



**PASTORAL CARE IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION:
A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF BELONGING
AND ACADEMIC IDENTITY**

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose It is increasingly recognized that doctoral education programs should better support doctoral students. In particular, it has been noted that students experience significant isolation during their PhD, which negatively affects their educational experiences and their personal wellbeing. Doctoral writing groups are collaborative learning communities that have in recent years received increasing attention to address this issue. This collaborative autoethnography explores the affective benefits (i.e., benefits associated with emotions and feelings) of these doctoral writing groups, particularly focused on the pastorally supportive nature of these learning communities.

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Background	Writing groups have been shown to promote academic writing skills and build reflective practice, personal epistemology, and academic identity. We have found that a much more significant benefit of our writing groups has been the pastoral care we have experienced, particularly in relation to the turbulent emotions often associated with academic writing. This should, perhaps, not be surprising since it is clear that academic writing is a form of identity work. There is, therefore, a clear need to better support doctoral students, particularly with regard to the more affective components of academic writing. This prompted us to write this collaborative autoethnography to showcase what we consider to be the primary role of doctoral writing groups: pastoral care.
Methodology	We employ a collaborative autoethnographic methodology to integrate our personal reflections into the existing literature in the field.
Contribution	We argue that doctoral writing groups are vehicles of pastoral care as they promote wellbeing, foster resilience, provide academic care, and build social capital.
Findings	We demonstrate that doctoral writing groups foster students' sense of belonging through self-reflection and the sharing of experiences in a safe space, which builds perceived self-efficacy and self-awareness. Furthermore, through the self-reflection and discussion that is inherent in doctoral writing groups, students also develop a better understanding of themselves and their place within the academy.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Our research highlights that writing groups may be designed to teach academic communication skills, but they provide an affective benefit that cannot yet be quantified and which should not be underestimated. Incorporating writing groups into doctoral education programs can, therefore, have a positive influence on the educational experiences of PhD students and improve their overall wellbeing. This paper concludes by providing practical suggestions to help practitioners implement writing groups into doctoral education programs, particularly focused on how these groups can be made more pastorally supportive.
Recommendations for Researchers	This paper also extends the theoretical understanding of pastoral care by providing a framework for pastoral care within the doctoral writing group environment. We show how pastoral care can be conceptualized as the promotion of self-awareness, self-efficacy, reflection, and empowerment of doctoral students through nurturing communities where all members are valued, encouraged, guided, and supported. Our experiences, which we have integrated throughout this paper, also highlight the importance of relationship-building within the educational community, particularly when these relationships are characterized by mutual respect and shared responsibility.
Impact on Society	The poor well-being of doctoral students has now been well-established across the world, but strategies to improve the academic environment for these students are still lacking. This paper provides evidence that implementing writing groups as a strategy to embed pastoral care in a doctoral education environment helps doctoral students flourish. Ultimately, this can lead to an improved academic research culture into the future.
Future Research	Future research should explore other methods of better integrating pastoral care interventions into doctoral education programs in order to reduce isolation and promote student wellbeing.
Keywords	doctoral education, writing groups, pastoral care, belonging, academic identity, autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing recognition of the need to better support the wellbeing of doctoral students. Indeed, recent research highlights that the doctoral education landscape is bleak, with a significant incidence of psychological distress (Anttila et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Levecque et al., 2017; Woolston, 2017). Studies show that high workloads, increased pressures to publish and compete for research funding, as well as career and financial insecurity contribute to a toxic doctoral training environment (Kulikowski et al., 2019; Lau & Pretorius, 2019). This is further compounded by a lack of support systems, poor work-life balance, and feelings of isolation (Kulikowski et al., 2019; Lau & Pretorius, 2019). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the lack of wellbeing in doctoral cohorts. A recent survey of more than 5,900 students showed that three-quarters of respondents had poor mental wellbeing and four out of five experienced some form of mental distress (Byrom, 2020). This highlights the need for improved pastoral care of doctoral student cohorts. In the context of this paper, we consider pastoral care to be ensuring that doctoral students are valued, encouraged, guided, and supported by promoting self-awareness, self-efficacy, reflection, and empowerment throughout their studies. We discuss our rationale for this definition of pastoral care in detail in the theoretical framework section of this paper.

Doctoral education programs are traditionally isolated, with students often lacking significant connection with peers outside of their immediate research group or supervisory team (see, e.g., Anttila et al., 2015; Beasy et al., 2020; Doody et al., 2017; Stylianou et al., 2017). One of the most important influences on a student's educational experience is that of the student-supervisor relationship (Cornér et al., 2018; Helfer & Drew, 2019; Stylianou et al., 2017; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). The impact of the supervisor should, therefore, not be underestimated. However, research highlights the importance of receiving support from a variety of sources, including peers, other academic staff, and professional networks (Cornér et al., 2017; Cornér et al., 2018; Fry & Schell, 2019; Kulikowski et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2020; Stylianou et al., 2017; Vekkaila et al., 2014; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Research also suggests that participation in a community increases degree completion (Cornér et al., 2018; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Notably, less social connection is associated with poorer mental wellbeing among doctoral students (Byrom, 2020), while a sense of friendship and collegiality is among the most important factors for PhD student satisfaction (Kulikowski et al., 2019; Owens et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of incorporating learning communities into doctoral education programs.

Increasingly, doctoral writing groups are included in educational environments as a way to incorporate collaborative learning. These groups are usually created to support doctoral students' scholarly writing development. Research shows that writing groups contribute significantly to improved learning outcomes for students, particularly in terms of improved academic writing skills (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017). Writing group participants report that they have reduced anxiety associated with academic writing, that their confidence has improved, that they are able to write more effectively, and that they feel they can provide more critical and constructive feedback (Aitchison, 2009; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Doody et al., 2017; Ferguson, 2009; Lam et al., 2019; Lassig et al., 2009; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011; Maher et al., 2008; Spies et al., 2021). Students write quantitatively more when they are part of a writing group and the quality of their writing improves through participation (see, e.g., Chakma et al., 2021). Additionally, research also demonstrates that doctoral writing groups foster participants' reflective practice skills, personal epistemology (i.e., their ability to understand their own as well as their peers' ways of thinking, see Hofer & Bendixen, 2012), and academic identity (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakma et al., 2021; Lam et al., 2019; Lee & Boud, 2003).

The authors of this manuscript are members of two writing groups at Monash University. These groups were indeed set up to further develop our academic writing skills. Through our experiences, however, we have found that a much more significant benefit of our groups has been the pastoral care we have experienced, particularly in relation to the turbulent emotions associated with academic

writing. This should, perhaps, not be surprising since it is clear that academic writing is a form of identity work; doctoral students need to develop their own voice, confidence, and sophistication in their writing as they transform into conveyors of knowledge through their candidature (Clarence, 2020). As noted by Clarence (2020), identity work necessitates emotional investment; at its core, therefore, writing is affective (i.e., it involves feelings and emotions). For example, many PhD students start their academic journey with a sense of confidence, but this confidence often wanes, replaced by feelings of anxiety (Cahusac de Caux, 2019). In particular, doctoral students experience significant anxiety associated with their academic writing (see, e.g., Cameron et al., 2009; Doody et al., 2017; Li, 2014; Spies et al., 2021; Stylianou et al., 2017; Wilson & Cutri, 2019; Wynne et al., 2014). These feelings of anxiety often manifest as a sense of being an academic imposter (see, e.g., Cutri et al., 2021; Doody et al., 2017; Lau, 2019; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). We were interested in further exploring whether doctoral writing groups had a role in addressing these affective components through the provision of pastoral care. Consequently, we initiated a literature review on the affective benefits associated with doctoral writing groups. We were surprised to find that this was something that had not yet been explored effectively in the literature. Even if affective benefits were mentioned in the literature, these were usually noted as unexpected side benefits. This prompted us to write this collaborative autoethnography to showcase what we consider to be the primary role of doctoral writing groups: pastoral care.

Our research highlights that doctoral writing groups are vehicles for pastoral care due to the affective benefits they provide. We show that doctoral writing groups foster a sense of belonging and encourage the development of a PhD student's academic identity. We argue, therefore, that doctoral writing groups promote wellbeing, foster resilience, provide academic care, and build social capital. The rest of this manuscript is divided into the following sections. First, we provide a theoretical framework through which to understand the concept of pastoral care within a doctoral education setting. Second, we discuss our methodological approach, highlighting how we used a collaborative autoethnographic methodology to explore the concept of pastoral care in doctoral writing groups. Third, we provide a narrative literature review of the existing research in the field. Fourth, we present our own reflections and showcase our proposed model of how doctoral writing groups provide pastoral care throughout the student's journey. Finally, we provide key recommendations for other practitioners to help them establish doctoral writing groups in their own settings.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF PASTORAL CARE

Before discussing the pastoral care function of doctoral writing groups, it is necessary to understand what we mean by the term *pastoral care*. This is because there are widely differing definitions of pastoral care in the literature, depending on the authors' epistemological perspective. Initial definitions of pastoral care in Australia relied on the values-driven and morality-focused philosophies of Christianity (Hearn et al., 2006). There are also several definitions of pastoral care that focus on developing students' independence, showing that pastoral and academic care are closely related (Hearn et al., 2006; Nadge, 2005). More recent changes have signaled a change to a more whole-of-institution approach that focuses not only on academic success but also promotes the wellbeing of students through a shared sense of belonging (see, e.g., Allen et al., 2018). In this manuscript, *sense of belonging* is defined as the extent to which doctoral students feel "accepted, respected, included, and supported" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 61) by those in academia, including their peers, supervisors, academic colleagues, and the academic institution more broadly.

We consider effective pastoral care to encompass the following four core components. First, the provision of effective pastoral care promotes health and wellbeing (Hearn et al., 2006). Second, effective pastoral care fosters resilience, leading to improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, problem-solving, and persistence (Hearn et al., 2006; Nadge, 2005). Third, effective pastoral care allows for the provision of academic care (i.e., promoting resilience and wellbeing through academic processes and structures, see Nadge, 2005), which builds self-efficacy and fosters empowerment (Hearn et al., 2006). Fourth,

effective pastoral care builds social capital, thereby encouraging trust, responsibility, and reciprocity (Hearn et al., 2006). These four core components are interlinked and provide a holistic framework to understand how pastoral care can be applied in educational settings (Figure 1).

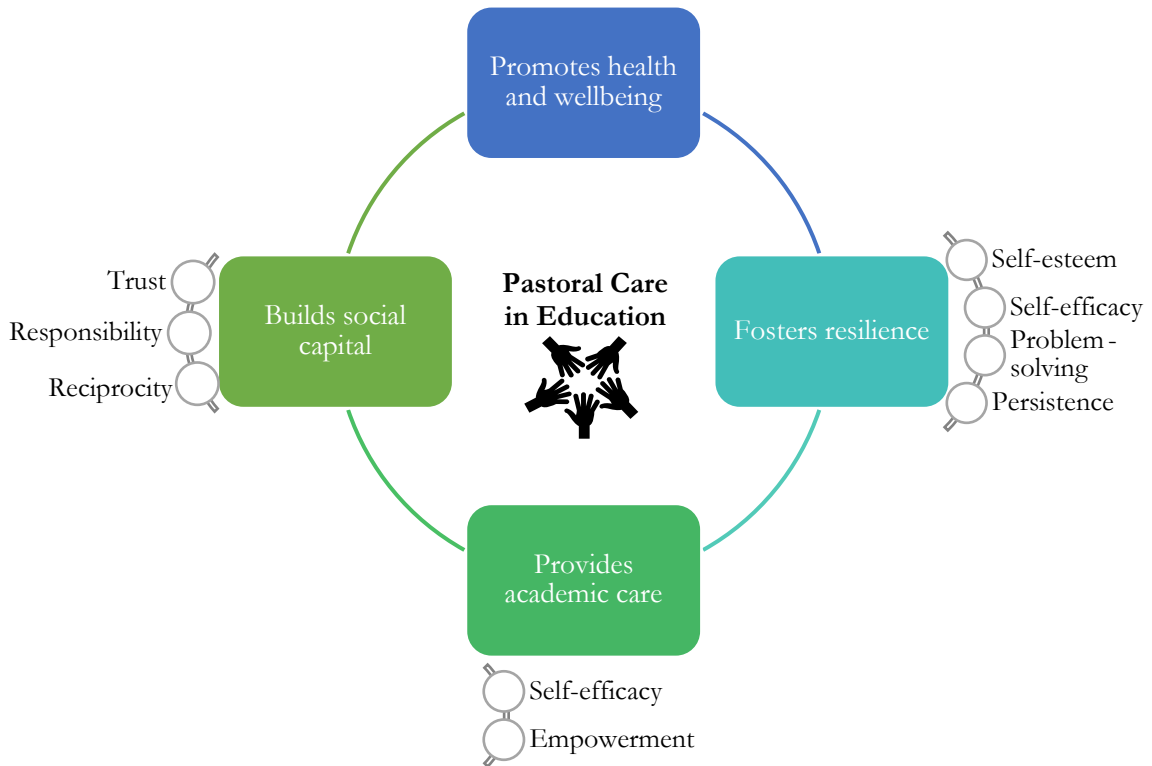


Figure 1. A holistic framework of pastoral care in education

We believe that pastoral care should be an integrated component of doctoral students’ educational experiences. Our conceptualization of pastoral care also highlights the importance of relationship-building within the educational community, particularly when these relationships are characterized by mutual respect and shared responsibility (Grove, 2004). We, therefore, consider pastoral care to be the promotion of self-awareness, self-efficacy, reflection, and empowerment of doctoral students through nurturing communities where all members are valued, encouraged, guided, and supported.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DOCTORAL WRITING GROUPS FOSTER A SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH REFLECTION AND SHARED EXPERIENCE

A review of the literature reveals that self-reflection and sharing of experiences help students develop a sense of belonging. Writing group participants are encouraged to reflect on their own work through the process of giving and receiving feedback (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakma et al., 2021; Doody et al., 2017). Throughout their PhD candidature, students may experience many challenges including a lack of work-life balance, intercultural difficulties, mental illness, financial and familial obligations, as well as academic writing and linguistic challenges (Agustin, 2019; Cahusac de Caux, 2019; Doody et al., 2017; Lai, 2019; Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Moharami, 2019; Muhalem, 2019; Utami, 2019; Zheng et al., 2019). Sharing struggles and difficulties about writing in a doctoral writing group provides PhD students with the opportunity to reach out for help (Doody et al., 2017; Spies et

al., 2021; Stylianou et al., 2017; Wellington, 2010; Wilson & Cutri, 2019; Wynne et al., 2014). Potential solutions to problems can be more easily identified when the issues are discussed reflectively with peers (see, e.g., Dwyer et al., 2012; Klein et al., 2008; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). The mutual sharing of struggles and difficulties within a doctoral writing group may not result in a direct solution, but it does provide the students with a way of acknowledging the affective component of their studies to gain emotional support (see, e.g., Chakma et al., 2021; Doody et al., 2017; Wilson & Cutri, 2019).

The social nature of writing groups provides an open space for peers to share experiences, insecurities, and mutual trust. The writing group provides a safe environment where participants are free to raise issues, seek clarification for their confusions and ask for help without fear (Beasy et al., 2020; Guerin, 2014; Oluwole et al., 2018; Wegener et al., 2016; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). These groups allow for the opportunity to share and celebrate successes while also sharing frustrations and failures in a social environment (Dwyer et al., 2012; Stone et al., 2010). Reports of writing groups highlight the friendship and collegiality that form in these communities (Ness et al., 2014; Rickard et al., 2009; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). In environments where supervisors often have significant power in a student's academic journey (see, e.g., Cotterall, 2011), the writing group also offers a space for students to experience different forms of distributed power (see, e.g., Aitchison, 2014; Chakma et al., 2021). Indeed, sentiments of friendship and collegiality are key factors in the success of a writing group, as it should be a space for honest and open discussion and support (Ness et al., 2014; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). Additionally, Wegener et al. (2016) reported that peers constructed mutuality when referring to their similar struggles and that a sense of trust among group members led to an open discussion of fears and doubts. These spaces of security encourage a sense of safety that helps writing group members by empowering them to learn and grow (Beasy et al., 2020). Stone et al. (2010), for example, note that participation in a writing group builds members' self-efficacy, sense of confidence, and self-belief. Doctoral writing groups, therefore, provide spaces of security for PhD students to share their experiences throughout their candidature (Figure 2).

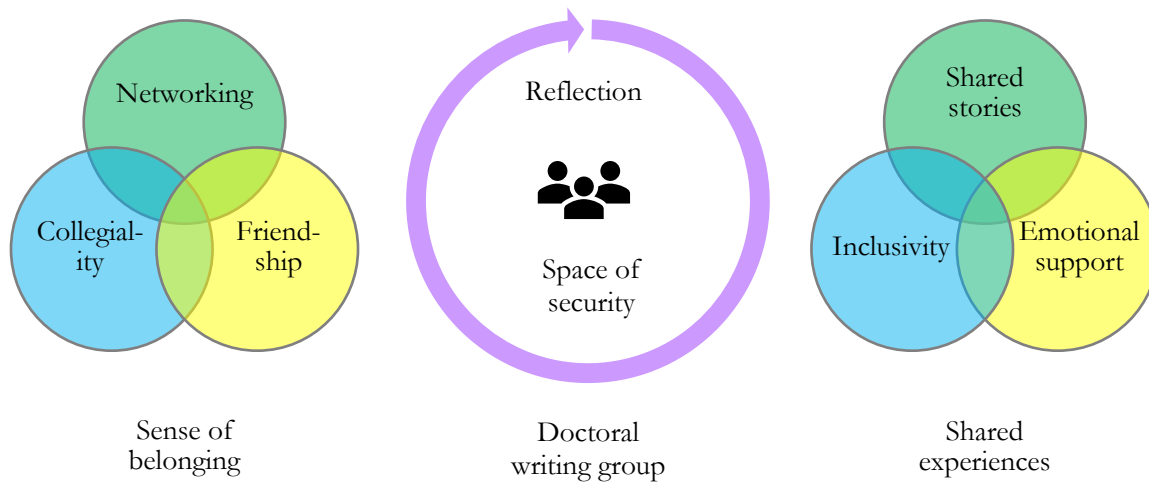


Figure 2. Doctoral writing groups as places of belonging and shared experience

Members of doctoral writing groups tend to learn from each other through the sharing of stories, experiences, struggles, and feelings (see, e.g., Chakma et al., 2021; Doody et al., 2017; Oluwole et al., 2018; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). Through the testimonies of other members of these groups, new doctoral students realize that they are not alone in their struggles. Group members eventually become colleagues who can offer sanctuary, sympathy, support, and words of encouragement rather than judgment (Klein et al., 2008; Li, 2014). In the studies by Wilson and Cutri (2019) and Chakma et al. (2021), for example, writing group participants eventually joined the facilitation team of the

respective groups. This sense of community and support leads to greater academic resilience for writing group members, which motivates them to persist with their scholarly writing (Beasy et al., 2020; Dwyer et al., 2012; Spies et al., 2021). As such, a writing group provides an opportunity for doctoral students to learn from and support each other throughout their studies.

In addition to sharing difficulties and challenges in doctoral writing groups, there is also an opportunity to share ideas and different perspectives among the members (Beasy et al., 2020; Bergen et al., 2020; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Doody et al., 2017; Guerin, 2013; Lam et al., 2019; Stylianou et al., 2017). Despite writing group members working on different projects or being at different stages of their research, they are still able to share similar experiences, such as preparing for milestones or searching for literature. Working with doctoral students from other disciplines or with different topics also means that there is an opportunity to exchange knowledge and understanding beyond students' own immediate research projects (Aitchison, 2014; Beasy et al., 2020; Bergen et al., 2020; Guerin, 2013; Lam et al., 2019). A diversity of perspectives may develop doctoral writing group members' ability to think about how they can contribute to their field of knowledge by linking their ideas and expertise (Aitchison, 2014; Bergen et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2019). Furthermore, a diversity of cultures, nationalities, and genders can help students consider issues from different perspectives and improve understanding of how to communicate best in multicultural contexts (see, e.g., Lam et al., 2019). This is where the facilitator's role in the writing group is crucial; the facilitator needs to ensure that different perspectives are voiced and valued. In this way, doctoral writing groups can foster an environment of inclusivity, privileging the diversity of participants' experiences.

DOCTORAL WRITING GROUPS ENCOURAGE ACADEMIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The literature also makes it clear that doctoral writing groups act as spaces where PhD students can develop their academic identity. This is particularly important given the rapidly changing academic environment. Research communities have diversified and internationalized, bringing about challenging but exciting opportunities to reimagine what academia can be (see, e.g., Guerin, 2013; Smith, 2010; Thesen, 2014). Simultaneously, however, Barnett (2017) describes contemporary universities as turbulent and unstable, swirling in the spaces between the world as it is and the world as it is represented in ideas. What academia should be, could be, and actually is, are three very different concepts; despite rhetoric to the contrary, academia is still a gendered, racialized, and classed space (Clegg, 2008; Smith, 2010; Thesen, 2014). Institutional traditions, expectations, and daily practices can also collide with personal hopes, ideologies, and interests.

In this complex and often-times confusing space, researchers construct their academic identities through their research practice and navigation of the master narratives of academia. Developing an academic identity can, therefore, be chaotic, particularly for diverse academics who carry the burden of reimagining who an academic can be. Academics' frequent use of metaphors when trying to understand and describe their identities illustrates the difficulty of the task (see, e.g., Billot & King, 2015; King, 2013). This is also true for doctoral students, who often story their academic identity formation through their writing using metaphors such as journeys, valleys, or mountains (see, e.g., Macaulay & Davies, 2019; Moharami, 2019; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). For students, the doctoral journey is one of becoming – becoming who they hope to be.

Doctoral students enter the complex world of academia with a diverse range of identities that shape the way they perceive themselves and their place in this society. Lee and Wolff-Michael (2003), for example, describe a student who experienced tensions and contradictions when trying to navigate the multiple identities of a PhD researcher, scientist, author, volunteer, and activist. Successful construction of an academic identity is likely to significantly contribute to a PhD student's sense of belonging within academia. Studies have shown that research communities, in general, can allow students to experience the typical roles of a researcher, which can help students' build their academic identity (Lee & Wolff-Michael, 2003; Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012; Saadi et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2020).

Furthermore, interactions between peers have been shown to foster academic identity development (McAlpine et al., 2009). Given these studies, it stands to reason that writing groups would act as valuable spaces for students to build their academic identities.

Writing groups provide participants with the opportunity to develop their academic identities specifically through their written work. It has been noted that academic identity for doctoral students is fostered through the act of doing research (Hoang & Pretorius, 2019). As previously mentioned, academic writing is a form of identity work; at the doctoral level, academic writing moves beyond the mere conveyance of knowledge on a page to a transformative experience of developing a new identity (Clarence, 2020). Scholarly writing, therefore, can be a space where PhD students develop their academic identity (see, e.g., Moharami, 2019; Muhalim, 2019). Through the sharing of written work and the discussion of constructive feedback in a doctoral writing group, students learn to develop their own academic style (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakma et al., 2021). When students from diverse groups interact and share their knowledge and experiences, they negotiate different perspectives on a topic and contribute to the construction of new knowledge (Aitchison, 2014; Bergen et al., 2020; Chakma et al., 2021; Doody et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2019). This helps doctoral students take greater ownership of their stylistic choices, build their writing confidence, and develop their authorial voice (Aitchison, 2014; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakma et al., 2021; Doody et al., 2017). The sharing of work also helps writing group participants develop a sense of agency, which in turn builds their sense of identity as independent researchers (Chakma et al., 2021; Wilson & Cutri, 2019).

Writing groups are also particularly effective in allowing participants to acquire a better understanding of themselves and others. The writing group environment creates a space where participants evaluate and reflect on their own assumptions and beliefs (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Doody et al., 2017). It has been shown that reflective practice helps students develop a better understanding of themselves and their place within academia (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Pretorius et al., 2019). For example, Lam et al. (2019) demonstrated that collaborative writing in a doctoral writing group setting was effective in fostering students' personal epistemology. Similarly, Chakma et al. (2021) highlight that writing group meetings helped participants "learn about themselves as researchers and writers [as well as] what strengths and weaknesses they held" (p. 50). Writing groups, therefore, encourage PhD students to learn more about themselves and build their academic identity into their writing.

Importantly, writing groups provide abundant opportunities for engagement in the most common practices of the discipline, leading to greater involvement in the academic culture and disciplinary practices. This navigation of the master narratives of the academy allows doctoral students to develop an understanding of the norms, values, and expectations of their chosen discipline (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). This allows students to become socialized into their disciplinary community, as well as academia more broadly (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Weidman, 2010). Doctoral writing groups should, therefore, be considered as spaces for academic identity development where participants build the social competence and capital to succeed within academia.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we employed a collaborative autoethnographic methodology to integrate our personal reflections into the existing literature in the field. Through this method, we have been able to shed light on the practical implications of what has been found in the literature. Furthermore, we used our personal reflections to provide insights and recommendations for practitioners to incorporate pastoral care into doctoral education through learning communities such as writing groups. This research project was approved by Monash University's human research ethics committee.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography has been used as a qualitative research methodology since the 1970s, particularly within the field of anthropology (Douglas & Carless, 2016). Two decades later, the methodology

came to prominence in the humanities and social sciences as researchers began to acknowledge the limitations of using a strictly scientific approach to understand the nuances of people's experiences (Holman Jones et al., 2016a). Researchers started to recognize the value of story-telling, personal lived experiences, and emotions in conducting social research (Douglas & Carless, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2016a; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). Importantly, researchers realized the value of combining the researcher's experiences through reflexivity to gain better insights into complex experiences through the purposeful exploration of personal narratives (Holman Jones et al., 2016a). It is important to note that autoethnography has critics; it is often cited as being either "too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). These detractors claim that autoethnographers are either too self-indulgent or, conversely, use too much theoretical analysis (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman Jones et al., 2016b). What these detractors fail to consider is that by combining the value of both the artistic and scientific orientations, autoethnographers can produce research that is rigorous, theoretical, and analytical while also being emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011).

As a methodology, autoethnography is used to "describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). Consequently, autoethnographers use personal experiences as their data sources; they reflexively interpret these experiences to help illuminate social, cultural, and political features of a particular phenomenon within a specific setting (Douglas & Carless, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). In this paper, we were particularly concerned with the experiences of students within the doctoral education setting. It has been noted that doctoral education can be considered as a unique environment which "cannot be fully explored or written about from an outsider's objective experience. It is complex and multifaceted, incorporating various influences, opinions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences" (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019, p. 30). In this doctoral education space, "the existence of different social and cultural practices, or at times a perceived lack of practices, cultivates an unspoken world in academia – the culture of doctoral training" (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019, p. 31). We also note that these implicit narratives of the academy lead to an often toxic environment where those *in-the-know* are privileged while the rest are excluded. This leads to feelings of frustration, marginalization, and anger (see Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). In order to make our experiences in academia explicit, we therefore decided to apply autoethnography in this manuscript. This allowed us to systematically integrate our personal experiences within our writing groups with the literature, thereby showcasing how pastoral care has occurred in our context. Importantly, we use our reflections to showcase how our experiences have shaped our view that acknowledging the affective domain in academic writing is crucial to improve overall doctoral student wellbeing.

COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

We utilized collaborative autoethnography to effectively incorporate our personal experiences within our understanding of the literature. Collaborative autoethnography includes the same features as traditional autoethnography; both approaches focus on the self, make the researcher visible within the research, remain conscious of the context, and engage in critical dialogue (Chang et al., 2013). The difference between these two approaches, however, lies in the combination of each participant's unique and independent voice to create the "synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation" (p. 24). Our approach has five benefits (see Chang et al., 2013) which we felt were particularly important, given our focus on collaborative learning communities. First, collaborative autoethnography allowed us to collectively explore the necessarily subjective experiences associated with the affective nature of writing. Second, working in a collaborative manner helped to ensure a distributed sense of power among the authors. Third, we believe this approach added richness and depth to the research process and the topic under investigation. Fourth, through this process, we were able to learn more about ourselves and others. Fifth, this collaborative task worked as a way to further build a sense of community within our writing groups. As detailed in the following sections, we applied collaborative autoethnography through combined group and solo work.

Reflection for learning

At the start of our project, the corresponding author applied reflection for learning (see Pretorius & Ford, 2016) as a teaching strategy to help us reflect on our own thoughts and feelings about the topic before exploring the literature in the field. Consequently, we completed individual reflections about our experiences in the writing group before conducting the literature search and analysis. We utilized a minimal model of reflection (see Pretorius & Cutri, 2019), which had five reflective prompts:

- Why did you join the writing group? What did you hope to learn?
- Do you think the PhD experience includes opportunities to build a sense of community?
- Does the PhD make you feel isolated?
- How has the writing group pastorally supported your PhD journey?
- What would you change to make the writing group more pastorally supportive?

Following the completion of our reflections, all authors read and summarized 17 studies that focus on the benefits of doctoral writing groups. These studies were chosen by the corresponding author because they are frequently cited in the field and/or have been accessed more than 500 times. Each author wrote their summaries independently and then shared their writing using a shared Google Doc. We then met to explore the themes that were highlighted in our individual reflections and the summaries each of us wrote from the 17 studies. This allowed us to create a general structure for our manuscript by dividing it into key themes: isolation, belonging, shared experiences, and academic identity formation. In this way, our collaborative autoethnographic approach allowed both individual and group meaning-making (Chang et al., 2013).

Manuscript preparation and trustworthiness

Following the reflective process outlined above, we extended our search to collect further literature related to the key themes we had identified. Each author chose a specific theme to investigate based on their individual interests that were highlighted in their reflections. Each author used standard word processing, annotation, and referencing software to conduct their own analyses of the research studies and extract themes highlighted in the literature. The corresponding author then created one document combining each author's individual text into one Google Docs document.

We met electronically via Zoom to read each author's text and provide suggestions for improvement. These meetings included time for personal and group reflections. Each author worked on their section between meetings to address the comments and suggestions from their fellow authors. We collaboratively worked through the texts each author wrote for their particular theme to create a cohesive manuscript for peer review. The narrative literature review presented earlier in this manuscript is the result of this collaborative process. We then returned to our initial reflections to explore how the ideas we raised in our reflections related to the literature in the field. We also used our reflections to illuminate implications for improved pedagogical practice in doctoral education.

We communicated through email and Facebook Messenger when peer review feedback was received. This allowed us to consider the feedback and suggest changes that were necessary to effectively address any concerns raised by the reviewers. This was a democratic process, where everyone provided suggestions and each person's perspective was valued. The corresponding author incorporated the final suggested changes into the manuscript and all authors approved the final version before resubmission.

Throughout our iterative and collaborative manuscript preparation approach, we were able to use reflexivity, triangulation between researchers, and theoretical analysis based on the literature to provide rich descriptions of data while also ensuring trustworthiness and rigor within our analysis. It is important to note that we have conveyed each reflection in italics using the author's own authentic voice, with no alteration to syntax or grammar. This serves to further enhance trustworthiness of our

research process. Additionally, the vulnerability that is present in some of the reflections serves to further emphasize the affective domain of academic writing.

FINDINGS

An exploration of our initial reflections about our experiences of being a member of a writing group revealed that we deeply valued the sense of belonging we had developed in these settings. For us, the most important benefit of the writing group was the sense of belonging it helped us develop. Many of us also noted the importance of being able to share our experiences and learn from each other. This sharing of experiences helped us feel valued and like we belonged, as demonstrated in the three extracts below.

Jacky-Lou: For me, joining the writing group means I get to use two of my favourite lifelines from a well-known television gameshow called 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire'. These lifelines, particularly 'phone-a-friend' and 'ask-the-audience' offer opportunities for the player to have better chances of answering the questions correctly. These forms of support offered or given to the contestant during the game seem applicable to a PhD student because doing a PhD, for me, is like playing 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' (Who Wants to be a PhD). While these lifelines can be used by the contestant only once during the game, in the writing group, these 'lifelines' are unlimited as long as the student is willing and interested and that members of the writing group are willing to help. Aside from the 'lifelines' offered in the writing group, based on my experience, there seems to be a sense of community built on trust and openness among the members. Although members of the writing group have different cultures and perspectives, there is a sense of belonging. There is that passion and compassion to help others. In the writing group, I feel that I am not alone in this challenging journey and that I can always ask other members to help me, even beyond the scheduled writing group meeting. Through the writing group, friendships are built and strengthened. There is this connection among the members. There are days when I really feel dumb and down and I just need someone to listen to my PhD hang-ups or I need to ask some questions. I know that I can always 'phone-a-friend' or 'ask-the-audience' in the writing group. With the support I receive, I feel inspired and encouraged.

Elham: We all tend to have similarities in the types of issues we have in writing, reading, rereading, and critiquing and hearing critique is a wonderful way to learn how it is done gradually. But also it is awesome to get feedback when I have a piece of writing. [...] PhD is an isolating experience. I am a sociable person, I look for socialising opportunities, and I do put effort in to make connections. However, the nature of research is isolating, especially during peak periods of the study, especially final year. Talking to the members and seeing that almost everybody experiences hardships and that it is normal to feel that way helps sometimes.

Ali: I can tell that having a sense of community happened for me firstly by joining an academic writing group. Sometimes I feel isolated. However, I find different ways to get along with my difficulties, by sharing my feelings with other friends, family, and senior academics. When I understand I am on track and all these issues would be resolved, then I have a sense of relief.

We also valued the opportunity to talk about issues other than our research, academic writing, or publications, particularly in relation to mental wellbeing, as the three extracts below illustrate.

Elham: I also found that [the facilitator] was aware of the importance of mental wellbeing, and emphasized that in sessions, so there was a theme in the background, the group members seemed to be aware of it too. I also connected to a few of the members who had/were experiencing mental issues as a result of their PhDs and it was helpful. Being around such people makes it easier to go through the bumps of PhD.

Danielle: Writing group is a good way to stay grounded, to hear others' unsugarcoated opinions, to share struggles. Meeting in a relaxed, social setting makes it a lovely way to finish the week and counteract Friday-afternoon-brain. Deliberately making space to talk about topics other than writing, and sharing food, might further increase the pastoral support.

Ali: Aside from academic help, I feel that it helped me psychologically forge a better person out of myself. It more broadens my prospect about the potential problems at the PhD level and how to cope with such cumbersome problems by speaking with other peers.

This was particularly true during the recent disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as we noted in this group reflection when we were working together on this manuscript.

During the last year, our writing groups have had the opportunity to move our meetings to an online format. The facilitator for our group developed a dedicated Zoom environment and feedback on written work was provided using the editing and suggesting features of Google Docs. Importantly, our facilitator ensured that the meetings always started with a time for reflection and informal discussion. This was particularly important given how isolated we were; many of our writing group participants were either still overseas due to border closures or in lockdown due to government mandates. This space for discussion offered us with the opportunity to feel like we belonged; we felt valued during a time of significant upheaval because the writing group was a constant in a world of daily changes.

Our reflections also highlighted our own struggles with developing our own sense of identity within academia. We had different purposes for completing our PhDs and different aspirations as to what we wanted to do when we finished. Our experiences made us question whether we fit in academia and our time in the writing group helped us identify where we belonged, as highlighted in the following two extracts.

Shaoru: That is because to me, the PhD experience is rather a process of self-improvement than being educated by others, it is the process of becoming, reliant on yourself more than others, by walking through this journey, you have the opportunity to see yourself inch step by step closer to becoming an academic not only from writing skills but also from a higher level of thinking and forming perspectives. To me, it is not a feeling of isolation, but more like a feeling of getting closer to where I want to be.

Danielle: I joined the writing group very early on in my PhD. Working in a busy school, my tasks were clear and urgent - there was little time for self-directed learning and reflection! Starting my PhD, I immediately wanted to be DOING things, but it took time to get used to the freedom of independent study and find my academic feet. Joining the writing group gave me a sense of making progress with my own writing, and with joining the academic community.

DISCUSSION

Scholarly communication has become a key professional skill for doctoral students. Universities have become increasingly corporatized, competitive, and focused on metrics (Sampson & Comer, 2010; Stylianou et al., 2017; Vican et al., 2020; Waitere et al., 2011). As a result, research dissemination has gained importance for all academic staff and doctoral students; indeed, the pressure to write for publication has increased drastically (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2012; Stylianou et al., 2017). Joining a doctoral writing group necessitates the investment of time and energy, so it stands to reason that students who choose to join these groups usually do so to gain the professional skills they perceive as important for their future success (i.e., academic writing skills). Our findings demonstrate that, while students may join writing groups to improve their overall academic writing, participants remain in the group because of the affective benefits they discover.

Our review of the literature indicates that the academic care, confidence, and improved perceived self-efficacy that students gain as part of this writing group prompts them to continue participating in these groups. For example, our reflections show that we valued our writing group experiences because of the sense of belonging we developed. The affective benefits that students gain from being a member of a doctoral writing group engenders trust, responsibility, and reciprocity between

members, which builds resilience and encourages persistence. Importantly, we highlight that the self-reflection and discussion that occur during the writing group leads to the development of participants' self-awareness which inspires autonomy and fosters wellbeing. We also show that doctoral writing groups help students better understand themselves and their place within the academy, thereby building social capital, encouraging social competence, and fostering empowerment. Taken together, the affective benefits of doctoral writing groups align with all aspects of the pastoral care framework described earlier. Therefore, we believe that doctoral writing groups should be considered as vehicles of pastoral care for PhD students as illustrated in our model in Figure 3.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

We acknowledge that building pastoral care into doctoral education settings can be challenging, given the structure of the PhD, which often still follows a more master-apprentice model. Consequently, we recommend that practitioners consider establishing writing groups that allow PhD students to learn in a more collaborative environment that is less limited by power imbalances (such as those found in the student-supervisor relationship). Other researchers have described a variety of writing group formats (see, e.g., Haas, 2014), as well as the challenges in establishing effective doctoral writing groups (see, e.g., Chakraborty et al., 2021). The challenges identified usually relate to time, resourcing, quality of facilitation, and group membership (Chakraborty et al., 2021). In terms of pastoral care, we believe the most important characteristics are the quality of facilitation and the membership of the writing group, as these are particularly relevant to the creation of a safe space that fosters belonging.

We view the role of the facilitator as essential for several reasons. First, an experienced or well-trained facilitator is able to guide the group with prompts and suggestions as to which areas to focus on during meetings (see, e.g., Lassig et al., 2009). Second, an effective facilitator creates an inclusive environment for peer feedback and discussion, which is essential for the success of a writing group. It is incumbent upon the facilitator to establish a culture of belonging within the writing group. This is particularly important when new group members join an existing group, as this helps to ensure that unequal power dynamics are not established within the group. Third, a facilitator that is familiar with the academic institution within which the students study is better able to guide participants through the often-times tacit master narratives of the institution. This is key in helping students develop their academic identity.

While we have noted that writing groups have a myriad of affective benefits that should not be discounted, it is important to note that this does not automatically happen. To build pastoral care into writing groups, we suggest the following steps for facilitators:

1. Develop a clear code of conduct highlighting expected behaviors within the group. This helps to ensure that all members feel that their contributions will be valued in the group. An example of such a code of conduct can be found in Chakraborty et al. (2021). It is important to note, though, that this should be done carefully, so as not to impose a sense of power upon the facilitator, thereby hindering the development of a safe space for students to learn collaboratively.
2. Incorporate time within your meetings for a pastoral check-in. Ask your writing group participants how they are feeling. As highlighted in one of our reflections earlier, this type of reflection time helps students feel like their experiences are valued. It also provides the group members with the opportunity to discuss those experiences that may not be directly related to their academic writing, but which are influencing their ability to dedicate their time to their studies (e.g., mental wellbeing). We acknowledge that this may take time away from the focus of the writing group (i.e., academic writing development), but it is invaluable in terms of group members' sense of belonging. It is important to note, though, that the facilitator needs to feel able to facilitate these types of discussions, so training (such as mental health awareness or mental health first aid) may be appropriate.

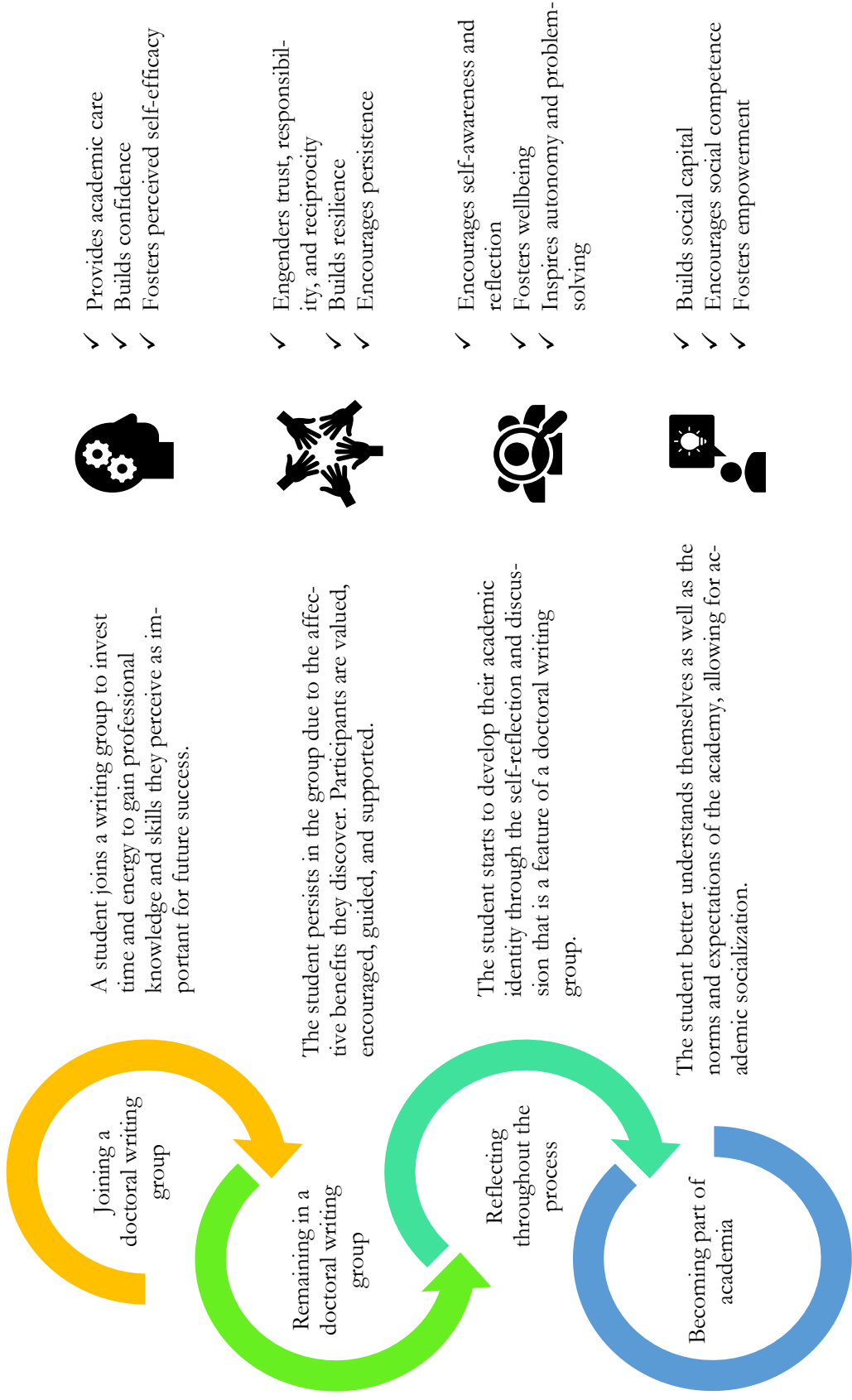


Figure 3. Doctoral writing groups as vehicles for pastoral care

3. Model the provision of clear and constructive feedback. Provision of feedback, as well as an understanding of how to interpret and use feedback, are skills that are not innate but need to be taught (Chakraborty et al., 2021). In our experience, this can take quite a bit of time, so facilitators should factor this into the time allocated to establishing an effective writing group. It is also important to note that students may not initially feel comfortable providing and receiving feedback. The facilitator of our writing groups helped us become more comfortable with the peer feedback process by providing samples of her own work for critique. By modeling the feedback that the sample writing would have received from others, as well as showcasing how to use this feedback to improve the writing, our facilitator was able to create an environment where we felt safe to share our own work and provide feedback on others' writing.
4. Celebrate achievements (both large and small). We have frequent celebrations when writing group members pass a significant milestone, publish a paper, successfully present at a conference, and when past writing group members graduate. We have found this helps the group feel more like a meeting of friends rather than an academic task. This helps to build a sense of community and gives participants hope that they can succeed in the future. Organizing celebratory gatherings takes deliberate effort on the part of the facilitator. In our experience, new members sometimes perceive these gatherings as time-wasting because they feel it is not contributing to the success of their PhD. However, we have found that over time, these participants come to value these gatherings because of the sense of community they help to foster. The facilitator should, therefore, be prepared that this can take time to occur.
5. Provide time throughout the meeting for participants to share their struggles. Importantly, allow other group members to provide strategies that helped them in a similar situation. This sharing of difficulties and solutions can help students build a sense of community. As participants develop a sense of trust between the group members, sharing of struggles and the provision of pastoral support becomes a feature of an effective writing group. As with the other strategies highlighted above, this type of environment takes time and deliberate effort on the part of the facilitator to achieve. We have found that participants can be hesitant in sharing their struggles, particularly due to fear of their concerns being reported to their supervisors. This highlights the importance of ensuring a safe space is created where power relations are minimized. Additionally, sometimes participants can provide feedback to another participant that can be unhelpful or even detrimental. This is where the facilitator needs to step in and provide suggestions that are more helpful.
6. Encourage a hybrid design for the writing groups by allowing face-to-face and online attendance. It is important that students are able to access the support system provided by writing groups, regardless of their mode of study. This is not a new idea; online learning has been used in various fields for many years. For example, a recent review highlights that both synchronous and asynchronous online collaborative learning can help students improve their language proficiency, express their identities more effectively, and learn how to carry out collaborative practices (Soyooof et al., 2021). A previous study has also shown that a hybrid form of face-to-face and online collaborative learning in a doctoral writing group helped students develop their academic writing, build intercultural awareness, and foster their personal epistemology (Lam et al., 2019). Our writing groups have always met face-to-face with some asynchronous online interaction via Facebook or email. The recent COVID-19 pandemic forced us to move entirely online for nearly two years. While we were initially skeptical of the potential for success of meeting online only, we discovered that the online setting actually had a wide array of benefits. We could still do everything we did when we met face-to-face. Importantly, though, we were surprised that the online writing groups could have been so valuable in providing pastoral care. We have, therefore, decided to change our future writing group meetings into a multi-modal setting. Meetings will return to a face-to-face setting when feasible, but an integrated online option will always be available for those unable to attend on campus. Feedback on written work will now be provided electronically as was done

during our online-only meetings, which will encourage all members to contribute regardless of whether they are attending face-to-face or electronically. Consequently, we urge educators to consider the affordances offered by online collaborative spaces in designing their doctoral writing groups. This can help make writing groups more sustainable and scalable, particularly given the limited resources that are often-times available for these types of learning activities.

CONCLUSION

The poor wellbeing of doctoral students has now been well-established across the world, but strategies to improve the academic environment for these students are still lacking. We provide evidence that implementing writing groups as a strategy to embed pastoral care in a doctoral education environment helps doctoral students flourish because they feel valued, encouraged, guided, and supported. We highlight that writing groups may be designed to teach academic communication skills, but they provide an affective benefit that cannot yet be quantified and which should not be underestimated. We demonstrate that doctoral writing groups foster students' sense of belonging through self-reflection and the sharing of experiences in a safe space, which builds perceived self-efficacy and self-awareness. Furthermore, through the self-reflection and discussion that is inherent in doctoral writing groups, students also develop a better understanding of themselves and their place within the academy. Consequently, we demonstrate that incorporating writing groups into doctoral education programs has a positive influence on the educational experiences of PhD students by improving their overall wellbeing. We, therefore, encourage educators to help create these types of safe spaces, as this will empower PhD students to succeed in academia and contribute to improving the academic research culture into the future.

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