WRITING TOGETHER, LEARNING TOGETHER: THE VALUE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF A RESEARCH WRITING GROUP FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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The high level of scholarly writing required for a doctoral thesis is a challenge for many research students. However, formal academic writing training is not a core component of many doctoral programs. Informal writing groups for doctoral students may be one method of contributing to the improvement of scholarly writing. In this paper, we report on a writing group that was initiated by an experienced writer and higher degree research supervisor to support and improve her doctoral students' writing capabilities. Over time, this group developed a workable model to suit their varying needs and circumstances. The model comprised group sessions, an email group, and individual writing. Here, we use a narrative approach to explore the effectiveness and value of our research writing group model in improving scholarly writing. The data consisted of doctoral students' reflections to stimulus questions about their writing progress and experiences. The stimulus questions sought to probe individual concerns about their own writing, what they had learned in the research writing group, the benefits of the group, and the disadvantages and challenges to participation. These reflections were analysed using thematic analysis. Following this analysis, the supervisor provided her perspective on the key themes that emerged.

Results revealed that, through the writing group, members learned technical elements (e.g., paragraph structure), non-technical elements (e.g., working within limited timeframes), conceptual elements (e.g., constructing a cohesive arguments), collaborative writing processes, and how to edit and respond to feedback. In addition to improved writing quality, other benefits were opportunities for shared writing experiences, peer support, and increased confidence and motivation. The writing group provides a unique social learning environment with opportunities for: professional dialogue about writing, peer learning and review, and developing a supportive peer network. Thus our research writing group has proved an effective avenue for building doctoral students' capability in scholarly writing.

The proposed model for a research writing group could be applicable to any context, regardless of the type and location of the university, university faculty, doctoral program structure, or number of postgraduate students. It could also be used within a group of students with diverse research abilities, needs, topics and methodologies. However, it requires a group facilitator with sufficient expertise in scholarly writing and experience in doctoral supervision who can both engage the group in planned writing activities and also capitalise on fruitful lines of discussion related to students' concerns as they arise. The research writing group is not intended to replace traditional supervision processes nor existing training. However it has clear benefits for improving scholarly writing in doctoral research programs particularly in an era of rapidly increasing student load.

INTRODUCTION

Participation in postgraduate research is on the rise. In the first half of 2008, there were a total of 38 464 students enrolled in an Australian research doctoral program (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), which is 20% higher than in 2003 (DEEWR, n.d.). Thus, there is unrelenting pressure on the university sector to provide adequate research training both in the *field of expertise* and in the *associated product* by which students will need to demonstrate a significant and original contribution to knowledge. For many doctoral students, the product that will show their contribution to knowledge is a written thesis. In many disciplines in Australia, the thesis is the culminating product derived from three to four years (full-time equivalence) work and the sole assessment piece for the award of a doctorate. Hence, the thesis constitutes an exceptionally high-stakes writing task and, accordingly, these students need to become highly proficient scholarly writers. Not surprisingly, many doctoral students struggle with scholarly writing. Although the role of supervisors is to support their doctoral students' work, they face three challenges in this support role. First, supervisors might not be proficient writers themselves (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 1999). Second, in tandem with increasing doctoral enrolments, their supervision loads are likely to be increasing (DEEWR, 2009, n.d.) and include students with various enrolment patterns (on-/off-campus; full-/part-time). Finally, there is no consensus on how supervisors can best support doctoral students to become scholarly writers. However, irrespective of the challenges to supervisors, there is an urgent need (and responsibility) for them to assist students to become a proficient scholarly writer. Within the doctoral context, being a novice writer is a common barrier to successful thesis production.

We face this challenge as a group of doctoral students at an Australian university. Throughout this paper, our use of the term "we" and "our" denotes the doctoral students (Dillon, Fox, Lassig, Lincoln and Neofa). The supervisor's (Diezmann) contribution later in the paper is identified in italics. We varied in attendance mode (on-/off-campus; full-/part-time) and the stage in our doctoral journey (from beginning to near submission). We share a common supervisor who has a large number of doctoral students and undertakes a leadership role within a large faculty. To address our constraint as doctoral students who are novice writers, we engaged in a *research writing group* (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). In this paper, we explain our rationale for selecting this form of writing initiative and its implementation, and reflect on the effectiveness of a research writing group for improving scholarly writing.

This paper begins with an overview of scholarly writing and a description of the development of expertise. Next we outline our context and propose a model that capitalises on the potential of a doctoral research writing group. We then investigate the effectiveness and value of our writing group model. Finally, the results of our study are presented and discussed, followed by concluding comments.

BACKGROUND

Scholarly Writing
Within the doctoral students' world, writing is not just something we *do* as an integral requirement of achieving proficiency; it is also a way of learning and knowing. From our perspective, scholarly writing is equated with academic writing, such as the production of theses and journal publications. Scholarly writing has content "grounded in literature and/or empirical research" (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000, p. 41). It is distinguished by its evidence of critical thinking about the content, scholarly references, the adoption of a particular style of formatting, and a recursive writing process that supports communication and development of ideas (Björk, & Räisänen, 1997). It also goes through peer review and an iterative revision process in order to develop a strong, coherent

conceptual analysis and argument. A hallmark feature of the personal and professional journey in higher degree research, for some more than others, is the struggle to achieve scholarly writing proficiency. The desire to do justice to one's topic is pressing, and the obstacles to becoming proficient are many.

Developing Expertise: From Acclimation to Proficiency
There are various theories that address how novices become experts. However, given the complex socio-cultural contexts of educational settings, translating research findings into practice in the educational arena has proved problematic. The Model of Domain Learning (MDL) (Alexander, 1997, 2003) focuses on developing expertise in academic domains and is embedded in extensive research. In contrast to other models of expertise, the MDL emphasises the learning journey rather than the sharp contrast between novices and experts (Alexander, 1997, 2004). According to the model, there are three stages in developing expertise: (1) Acclimation, (2) Competence, and (3) Proficiency/Expertise (Alexander, 1997, 2003). The three components of the MDL are subject-matter knowledge, strategic processing, and interest, and they provide the foundation for expertise development (see Table 1). These function interdependently and are constructed differently for individuals in their domain learning journey (Alexander, 2003, 2004).

Table 1
Components of the Model of Domain Learning

Components	Aspects of the components
Subject-matter knowledge	1. Domain knowledge: breadth of field knowledge 2. Topic knowledge: depth of specific domain topics
Strategic processing	1. Surface-level strategies 2. Deep-level processing strategies
Interest	1. Individual interest: learners' long-term, committed interest in a domain 2. Situational interest: based on short-lived interests

(Alexander, 2004)

Experts are characterised by an integrated, broad and deep knowledge base that they use to identify problems and contribute new knowledge to their domain, which involves a high level of strategic processing (particularly deep-level processing strategies) (Alexander, 2003, 2004). They also have an enduring interest in a domain that is primarily motivated by individual interest rather than situational interest (Alexander, 2003, 2004). Only selected learners can achieve true expertise in an academic domain because it requires exceptional levels of knowledge, strategic processing, and interest and long-term commitment to the domain. In other words, experts are proficient 'across the board' (Alexander, 1997).

The MDL suits our focus on becoming more scholarly writers for three reasons. First, the main focus of the MDL is on the quantitative and qualitative changes that take place during the learning process (Alexander, 2003, 2004). For instance, we would expect to see changes in *how much* we know in terms of a repertoire of skills, as well as visible improvements in *how well* we use writing to communicate with various audiences. Second, the MDL accounts for the unique blend of affective and motivational factors that are involved in achieving success and expertise (Alexander, 2003). Dialogic processes 'feed into' the way a person might feel about themselves and the task at hand (writing), and thus have potential to support or undermine success. Third, the MDL model assumes a progressive blurring of the lines among a writing group's members who may have variable expertise (Alexander, 2003). In our case, expertise varies between ourselves and the research supervisor. Since our group functions more collaboratively rather than by drawing sharp distinctions between supervisor/expert and the rest of us (even though this may be the reality), we can monitor the change processes without altering the current group dynamics. Hence, the MDL

model provides a sound foundation for understanding the development of academic writing expertise.

Research Writing Groups

The research writing group model essentially emphasises a system of collaborative mentoring between students and supervisors. Proponents of research writing groups claim they are effective in addressing many of the "epistemological, experimental and textual dimensions of writing within research degrees" (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, p. 266). To achieve this, four key pedagogical principles of effective research writing groups need to be considered: (1) group identification (e.g., a shared institutional context and research supervisor); (2) peer learning and review; (3) the notion of community – the writing group as a community for learning, and development of a discourse community with a common language; and (4) incorporating research writing into normal business (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Research indicates that research writing groups can support numerous salient outcomes. Academic outcomes include creating a focus on the connection between writing and thinking/knowledge production (Aitchison & Lee, 2006), developing team building practices that maintain focus and direction and improve task completion (Dorn & Papelewis, 1997; Horn, 2001), and promoting graduate students' professional development and contribution (Mullen, 2001). There are also beneficial community outcomes, such as, developing doctoral students' sense of scholarly identity and belonging, and fostering collegial support between doctoral students and staff members (Mullen, 2003).

OUR CONTEXT

Conscious of the need to improve the quality of our writing, we formed our own Research Writing Group (RWG). The broad aim of our RWG is to develop our writing expertise; to take the journey from acclimation to proficiency (Alexander, 2004). The group currently consists of one university professor and six doctoral students whose research focuses on education from early childhood through to tertiary education. We are investigating the experiences of teachers and students. Our broad range of research topics consist of only some overlap, including teachers' understandings about issues in education, the use of ICTs with students, and students' creativity. We all have one supervisor in common (Diezmann), the professor who formed the group, but also have one or more additional supervisors. There were multiple challenges facing our group. These included: irregularity of meeting times; it was rare for all members to be available for every meeting; our different content areas and methodologies; being at different stages of our research/thesis writing; and people will drop-in/drop-out at various times, depending on their HDR progress. Hence, we needed the RWG to have sufficient flexibility to accommodate our needs while simultaneously supporting each member of the group to become a scholarly writer. Throughout this paper, the five Doctoral Students involved in the current investigation are referred by the initials "DS" and the numbers from 1 to 5 (DS1, DS2, DS3, DS4, DS5). The Supervisor is referred to by the letter "S". The characteristics of the supervisor and five doctoral students are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Research Writing Group: Supervisor and Doctoral Student Characteristics

Group member	Gender	Age group	Ethnicity	English is first language	Part-time or full-time study	Time into doctoral study
S	Female	46-55	Australian	Yes	N/A	N/A
DS1	Female	56-65	Australian	Yes	P-T	3 yrs, 8 mths (equiv. 1 yr, 10 mths F-T)
DS2	Female	36-45	Australian	Yes	F-T	3 yrs, 2 mths
DS3	Female	26-35	Australian	Yes	F-T	1 yr, 3 mths
DS4	Female	46-55	Australian	Yes	P-T	3 yrs, 8 mths (equiv. to 1 yr, 10 mths F-T)
DS5	Male	36-45	Papua New Guinean	No	F-T	2 yrs, 1 mth

OUR RESEARCH WRITING GROUP MODEL

Our RWG has three key components comprising *group sessions*, the *email group*, and our *individual writing* (Figure 1). The group sessions are central to the RWG. Some aspects of these sessions – instruction and practice of writing skills/processes/strategies, a focus on elements of thesis writing, and discussion of non-technical aspects of writing (e.g., ethics, authoring) – are more directly led by the research supervisor (the expert). The focus can be general topics that are essential for all doctoral students to learn, or can stem from weaknesses or errors our supervisor has identified in one or more students' writing. Other aspects of the sessions are more collaborative, with the lines blurring between those at different levels of expertise. This is particularly evident in sessions where members share a sample of writing to receive feedback, or when the group is jointly constructing a journal article documenting the effectiveness of the RWG. We also have an email group to keep all members informed about the group sessions, and to share writing, feedback, and reflections. The final, and most important, component of the RWG is how our individual writing improves through the group sessions and email group. It is expected that we actively reflect on and apply knowledge and skills we learn from the group sessions and the feedback we receive via email to write new sections of our individual writing and to edit previous writing. Primarily, this is for the purpose of the doctoral thesis; however, the RWG also assists the writing of scholarly journal articles or conference papers. These three complementary components of the RWG (group sessions, individual writing, email group) all played a significant role in supporting the development of our scholarly writing and were designed to overcome the multiple challenges in our contexts.
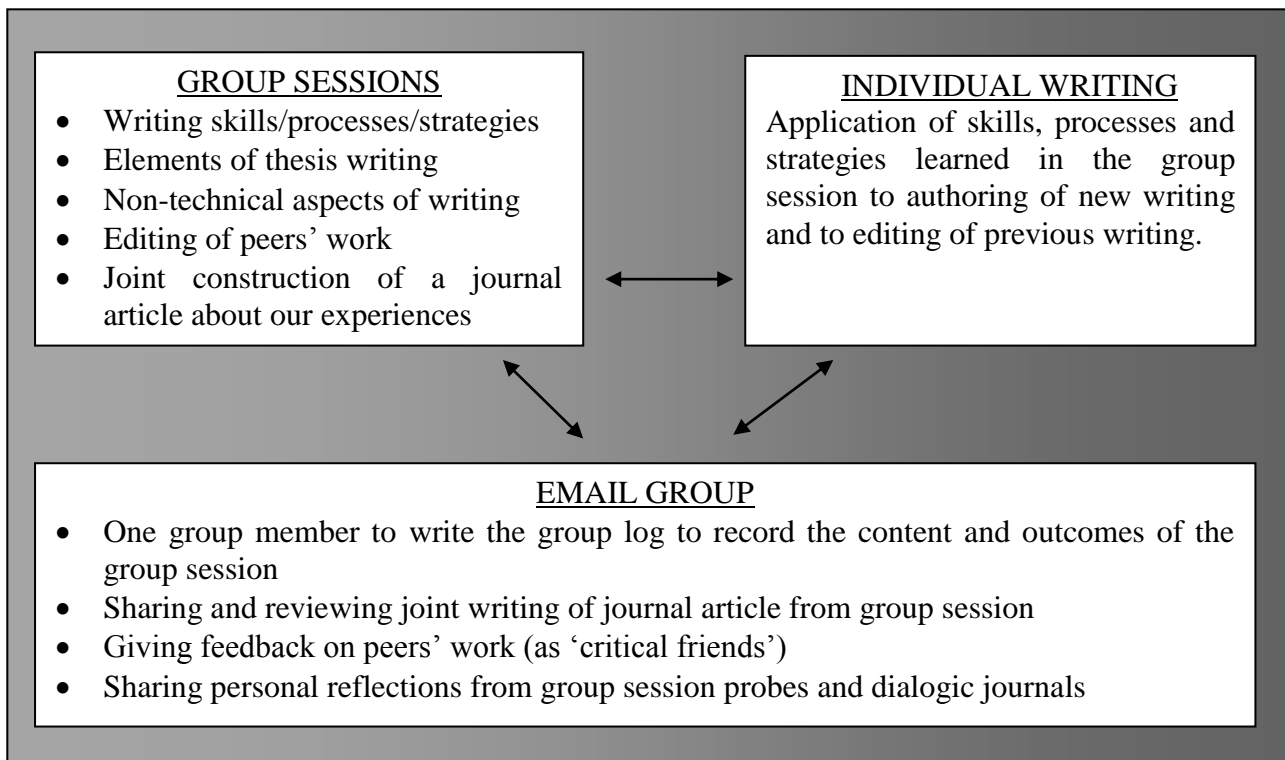
GROUP SESSIONS	INDIVIDUAL WRITING
• Writing skills/processes/strategies • Elements of thesis writing • Non-technical aspects of writing • Editing of peers' work • Joint construction of a journal article about our experiences	Application of skills, processes and strategies learned in the group session to authoring of new writing and to editing of previous writing.

EMAIL GROUP
- One group member to write the group log to record the content and outcomes of the group session
- Sharing and reviewing joint writing of journal article from group session
- Giving feedback on peers' work (as 'critical friends')
- Sharing personal reflections from group session probes and dialogic journals

Figure 1. Research Writing Group model.

The group uses a number of reflective techniques within the model to record and reflect on our scholarly writing development through the RWG. These reflections provide a progressive record of learning development at the group and individual level. They also serve to develop a dialogical relationship between group members as partners in the learning process where we build a series of shared narratives to document our experiences. Reflective techniques include:

- *Probe Responses* (Group): At the end of each group session, we each respond to a reflective question, *What did you find to be most meaningful today?*

- *Dialogic Journals* (Individual): Within a week of each session, we write a deeper reflective analysis of something pertinent we learned in the group session or progress we have seen in our own writing due to the previous group session experience.

- *Feedback on writing*: We keep a record of feedback received from RWG members (our 'critical friends') and supervisor.

- *Group log*: We keep a log that provides a summary and record of what we did in each group session and the outcomes for the group. This is also a way of keeping all members informed because not everyone can attend each group session.

Support involved multiple opportunities for us to express our ideas in *own words*. Our first-hand accounts of various unsatisfactory attempts at effective writing along with the problem-solving discussions about specific ways to improve our techniques have created a body of reflective narratives. By putting our experiences into words and subjecting those words to critical examination, we achieve several important goals: we put ourselves into someone else's position (including a potential reader); we imaginatively re-construct what is happening in different ways; and we share understandings and possibilities. As a final step in our sessions together, we synthesise our experiences into a form of narrative "re-storying" (Creswell, 2005), which is pivotal in releasing new information and bringing forth fresh insights. Thus, through shared narrative spaces, our writing endeavours take place within a trusted, confidential and facilitated forum of peers in what proves to be a creative process of exploration and discovery. However there are also challenges.

From the outset, the two main challenges for us have been the pressures of time and the different needs and abilities of doctoral students in the group. In terms of time, the key challenges are finding times everyone is available to meet and the amount of time available during each session. Time is particularly challenging for students who are enrolled part-time and work off-campus. Although the group sessions are the core of the model, the email group and individual writing components help to overcome time restrictions. The email group improves efficiency, and allows for the reality that, due to other study/work/life commitments, members are not available to attend every meeting. Through the email group, all members can stay up-to-date and participate in ongoing activities of the group. The individual writing component allows time to apply what we learn to our own writing. Due to time limitations during group sessions, we cannot give individual attention to everyone's work. Although the group originally tried to meet monthly, we no longer have a fixed timetable. Allowing for irregular meeting times ensures the group stays flexible enough to suit people's varying schedules throughout the year. Thus, time is a challenge we have overcome through the different components of the RWG and the flexibility of our group.

Accommodating individual differences of group members is also a challenge. These differences include the diversity of members' research topics outlined earlier, being at different stages of research and writing, having varied research designs and methods, and our different abilities. In terms of the RWG's 'curriculum', the focus remains on the skills, processes and strategies to improve scholarly writing, not on research topics or methodology. The writing group also does not have a set, sequential program, allowing students to join or leave at any time. This accounts for the drop-in and drop-out of students as they start and finish their PhDs. In regards to our different abilities, our research supervisor tried to focus on common mistakes or errors we made to keep it relevant to everyone. Moreover, through giving and receiving feedback and sharing our reflections, we discovered that individual differences have also been advantageous. This is because we bring a range of experiences, knowledge and skills and are able to contribute to the group in unique ways. Therefore, while catering for diversity within the group is a challenge, it is also an advantage that has enhanced our experiencing of learning from peers.

The following sections put our RWG model to the test as we investigate the effectiveness and value of the model for us as doctoral students and receive a 'reality check' on our writing progress from our supervisor.

DESIGN AND METHODS

Our RWG sought to investigate the following two research questions through reflection on the practices of the group and the outcomes of participation in this group:

1. *How effective is the research writing group model?*
2. *What is its value for doctoral research students and supervisors?*

To answer, these questions, we explored the following five aspects of the RWG experience using a narrative approach in which all doctoral students in the group created written reflections about their learning and participation in the RWG group in relation to five stimulus questions. The supervisor prepared reflections to our responses.

- What are doctoral students' main concerns about their writing?
- What are the key writing processes and strategies doctoral students learn in a research writing group?
- What are the benefits of participating in a research writing group?

- What are the disadvantages of participating in a research writing group?
- What are the challenges to participating in a research writing group?

We selected a narrative approach for this investigation for two reasons. First, narrative as an approach is especially useful where situated complexities of working and practicing can prove to be "messy, uncertain and unpredictable" (Lyons, 2007, p.614). Within the context of a RWG, the group members fulfilled the complex roles of learners, researchers *and* participants. This is a new, messy and uncertain experience for us. Second, a narrative approach is as an effective method for informing on transitional changes (Reissman, 2008). As learners, we envisaged ourselves in an ongoing process of transition, namely, becoming more capable scholarly writers.

RESULTS

These narrative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in the data. The results are organised around four points relating to the stimulus questions: (1) concerns about their writing, (2) processes and strategies learned, (3) the benefits of the RWG benefits, and (4) the disadvantages and challenges of participation. Recall, the supervisor's reflections on the results are indicated in italics.

1. Concerns about their Writing

All students expressed some concerns about their writing. In reflecting on what their concerns were, participants indicated that they had issues with features of their writing as well as struggling with self-doubt or confidence. The following themes emerged from their responses, namely technical, non-technical and conceptual elements, and developing confidence as a scholarly writer. A description of the notable elements in these themes and an excerpt from participants' responses about their writing concerns is provided in Table 3.

Table 3
Students' Concerns about their Writing

Theme	Sample excerpt
Technical Elements – e.g., writing and editing conventions, structuring sentences/ paragraphs/sections, word choice	"[Academic writing] requires knowledge of writing conventions and strategies and how they get together to create a well-structured piece of academic writing." (DS2)
Non-technical Elements – e.g., academic expectations and standards, working within limited timeframes	"...the struggles I have had with being able to produce thought-provoking, authoritative, well-reasoned and evidence-based pieces of work in a timely manner." (DS4)
Conceptual Elements – e.g., constructing cohesive arguments, writing fluency, rigour	"Thinking about how these little pieces pull together to make the big picture has been my weakness." (DS2)
Confidence	"Developing confidence in writing the doctoral thesis..." (DS5)

The students' concerns mirrored my own. The identification of limited time frames as a non-technical element and confidence require further comment. During a doctoral journey, students appear to perceive the time to complete the thesis to be limitless because often deadlines for writing work need to be extended. Hence, their acknowledgement of limited time frames for the production of written work is recognition of the practicalities of scholarly writing. On the issue of confidence, there can be few experiences more demoralising then repeatedly receiving feedback that writing

needs to be revised, restructured or rewritten. Hence, the impact of the RWG on students' confidence is of particular importance. (S)

2. Processes and Strategies Learned

Participants referred to having learned an extensive array of writing processes and strategies through the RWG. In many respects, these learnings were associated with the areas of main concern. For example, some participants were concerned about their ability to use sentences and paragraphs well in structuring their writing and indicated that they became more competent at this as a result of their participation in the RWG. There were also some learnings that related to other processes and strategies, such as gaining experience in collaborative writing processes, and giving and receiving feedback. One participant indicated that learning how to write collaboratively was a valuable experience that she may not otherwise have had the "opportunity to practise outside of the writing group" (DS3). Table 4 presents a summary of finding related to the processes and strategies learned.

Table 4

Processes and Strategies Learned

Theme	Sample excerpt
Technical Elements – e.g., writing and editing conventions, structuring sentences/ paragraphs/sections, word choice	"...citations using APA standards, referencing, paragraph expansion, use of conjunctions, shortening sentences, selective use of vocabulary" (DS5)
Non-technical Elements – e.g., academic expectations and standards, working within limited timeframes	"I have learnt about... the ethics of writing as a group such as authorship considerations and contribution to the writing." (DS2)
Conceptual elements – e.g., constructing cohesive arguments, writing fluency, rigour	"achieving fluency in trying to tell a 'good story'" (DS1)
Collaborative Writing Processes	"...learning how to write collaboratively, which is a valuable experience..." (DS3)
Giving and Receiving Feedback	"... I have learnt about how to receive feedback and what it is like to get 'reviews' and respond to others suggestions." (DS2)

The RWG heightened students' awareness of the issues involved in authoring and editing and provided opportunities for role reversal. Through face-to-face interaction, the RWG provides the advantage of the supervisor 'thinking aloud' about writing. Within the RWG, the students also have opportunities and indeed responsibility for editing the writing that is co-produced. During this process, the students developed a shared vocabulary for conceptual and technical issues. Additionally, they appeared to understand the complementary roles of authoring and editing in the production of quality writing. (S)

3. Benefits of the Research Writing Group

Students' responses revealed a shared belief that "the benefits of participating in the RWG have been immense" (DS2). While the narrative data largely focused on development of academic writing skills, social and personal advantages were also commonly reported. The range of benefits can be grouped in five themes, specifically improved writing quality, collaborative writing opportunities, peer support, confidence, and motivation (Table 5).

Table 5
Benefits of the Research Writing Group

Theme	Sample excerpt
Improved Writing Quality – e.g., increasing knowledge and application of technical, non-technical, and conceptual elements of writing, and improved ability to give constructive feedback	"I have learnt and put into practice many writing strategies and these have begun to be 'second nature' during writing." (DS2)
Shared Writing Experiences – e.g., writing a joint paper, sharing individual writing samples and receiving feedback, public writing for (and with) a large group academics	"Getting the 'right' kind of feedback from a skilled writer as a role model and being able to share one's insecurities and various attempts at writing amongst a trusted group of colleagues." (DS1)
Peer Support – e.g., emotional support, mutual trust and respect, a doctoral peer group	"...the support that RWG student participants receive as they share the long and difficult doctoral journey." (DS4)
Confidence	"Now I can break the fear of getting started in writing." (DS5)
Motivation	"It has been motivating to work with and learn from such a diverse and capable group of people." (DS3)

Of note is the benefit of the RWG as a forum for writing as a shared activity in which peer feedback played a key role, and the impact of the RWG on confidence and motivation. Thus, the group provided a sharp contrast to the isolation of solitary writing and capitalised on social learning. The main benefit of the writing group was an obvious improvement in the quality of doctoral students' scholarly writing in their individual work. Thus, students were able to maintain the higher quality writing that was produced in the group situation when they produced individual writing. (S)

4. Disadvantages and Challenges of Participation
The same two themes of time and individual differences were identified from the questions about disadvantages and challenges associated with RWG participation. Thus, they are presented here together (Table 6). Most notably, participants indicated that the time that RWG participation takes away from working on the thesis is a problem. Adhering to specific meeting times was also a problem for some members. Individual differences also present some challenges, for example, individual differences among research topics, points in the doctoral journey, time commitments, abilities, and confidence levels. Although this presents a range of difficulties, as one participant noted, it can also be motivating, challenging individuals to strive to "achieve [a] higher level of writing" (DS5). However, two participants (DS3, DS4) explicitly commented that the disadvantages of participating in the RWG were outweighed by the benefits.

Table 6
Disadvantages and Challenges of Participation

Theme	Sample excerpt
Time – e.g., time taken away from personal research and writing, finding time within our busy lives and balancing study/work/life commitments	"The time that participation in the RWG takes away from working on your thesis is really the only disadvantage." (DS4) "Sometimes it is difficult to have done the reading or reflection when there are other work or study commitments." (DS2)
Individual Differences – e.g., differences in commitment, abilities and needs	"Sometimes, I get discouraged when I compare my level of writing with those of my group members." (DS5) "The specific needs of quieter individuals may not always be addressed, unless they are prepared to be assertive." (DS1)

The issue of time is problematic but I concur with the participants who stated that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. The time spent in the RWG or on associated activities is a very small proportion of the time that doctoral students spend on writing. Hence, a more appropriate way to think about it is time in terms of a 'time benefit' analysis, that is how much has been learned in a set time. For example, some doctoral students rapidly learnt about 'logical flow' in the RWG despite repeatedly receiving this individual feedback over many months.

The issue of individual differences in writing capability was one of my initial concerns when we commenced the group. In a traditional one-to-one supervisory relationship the student is always the less capable writer. However, in the RWG more capable students acted as role models for other students which enhanced their confidence and motivation. (S)

DISCUSSION

The five doctoral students' and their supervisor's reflections on the RWG revealed that it performs a unique function as a rich learning experience for writing. This is mainly due to the shared dialogue about writing, group immersion in authentic writing activities, and a commitment by all members of the group towards improving the level of scholarly writing of all members. Key findings of this investigation relate to the value in the use of our particular RWG model to assist members to become more scholarly writers.

The results of this investigation revealed the effectiveness and value of the RWG. To discuss the connections between the study's results, the MDL and our model, we will address three key points. First, members have gained a greater awareness of their specific writing concerns and difficulties, and have been able to discuss and address them. For example, through direct instruction from the supervisor in group sessions, reading published articles and books on scholarly writing as a group, and reviewing each other's work in groups and through email, we gained awareness about the need for more breadth and depth in our understandings. This means that by adding to our repertoire of technical and conceptual writing elements, we expanded our *domain* and *topic knowledge*, which is a key component of the MDL (Alexander, 2003, 2004). Second, improvement in relation to our learnings about writing processes and strategies was initially prompted by group session instruction, joint writing, reviews of peers' writing, and readings from articles and books. This was enhanced by

our narrative interactions, particularly through various dialogues in group sessions, and then through application to our individual writing. For instance, by reviewing and discussing individual and joint writing, we learned how to identify and articulate effective writing strategies. Thus, we have added more frequent and natural application of *deep-level processing strategies* (e.g., conceptual threads throughout arguments, authoritative and critical writing) to our repertoire of MDL (Alexander, 2003, 2004) *surface-level strategies* (e.g., sentence structure, APA conventions). Third, the main message from the data was that the advantages far outweighed any disadvantages or challenges. The significant benefits were a result of the complementary nature of the RWG model's three elements (group sessions, the email group, individual writing), which worked collectively to improve our writing using a range of learning styles. For example, the model maintained and increased the interest of members through its shared context and relationships of mutual trust. Through the group activities and narrative exchanges, the model extends on what a person could expect to achieve individually. We were first motivated by what the MDL (Alexander, 2003, 2004) terms as *situational interest* of the group tasks (and to some extent still are). However, we are also now highly motivated by *individual interest* (Alexander, 2003, 2004) in becoming more proficient writers. The findings of this study extend on the literature by presenting an effective, empirically-based research writing group model with a specific structure, which has developed and improved considerably over its one-year life to date. It also establishes the forms of narrative that optimise the benefits of our RWG.

The RWG was unique in that it exposed members to the continuum of less to more scholarly writing from novice to expert. Alexander's (1997, 2003, 2004) stages of domain learning proved to be critical junctures along this continuum. At the acclimation stage, group members had developed the language for dialogue about writing and awareness of some of the key issues. Whereas, at the competence stage, they had developed the ability to improve their own and others' writing, for example, by detecting various types of errors or issues that weakened the writing. What is notable about these two stages however is that the developing writing expertise was 'single-strand'. That is, discussions could be had about the importance of advanced organisers or the appropriate use of numbering in text and students could then check their writing for these particular issues and address them as necessary – but one writing issue was dealt with at a time. However, as we noted in our reflections, writing is 'multi-strand'. For example, there are the basics of English language competence, the technical issues of style, and the scholarly issues of argumentation and citing evidence. Thus, a competent writer can attend to each of these strands with some deliberateness, perhaps almost as a mental checklist. The final stage of expertise, being a proficient writer, involves the ability to simultaneously attend to these strands of writing and over time for this to become 'second nature'. At this stage, the writer's cognitive resources are freed up for attention to the topic at hand, be it the crafting of a complex topic or the creation of an eloquent argument. Our progression as an RWG has seen clear evidence of acclimation and competence and, excitingly, glimpses of proficiency!

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

A major constraint to successful production of a doctoral dissertation is *being a novice scholarly writer.* Overall, the value and effectiveness of the RWG lies in its potential to improve students' writing knowledge, strategic processing, and address individual interests. By complementing existing supervision processes and other research training processes, it can contribute to a more successful doctoral experience through the development of capable scholarly writers.

The RWG model could be applicable to various university contexts, even when faced with challenges such as time and individual student differences. Although our group has a shared supervisor, this is not necessarily a requirement. However, the group facilitator should be

experienced and proficient in the domain (writing), have the relevant knowledge, processing strategies and motivational characteristics, and be able to provide a range of explorative opportunities that are personally interesting and stimulating for students (Alexander, 1997). It may be that these criteria can be met by one person (as in our case), or by a "community of experts" (Alexander, 1997, p. 238). In addition to the qualities of the expert supervisor, another important element is for students to develop a supportive climate. Our group developed a trusting, confidential and respectful forum where we engaged in creative, collaborative process of "writing to learn" and "learning to write" (Diezmann, 2005, p. 443).

The doctoral journey offers many opportunities for academic and personal development, but as one group member (DS2) captured succinctly in her reflections, "I don't think this growth would have come as quickly without the RWG." Members of our doctoral group certainly would not claim to be writing experts yet, but the RWG is helping us to work towards this goal!

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