news about the politics of Turkey’s earthquake “became an enormous distraction, making it difficult for [them] to maintain [their] usual self-discipline” and creating “heightened anxiety levels beyond anything [they] had experienced before” (R3). As shown in table 1, more than 25% of the 45 survey respondents specified the shared trauma of the earthquake among their motivation for joining the OWG. Responses coded as group/community and distractions/focus did not specifically mention the earthquake or trauma, but they may be related to disaster-exacerbated isolation and news-cycle-related distractions.

Moreover, the effects of this trauma on scholars in our communities reach far beyond the disaster zone. Whereas those who are living in regions affected by natural disasters face physical and logistical challenges as well as the psychological toll, scholars in the diaspora also may experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and anxiety as they watch their colleagues go about daily life while they are struggling to meet writing deadlines (Diaz 2017; Takeda 2015). Of the 12 survey respondents who cited shared trauma as a

Table 1
Motivations



motivation to join the OWG, eight were located outside of Turkey. One participant who was based in the United States underscored the particular challenge of being “an ocean away” in a materially comfortable setting while family and loved ones struggled back home (Email 3). Post-disaster OWGs can provide a tailored platform for scholars who are seeking solidarity with co-nationals who are sharing similar trauma, including those outside of the disaster

Politics exacerbated challenges to productivity, consuming energy and generating hours of unhealthy “doom-scrolling” irrespective of location (Mannell and Meese 2022). This time suck was compounded in Turkey by the runup to highly contested elections in May 2023 and by government moves to shift university education online to free up dormitory space for those displaced. Scholars tweeted that amid a never-ending news cycle, they were struggling

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zone. Supporting this point, a participant who indicated the United Kingdom/Europe for their region noted that they were part of other groups but, “at that moment, I needed one to acknowledge what was happening during the disaster” (R45).

CASE STUDY: 2023 EARTHQUAKES IN TURKEY AND SYRIA

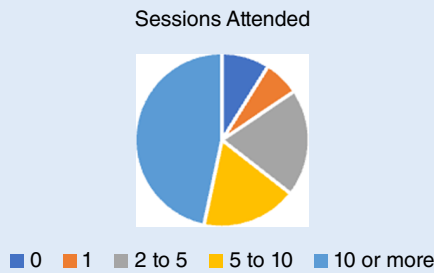
On February 6, 2023, a series of devastating earthquakes and aftershocks hit Turkey and Syria, killing more than 50,000 people, displacing millions, and destroying thousands of workplaces. Search and research efforts and aid provision were hindered in both countries by numerous factors, including the lack of preparedness, hyper-centralization of decision-making authority, and effects of Syria’s civil war. As the immediacy of the catastrophe began to fade, scholars from the region shared on social media that they felt alone, invisible, and lacking focus. Researchers at universities outside of the region expressed frustration that those around them could not understand the magnitude of the grief and anger they felt at the (lack of) government response (Atay Alam and Saryüce 2023). Scholars in the diaspora also noted that they felt guilty for thinking about their own work-related issues while those back home were suffering physical and financial hardship. These responses reflect findings in the disaster literature suggesting that diasporic individuals experience guilt for not “sharing the same hardship” as those back home, leading them to seek solidarity among co-nationals (Takeda 2015, 500).

to focus, meet deadlines, and thus progress in their careers. I observed that social media posts expressing these sentiments began to circulate approximately one month after the earthquakes.

Considering how a previous ad hoc writing group in which I joined two scholars from Turkey allowed us to vent about politics and then focus on writing tasks, I thought that creating a group for other scholars who were affected could meet some of the demonstrated demand for solidarity and structure. As a political scientist with cumulative years of fieldwork in Turkey, the great majority of my intellectual, professional, and personal community is centered in the country and its people. Establishing a virtual writing space seemed like a small way to support those from a region that contributed so much to my own development.

What follows is an overview of how the group formed and the strategies I used to augment participation. On March 3, 2023, I posted a message on what was then Twitter inviting scholars from Turkey and Syria who might benefit from a virtual writing community to contact me (Lisel Hintz [LiselHintz] 2023). I expected that a few people might want to join. Yet, during the next two days, I received 120 inquiries via direct message and email. I personally knew several of the scholars but had not previously interacted with most of them. The number of my then-Twitter followers—about 15,000 at the time—likely played a significant role in disseminating my initial post outside of my communication circles (i.e., 203 retweets, 1,189 likes). My

Figure 1
Attendance



membership in discipline-based networks meant that many responses came from political scientists. However, broad dissemination generated interest from across academic fields. This wide disciplinary representation led me to choose a silent coworking format for sessions rather than a workshopping group (Buckinx, Buechel, and Silverman 2022).

Initially taken aback by the number of requests, I soon replied to each message to ensure that respondents felt acknowledged and knew that I could answer their questions. Communicating individually and setting up the email distribution list took approximately 12 hours, but this represented the only significant time investment other than running the sessions. Furthermore, many scholars wrote that corresponding with someone who showed interest in their well-being was meaningful in a time when many felt isolated in their trauma. By the 42nd week, 229 scholars were on the group email list.

Between the first session on March 7, 2023, and the final session of 2023 on December 21, I held more than 240 two-hour sessions. A term with course leave in Spring 2023 allowed me initially to offer eight sessions, which I continued over the summer. During the Fall 2023 term, in which I taught two courses per week, I held seven weekly sessions. Although I sometimes used the sessions for course preparation, I often benefited from being able to carve out time for writing. For those instructors whose teaching schedules do not permit holding as many sessions, it is useful to note that participants reported that joining even a few times was beneficial. A survey respondent who joined three times noted accomplishing more writing in each session than when working alone (R23). Similarly, a respondent who joined only a few times due to family commitments reported getting four to five hours' worth of work done in each two-hour session (R24).

Of the total number of participants, 111 scholars joined at least once. A core group of approximately 15 joined regularly, and average participation in each two-hour Zoom session was six to seven scholars. Some scholars joined more than 50 sessions. Of the 45 survey respondents, almost half had participated in more than 10 sessions. This result likely was affected by a correlation between enthusiasm for the group and a willingness to complete the survey. However, as shown in figure 1, several respondents attended no sessions or only one session.

Answers from respondents who attended no sessions provided preliminary insight into the discrepancy between those who asked to join the list and those who participated. One respondent cited

uncertainty about the purpose of the group and “how it would work” (R9); another reported thinking that the sessions would provide discussions of post-disaster mental health strategies (R4). After receiving these responses, I clarified the language in advertising the group and now include a section for first-time participants in weekly emails entitled, “Here’s What You Can Expect” (see online appendix 2). A third nonparticipant noted an inability to be motivated enough to join (R15), and a fourth cited time-zone differences (R28). As shown in table 2, the reason cited most often for joining less frequently than anticipated or not at all was general scheduling issues, which included time zones.

Despite accommodating as many time zones as possible while I was based in Europe—including offering four sessions from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Eastern Time each week—participation outside of Europe was low: only two survey respondents were based in North America. Almost equal numbers were based in Turkey (22) and the United Kingdom/Europe (19); two cited “other region.” For PhD students in the Pacific Time Zone, for example, morning classes posed an obstacle (Email 1). Other reasons cited included work schedules and family commitments, which may reflect how the gendered dynamics of caregiving shape access to professional opportunities in the Zoom era (Kim and Patterson 2022). Approximately 80% of those who participated at least once were women, and several remarked that they used the time to carve out space for work apart from familial obligations (participant observation). Both male and female participants were occasionally joined onscreen by family members as they balanced work and childcare. To address time-zone participation issues for more scholars in North America, and at the request of a PhD student in Turkey who could participate only late at night because of childcare responsibilities (Email 6), I recruited a scholar from Turkey based in the United States to host a session from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern Time.

During the first two weeks of sessions in 2024 that were completed by the time of writing, participants based from Turkey to the US West Coast joined sessions hosted by me, now based in the Eastern Time Zone, and group members in the United Kingdom and Turkey who generously volunteered their time. I will continue to host and coordinate sessions among group members as long as my schedule allows and scholars join.

SPECIFYING USEFUL ASPECTS

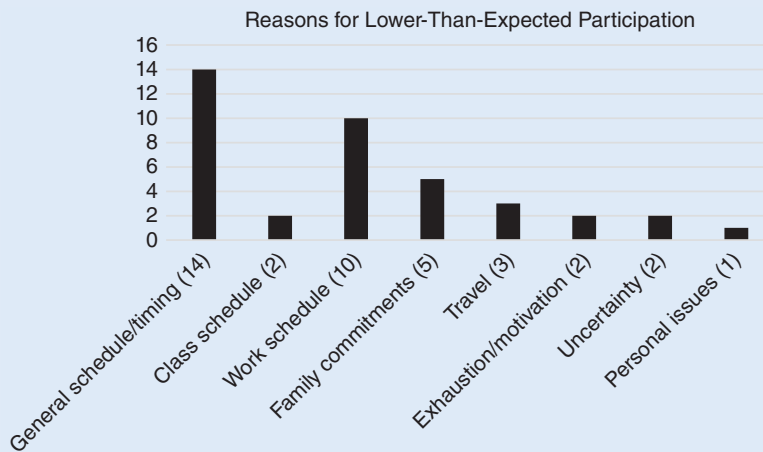
Drawing on my experience of hosting a post-disaster OWG, as well as survey responses and Internet correspondence, this section highlights group aspects that participants found useful. Table 3 presents the coded survey responses. Similar to answers about their motivation to join and obstacles to participation, respondents often cited multiple factors.

Group Format

By far, the most frequently cited useful aspect was the group format, a component inherent to all OWGs. However, survey respondents in this post-disaster group often cited the specific nature of the community formed by those sharing a traumatic experience. As one PhD student noted:

The [earthquake and ensuing politics] became an enormous source of distraction, making it difficult for me to maintain my usual self-discipline. Concentration and time management became real challenges, leading to unproductive days, dwindling

Table 2
Lower Participation



motivation, and heightened anxiety levels beyond anything I had experienced before. Since I was [doing] field research, I [was] already far from the university and academic environment. I really needed a motivating, disciplining, supporting atmosphere where I could be surrounded by people who shared similar experiences to mine. (R3)

In email correspondence, an assistant professor echoed these sentiments and stressed the benefits of a collaborative atmosphere based on post-disaster solidarity to counter the competitive nature of academia:

[Writing] feels alone, and sometimes I find myself talking to both reviewer [1] and [2] in my head... Amidst a disaster, this group helped me move from a logic of competition, to finding solace and solidarity in cooperation. “We are creating knowledge to our best ability together” is the feeling I leave with after a session. (Email 3)

Feedback from participants indicated that the communal atmosphere created a comfortable environment that provided structure, motivation, and accountability in a post-disaster context. One

participant noted that the group setting enabled her to “to overcome my messy post-earthquake psychology (and writer’s block) and come back to the mental space I needed to write and submit [an] article” (Email 2). Survey respondents also highlighted these community and accountability aspects: “[I wanted] to be able to concentrate while working alone (which I struggle [with] quite a lot)” (R12); and “I am struggling myself to sit and work on my master thesis alone. Finding the motivation and keeping it for hours are really challenging for me” (R16). One PhD student working on his own DM’d a screenshot to me showing that he had written a “new record” of 935 words during that evening’s session (Twitter DM 1). Another PhD student stressed the accountability factor that the group generates: “I feel liable to write at least a few paragraphs and these sessions help me to make a structured plan for writing” (R17).

Visibility is a key element of the group format that participants cited as useful. The Zoom group functions as a sort of “virtual library,” in the words of a postdoctoral researcher (R24), because participants work with microphones muted in the online presence of others. Camera use is at participants’ discretion—some join

Table 3
Useful Aspects

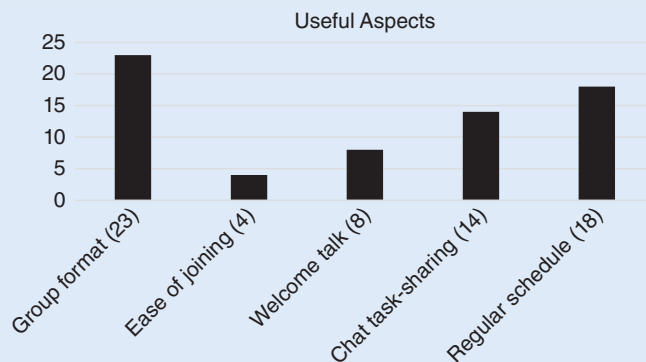
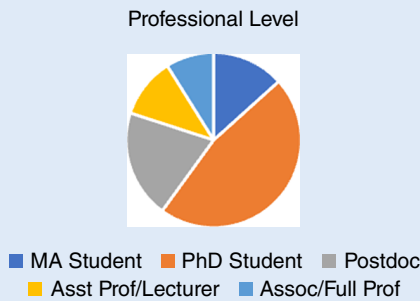


Figure 2
Professional Level



from libraries or cafés or are balancing writing and childcare, for example—but most keep their camera on. One participant noted that visibility bolsters the “psychological aspect of writing together as a group” (R3). Responses suggested that this aspect boosted concentration (e.g., “I concentrate much better when I see others writing” [R2]) and motivation (e.g., “Seeing others working in a devoted manner makes me feel motivated” [R31]). A master’s student emphasized the solidarity aspect: “[S]eeing that people are working alongside me makes me feel like [I am] in a library and proves that it is not just me having hardship to write” (R16). A PhD student echoed the point about participants’ ability to “see that others may struggle too, so [the group] has an alleviating effect on imposter syndrome” (R5). The presence of senior scholars seemed to have an added imposter-syndrome-reducing effect for the many early-career scholars in the group. As one PhD student wrote, “It is amazing to see all the names I read often join the same sessions” (Email 5). PhD students and postdoctoral researchers comprised approximately 75% of the survey respondents (figure 2)—roughly representative of the participation that I observed.

Ease of Joining/Flexibility

The schedule of seven or eight weekly sessions was designed to accommodate as many time zones as possible while I was based in Europe. A survey respondent reported being “very glad there are so many sessions each week, which gives me the flexibility to join when I can” (R20). Another found useful the ability to join late and leave early (R2), enabling participants to work communally for whatever part of the session fit their schedule. A third respondent noted that having the option to join was “flexible and creates an incentive without necessarily feeling like (yet another) obligation” (R35).

Welcome Talk

I used approximately the first five minutes of each session to greet participants, checking in on their well-being and work progress. Group members suggested that they preferred a shorter welcome chat and more time for writing, a preference supported in the survey by those who found other OWGs’ introductions too long (R1, R12). Survey responses suggest that this time to chat set a “welcoming attitude” for the sessions that was “most helpful” in making participants feel comfortable around one another (R2). A senior scholar stated that the brief chat at the beginning “goes a long way in terms of strengthening

the feeling of community” (R8). Participant observation also suggested that this sense of community grew through the welcome chat, especially among frequent joiners. Zoom members all cheered using “participant-reaction” emojis when a master’s student shared that she had written 10 pages in one week after not making progress on her thesis for months. I observed similar collective celebrations when I told the group that three regularly participating PhD students had successfully defended their dissertations and a fourth had submitted his. As an assistant professor commented: “Sharing experiences, news, progress was very helpful. Also the feeling of being part of a community” (R6).

Chat Box Task-Sharing

To enhance focus on respective writing tasks, I asked participants entering the Zoom room to post in the chat box a one-sentence description of the project that they intended to work on during that session. Sharing topics also allowed participants to identify points of common research interest across group members. When they saw similar topics, participants posted links to relevant sources in the group chat. Using the chat function also allowed those who join later in the session to share their topics “without disturbing others” who already are writing (R2). A PhD student noted the motivational component of sharing topics: “I also really like to see what other participants of the group are working on” (R3). A first-time OWG assistant professor found posting in the chat box useful in tracking their own progress as well as learning about other participants’ research areas (R20). By noting participants’ topics in the group chat, I was able to facilitate introductions among those with mutual research interests.

Structured Schedule

In contrast to the ad hoc nature of the small OWG I had joined prior to the earthquakes, I believed a regularly scheduled set of sessions would encourage participation by allowing potential participants to plan ahead. To provide this regularity, I sent out the weekly schedule and background information about the group on Mondays and kept the schedule as consistent as possible. Deviations from the schedule occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic and two weeks of conference travel. I was able to recruit a frequent participant to host a few of the regularly scheduled OWG meetings during this time but also had to cancel some sessions.

Survey responses suggested that “continuity” (R11) in a schedule that someone else sets can provide motivation to “be there at a certain time,” generating momentum that increases productivity (R16). As one PhD student commented: “It creates [a] sort of certainness. You know when, where, how many minutes to study” (R14). A senior scholar commented that “having certain time periods, which are more or less stable and consistent, is important” (R8). Furthermore, although two-hour sessions seem to be “the most efficient” length of time for concentrating on a specific writing task (R7), they also can serve to jumpstart participants’ workday and boost morale. Another PhD student reported that “I discovered that every day I started with writing sessions turned into a highly productive day and stopped experiencing feelings of guilt and inefficiency when going to bed at night” (R3). A PhD student in Turkey joined each morning session for six weeks straight and reported significant progress and improved morale; even after breaking the streak, she continued to join (participant observation).

“I WASN’T AWARE OF SUCH A THING, BUT IT SHOULD BE SPREAD” (R36)

In the aftermath of natural disasters, OWGs can assist scholars in (re)building a steady writing schedule among a uniquely supportive community of those who are sharing similar trauma. The data from this study suggest that these groups can have a meaningful impact on affected scholars’ trajectories, particularly for early-career researchers who already are struggling with challenges (e.g., imposter syndrome) when they then are confronted with a devastating disruption. Although university-level initiatives can address such disruptions—partnerships between Scholars at Risk campus chapters and the Global Disaster Assistance Committee to host displaced researchers, for example—the individual act of hosting an OWG can have a wider transformative reach and can aggregate the more often that individuals decide to host them.

Zooming out, post-disaster OWGs can be an effective way to bolster academic solidarity more broadly. The blueprint developed in this article can complement initiatives such as “smoothing the pipeline,” particularly for graduate students from historically underrepresented groups (Becker and Zvobgo 2020), as well as support for contingent faculty (Czastkiewicz and Seefeldt 2019). More specifically, characteristics of the post-earthquake OWG suggest that online writing sessions can align with solidarity-building initiatives for Global South scholars, who already face challenges including visa and work-permit hurdles, lower citation rates, and underrepresentation (Collyer 2018; Medie and Kang 2018). Coming from Turkey and Syria, the participants in the OWG that I hosted frequently cited personal struggles with these issues during our welcome chats.

To facilitate the spread of post-disaster OWGs that Respondent 36 advocated as noted previously, I summarize in the following five points the blueprint that this study developed. Building on Koeijer and Parkinson’s (2020) aptly titled “Preparing Political Science for Disaster” article, I hope this study prepares scholars to support disaster-affected colleagues in their own research communities.

1. *Establishing a Post-Disaster OWG:* Assess your personal and institutional capacity to organize and host sessions using a virtual platform such as Zoom for at least a few weeks. If you do not have institutional access to host two-hour online sessions, encourage a colleague in your network with access to provide a link while you commit to fulfilling the host role. If this is not possible, even 45-minute sessions can be valuable in creating community and kickstarting work. After establishing your capacity to host, create an announcement stating the purpose of the group, for whom it is intended, and how people can join. Share the announcement widely on social media and through personal and professional networks. Respond to inquiries with an ethic of care and cognizance of the hardship that those writing to you are experiencing.
2. *Expanding Group Reach:* Create a spreadsheet of names and email addresses to manage requests to join. Use social media to share group information weekly, and update the spreadsheet as new requests arrive. Whereas my relatively large social media following was a bonus, those with a smaller online presence can ask others with a larger following to amplify their call. They also can ask colleagues to mention the initiative to any poten-

tially affected graduate students that they mentor. I thank those who did so for this OWG.

3. *Communicating Group Information:* Using Bcc for privacy, email the schedule and password-protected Zoom link at the same time each week. Ensure that the time zone listed is very clear, and be aware of regional variation around daylight-savings periods. To clarify expectations, include in each weekly email helpful information for first-time participants.
4. *Run-of-Show:* Verbally greet participants at the beginning of the session and via DM for late joiners. Chat for a few minutes while participants are joining to build up group energy and create a communal atmosphere. To create focus and identify common interests, ask participants to post a sentence in the group chat about their task for that session. Ask participants to mute their microphone and close social media apps, and wish them a productive session. End sessions promptly by letting participants know that time is up and when they can expect the next session.
5. *Building Motivation:* To motivate new and regular participants, use the welcome talk and group-chat function to mention the progress that participants have made with their journal and dissertation submissions and finished chapters. Celebrate the achievement of small goals such as daily word targets reached as well.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TRMKNW>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096524000015>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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