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Diversity in collaborative research communities: a multicultural, multidisciplinary thesis writing group in public health

Cally Guerin^{a*}, Vicki Xafis^b, Diana V. Doda^b, Marianne H. Gillam^b, Allison J. Larg^b, Helene Luckner^b, Nasreen Jahan^b, Aris Widayati^b and Chuangzhou Xu^b

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Writing groups for doctoral students are generally agreed to provide valuable learning spaces for Ph.D. candidates. Here an academic developer and the eight members of a writing group formed in a Discipline of Public Health provide an account of their experiences of collaborating in a multicultural, multidisciplinary thesis writing group. We consider the benefits of belonging to such a group for Ph.D. students who are operating in a research climate in which disciplinary boundaries are blurring and where an increasing number of doctoral projects are interdisciplinary in nature; in which both academic staff and students come from enormously diverse cultural and language backgrounds; and in which teamwork, networking and collaboration are prized but not always proactively facilitated. We argue that doctoral writing groups comprising students from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds can be of significant value for postgraduates who wish to collaborate on their own academic development to improve their research writing and communication skills; at the same time, such collaborative work effectively builds an inclusive, dynamic research community.

Keywords: writing groups; doctoral education; peer learning; multicultural; multi-disciplinary

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Introduction

Growing interest in writing groups for doctoral students has been sparked by a number of factors, including greater recognition of the need for a variety of supervision pedagogies, funding pressures to achieve timely completions, and the complications created by an increasingly internationalised research community. Literature exploring doctoral writing groups ranges from reports on specific programmes (Aitchison 2009; Aitchison and Lee 2010; Cuthbert and Spark 2008; Delyser 2003; Ferguson 2009; Larcombe et al. 2007; Maher et al. 2008; Mullen 2003; Parker 2009), and the value of peer learning/mentoring and community building (Caffarella and Barnett 2000; McAlpine and Asghar 2010; Pyhältö et al. 2009; Stracke 2010), to discussions of identities formed during writing (Kamler and Thomson 2008; Lee and Boud 2003). Without exception, the research demonstrates the positive value of writing groups in providing effective learning spaces for doctoral candidates.

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However, these students operate in a research climate in which disciplinary boundaries are blurring and where doctoral projects are increasingly interdisciplinary in nature; in which both academic staff and students come from enormously diverse cultural and language backgrounds; and in which teamwork, networking and collaboration are prized but not always proactively facilitated. While distinctions between the global and the local are in the process of being renegotiated, it is necessary to start conceptualising collaborative communities that are going to be most valuable for today's academics and researchers. This includes a reconsideration of the academic subjectivities we want/need to produce through doctoral education for those entering this research climate. Writing groups can play a valuable development role for Ph.D. candidates, and we offer insights into the kind of writing group that will provide students with the skills and experiences we believe will be most useful to them in the current environment.

This paper provides an account of a writing group formed in Discipline of Public Health that lies at the heart of the concerns listed above. We argue that doctoral writing groups comprising students from diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds can be of significant value for postgraduates who wish to collaborate on their own academic development to improve their research writing and communication skills; at the same time, such collaborative work effectively builds a research community.

Original rationale for establishing the Public Health Writing (PHeW) group: the academic developer's voice

The PHeW¹ was initiated as part of a larger project to fill a complex need for various kinds of academic and social support in the postgraduate community at Adelaide University. It was intended that participation in thesis writing groups (TWGs) could help candidates maintain momentum as they moved into the middle stages of candidature, a period in which the initial excitement of embarking on an ambitious, long-term research project has often begun to fade. I also wanted to mobilise TWGs in order to combat the isolation often experienced during research degrees, and in the process stimulate a lively, collaborative research culture. The PHeW group was one of the first TWGs established.

The primary work of a TWG is, naturally, focused on developing writing skills, but much more can be gained simultaneously. Regular meetings provide motivation to produce written text for the group to critique (Mullen 2003), and create a timetable for participants to complete written work. The group dynamic that I hoped would evolve in PHeW includes a positive impetus to write because of a sense of responsibility to other group members to produce something for discussion when an individual's turn came around. One could speculate that peer interaction would also be stimulating, hence renewing interest in the writing process and research project as a whole. A further major benefit of participation would be that members could learn a great deal about writing through the process of critiquing each others' work (Aitchison 2009; Caffarella and Barnett 2000; Lee and Boud 2003). Not only do students need excellent writing skills to communicate their projects, but providing constructive feedback is a valuable skill for academics working in an environment that privileges the concept of peer review.

Students were invited to gather a group of peers (6–12 participants) and arrange a meeting. I wanted to highlight that the programme is intended to be specific to the participants' discipline. There are some persuasive arguments for multi-disciplinary writing groups (see e.g., Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke 2009 and Ferguson 2009), and for multi-disciplinary groups that share broadly similar methodological approaches (Bastalich 2011). However, initially I was under the mistaken impression that the advantage of group members working within the same discipline would be that participants were familiar with at least some of the jargon and specialised knowledge required to understand each others' writing, and that this would develop a growing awareness of the expected conventions of the disciplinary culture. These early steps as 'legitimate peripheral participants' (Baker and Lattuca 2010; Lave and Wenger 1991) of the disciplinary community would therefore include the recognition of peers as a valuable resource; members of PHeW could draw on the extensive combined knowledge of their peers to advance their projects and gain confidence in their own contributions to their wider community of practice. As becomes clear, however, the participants in the Public Health group are from a wide range of disciplines, and, in fact, regard this diversity as a strength in their writing group.

The writing group was intended to continue meeting independently after the academic developer stopped attending. Therefore, it was crucial that the group be student driven, rather than relying on authority figures to drive it. Unlike the writing seminars reported on by Delyser (2003), Larcombe et al. (2007), and Ferguson (2009), for example, that are actively led by academic staff with a set programme, the idea here was for students to take responsibility for the ongoing existence of PHeW. I facilitated the first few sessions until the 'habit' of meeting was established, and then the group members took over. Participants could instigate useful development activities on their own (Hartman 2007; McAlpine and Asghar 2010). Ideally, such writing groups can promote a sense of belonging to a collaborative community of researchers, thus mitigating against the loneliness and isolation so often experienced during doctoral studies.

Of the many reasons that isolation might develop during doctoral candidature, two in particular stand out. First, the requirement to produce original work of sufficient depth results in intensely individualised projects in many disciplines. This can mean that few people understand the intricacies of the argument, the subtleties of the experimental findings, the conceptual bases or, indeed, the language and vocabulary to discuss these projects. Second, an abiding myth appears to exist amongst academics that writing is a solitary process and must, by its very nature, be undertaken alone (Lee and Boud 2003), even though the basis of all academic research is peer review (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Boud and Lee 2005; Ferguson 2009). While isolation is a concern for all students, this can be a particular issue for international candidates arriving direct from their home countries to commence research doctorates. I wanted TWGs to highlight the value of collaborative communities of practice in the university environment.

Writing groups can thus support the development of a sense of scholarly identity and belonging to the disciplinary community (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Boud and Lee 2005; Ferguson 2009; Maher et al. 2008; Mullen 2003; Parker 2009). In creating a student-centred forum to promote intellectual discussion, I aimed to heighten awareness that the research students themselves are the individuals who constitute the discipline's future and contribute significantly to any lively, vibrant research

culture. In the process of learning about writing, the PHeW participants could develop skills in collaborating for mutual benefit, a capacity that is greatly advantageous in the contemporary academy that increasingly prizes collaboration and teamwork. What follows is the PHeW group members' accounts of how it played out.

Participants and approach

The core PHeW group eventually comprised seven women and one man, all doctoral candidates located in a School of Public Health at a research intensive university. It is a group rich in cultural diversity (members hail from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Germany, Australia, China and Norway) and in disciplinary diversity (economics, ethics/law, occupational health and safety, epidemiology, pharmacy, health policy development, statistics). When the group first met, they had been working on their Ph.D. projects for 6–12 months. One member commenced postgraduate study directly after an undergraduate degree; the others had all been in the workforce for 14–25 years, and many had been operating at senior levels in government, research and academic positions. While other writing groups discussed in the literature state that they include a mixture of local and international or English as an additional language (EAL) students (e.g., Larcombe et al. 2007), other demographic information regarding participants is generally missing. It is included here to emphasise the diversity of backgrounds of the group.

Together, PHeW members have reflected and written about their participation in the writing group, taking the insights of autoethnography to analyse and understand the experience. In line with Anderson's (2006, 375) requirements for analytic autoethnography, here the researchers are all '(1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena', that social phenomena in this case being TWGs and doctoral education more generally. However, as Hayano (1979, 102) reminds us, 'cultural "realities" and interpretations of events among individuals in the same group are often highly variable, changing, or contradictory'; with this in mind, we have woven the individual voices of the students into a broader account that draws out the common threads of those narratives but allows for diversity and difference, and have framed the reflection within the voice of the academic developer. Rather than attempting to present a case study, this 'multi-voiced' account is intended as a thoughtful ethnographic reflection that focuses on a particular situated experience, adding to the literature initiated by Maher et al. (2008) and Lassig et al. (2009).

Members of PHeW contributed reflective comments on two separate occasions approximately six months apart. The first set of questions was developed by the whole group including the academic, and individual written reflections were provided by all members. The second set of questions was developed in response to the initial reflections and became more focused on the emerging themes. The reflections were then collated and emerging themes identified. The consensus was to anonymise the quotations in order to focus on the themes explored by the whole group, rather than tracing each person's responses separately.

The PHeW group: participants' voices

The need for such a group was identified by one of the doctoral researchers who contacted the academic developer to discuss the issue; this resulted in the formation of PHeW. Members joined the group for a variety of reasons: some recognised the value of further developing their writing skills, some felt it would help develop their language skills, some needed an audience for pieces of their writing, while some were in search of a sense of belonging in this diverse academic community. Not surprisingly, given the make-up of the doctoral student population at the institution, those who responded were from culturally and disciplinarily diverse backgrounds, which proved to be a major strength to the group. Our insights resonate with findings published on other writing groups (e.g., Cuthbert and Spark 2008; Lassig et al. 2009; Maher et al. 2008; Mullen 2003), but provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the value of linguistic, cultural and disciplinary diversity in such groups in our own voices. Our reflections on constructing this collaborative community are outlined below. As becomes clear in the reflections, we came to see the disciplinary and linguistic/cultural diversity as a major strength in the group and as a key contributor to our learning, prompting us to examine our work and our ways of thinking in novel ways. Our collaboration was enriched by this diversity.

Linguistic and cultural diversity

The linguistic and cultural diversity of our group could have been seen as an impediment, particularly in terms of our varying degrees of English language proficiency. A significant body of literature focuses on the challenges posed to international students when attempting doctoral study and research publication in English (Bitchener and Basturkmen 2006; Chang and Schleppegrell 2011; Cho 2004; Hirvela and Belcher 2001; Li 2007; Wang and Li 2008).

Improved writing skills

The PHeW group certainly benefited those of us with EAL. These members have developed English language skills in terms of grammar and vocabulary, the development of which can only be achieved over time; the PHeW group, which has continued to meet for nearly two years with only very limited breaks, has given us this opportunity:

As an International student, I think my writing [is] better than before I join the TWG. Last time, some of my writing didn't make sense to other[s], difficult to follow and redundant.

A distinct feature of our group is also the fact that the majorities of members use English as an additional language. Members come from a number of different nationalities and cultures. The group offers a unique opportunity to work on language skills in an informal, but very effective manner. Personally, I believe that my academic vocabulary as well as my grammatical skills have benefitted tremendously from the meetings.

In addition to critiquing specific aspects of members' written works it focuses on language skills, and many other important issues raised by the members. For example, it

takes care of all aspects of the document including research methods, the flow of the argument, and readability.

However, we discovered that this linguistic diversity has a significant positive influence on native English speakers too. When communicating with EAL peers, we noticed that the native English speakers not only became more aware of the language itself, examining our own work more closely but also more aware of the need to make ourselves understood by a linguistically diverse audience:

Having students from different nationalities has made it even more important to express my ideas clearly so that has been excellent training. I also think that the national diversity has brought up many more grammatical issues that we have resolved, and I have learnt a thing or two about fairly basic grammar that I thought I knew and took for granted. That has been an eye opener at times.

Such language awareness in today's academic context is essential, as increasing academic mobility (Hoffman 2009; Pherali 2011) means that large numbers of students and academics originate from diverse backgrounds with varying degrees of English competency. Indeed, much of what is published is intended for international audiences, highlighting the need to ensure that our writing is accessible to all.

An unintended but valuable outcome of the group's linguistic diversity has been to ease the pressure on students seeking to enhance their language skills but unable to obtain assistance with this from supervisors, some of whom do not view this as part of their core duties, as Strauss (2011) testifies:

The TWG has given me valuable feedback on my work, that possibly no one else could have given me especially in regard to use of language. The fact that English is not my mother tongue requires me to constantly work on language skills, for which supervisors often do not have the time when they provide feedback.

Improved understanding of academic culture

We recognise that the cultural and linguistic diversity in PHeW mirrors the diversity in academia in most English-speaking countries, raising some of the challenges that face international staff as well as students (Green and Myatt 2011; Jiang et al. 2010; Luxon and Peelo 2009; Saltmarsh and Swirski 2010). Academics are not isolated from the outside world; rather, they belong to an international community which includes colleagues from a diverse array of cultures and backgrounds. In this sense, PHeW resembles the structure of international research forums and therefore creates an ideal place to prepare for interactions on the international academic scene, 'to create networking for future work':

The group is absolutely useful for me to learn universal academic behaviours; in particular for me who hold "eastern academic culture". I strongly believe that what I have learnt from the group regarding academic behaviours would be very important for me to develop my academic professional internationally.

Multi-nationality in this group is also an advantage. I am [nationality], who is not quite familiar with the Western culture. Working in this group with multi-nationality is worthwhile. For example, the different perspectives given to a piece of my work (about

health-related behaviour of [*nationality*] people) are valuable, because the readers/ audience of our published articles is in fact from different nations.

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Apart from language issues that arise in such culturally diverse groups, there are significant attitudinal and behavioural differences. PHeW displays cultural awareness and recognises that the differences in attitudes and behaviours enrich the group's understanding of alternative ways of thinking.

Issues arising from the linguistic diversity in our group sometimes intermingle with issues arising from cultural diversity. For example, linguistic diversity does impose uneven costs on the group members, particularly for those of us who require more time than fluent English speakers to process the materials examined. This may be even more pronounced when examining work in fields that differ from our own, where we are even less familiar with the language and methods. When time is short, language challenges may reduce some members' ability to fully participate in discussions, which in turn gives a more prominent voice to fluent English speakers in the group: 'sometimes I was not fully prepared and in that kind of situation I felt like [I was] not contributing enough'. Cultural difference also plays a role in this loss of voice; Australian universities have an ambivalent relationship with culturally different forms of knowledge (Singh 2009; Singh and Meng 2011). Some of our members come from cultures where criticisms are not openly aired, creating difficulties in critiquing others' work, despite assurances from other PHeW members that this is not only culturally acceptable in Australia but also necessary in academia:

The national diversity makes us know and understand the attitude of a person. Maybe my friends would notice my attitude that I'm not actively speaking at the meeting. It is not only because I have limited in English but also did not get used to share opinion in the meeting previously.

Some members are more active than others. [*EAL*] speakers tend to be less outspoken during the meetings. Culture and language barriers should not be underestimated and it can be hard to make your voice being heard.

Importantly, though, cultural diversity has not been detrimental to the group. On the contrary, the differences noted have been perceived as valuable learning opportunities, 'provid[ing] a useful forum for practising giving feedback to colleagues'. The integration of local and international doctoral students is not always managed well in universities (Cotterall 2011; Goode 2007; Robinson-Pant 2009; Trice 2005; Walsh 2010); writing groups like ours can help overcome this. Our experience has enhanced our understanding of the attitudes and behaviours displayed, thus enriching relationships and helping us adopt behaviours needed in contexts different from those we have previously experienced, challenging as the latter may be:

I noticed that there is a bit (but significant) difference in the way to give feedbacks to colleagues between what I used to have with my colleagues at home and in the group. I learnt how to supportively criticize others' work.

I think I have also learned how to be more tactful and compassionate in giving feedback and at providing encouragement and positive feedback.

... in some cultures expressing your own opinion in front of a group is not so much the norm and therefore the discussion may often be led by the same people, while others (those who do not speak up so much) worry that they are not contributing enough. In that case, the attitude of the participants to these differences is very important. I think it is important that each participant recognises and appreciates the unique contribution of each member of the group, whether it be written comments, verbal discussion or being an attentive listener during the meeting.

Disciplinary diversity

Brought together by the desire to share our work with other candidates and improve our language and academic skills, committing to a group with such great disciplinary diversity nevertheless raised concerns:

At the beginning I was not sure whether I would be able to contribute anything to this group as well as I wondered whether this would be a strong constraint on my time.

Despite initial reservations, however, we all now acknowledge that the multi-disciplinary nature of PHeW has contributed to the development of key research skills; perhaps it has even been central to its success. As Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke (2009) found, the mix of fields involved may have contributed to producing a less 'competitive' environment: there is no need to 'prove' academic superiority. Rather, the focus turns to the writing itself and thoroughly explaining and communicating key concepts of our work so that others can understand:

I wonder whether the multiple disciplinary backgrounds of members took out the competitive edge right from the beginning. In Public Health there is generally a great deal of tolerance and openness about different approaches as this at the essence of the field. I believe that this open-minded attitude that we already experienced before the group started helped us during the warming up period.

Awareness of audience

Awareness of the audience arose very early in our collaboration because we had to communicate our work clearly to this diverse 'lay audience'. This is increasingly important in any academic endeavour, given the multi-disciplinary nature of much current research (Ferguson 2009). Focusing on the intended and extended audience of our work necessarily forces our attention towards our key messages, assisting us not only in the clarification of arguments but also in the removal of unnecessary detail:

The TWG has made me think more about the audience I am writing for and has helped me to target my writing to better communicate my work to my audience. In particular, the TWG has helped me to clarify and focus on the main messages and the purpose of what I'm writing, rather than get lost in the detail, which can often happen when I'm working on my own.

I have become better at promoting and justifying my work, and expressing how it contributes to current knowledge, which is so important when writing for journals.

One of the best moments for me was getting feedback on a paper that made me see that I hadn't gotten across what the paper was really about. I couldn't see the proverbial wood for the trees as I was stuck in the detail and would not have been able to see that myself.

24 made me look at the big picture and focus on the message. I often ask myself now 'what am I actually trying to say here' when I'm writing anything. When I had the chance to explain that verbally to members of the TWG it forced me to really think about the point of my paper.

Such close consideration of the audience often has the additional benefit of helping clarify areas in our own work. This is a key contribution, especially in 30 context of one's Ph.D. journey, a period during which a candidate endeavours to gain an in-depth understanding of their own area and develop further expertise:

In addition, I have had to explain the constructs and norms in my area which I have found useful, as it has helped me clarify my thinking and understanding of some of the issues that are relevant to my area.

Given the disciplinary diversity 23 of the group, the multitude of expertise and different worldviews, we are exposed to new ways of understanding the issues in our own areas of enquiry:

It has been useful to get feedback from people from other disciplines as their different perspective seems to bring up issues in my work as well as new ideas that I would not have otherwise thought of.

Even though confront the same academic problem, the people from different background hold different views and analysis in different angles, this in a way is similar with brain storming, and it is helped me widen my horizons.

I am sometimes amazed at the very different ways the members perceive what I have written. Such insights have enabled me to broaden my thinking when writing and consider issues which might not otherwise naturally arise in my thinking.

Awareness of broader learning

Intellectual stimulation during one's doctoral candidacy comes in various forms. Candidates are challenged intellectually by attempts to fully understand their own field and to convey their knowledge to wider audiences. The disciplinary diversity of PHeW demonstrates, however, that there are additional benefits to being exposed to a variety of sub-disciplines. Despite the language challenges of delving into unfamiliar fields, we have all benefitted from this disciplinary diversity. It has provided an invaluable educational process neither intended nor envisaged at the outset, so that 'we are able to learn more about each others' fields':

Working in a group with the diversity of the nationality and disciplinary is actually a big challenge for me, again, because English is my additional language. It is actually quite difficult for me to understand 4 issues/topics of other disciplines, such as philosophy/law and economic. However, I realise that every knowledge/area of interest is connected/related to others. So, through the group I learn to be familiar with/to get used to the multidisciplinary concept, which will be invaluable for my professional development.

I've gained broader perspective on public health topics from other countries as well as from other sub-disciplines.

Furthermore, the diversity of topics and research backgrounds teaches us to be much more open-minded and learning-oriented about different approaches and research methods, which provide 'good opportunities to learn something new in every session':

The diversity is good for us, to have wider knowledge about other issues. Through considering the work of other members who are examining different fields, I have learnt a lot not only about their fields but also about the frameworks applied in these areas.

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By being exposed to a number of research projects in different fields, you broaden your understanding of other research areas which is vital if you wish to be a well-rounded academic who has a good understanding of other fields. Nowadays, research is often multi-disciplinary and so developing an understanding of other areas is important.

Having members from different areas, as they provide different angles and varied perspectives, there is a huge benefit in pooling knowledge and learning from each other.

In fact, it is this diversity and incidental learning that has provided a reason for us to continue attending the sessions and has been a major advantage to all of us.

Building community and belonging

Discerning what factors facilitated the sense of community is difficult; many may have bi-directional influences. However, members' perceptions of the benefits of this group include overcoming isolation, overcoming bouts of self-doubt and building confidence and trust, which has resulted in a commitment to our 'learning community' (Parker 2009), resonating with the responses reported by Maher et al. (2008).

Overcoming isolation

Despite the mounting pressure as we all near the end of our candidature, as we sit around our meeting room table reflecting on this experience, we have almost imperceptible smug smiles at the gem that our culturally and disciplinarily diverse group has created. The 'intense isolation' frequently reported by Ph.D. candidates has been immensely softened by membership of this group. We acknowledge how this group has brought to our Ph.D. journey a sense of community many of us may not have envisaged or expected, and has provided invaluable emotional and social support:

Personally, TWG always encourage[s] me, for example when the first time I would present my study in conference, they supported me. One of them gave her time for me to practise my oral presentation, outside our scheduled meeting. Sometimes, we also go out for coffee together and sharing life story.

Being an overseas student, from the very outset of my PhD research, I had a feeling of hesitation and about my acceptance to the native Australian students. But after 2 or 3 meetings of this group I found that many of the members are from EAL backgrounds and we are all from a variety of disciplines and I felt really comfortable as I found I was not alone in this intellectual journey and realised with confidence that there were ways to overcome these problems. Additionally group members' support and the friendly environment helped me keep coming back to meetings.

However, being the student whose role it is to learn in the first place can be somewhat passive and thus at times frustrating. Conversely, the writing group gives me the feeling that I can actively contribute something and my peers may actually find this valuable. So I believe that in order to feel being part of the academic community, it helps when you can practice an active role in critical thinking that is considered to be helpful to someone else.

Struggling with self-doubt

One of the factors that has contributed to a sense of belonging to this community was the realisation that we all face similar challenges, 'that we are all in "the same boat" struggling with the same problems'. Simply discovering that all candidates experience difficulties and self-doubt during candidature seems to have alleviated some of our anxiety; as Cameron, Nairn, and Higgins (2009) and Wellington (2010) remind us, these are common but often unspoken emotional concerns for many Ph.D. students:

The TWG has provided a sense of community where we are all at the same eye height. This type of support is extremely valuable on the emotional ride throughout the candidature. It helps to see how other group members deal with challenges and knowing one is not alone in that respect.

Undertaking a PhD can be quite a lonely experience, because each person's work is necessarily unique – no-one is doing the same thing as you nor grappling with exactly the same problems as you. Yet we do share many common struggles. The TWG provided a safe forum in which we could share our experience of some of these struggles and realise that we were not alone. It is reassuring to learn about the experience with other students, because even though we all have our own challenges, we do all seem to face self-doubt at some point so it's comforting to know that's a normal part of the experience, no matter what our background.

The understanding that 'others in the same situation are struggling with the same problems as I do' can also be crucial for developing confidence as an early career academic.

Building confidence

Confidence building is a key thread in our reflections, particularly in relation to the academic realm. Like the students in Mullen's (2003), Larcombe et al.'s (2007) and Ferguson's (2009) studies, we are all now more confident about our work. Confidence has developed in the safe environment of the group where harsh criticism from anyone, including senior academic staff, is absent, thus allowing us to gain a positive sense of 'academic self' (Lee and Boud 2003). Mistakes made here are easily 'forgiven' and are to be learned from rather than be cause for shame; there are 'no strings attached' in this 'ideal playground' for exploring our own ideas. Concerns about appearing inadequate are put aside and honest feedback is both generously given and graciously received:

After having presented my own work in the group and receiving honest and useful feedback, I felt more confident that I am not producing complete non-sense. As a consequence I feel that with more confidence the writing itself becomes natural.

... it gave me more confidence in dealing with the reviewers' comments on one of my submitted manuscript. When I received the reviewer's feedback from the journal, I was frustrated and thought that is the end of it and I will never be able to publish anything.

When I presented my manuscript with reviewer's feedback in the group meeting, it reduced my level of frustration and gave me confidence.

The defining moment for *[me]* in the group was when I presented work, which had undergone a many revisions by my supervisors. At that time I had already developed a very negative attitude towards that work and consequently doubted myself and my justification of doing a PhD. The group however congratulated me on the work as they saw *[it]* with fresh eyes. It was a simple thing after all, but the confidence boost I gained from this was immense.

Research on my own project is generally happening under relatively close supervision. It is a bit like a dog taken out by his owner for long walk, but is kept on a leash. In contrast, when discussing someone else's work at the TWG I would compare this to the dog being let off the leash in a little park. The TWG provides me with a small but manageable dose of the realm of unsupervised critical thinking beyond the candidature, which I imagine to be the essence of academia.

Even though acceptance into a Ph.D. programme is evidence, in itself, of a student's academic abilities, it is common for students to suffer bouts of insecurity about their ability to complete their projects and the quality of their work. It is therefore tremendously important to receive feedback from respected and trusted individuals; the positive feedback builds confidence, while critique, as well as being educational, builds confidence in one's ability to improve the work and attain the expected standards.

⁵ *Trusting the community*

We recognise that the sense of community developed over time would not have been possible without mutual trust and respect. This has been instrumental in creating a safe environment for both academic and personal development, and has in turn made it 'possible to share problems without feeling uncomfortable'. Without a sense of trust it would also have been impossible for us to become more confident both in ourselves, as emerging academics, and in our work:

I believe that the comfortable environment of the thesis writing group enhances the experience of free critical thinking because of the level of trust that we have in each other. It seems we developed an attitude towards each other that includes unconditioned respect for every single member in the group. I am not anxious [about exposing] my thinking to the group members, even though I might be wrong on a particular point. I can brainstorm without boundaries.

... our contact with each other has helped develop a sense of trust and camaraderie that adds to the whole PhD experience. Doing a PhD, after all, is also about developing relationships with like-minded people in addition to achieving academic and professional goals.

One of the greatest achievements in my mind is that by now we tend to present work in progress rather than the already polished parts. It indicates our level of trust that is needed to expose unfinished thoughts as well as it proves that the presenter considers the group's feedback as a valuable ingredient process of the work.

This trust has been built step by step as we each took risks in exposing our work to the group and learned to offer supportive feedback to each other.

Group conclusion: our community

We each embarked on the journey of the PHeW group for different reasons and at the outset were unsure of the exact nature of the benefits it would yield. However, irrespective of each member's experience with writing and previous involvement in academia, we agree that each of us has undoubtedly benefitted in more diverse ways than originally anticipated.

The multiplicity of areas of expertise, language and cultural backgrounds has contributed to a developing awareness and acceptance of diverse views on our work. Importantly, it has assisted us in extracting ourselves from deeply entrenched ways of perceiving both our own and others' work. This diversity has heightened our awareness of the audience of our work and has increased our capacity to be both learners and teachers in the process of peer review (Aitchison 2009; Caffarella and Barnett 2000; Stracke 2010), a process inextricably linked with academic pursuits and therefore of great value to emerging researchers and policy-makers. We have been exposed to a variety of fields, very much characteristic of Public Health as a discipline, which we might not otherwise have had the opportunity or confidence to engage in actively or critically. This experience will surely prove to be of great value in our future interactions with the increasing multi-disciplinarity of work in our respective fields.

We took an unstructured approach to developing our writing skills, dealing with issues such as structure, grammar and syntax as they arose, rather than choosing specific topics for discussion in advance. Nevertheless, the attention and dedication applied to all reviews, in addition to the continuity of the sessions over the two years, has without doubt contributed to the further development of our language, research and academic skills, one of which is the ability to present our work accurately, unambiguously and confidently.

Over and above the academic and professional benefits we have gained through PHeW, we consider ourselves to be recipients of an unexpected benefit, which for some may surpass all others; the sense of camaraderie, trust and belonging we have experienced in this small 'scholarly community' (Pyhältö et al. 2009) has enhanced our Ph.D. journeys and has softened, if not eradicated, the sense of isolation many initially experienced. The exacting nature of our studies became more bearable in the knowledge that we are all experiencing similar difficulties, to greater or lesser degrees. While human relationships necessarily experience fluctuations to which we have not been immune, the respect that we have for each other both as professionals and as human beings has enriched our lives. This, if nothing else, has been an invaluable benefit of peer learning (Stracke 2010).

As we approach the end of this enriching collaboration, we conclude that the diversity of our group contributed to our sense of community rather than the community forming *despite* the diversity. Our commitment is to the PHeW community, where each member is willing 'to give as much as they get out of it, but at the same time appreciating that each person has something different to offer'. We all recognise the difficulty in disentangling the direction of influence and acknowledge that this conclusion arises organically from the experience itself rather than from empirical evidence collected and examined in accordance with standardised scientific norms.

Academic developer's conclusion

My original intentions were certainly met in terms of a TWG building a collaborative community for doctoral candidates (McAlpine and Asghar 2010), but I had not anticipated the enormous value of the diversity in the group. While much of the literature explores the experience of international students and the difficulties they face in relation to cultural differences, the focus of PHeW members' reflections was just as much on their disciplinary diversity as the cultural diversity. What does this focus on disciplinary identity tell us about the nature of the academy at present?

As traditional disciplinary boundaries blur and Ph.D. projects are increasingly focused on interdisciplinary investigations, the scholarly identities formed during the doctorate are also shifting. As disciplinary identities become progressively uncertain, so too do the proscribed communities of practice those identities seek to operate within. Rather than preparing to enter a discrete, fixed community of practice, many Ph.D. candidates find themselves in situations that demand different conceptions of scholarly identities in order to negotiate rhizomatic academic networks that are characterised by connection, heterogeneity and multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Public Health offers particular insights into this moment in the academy – while the students in this writing group identify with specific disciplines (they characterise themselves as ethicists, economists, statisticians), they also simultaneously take up the label of researchers in 'Public Health', itself a new 'discipline' that incorporates and connects a multiplicity of heterogeneous, traditional disciplinary expertise. The current research climate requires shifting, fluid scholarly identities which effectively traverse the formation and proliferation of diverse collaborative communities that individual researchers are required to move between at various moments, coming together in different configurations, dispersing and reforming as their projects broach disciplinary boundaries in unpredictable, unprecedented ways.

These kinds of TWGs are an ideal space in which to equip doctoral candidates with the skills they will be expected to possess in order to undertake interdisciplinary research in the future. If they can conceptualise their role as academics and researchers as flexible, in-process, unfixed, they are better prepared to travel across the networks of collaborative communities that proliferate in unexpected directions in a rhizomatic research world. Those communities and sense of belonging are still highly valued, but they are also temporary and mutable, subject to change and development.

Note

1. Public Health Writing is the name assigned to the TWG under discussion in this paper.

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