

Writing Groups as Developmental Networks: Fostering Doctoral Student Wellbeing and Identity

Ritter Rickels, K., & Tosolt, B.

OneGoal, University of New Mexico

This article examines how virtual writing groups can function as liberatory spaces that promote mutual accountability, a sense of chosen family, and identity development among doctoral students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Grounded in communities of practice theory and the concept of fictive kinship, we conceptualize writing groups as relational ecosystems that transcend conventional mentoring. Utilizing qualitative focus group methodology, we conducted in-depth narrative analyses with nine women doctoral students participating in a weekly virtual writing accountability group. Our guiding research question asks: How do participants in a voluntary virtual writing group understand its impact on their identity development and scholarly wellbeing? Findings reveal that participants initially joined the group for structure and productivity but remained due to the relational trust, accountability, and affirmation they experienced. Over time, the group evolved into a space of chosen family, offering emotional safety, co-constructed leadership, and freedom to “take off the cape” of performance often required in traditional academic environments. This study contributes to the literature on doctoral student success by highlighting how non-institutional support structures can serve as deeply generative spaces for academic identity formation, particularly for women and students of color. We discuss implications for designing doctoral programming that balances required structures with voluntary, affinity-based communities that center relational belonging, trust, and purpose.

Keywords: Doctoral students, fictive kinship, educational leadership, community of practice, identity development

Introduction

When a student elects to enter a doctoral program, that student is choosing to devote resources such as time, energy, and finances to that endeavor; while this is true for any student, it is particularly true for working professionals who are diverting resources from their already-busy lives. We (the authors) argue the student is not the only party making a decision about allocating resources: a doctoral program is also choosing to devote resources to that student in order to facilitate their success. This bidirectional understanding of commitment as being between a student and a program aligns with calls for institutions to become student-ready (McNair et al., 2016). However, literature is replete with statistics documenting that the majority of doctoral students who complete their coursework exit their programs without completing their dissertations. While there are varied reasons for doctoral student non-completion, scholarly writing can be a barrier to doctoral student completion (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014).

This trend is exacerbated for doctoral students from minoritized populations (Xu, 2014). Doctoral program traditions are grounded in the expectation

of a White male, partnered doctoral student population (Offerman, 2011). As doctoral programs enroll increasingly diverse student populations (American Council on Education, 2023), we argue that they must intentionally expand their approaches to supporting doctoral students. Creating the support structures a diverse doctoral student population needs in order to establish and maintain high levels of doctoral student success is necessary if we are to minimize the gap between the “symbolic commitment of institutions and a lived reality” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 90).

Rooted in these realities, we are interested in supporting doctoral degree completion, particularly among learners with marginalized identities. We concur with Ahmed (2017) who writes that “[i]ntersectionality is a starting point, the point from which we must proceed if we are to offer an account of how power works” (p. 5). The purpose of this paper is to describe an emergent writing group in an EdD in Educational Leadership program, but not to prescribe a best practice that others should adopt wholesale (Ahmed, 2017).

Through the findings of a focus group, the paper discusses the insights shared by doctoral students that support the argument for the expansion of the model toward the efforts of student success.

Literature Review

Writing groups have been suggested as a potential approach to assist doctoral students in navigating the cognitive, affective, and social challenges identified in becoming a scholarly writer (Forster, 2020), challenges that strengthen through interaction (Vacek et al., 2021) to create more significant barriers particularly for working professionals and those who hold marginalized identities (Hwang et al., 2015). We echo Aitchison and Guerin's definition of writing groups, understanding them as "situations where more than two people come together to work on their writing in a sustained way, over repeated gatherings, for doing, discussing or sharing their writing for agreed purposes" (2014, p. 7). Writing groups can be understood as distinct from other writing supports, such as writing retreats and writing courses, in that they are sustained rather than episodic, invitational rather than mandated, and formative rather than summative. Writing groups may vary in a number of characteristics, including purpose (accountability versus feedback, for example), leadership (such as without a leader, peer-led, expert-led), and format (including considerations such as in-person or online; frequency, and duration of meetings) (Haas, 2014).

Doctoral students are positively impacted by engagement in writing groups in many ways. Participation in writing groups socializes members into the norms of writing, building in novice writers an understanding of writing as iterative and processual rather than pristine and final (e.g., Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Forster, 2020). Not only do writing groups assist writers in growing their writing skills, but they also develop writers' senses of themselves as writers; that is, self-identity as a writer is also developed (e.g., Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Danvers et al., 2019; Duffy-Jones & Gibson, 2022). Engagement in a writing group culminates in a sense of belonging (e.g., Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Danvers et al., 2019) and even asserting a right to belong in the community of scholars (Godbee & Novotny, 2014), a clear sign that writing groups develop scholarly identity (e.g., Duffy-Jones & Gibson, 2022; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

We position writing groups within the broader terrain of communities of practice (CoPs), "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Newcomers bring emergent practice and personal experience to a CoP which results in the interplay of growth for all members' identities (Wenger, 2000). One application of communities of practice is the writing group; another is the Leader-Scholar Community (LSC).

Traditionally, doctoral students complete

dissertations either through an intensive 1:1 relationship with a chair or mentor or as part of a research team or laboratory. Our program supported dissertations from conceptualization through completion through the LSC (Olson & Clark, 2009). Together, four to six students and two faculty met monthly for two years and engage in a variety of actions, including direct instruction, honing research questions and approaches, and responding to submitted writing. In addition, the two faculty became the chair and second members of each of the four to six students' dissertation committees.

Similarly to writing groups, the LSC is intended to support cognitive, emotional, and social needs and to socialize students into "understandings and dispositions that support teaching and learning about how to conduct applied research and study their practices in local schools, organizations, and communities" (Olson & Clark, 2009, p. 217). However, the two LSC participation is compulsory and while students share details about their intended dissertations to help program faculty form LSCs, students have little choice over which faculty and other students they work with in their LSC. While the LSC can be a tremendously powerful support mechanism, to support other needs such as the development of a regular writing practice, the second author developed writing groups outside the LSC structure.

The focus of this article is on a weekly writing group; this writing group is primarily an accountability writing group and it operates virtually, both of which are features that differentiate it from the literature which tend to describe writing groups that meet in-person and engage the feedback and writing practice instruction (e.g., Aitchison & Guerin, 2014). Similarly to writing groups described in the literature, our writing group consists entirely of people who identify as women (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014). The writing groups described in the literature are either monoracial (e.g., Godbee & Novotny, 2014) or silent on racial descriptors (e.g., Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Danvers et al., 2019; Vacek et al., 2021), which typically implies the presence of majority racial identities (Mazzei, 2008). Unlike these groups, our group is comprised of roughly equal populations of Black and White women and proceeds from the assumption of an intersectional framework (Ahmed, 2017).

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a focus group methodology informed by narrative inquiry to explore how members of a voluntary virtual writing group understood its impact on their identity development, sense of belonging, and scholarly wellbeing. Narrative inquiry was chosen for its capacity to center personal stories, identity shifts, and relational meaning-making in community

contexts. Our guiding research question asks: How do participants in a voluntary virtual writing group understand its impact on their identity development and scholarly wellbeing?

Aligned with this core question, we wanted to understand if and how these descriptions intersect with the concept of fictive kin (Ibsen & Klobus, 1972). Fictive kin is a voluntary relationship without blood lineage, in which mutual familial regard and respect for one another is held, often borne out of a shared affinity and purpose (Ibsen & Klobus, 1972; Taylor et al., 2022). It is a concept common in Black, African-American, and other communities of Color and rarely leveraged by White-identifying people (Nelson, 2014).

Participants and Data Collection

Nine women—four White women and five Black women—who regularly and actively engage in the writing group were invited to participate in a focus group conversation. Five participants—four White women and one Black woman—chose to participate. Each participant had a unique entry point into the group and varied in tenure. One participant served as a faculty member and original convener of the writing group, and all participants regularly attended and contributed to the writing group, which met weekly via Zoom. Data collection was conducted using a semi-structured protocol that invited participants to reflect on:

- their initial motivations for joining the group;
- experiences of accountability, support, and identity development;
- perceptions of relational dynamics and trust within the group;
- and the emotional, academic, and professional role the group had played in their scholarly journey.

As a part of the protocol, each participant created and shared a visual or artistic artifact that represented their experience in the writing group. These artifacts served as catalysts for deeper storytelling and reflective dialogue. The focus group was conducted in person, recorded with consent, and was initially transcribed via Otter.AI with a section transcription spot check by the authors. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant confidentiality and anonymize individuals referenced in the transcript.

Research Positionality

The researchers also participated in the writing group and held dual roles as both facilitators and peers during the focus group. We approached this research from a researcher-participant standpoint, consistent with traditions of participatory and relational qualitative inquiry. This proximity enabled rich contextual insight and reflexivity. We engaged in continuous reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and collective dialogue to name our assumptions and remain attentive to power dynamics.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations:

Sample size and composition: Although nine individuals were invited, only five participated in the focus group. The racial composition—four White women and one Black woman—does not reflect the group's broader diversity. As a result, the findings may underrepresent certain perspectives, particularly those of the Black women in the group.

Researcher bias and dual roles: The dual role of the researchers as facilitators and participants may have influenced both the conduct of the focus group and the interpretation of data. While steps were taken to address this—including reflexive practice and member checking—this closeness may still shape findings in unseen ways.

Results

Through a priori coding, an emergent theme became clear: the interaction between the required LSC structure of the doctoral program and the opt-in nature of the writing group. If considered through the concept of fictive kin, we attribute the idea of family of origin to the LSC structure and chosen family to the writing group. We hypothesize that for some students, their LSC meets their needs fully, and as such, they do not desire or require other supportive family-like structures. For the focus group participants, the writing group provides an additional family structure, a family of choice, which presents an opportunity to seek what is wanted and needed beyond what family of origin offers. While focus group participants noted their motivation for joining the group was originally to meet a functional need, their continued engagement in the writing group shifted individual motivations toward a sustained collective. As one participant noted while the others nodded in agreement, "I've gotta show up for my people".

These findings are reflected in the two frames of bidirectional relational engagement between the researchers: one of mentorship and another of friendship. The functional start of our relationship was one of function and hierarchy – faculty member and doctoral student. However, our relationship has evolved to be inclusive of various roles and engagements, perhaps atypical of the expected relationship between faculty member and graduate student but very much in keeping with Ahmed's (2017) call to "create relationships with others that are more equal" (p. 1). For example, we are now friends and collaborators in academic and non-academic endeavors. While we each tend toward a desire for achievement individually, our mutual accountability is enhanced because of the power of the relationship. The depth of our relationship – one akin to a chosen family bond – mirrors the transparency, support, and solidarity (when the need arises) the writing group created for participants.

Discussion

We contrast the institutional model of LSCs with the organic structure of the writing group. While

LSCs mirror family of origin dynamics—predefined roles, fixed expectations, and limited voice—the writing group functioned as chosen family—fluid, affirming, and responsive to member needs. Table 1

Table 1
Comparison of Doctoral Support Structures

Dimension	Leader-Scholar Community (LSCs)	Writing Group
Structure	Institutional, required, top-down	Voluntary, organic, peer-led
Goals	Academic progression, institutional metrics	Emotional safety, identity development
Membership	Assigned, cohort-based	Affinity-based, opt-in
Power Dynamics	Faculty-facilitated, hierarchical	Co-constructed leadership
Accountability	Compliance-driven	Trust-based, mutual
Emotional Environment	Variable	Intentionally safe, affirming
Metaphor	Family of origin	Chosen family

underscores the emotional, social, and structural differences between the institutional and optional communities.

The findings of the focus group and our own relationship demonstrate the same parallel structure: a movement away from structural functionalism and instead toward genuine community. Creating, sustaining, and interacting within this collapsed hierarchical space (Ahmed, 2017) affords members to break the boundaries of relational and power norms to both give and receive in community. One participant noted, “there’s not many spaces where I can just receive... I exhaust myself in the world the rest of the time except [writing group]”.

Further, while there are members of the writing group who rarely miss a single week, there are members of the writing group whose participation is more episodic or cyclical. The writing group is the people who convene at a given session; it expands and contracts organically and is always itself, regardless of who is participating at that moment. The relationships expand and iterate among individuals, the collective, and their broader placements in the world. As one participant posited, writing group “keep[s] me accountable week over week, but the relationships keep me coming back”.

Across age, race, professional background, and more, a chosen family is formed with loosely structured roles with the goal of supporting one

another in scholarship and doctoral completion. Within the structures, those with marginalized identities take on leadership roles. One participant reflected, “I feel like Black women are leading the way [in this group]”. For doctoral students who hold marginalized identities, this is where the transformative power of writing groups lives. Through the development of the community – or the scholarly fictive kin – one can show up fully to be supported and to support others in their individual and collective success. We would be remiss if we left the reader with the impression that it is only the students who gain from having scholarly fictive kin; faculty who facilitate and hold membership in such groups are afforded the expansion of their own networks of collegial support. The benefits are bidirectional across power structures and dynamics.

Conclusion

We argue that when a doctoral program offers admission and a doctoral student accepts it, both the doctoral program and the student are bound in a mutually-accountable relationship. Prior to degree completion, a doctoral student may choose to exit a program or a program may choose to exit a doctoral student. We argue that such decisions should be made only after a program provides and a student meaningfully engages in a variety

of supports designed to meet the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of doctoral students. Just as institutions have dropped barriers to minoritized students' admission, they also need to build differentiated support structures to fulfill their portion of the institution-student relationship (Ahmed, 2017).

Our analysis suggests that the compulsory nature of LSCs is misaligned to the intention of communities of practice (CoPs) whereas invitational writing group structures more fully align to the conditions needed for a high-impact CoP. We do not necessarily suggest that writing groups replace LSCs; instead, we argue that a layering of student support structures furthers how doctoral programs may support doctoral student completion. Moreover, we name that LSCs and writing groups are only two of the possible options to support students' needs. By offering choice in the supportive structures available, the opt-in nature of writing groups creates the space for doctoral students to develop a family of choice, their own fictive kin (Ibsen & Klobus, 1972).

We offer that invitational writing group structures are one such support that is supported by a strong theoretical grounding and a robust literature (e.g., Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Danvers et al., 2019; Dufty-Jones & Gibson, 2022; Godbee & Novotny, 2014; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019; Vacek et al., 2021). However, we would violate the spirit of the writing group were we to prescribe a particular format for others to take in forming and sustaining their own writing groups. Thus, rather than offering generalizable or even transferable practices, we offer as a framework "asking ethical questions about... how to create relationships with others that are more equal; how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 1).

As we reflect on our own experiences creating and sustaining a regular writing accountability group, we recognize that a small group of people who are able to devote the time and energy to one another can make a meaningful difference in supporting scholarly identity development and doctoral student success. As our participants helped make clear, writing group communities have the power to be transformational through the accountability, relationships, and support that they entail. By creating a space with low barriers to entry, the writing group functions as an access point (Ahmed, 2017) to the norms and identity of scholarly writing. The writing community creates a space where one can "take off [their] cape".

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Aitchison, C., & Guerin, C. (2014). Writing groups, pedagogy, theory and practice: An introduction. In C. Aitchison & C. Guerin (Eds.),
- Writing groups for doctoral education and beyond: Innovations in practice and theory* (pp. 3-15). Routledge.
- American Council on Education. (2023). Race and ethnicity of U.S. graduate students. *Enrollment in Graduate Education*. <https://www.equityinhighered.org/indicators/enrollment-in-graduate-education/race-and-ethnicity-of-u-s-graduate-students/>
- Cahusac de Caux, B. K. C. D., Lam, C. K. C., Lau, R., Hoang, C. H., & Pretorius, L. (2017). Reflection for learning in doctoral training: Writing groups, academic writing proficiency and reflective practice. *Reflective Practice*, 18(4), 463-473. doi: 10.1080/14623943.2017.1307725
- Danvers, E., Hinton-Smith, T., & Webb, R. (2019). Power, pedagogy and the personal: Feminist ethics in facilitating a doctoral writing group. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 24(1), 32-46. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2018.1456423
- Dufty-Jones, R., & Gibson, C. (2022). Making space to write 'care-fully': Engaged responses to the institutional politics of research writing. *Progress in Human Geography*, 46(2), 339-358. doi: 10.1177/03091325211020807
- Forster, E. (2020). Power and paragraphs: Academic writing and emotion. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 19.
- Godbee, B., & Novotny, J. C. (2014). Asserting the right to belong: Feminist co-mentoring among graduate student women. *Feminist Teacher*, 23(3), 177-195. doi: 10.5406/femteacher.23.3.0177
- Haas, S. (2014). Pick-n-mix: A typology of writers' groups in use. In C. Aitchison & C. Guerin (Eds.), *Writing groups for doctoral education and beyond: Innovations in practice and theory* (pp. 30-47). Routledge.
- Hwang, E., Smith, R. N., Byers, V. T., Dickerson, S., McAlister-Shields, L., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Bengé, C. (2015). Doctoral students' perceived barriers that slow the progress toward completing a doctoral dissertation: A mixed analysis. *Journal of Educational Issues*, 1(1), 165-190. doi: 10.5296/jei.v1i1
- Ibsen, C. A., & Klobus, P. (1972). Fictive kin term use and social relationships: Alternative interpretations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 34(4), 615-620. doi: 10.2307/350312
- Inouye, K., & McAlpine, L. (2019). Developing academic identity: A review of the literature on doctoral writing and feedback. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 14, 1-31. doi: 10.28945/4168
- Mazzei, L. A. (2008). Silence speaks: Whiteness revealed in the absence of voice. *Teaching*

- and *Teacher Education*, 24(5), 1125-1136. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2007.02.009
- McNair, T. B., Albertine, S., Cooper, M. A., McDonald, N., & Major, T., Jr. (2016). *Becoming a student-ready campus: A new culture of leadership for student success*. Jossey-Bass.
- Nelson, M. K. (2014). Whither fictive kin? Or, what's in a name? *Journal of Family Issues*, 35(2), 201-222. doi: 10.1177/0192513X12470621
- Offerman, M. (2011). Profile of the nontraditional doctoral degree student. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 129, 21-30. doi: 10.1002/ace.397
- Olson, K., & Clark, C. M. (2009). A signature pedagogy in doctoral education: The Leader-Scholar Community. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 216-221. www.https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X09334207
- Taylor, R., Chatters, L., Cross, C. J., & Mouzon, D. (2022). Fictive kin networks among African Americans, Black Caribbeans, and Non-Latino Whites. *Journal of Family Issues*, 43(1), 20-46. www.https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X21993188
- Vacek, K., Donohoe, W. J., Gates, A., Lee, A. S., & Simpson, S. (2021). Seeking balance within personal writing ecologies: A collaborative autoethnography of a doctoral student writing group. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 43(1), 104-118. www.https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2019.1703670
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization*, 7(2), 225-246.
- Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015, June). Introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of the concept and its uses. <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>
- Xu, Y. J. (2014). Advance to and persistence in graduate school: Identifying the influential factors and major-based differences. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 16(3), 391-417. www.https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.16.3.e