



ACADEMIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTORAL SCHOLARS IN AN ONLINE WRITING GROUP

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study explores how online writing groups facilitate the academic identity development of doctoral scholars.
Background	Academic institutions around the world, and especially in developing societies, are demanding increasing amounts of research and publications from their doctoral scholars. The current study used an online writing group to facilitate writing skills development, which bolstered the academic identity development of participating scholars. Academic identity is defined as the becoming and being of an academic scholar, with writing skills as a means of acquiring and performing the status and skills of a scholar. It is reflected in the confidence, contribution, and relationship carried out in writing as a member of the academic community.
Methodology	This study utilizes narrative inquiry as a research methodology to capture the experiences of six doctoral scholars from two universities in Nepal. We explore the academic identity of doctoral scholars from a sociocultural perspective, employing unstructured interviews, meeting notes, and entry and exit surveys of the online writing group.
Contribution	This article shows how online writing groups offer unique and impactful opportunities for networking, collaboration, and problem-solving, which can significantly enhance their writing abilities and prospects of publication, thereby fostering their intellectual agency and academic identity.
Findings	This study reports three findings of the value of online writing groups: addressing gaps in formal education, community as a form of accountability, and virtual

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community as a platform for identity development. On the final finding of identity development, we identify and discuss four themes from data analysis: growth of self-image as scholars, strengthening of commitment to scholarship, identification of venues for expanding the scope of publication, and enhancement of digital skills. The informal and collaborative nature of online writing support facilitated socially constructivist learning, which was highly conducive to the development of academic identity among emerging scholars.

Recommendations for Practitioners	It is recommended that institutions implement and encourage online writing support programs as an effective means of addressing gaps in doctoral education. While this program can fill gaps in the low-resource contexts of developing countries, it can bolster formal mentoring in any context.
Recommendations for Researchers	Further research should use large-scale or longitudinal studies to explore how informal, especially online writing support and collaboration, accelerate research and writing skills, scholarly productivity, and overall academic identity formation of doctoral scholars.
Impact on Society	As societies around the world accelerate their demand for doctoral degrees and also require research and publications for degree completion, new and creative approaches utilizing emerging technologies could help to fill gaps in curriculum and support systems for their doctoral scholars.
Future Research	Future research could expand the scope and take a longitudinal approach for more fine-grained data and developing broader perspectives.
Keywords	academic identity, doctoral scholars, communities of practice, online writing group, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Receiving a doctoral degree involves acquiring the skills, confidence, and recognition as a scholar – and not just acquiring more content knowledge in a certain field of study. The process of becoming an academic scholar with a doctoral degree entails identity development as one, and it is a multifaceted journey constituting not just professional but also personal and relational development (Pifer & Baker, 2016). Studies show a strong relationship between the development of skills/confidence in scholarly writing as part of the development of academic identity: writing skills foster personal and professional confidence among emerging scholars, connecting them with their community and creating recognition as scholars.

We define the overall academic identity of doctoral scholars as encompassing the sense of “who they are, who they want to become, and how they communicate and join with the scholarly community” (Lee & Aitchison, 2011, p.62). There is no straightforward process of “shaping a sense of academic identity” (Alexander et al., 2014, p. 162). As the findings reported in this study will indicate more broadly, developing academic identity is a continuous, recursive, and iterative process of “becoming” a scholar and locating oneself in the academic landscape. We will also show that while scholars in their doctoral journey depend heavily on formal curricula and mentorship, informal learning spaces such as conversations, workshops, and writing groups (online and offline) “contribute to doctorates’ sense of belonging to an academic community” (Tatebe, 2019, p. 168). Thus, academic identity development takes place through the development of a sense of becoming and being acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the formation of certain recognition and relationship in the formal and informal academic communities that emerging scholars need or want to belong to.

In relation to the development of writing skills, we define academic identity based on the study of Inouye and McAlpine (2019). Discussing the notion of academic identity, Inouye and McAlpine ar-

gue that “as doctoral students engage in scholarly writing, they also forge new identities as researchers and potential academics ... construct an academic identity that is reflected in the research contribution they wish to make” (p. 2). Furthermore, viewing from the sociocultural perspective, Inouye and McAlpine have offered a comprehensive definition of the term: academic identity is reflected in “how researchers situate themselves and contribute to their disciplinary field, identifying and being identified as members of the academic community” (p. 15). Because the diverse developments, functions, and relations in the process of becoming academic scholars are carried out in writing, it is productive to explore that process with a focus on the development of skills and confidence in academic writing.

Doctoral scholars do not easily become effective writers and confident intellectuals; they need support in their writing to help them meet the demands of communicating the increasingly specialized knowledge they engage in and learn to produce. Universities in socioeconomically advanced countries not only have formal and well-established writing support systems (such as writing centers) but have been using writing groups for years (D. Maher et al., 2008). In developing countries, even as the demand for doctoral degrees is rapidly expanding (Allen, 2019), doctoral writing support of any kind is yet to become widespread. Fortunately, the rapid adoption of Internet technologies in the developing world, a trend that was suddenly expanded and reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic, has prompted scholars in many countries to address the gap with some urgency and speed.

In the context of Nepal, where the current study was conducted, informal networks of scholars, including doctoral scholars and their mentors, are creating opportunities for web-based collaboration and support for themselves and their mentees. It is in this context that this article explores the academic identity development of a group of Nepali doctoral scholars through their experience of participating in an online research writing group as a community of practice. It illustrates the educational significance of writing groups to support doctoral scholars in their research publications, focusing on the contribution of such support to the development of their academic identity.

The motivation for writing this paper emerged from the first author’s participation as a doctoral scholar in the above four-month-long program, called the online writing group (OWG). This OWG was organized and facilitated by a dedicated Nepali-American professor, the second author, who works at a public research university in the United States. The third author supported the program as a resource person, alongside another scholar in Nepal. Among the 12 participants from across the country, six doctoral scholars were interviewed for this study after the completion of the program. Our distinct positions and relationship with the participants allowed us to situate and interpret their experiences in full context, while we made our best efforts to avoid influencing their response and critically assessing the value of the program for them.

This article discusses three major findings about the online writing group: that it can help fill gaps in formal education, uses the community as a form of accountability, and provides a virtual community as a platform for identity development. It further breaks down the third finding into four themes about identity development that emerged from data analysis. The increased ability to write and communicate better boosted the participants’ self-image as scholars. Mutuality and non-hierarchical relationships in peer support also strengthened their commitment to their scholarship. The participants were able to identify venues for publication and submit their work with greater confidence. The program’s hands-on workshops significantly enhanced their technological skills, which today’s academic communication requires. Based on the findings, we argue that extended and informal support initiatives can help to address the gaps in the formal education of doctoral scholars, enhancing the intellectual agency and scholarly voice, ability for self-reflection and mutual support, and confidence and an overall sense of scholarly identity. We conclude by offering recommendations for developing and implementing online writing support programs as an effective means of addressing gaps in doctoral education.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A SCHOLARLY BACKGROUND ON WRITING GROUPS

Like the more popular tradition of reading groups (including “book clubs”), the use of writing groups is a fairly established practice in many academic communities. Especially in developed countries, there are long-rooted traditions of scholarly collaboration and mutual support among writers through the use of writing groups (Lee & Boud, 2003). Lee and Boud (2003) show that the trend of establishing academic writing groups institutionally within the university in the US started in the 1990s. Western universities have adopted this strategy to support graduate students, such as in the form of thesis or dissertation and article writing groups. In fact, faculty members also often work in groups to make time in their busy lives (Geller & Eodice, 2013) and to support and hold each other accountable (Skarupski & Foucher, 2018). A web search of university-run writing groups shows dozens of such programs that are organized by academic departments and units to support graduate students. Several universities have established writing groups as one of the writing support programs to support their students, especially doctoral scholars. An increasing number of those universities are running writing groups in an online format, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some examples of writing groups can be found at the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of North Carolina, the University of Texas at Austin, and the Australian National University. In these programs, a writing coach usually coordinates student groups to regularly meet and support each other; the programs target writings for both degree completion and scholarly publications. Studies of these rich and impactful programs and practices are just emerging.

While there is limited systematic research on writing groups, there is some scholarship on it that we can draw from. Besides some earlier works like Gere’s (1987) book titled *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* and Lunsford and Ede’s (1990) article on women’s collaborative writing, there are more recent works by Lee and Boud (2003) and a few dissertations and articles that discuss writing groups in the field of Writing Studies. In fact, the practice of writing support using groups is so common that it is also broadly discussed in a wide range of disciplines. D. Maher et al. (2008) highlighted the importance of writing groups for doctoral students to publish their articles in the Australian university context. They indicate that collaboration and mutual support in the area of writing skills can make an even more significant difference in the growth of confidence and sense of academic identity among doctoral students in societies where formal writing support is lacking or insufficient. However, the implications of writing groups for the formation or fostering of the academic identity of scholars have not yet been studied. Nor have scholars researched writing groups in virtual forms.

In addition to drawing insights from available research and scholarship, the writing group reported in this article emulated features of various writing groups in practice, in both formal and informal spaces, and within and beyond academe. The goal of writing groups involving faculty scholars is to produce a publication (DeFeo et al., 2016). Participating in such writing groups provides participants the opportunities for collaborative learning, which also helps them to “transform as a writer” (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018, p. 10). Other writing groups serve the purpose of helping students develop writing skills; writing centers use them as a mode of support (Skarupski & Foucher, 2018). Yet others emerge in response to demands posed by universities upon their faculty members or graduate students to publish. Many universities have mandatory provisions for publishing a minimum of two research papers to award the doctoral degree (and not just for faculty promotion). Our writing group responded to publication demands, where there was insufficient support, and to help participants improve skills as well.

Responding to the demands of doctoral education and exploiting the convenience of online collaboration that far more scholars were exposed to during the Covid-19 pandemic, the informal writing

group as an approach for support and collaboration is likely to grow. The increasing use of this approach in the informal “third space” (Watermeyer, 2015) as we have observed from programs described on the internet, might actually influence and put pressure upon formal academic support systems or even create them where they did not exist before the pandemic. Moreover, “professional conversation as a writing group” (Carr et al., 2020, p. 1) advances the third space for the members of a writing group. Many universities utilize writing groups as a strategy to foster the research development of graduate students and significant support for their academic publications. Simultaneously, writing groups contribute to the academic identity of doctoral scholars (Lee & Boud, 2003). Besides, multidisciplinary writing groups for doctoral writing “offer experiences that enable researchers to embrace the qualities of flexibility, multiplicity, collegiality, and connection” (Guerin, 2013, p. 137). Whether they are organized as formal programs or informally by a voluntary network of scholars, writing groups can not only provide the opportunity to continue writing; they can also foster a sense of academic identity, especially among emerging scholars.

For all the above reasons, writing groups serve as social support groups for any scholars, and they further provide a number of impactful benefits to doctoral scholars, including peer feedback and mentorship, mutual accountability, commiseration, exchange of resources, and a timeline to work within. These benefits, in turn, contribute to the process of identity development of these novice scholars as members of their disciplinary and professional communities. As a study in the Australian context identified, social support systems in empowering the “doctoral students and helps develop a sense of becoming a researcher and being recognized as one” (Mantai, 2019, p. 377). These groups allowed scholars to experience a safe and creative space to discuss, write and learn together (Aitchison, 2009). In short, the writing group reported in this article was informal, online, and facilitated by experts, but it drew upon scholarship about the features of the various traditions of writing groups from the pre-online/pre-pandemic era to virtual, informal, and multidisciplinary writing group practices.

DOCTORAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Doctoral degree challenges scholars to find a niche and establish themselves as leading experts on a specialized issue. But this process of establishing an identity as an expert happens through the act of written communication, especially the dissertation and in some cases, additional publication, regardless of the discipline. In this journey, one’s sense of identity as an academic researcher and expert depends quite heavily on one’s ability to communicate new knowledge effectively. The support system provided to doctoral students, either within the faculty from the university system or outside freelancers (Mantai, 2019), has been proving productive. Compared to the writing support for the doctoral, particularly in the western higher education context, there is no practice either Bootcamp for doctoral students or any kind of writing support for doctoral scholars in Nepali universities. After completing the doctoral, the social impact of one’s research is a critical issue in the academic milieu. This kind of social impact is an identity tension among doctoral scholars. Besides the social impact, doctoral scholars are equally supposed to have strong writing skills to share and publish their research scholarly, which ultimately leads them to gain an academic identity. Through writing abilities, scholars must project “sophisticated awareness of how to project oneself within a variety of social, cultural, and linguistic settings” (Aitchison, 2009, p. 906). Meeting these demands and establishing the identity of a scholar requires a great deal of support for doctoral scholars, especially those who need to write in a language that is not their native tongue. A seminal work of Flowerdew (1999) in the case of Hong Kong found similar results for substantial writing support for those scholars who have English as an additional language. Concerning identity development, Inouye and McAlpine (2019) argued that “doctoral students are required to not only become experts in their fields but critically assess and synthesize ‘new and complex ideas’ in making a contribution that extends the frontier of knowledge” (p. 16). As writing also facilitates all these skills, participating in the writing group helps them cope with the challenges.

The doctoral research journey is not just completing research and publication; it is a process of one's professional growth and identity formation. This process is facilitated by a number of support systems and collaboration opportunities. Writing groups call for systematic study, as they are used in both formal and informal ways to facilitate that process. Some scholars have viewed writing groups as a method for making doctoral scholars more productive by using them to help graduate students publish more articles and book chapters (e.g., Allen, 2019) as well as for completing their dissertation/thesis faster. What is yet to emerge in the scholarship is a deeper understanding of how writing groups can bolster a sense of academic identity among graduate students. It is also necessary to study how informal and online writing groups can help to fill the gap in institutional support for doctoral students in developing countries, due to the lack of resources and institutional foundations for formal programs: "the practices within different groups can address the often-unmet needs of students to bolster their stakes as scholarly writers" (Lassig et al., 2013, p. 300).

SHAPING SCHOLAR IDENTITY THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

From the sociocultural perspective, in this article, we build on the idea of "communities of practice" (Wenger et al., 2002). A community of practice (CoP) is a learning group formed to achieve a common purpose through regular interaction among the members. Such groups seek to strengthen the performance and productivity of the members. For instance, Wenger et al. (2002) define CoPs as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). Through the sociocultural perspective of identity, CoPs can either be formal or informal groups in structures that focus on the collective responsibility in linking learning and performance (Wenger, 2006). But the openness, interactivity, and dynamism of an online community add new dimensions to the older notion of a community of practice that we will discuss as "community of practice 2.0" (e.g., Kabbas Al-ghamdi & Kabbas Al-ghamdi, 2015). Whereas the traditional notion of community relied on the metaphor of physical space and the process of outsiders gradually gaining insider status, we will discuss our findings based on the community we observed that was shaped by the virtual network and the affordances of network technologies.

Beyond being a traditional community of practice, the writing group was also what Gee (2000) calls an "affinity group." Members of the group worked as a learning community through collaboration and mutual accountability. They were emotionally attached and willing to support each other. They were drawn together by a common challenge. They voluntarily came together to engage in diverse experiences, including as coworkers, peer-supporters, accountability partners, chatting and idea-sharing interlocutors, and peer critics for improving academic writing. Teng (2019) notes that emerging scholars "interact with one another to clarify their work and to define and even change how the work is done, for which they share in a 'joint enterprise' or 'mutual engagement'" (p. 4). In our program, we found that this enterprise and mutuality can be fertile ground for emerging scholars' identity formation.

A community practice, and especially one formed as an affinity group, offers a platform for its members the opportunity to recognize one another as scholars. In a mutually supported group, learning becomes a relational process and occurs through social interactions, collegiality, and commitment (Choi et al., 2021; Horrill et al., 2021). From this sociocultural perspective, an online writing group can be a learning community "that assumes identity is shaped by participatory social practices" (Lassig et al., 2013, p. 301). In this study, we also define the concept of academic identity in terms of "a sociocultural perspective where identity and individual action are largely related to the particular groups in which one claims membership" (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019, p. 16). In a traditional mentor-based support system, and especially in a power-based relationship, identity formation can easily be stymied if the mentor does not readily and effectively delegate authority and foster the agency of the mentee. By contrast, in a mutuality- and affinity-based group, identity formation happens through

validation and support by equal members of the community of practice. As we observed in our program, scholars who are used to being guided and taught by authority figures may take time to optimize the affordances of the non-hierarchical and non-expert-led learning process; some may have learning needs or processes that they cannot figure out on their own. But the benefits of an open and informal group that has no authority figure can be unique and many, especially as an extension to formal mentoring.

Building mainly on the concept of community of practice and resituating writing groups in the context of virtual, informal, and interdisciplinary spaces, this article inquires how online writing support facilitated the development of writing skills, thereby helping them form a sense of identity as scholars. Specifically, this article seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do online writing groups support doctoral scholars in their research, writing, and publishing of articles?
- What motivates doctoral scholars to take advantage of informal writing groups beyond institutional contexts?
- How do online writing groups support the development of the academic identity of doctoral scholars?

METHODOLOGY

STUDY APPROACH

We applied narrative inquiry as a research methodology to study the lived experiences and identities of doctoral scholars who participated in the online writing group (OWG) for four months (November 2019 to February 2020). Narrative inquiry helps study the participants' lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) as it allows researchers to solicit participant responses about an experience in its full context. As Hong and Cross Francis (2020) argued, we view identities and stories as means of explaining narratives from spoken and written stories of the participants. As organizers of a program in which the participants share their experiences, we had the advantage of a deeper understanding of the context of the narratives and reflections. We paid attention to not influencing the participants when soliciting their opinions and ideas about their experiences.

PARTICIPANTS AND THE SAMPLING PROCEDURES

For this study, five doctoral scholars from the Tribhuvan University's School of Education and one from the Kathmandu University's School of Education (three males – Binod, Deb, Bharat; three females – Ruma, Prabha, Laxmi) participated in the interviews. All the names are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Among these participants, Binod, Deb, Bharat, Ruma, and Prabha were doctoral scholars from Tribhuvan University, whereas Laxmi was from Kathmandu University. Deb is closer to the end of his doctoral journey, whereas other scholars were in the midst of their doctoral research. The perspective of the disciplinary focus of the OWG members was diverse – two were from English education, one from educational leadership, two from health education, and the remaining one from general education. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the study participants at the time of data collection.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants

SN	Participants' Pseudonyms	Gender	Study Year	Department
1	Binod	Male	1st	General Education
2	Deb	Male	3rd	English Education
3	Bharat	Male	1st	English Education
4	Ruma	Female	2nd	Health Education
5	Laxmi	Female	2nd	Educational Leadership
6	Prabha	Female	2nd	Health Education

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

All interviews were conducted in the local language, Nepali, in August 2020 and were transcribed and translated into English. We have analyzed the data using a narrative thematic analysis approach, which focuses on the participants' stories and "what is said" and categorized them into themes (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). Audio recordings were transcribed in the original language, using a natural and verbatim approach, then significant portions that focused on the issues pertinent to the research questions were translated into English. After reading the transcriptions multiple times, keywords that answered the research questions most significantly were marked (Caine et al., 2019; Saldana, 2016). Using a narrative inquiry approach, themes were generated through a contextual comparison and interpretation of the keywords (Choi et al., 2021; Riessman, 2008). Sections and subsections of this article's findings and discussion section emerged from further discussion and organization of ideas to best reflect the overall responses/experiences of the program participants.

RESEARCH RIGOR AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) pointed out, "trustworthiness" is achieved by credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research. To maintain research rigor and trustworthiness, it is equally important to note how researchers operationalize qualitative terminologies, use their backgrounds and research expertise/engagement in the field, and triangulate data sources from interviews and field notes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We posit that validity is a more positivistic term that refers to quantitative research for determining the cause-and-effect relationship. As such, we instead established validity in our qualitative research using narrative inquiry by focusing on rigor in data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Polkinghorne, 2007).

The intent of narrative inquiry is to gain an in-depth understanding of the study phenomena through the 'presentation' and 'representation' of the lived experiences shared by participants. In order to ensure the research rigor, we sought the participants' feedback on the interview protocol and improved it (Brazil, 2021). We read the data carefully multiple times (Martin et al., 2021). We employed peer debriefing as a technique to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Spall, 1998). For this, we worked on the draft manuscript in Google Docs, which provided a virtual platform for close and interactive collaboration throughout the process. Using Google Docs also allowed us to revisit the data analysis by "checking and rechecking the codes and interpretations" (Park & Schallert, 2020, p. 7) and to review the themes based on the transcript. Such an iterative process ensured a strong relationship between the data collection and our analysis procedure (Teng, 2019).

Finally, as insiders and involved in the OWG procedure in this study, we triangulated the participants' responses with meeting notes prepared by the facilitator (second author). The efforts above collectively helped to ensure the trustworthiness of both the data collection and analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to explore the potential value of writing groups in the academic identity development of doctoral scholars. Our analysis and theming process generated three significant findings related to our research questions: (1) the support program filled the gaps left by formal curricula, as well as providing an alternative space and resource during a pandemic; (2) participants were motivated to participate because they found community, commiseration, and accountability mechanisms in the alternative space; and (3) the informal, networked, and virtual community of support uniquely fostered the participants' identity as writers and scholars. As academic identity formation is the key focus of this research, we further explore the third finding by identifying four specific themes indicating ways in which online writing group programs bolster this process for doctoral scholars.

LEARNING THROUGH INTERACTION

Interviews with participants consistently revealed that they were most encouraged by the non-hierarchical relationship of the informal and virtual community, and collaboration among peers; they were somewhat surprised that the experts primarily facilitated the community and collaboration. In contrast to traditional mentoring, especially in societies and their academia characterized by hierarchical relationships, informal and online communities provide a number of interactive and collaborative affordances. Traditional forms of writing support and research mentorship for doctoral education, especially in developing countries but also in developed ones, tend to be dominated by a supervisor who has significant authority over the doctoral scholars. This authority tends to be magnified in societies that value socio-epistemic hierarchy: the professor is held in high honor, rendering the student rather powerless and passive. Interaction tends to be minimal, except when there is a unique interpersonal relationship/dynamic between the doctoral mentor and mentee (Alt, 2015; Felix, 2002).

Based on the above finding, we posit the non-hierarchical, mentee-empowering, and collaborative affordances as defining features of what we call "community of practice 2.0." Much like "web 2.0," or social and participatory web platform that replaced the non-interactive or one-way-traffic flow of information before the mid-2000s, our writing group connected members in lateral, equal-power, and collaborative relationships. In our writing support/collaboration program, this relationship was not only facilitated by the affordances of the technologies we were using but also created by our mutual respect among peers. As participants generally highlighted in the interviews, the program was a conducive environment for socially constructivist learning.

Socially constructivist learning

Participants of our program and study noted that they were inspired to be a community of coequals, seeking to create opportunities to share resources and feedback and, most importantly, to engage in knowledge-making as an interactive social process. The academic identity development of doctoral scholars is "highly influenced by how the doctoral students interacted with their faculty and peers and how relationships were maintained" (Ching, 2021, p. 13). Making the interaction peer-based and collaborative fostered the social constructivist nature of learning at the advanced level. One of the aspects of socially constructivist learning is the pooling of expertise so that someone who needs help with a certain challenge is able to receive help from another who has that expertise.

Some participants said that they benefited most from the collaborative nature of the program. For example, Binod said that they did not know where or how to get the resources they needed, and they were supported by others with that skill. "Collecting related materials is [a] great challenge for me;

free available materials are not useful and useful articles are not available in [sic] free.” The group created a repository of material, while members helped out one another with more specific challenges, including finding materials and learning new technical and academic skills. One set of resources in our program was a video series created for doctoral students in another country, covering a whole range of needs such as how to conduct a literature review to how to find a journal and adapt/write an article for it. These resources helped participants to practice skills or explore new ideas independently, as well as in collaboration through the workshop meetings. In addition to providing resources, our program also helped participants practice strategies in a few key areas where participants lacked skills or confidence.

Similarly, participants also found the writing group helpful for brainstorming and developing ideas, as well as learning from interaction how to develop topics. The program provided opportunities for interactive learning by organizing hands-on workshops as a key feature of the initiative. Participants used collaborative reading and practice behind various steps of the research and writing process, including tackling common challenges of writing and publication, making a topic researchable, developing a publishable article, understanding a research-based writing project, finding and understanding venues, gathering and analyzing data, outlining the article, drafting the article, revising, editing, and formatting. Different workshops provided the occasion for practicing skills or better understanding a research or publication step. “I only [had] a vague idea of the topic,” said Dev, an English education doctoral scholar. “I lack[ed] clarity in the theoretical framework as well as broader significance of the study. I [was] also facing the challenge of getting relevant literature on it.”

The workshops, as well as resources and mutual support, made strong interventions without dictating the process for the participants. The program’s ability to pool resources and skills created opportunities to learn that extended beyond formal learning. The program did not have any instructor-student relationship. The principal facilitator (also second author here) provided necessary resources, including videos on academic writing and publication. Additional facilitators (including the third author here) also guided participants to review and refine their article drafts. Participants of the program met virtually every Saturday and shared their ideas in OWG with the completion of parts of their academic article drafts across a dozen milestones assigned by the program. In addition to presenting incremental drafts and revisions of their writing, they were encouraged to exchange and discuss feedback on each other’s drafts (in pairs) using Google Docs. Participants then needed to implement the received feedback and discuss it in the upcoming workshop. Facilitators also provided feedback, as relatively experienced writers and in the case of the resource person a writing professor.

About the virtual learning environment during the OWG workshop, Binod said:

I have participated in several physical professional development training and workshops earlier. However, this was my first online workshop via Zoom. It was a unique experience for me to participate in the interaction during the workshop. Just after this workshop, the Covid-19 pandemic also spread in Nepal. After that, university teaching gradually shifted to online because the in-person classroom was impossible. I experienced, in most of the physical workshops, facilitators become active while participants remain listening. However, in this OWG, I got a chance to ask questions, share my experience, and receive feedback from my colleagues and the facilitators. As a result, my draft got significant improvement. Moreover, I have no hesitation in posing my confusion in the group. Besides the article writing and publishing knowledge and skills, I also learned strategies to make workshops more interactive. I will use this skill in my regular classroom teaching too.

The four months of the program (November 2019 to February 2020) focused on reworking to finalize the draft and make it publishable. After taking a few months to develop their research-based articles further and adapt them to venues they found, participants presented their work in a “celebratory” workshop in July 2020.

Researching and writing go together with doctoral research. Due to the unavailability of formal training in developing the research-based papers, the doctoral scholars in our program had been experiencing problems in research writing and paper publishing. As a “community of practice,” the writing group provided a space for cooperative learning (Tyndall et al., 2019) by interacting with each other and helping them improve their writing skills. Regarding the interaction in the workshop, Ruma stated:

In the workshop, I liked the peer learning, i.e., the breakout room feature of Zoom for discussing the draft with a peer. I benefited from peer group learning, especially when working with a single partner. This group was convenient for me to share, comment on, critique, and discuss each other’s drafts. I often felt uneasy about sharing my views in the full-group discussion, but I did not feel hesitation in smaller peer-group activities.

The fact that today’s technologies like Zoom allow graded privacy levels creates levels of comfort that may not be available in formal in-person settings. Like Ruma, other participants Prabha, Laxmi, and Binod, also experienced similar benefits from the paired group in developing confidence and improving the draft. This learning approach has a pragmatic and philosophical significance: learning becomes socially constructivist when interaction facilitates the process, peers become emerging experts, and learning is done by doing (Felix, 2002). Positive aspects of online learning are reported in a previous study (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013). Several other studies also confirmed the crucial role of the mutual process of engagement in critiquing the peer draft (Aitchison, 2009; Ferguson, 2009; Lassig et al., 2013; D. Maher et al., 2008). Our program participants did share about hesitation during the discussion with the whole group; but once they worked in pairs or took notes to prepare for a full-group discussion, they were more confident in sharing ideas. These levels of comfort that the technology created helped participants take gradual steps in their self-confidence and identity (Vokatis & Zhang, 2016) as writers and scholars.

Writing is conceived as a social activity (M. Maher et al., 2013), and this is particularly true for doctoral scholars and it is most significant for their productivity. As our participants noted, the informal and virtual spaces added the social and interactive type of opportunity that they rarely find within formal educational spaces. Classroom instruction follows the schedule and class planning of the instructor; personalized support by the dissertation supervisor is characterized by unequal power. In contrast, the informal space of a virtual community is characterized by equality and collaboration, mutuality, and shared accountability. The interaction on today’s multimodal platforms also allows participants to interact (or not interact) in different ways: Zoom, for instance, includes options to interact through text, voice, video, polls, and reaction tools. Turning off the video, muting the audio, and taking a break or preparing to speak by chatting on the side or writing offline adds to the possibilities for different learners.

Learning through mutual support

At the advanced level, learning does not happen only when teaching is happening; learners can advance their learning when they find the resources they can mobilize on their own terms. An informal community provides such an occasion where participants can support each other in the learning process. Participants in this study reported that they gained the confidence to write an article and search for a proper journal to publish because the program targeted critical areas of need especially due to the program’s mutual support framework. The program began by helping participants enhance their skills to develop/refine their research agenda; we did this in the form of learning to write the introduction section of a research article. Participants did regular peer review, paired and small-group discussions using Zoom breakout rooms, and follow-up full-group discussions.

Because participants could pool and exchange knowledge and skills, they could find support as needed rather than learning whatever is taught in a formal program. Regarding this and a number of other skills and strategies that the workshops covered, Baharat shared his experience as follows:

After participating in this OWG, I have learned a number of technical aspects of article writing and publishing, such as: setting the research context and linking the study to the international context; stating the researcher's positionality; identifying the relevant journals, and the article publication process, and the importance and the process of the peer-review for journal publication. Besides, I learned about predatory journals and became aware of identifying such journals to avoid being victims of such journals.

By helping participants practice strategies and exchange skills and ideas in areas of difficulty like the above, the program enhanced their confidence as researchers and writers. Our approach was distinct from traditional teaching and even institutionalized workshops reported in the literature. For instance, informal institutional efforts to support publication, Cargill et al. (2017) helped scholars with the formal aspects of research skills; the program was instructor-driven and deficit-focused. They carried out an interventional study with a follow-up, concluding that the writing workshop was helpful to gain confidence in article writing and publishing in the English language.

In our study, we did not focus on surface issues like language or format; instead, we covered the larger ecology of research and writing/publication where the participants could independently and collaboratively figure out what to do, using the resources and practice opportunities. Several participants highlighted different areas where the resources and exercises helped them overcome their challenges. During the interview, Laxmi and Deb discussed how useful they found the video material about how to identify appropriate peer-reviewed international journals. By following up on the video material with discussion and activities during the workshop, they gained greater insight into selecting the right journal, the publication process, and strategies to refine their papers. The discussions and activities helped participants become more conscious of predatory journals, junk publications (for the sake of publication), paywalls, and other challenges they could openly discuss for overcoming or dealing with. For example, Deb said he became more conscious of the predatory journals and discussed how not to become a victim of publication scams.

The emerging awareness about these issues is significant as part of identity development as scholars. As Yang et al. (2022) have pointed out, challenges like this can undermine the identity formation of scholars. So, it is important that emerging scholars learn how to avoid or tackle such challenges, in addition to learning skills to perform scholarly tasks.

Our survey results indicated that the participants have been experiencing a challenge in disseminating their research/knowledge contribution to the international audience in international journals. Guerin (2013) argued that the “practice of writing group support in this regard develops flexibility, diversity, collegiality, and connection with the doctoral scholars” (p. 137). Viewing the communities of practice theory, participants gain insight from sharing ideas and helping each other solve the problems in writing (Wenger et al., 2002). The strategy of making an annotation table helps to write an article conveniently. All the participants shared in the exit survey that one of the most meaningful insights from OWG was to prepare an annotation table of reviewed resources in a systematic.

Participants reported having benefited from the technique of making annotations for organizing literature systematically, such as preparing and using the annotations tables for preparing the research-based writing. For instance, Deb stated:

One of my drafts was pending for two years. I was confused while writing the manuscript about how to make a connection between theory, literature, and data for developing the paper in an organized form. From the idea of using an annotation table, exchanging information among colleagues, and the support from the facilitators, I completed the draft and submitted it to the international journal. Without participating in this OWG, I would not have been able to complete that manuscript.

The experience of Dev indicates the power of community of practice. From the perspective of Wenger (2006), shared practice between the members helps to be productive. Moreover, the theory

also indicates that a community of practice helps members “understand and appreciate each other’s contributions” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 137).

FROM WHITEBOARD TO KEYBOARD: MOTIVATION TO JOIN WRITING GROUP

The second major finding regarding our second research question – about the potential of online writing initiatives to support doctoral scholars with academic writing and publication – was that our participants found the program to be a uniquely helpful opportunity. For all of the scholars, the program was the first time they had participated in a virtual workshop. They were meeting virtually online instead of the in-person meeting. In the words of Bharat:

I had never participated in this kind of virtual workshop before. Although it was via Zoom meeting, it was like an in-person meeting, with live interaction among the participants. I felt like I was interacting in the classroom together with my friends. For me, the classroom shifted from ‘whiteboard to keyboard.’ It was a fantastic experience to interact with people from the US, Japan, and the different parts of Nepal at the same time.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, the advent of online and virtual learning with different platforms (Zoom, Teams, Google Met, Moodle, etc.) came into practice in almost all fields, including teaching-learning. For instance, after spreading the coronavirus, many more universities and schools have been practicing virtual learning through online classes. In countries like Nepal, before the Covid-19 pandemic, these kinds of online teaching practices were only used in a few academic distance learning programs of higher education.

Bharat’s experience may be distinct from that of students and researchers in the pandemic-forced virtual learning; without the compulsion for exclusively online learning, all in the physical isolation behind the virtual connection, it seems that the “supplemental” flexibility, convenience, and even fascinating nature of virtual connection may have made Binod and other participants so excited. But a closer analysis of his responses to our interview questions further reveals that he was equally inspired by how helpful he found the program. In the same vein, Binod said:

The program was helpful and supportive for me in several ways. I have built the skills and confidence to craft a paper that is likely to be publishable. Most importantly, I have developed the confidence to produce articles from the research papers, identify the appropriate international venues, and submit them.

Before the workshop, Binod said that he was “afraid of approaching international journals” and did not have the discipline or habit of working within a timeline. He also added that he gained skills for remote collaborative writing in Google Docs:

learned to make my writing clearer and coherent, and practiced making annotations for developing papers, and sharing article drafts to get feedback from colleagues and experienced mentors.

Besides these broader skills, Binod said that he also learned many “micro-skills” to develop, organize, and finalize the articles. Significantly, the time frame of our program was just before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal. In this sense, our program participants were experiencing what many academic communities across the world experienced right after we completed our program. So, our participants did not view the program as a forced alternative like the world did during the pandemic; they had voluntarily joined an alternative space and support system mainly to make up for the lack of support within the formal curricula and institution. The program not only provided additional support to whatever opportunities the participants had in their academic institutions; in some cases, it filled a gap and addressed an unfulfilled need. As such, even in normal times, virtual writing groups/communities can complement and supplement the need for writing support for doctoral scholars.

Participants of this OWG were selected through an open call in the name of ‘Writing Group - Nepal, 2019-2020’. As reported by the participants, the main reason for joining this writing group was to improve their writing skills for publishing research-based articles in international journals. Participants had earlier publications in national journals, but none had published papers in rigorous international peer-reviewed journals. Ruma said:

After rejection from a few international journals, I used to think that I was not skilled enough to write articles for international journals. I guess my language competency and article crafting skill is poor. Therefore, to improve my article writing skills and publish in international journals, I joined the OWG.

The major challenge for publishing articles in top-tier international journals, as the participants shared, was the lack of adequate skill for crafting papers according to international standards. Similar to the perception of Ruma, a study in Hong Kong concluded that English language proficiency had been a problem for publishing papers, particularly for non-native speakers of English (Flowerdew, 1999). More importantly, Flowerdew (1999) argued that “rhetorical patterning, innovative thinking, and literature reporting” (p. 140) are the technical problem of the English language for article publications. Even though English language skills are essential, writing skills for research-based papers are more important for publications. As a result, doctoral scholars failed to publish their research articles in rigorous peer-reviewed journals.

Improving writing skills and publishing papers in such journals is challenging everywhere (Allen, 2019; Yang et al., 2022). There needs to be strong motivation among doctoral students for dedication to research and writing. The lack of motivation creates stress and identity tensions among doctoral students. According to Pappa et al. (2020, p. 173), “the principal sources of stress identified were intrapersonal regulation, challenges about doing research, funding and career prospects, and lack of a supportive network. Despite the negative presence of stress, most participants saw stress as a motivating element”. Similar to this finding, Ruma shared that she perceived a lack of creative writing skills and tended to be frustrated due to fear of rejection for publication in an international journal. As Ferguson (2009) argued, writing groups can play a supportive role in mitigating stress. During the entry, survey participants shared that another reason for joining this OWG is completing and submitting the manuscript to a proper international journal. Mainly, Laxmi, Prabha, and Binod have completed their manuscript to achieve it through OWG. Similarly, Bharat and the first author have the draft in progress.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTORAL SCHOLARS

Especially at the advanced doctoral level, writing is not simply a process of expressing one’s ideas and opinions but rather a layered and entangled set of processes. It requires researching and reading, reviewing current knowledge to formulate an intellectual position, gathering data and tracking the process, analyzing and interpreting data, discussing and receiving feedback, and then engaging in the narrower set of writing tasks (such as outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and formatting). While writing has to mediate and often carries the intellectual weight of many of the above processes, the most important task writing does is to help the scholar develop their own voice and articulate it in the form of the research plan and framework, methodology and theory, and discussion and sense-making from whatever for the research takes. As such, providing scaffolding in the writing process can ease the many other academic identity development processes facilitated by writing.

Viewing yourself in the mirror: Reflecting on self-development

Doctoral scholars often feel what is commonly called the “impostor syndrome”: Am I who I say I am? Do I have the knowledge or authority to speak on this issue? Overcoming such anxieties requires not only labor and time but also the opportunity to perform one’s emerging expertise and skills, thereby learning to see oneself as a scholar. We found that working with peers in a space that is

characterized by equality rather than hierarchy can allow emerging scholars to see that emerging identity in each other. It also promotes the notion of ‘academic belongingness’ (Thomas, 2019). Interactions during the online writing workshop encouraged participants to engage in sharing their ideas and comments and to provide feedback freely among the participants. Such practices of writing groups help participants to assess their knowledge and skills for crafting their research papers to publish. They experienced that working with a peer was much more beneficial and productive in refining their draft. About self-reflection, Prabha explained:

Earlier in my article drafting, I was not aware of the weak part of my writing from the publication’s point of view. When I got an opportunity to hear the critical judgments and comments both from OWG colleagues and facilitators, it helped me to identify the points to be revisited in the draft, such as framing the problem and research gap, linking pertinent literature with the write-up, linking theory with the data analysis, and concisely write the conclusion. It was like ‘viewing my face in the mirror’. Finally, this helped to reflect on me. As a result, I have reworked my two previous drafts and submitted them to international journals.

Like as Prabha opined, the literature has also indicated similar findings on the role of reflections of the writing group participants in improving the article crafting skills (Aitchison, 2009; Guerin, 2013). Inouye and McAlpine (2019) mentioned that the role of reflection helps participants in “advancing their research thinking and encouraging critical reflection on writing and research practices” (p. 2). On the one hand, this is consistent with the theory that community members “greatly benefit from reflection and active development efforts as they take on more mature responsibilities” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 96). On the other hand, being a part of the informal, virtual, peer-group community did not involve going from being an outsider to being an insider.

While community formation may take a little time and effort in informal virtual communities as well, Wenger et al.’s (2002) idea of legitimation for gaining membership became far more fluid and open. The online and informal nature of the writing group offered the ‘unique power’ (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015) to help emerging scholars to join a group and see themselves in the mirror of another without the dynamics of power and permission discussed in the original theory of community of practice.

Another participant, Bharat, said that the OWG supported him to reflect more critically. Bharat said that he shaped his identity as a researcher by reflecting on the technical part of research writing skills. Bharat recognized himself as an empowered scholar and shared his experience as:

Engagement in the writing group became an opportunity to reflect on me in many ways. Comments from the facilitators and the group colleagues helped me self-assess my draft articles. I have learned to make strong arguments, make writing audience-focused, set up the context, rethink and restructure my writing style, write flow, link paragraph to paragraph and sentence to sentence, and critical reading and critiquing skills.

The participants of the writing groups reported that their experiences help them to develop an identity as research scholars (Guerin, 2013). For scholars, writing is not just a means of expressing pre-existing ideas but also a process for meaningful knowledge contribution. This finding is consistent with other studies on writing groups in the higher education context supporting doctoral scholars in academic writing (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018).

A writing group transforms doctoral scholars for their meaningful contribution to scholarly productivity (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018) and self-reflection for them. Formal academic programs during this Covid-19 pandemic were so affected by the spread of the virus that many universities remained closed. Cahusac de Caux (2021) found that the pandemic negatively impacted and declined doctoral scholars’ academic writing commitment. In that context, the participants of our program found the collaborative initiative as a refuge from the impact of the pandemic, a space where they could be productive by being visible, accountable, and taking small steps.

Commitment to scholarship

Writing groups are formed for a specific purpose to produce meaningful research output either in a research article or research paper, or thesis. Doctoral scholars in OWG are committed to completing the tasks within the time frame since the group is to be established with a specific purpose for a particular period. Binod explained how he was able to complete the draft in time:

The time frame and the deadline for the participants compelled me to complete the draft in time. I felt more comfortable working with the phase-wise task division on the different sections of the articles. Initial discussion on framing the research problem and topic, and designing the research design enhanced my confidence.

Like Binod explained, the OWG had planned the activities and participants' commitment stipulated time frame as follows:

- November 9, 2019: Preparatory meeting
- November 16, 2019: Tackling challenges for writing and publication (participants – making article title researchable and acceptable)
- November 23, 2019: Analyzing research-based writing (participants – data gathering and research purpose planning)
- November 30, 2019: Finding and understanding venues (participants – from research design to writing)
- December 7, 2019: Drafting manuscript outlining
- December 7, 2019, to January 18, 2020: Time for drafting
- January 13 to February 8, 2020: Writing the article (fleshing the argument, engaging sources, revising the manuscript, and editing, proofreading, and formatting)
- July 2020: Submission presentation and celebration

From the structured timeline of the OWG, all the participants prepared the article draft and presented it at the final workshop. This finding is consistent with the study finding in different international contexts (Cargill et al., 2017; Tyndall et al., 2019). The first author also completed a journal article draft during the program. Through the shared timeline, the writing group offered a conducive and stimulating environment for developing articles for doctoral scholars. In the process, it fostered their identity as committed academic writers and scholars.

Commitment leads doctoral scholars to be more productive in order to publish their scholarship during their doctoral research journey. Regarding the relation between identity construction and the motivation of doctoral scholars, in an Australian university context, Ai (2017) states that “academic identity construction plays an integral role in their well-being and productivity” (p. 3). For instance, Ferguson (2009) argued that “writing establishes one’s academic identity, with high-quality peer-reviewed publications deemed significant indicators of worth” (p. 295). As theory informs (Wenger, 2006), a writing group is not just a friends’ club; instead, it is a community of practice with committed scholars’ identity. And the doctoral scholars could get the opportunities to foster their academic identity by becoming productive scholars.

Finding venues, finding community

One of the OWG sessions was about identifying and understanding the venue for publishing the article. Finding the proper journal is a challenging task for doctoral scholars. Selecting the right journal for publication was discussed during the workshop. As meeting notes indicate:

Ultimately, while we seek to “get published” and it feels like we’ll accept anyone’s acceptance of our work, we must judge the quality of the venues - not just because there are a lot of fraudulent practices in publication but also because we don’t want either bad publishers or our shoddy publication on our resumes.

There are a lot of predatory journals, and many of the scholars are victims. Similarly, selecting a suitable journal matching one's study is equally important. Publishing in more rigorous journals is the way to "strengthen one's identity as a researcher and writer" (M. Maher et al., 2013, p. 195). Another serious issue related to the researcher's identity discussed during the workshop was the rejection from the journals. However, for the doctoral scholar, being published in a peer-reviewed journal "becomes a key site where this identity is performed and recognized worldwide" (Lee & Boud, 2003, p. 190). This kind of recognition helps doctoral scholars to reach the broader academic communities and opens the chances for connecting to communities of practice for future collaborations. Regarding article publishing, Deb highlighted the role of community recognition:

Identity for me is how one presents their scholarship in the academic community. In addition, I found that being accepted by the western community is a measure of gaining identity. It is hegemonic thinking, and I have different views.

Strengthening the Nepali journals is a severe issue that Deb raised and supporting our publications helps to connect local knowledge to global scholarship. However, selecting either an international or national journal is a strategy (Flowerdew, 1999) for successful scholars to develop their academic identity.

Technological mediation of identity formation

As the participants of our study reported, using technology for carrying out academic work is an important skill and an identity marker for doctoral scholars. From offline tools like word processors to online databases, an increasing range of digital technologies is required for completing every academic task. In fact, in addition to researching, reading, writing, and presenting their ideas virtually and interactively, doctoral scholars increasingly have to use more and more technologies for participating in events such as workshops and webinar conferences as facilitators or participants. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, online platforms have become even more essential for all kinds of academic work and collaborations, as well as regular classroom teaching.

The OWG helped participants to become familiar with using technology for all the above purposes, as one of the participants, Ruma, highlighted as follows:

I have never heard of online platforms before the OWG. Just after the OWG, regular classroom teaching became impossible for a long time as the coronavirus spread. My institution adopted to run classes via Zoom for the students, and my experiences during OWG helped me easily handle the relatively new technology for my colleague. I facilitated managing Zoom for my colleagues, which was a moment of pleasure for me.

Similar to Ruma, practicing online platforms was new to the first author. As a participant, the first author also gained the confidence to tackle the technological challenges required by academic writing. As scholars have highlighted, as a community of practice, this writing group offered participants opportunities to learn from each other (Aitchison, 2009; D. Maher et al., 2008), and this mutually supported learning process was greatly enhanced by interactive technologies. The OWG was the first online workshop/webinar for the participants. These kinds of online events were rare before the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants shared unanimously that they also learned to facilitate webinars more interactively and effectively. Emphasizing the role of technology in the program, Prabha explained:

I was familiar with the face-to-face workshops earlier. I did not have the experience of participating in an online workshop like this. From this workshop, I learned to facilitate online webinars such as resource sharing via google drive, Google Slides, and Google Docs, creating interaction, and context settings, designing a precise presentation, and sharing videos on YouTube.

Broadly speaking, as also indicated in the communities of practice theory, using information technology is essential to make knowledge accessible among community members, even in remote areas (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 188). The findings of our study show that there is much room and need for further exploring the intersection of informal, virtual learning communities and the broader understanding of communities of practice.

As interactive technologies fundamentally reshape the academic world (as well as the rest of the social and professional worlds), it is important that academic scholarship better understand how communities form, connect, collaborate, and advance knowledge and practice in and through the virtual (and especially web 2.0) platforms and processes. Situating the inquiry of academic scholars' identity development in the above broader context allowed the current study to raise a number of significant issues about this subject.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the identity development of doctoral scholars through their experience of participating in an online writing group. Seeking to complete an academic journal article each within the time frame of a program that had specified deadlines across the research and writing processes, the doctoral scholars could work productively as writers. Collaboration and mutual accountability helped them produce more writing through weekly commitment. By raising critical awareness about the broader process of identifying and working with a journal and specific challenges like recognizing predatory journals, the program further helped the scholars gain new knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. Doctoral scholars were motivated to join the program to fill gaps in their formal curricula and mentorship.

The study showed that interactive learning, especially across a peer group and in the informal and virtual setting, can be uniquely empowering for emerging scholars; the online platform and social constructivist approach to learning that we adopted (Alt, 2015; Felix, 2002) created a uniquely helpful space for doctoral scholars to cultivate their intellectual voice and develop an agency as scholars. The virtual, informal, interactive, and resource-sharing affordances of the online mode of the program bolstered the development of a sense of membership in a community of scholars. Additional resources in that virtual space, as well as collaboration and commiseration with peers, helped to meet their needs and to overcome their weaknesses. This study essentially shows the potential of what we call "community of practice 2.0" (based on the concept of web 2.0) for academic identity development, a topic worth further study and conversation. As technology reshapes the landscape of higher education, the process of identity formation is increasingly dynamic, complex, and ongoing. Studying identity development in this dynamic context offers opportunities for productive research and educational programs.

Based on our findings, we suggest that other researchers pursue large-scale or longitudinal studies into how diverse forms of writing support and collaboration can accelerate the formation of research and writing skills, scholarly productivity, and overall academic identity. Ours was a limited study based on a pilot program and a small, purposive sampling; a more extensive and more triangulated data set would allow for better generalizability and broader discussions. Yet, within the research questions we posed, regarding the value of online writing groups for emerging scholars, we hope this study will provide perspectives for both practitioners and at the level of institutional policy. Similarly, while we conducted and studied the program before the pandemic, as the academic world now continues to adopt the virtual modes of learning and support that were forcibly introduced by the disruption, erstwhile alternative programs like this are likely to become mainstream in the future. Better understanding and improving them is in the interest of doctoral scholars and institutions alike. Further research on this issue could systematically gather observational data to bolster perspective and theory building. It could also expand the scope and take a longitudinal approach for more fine-grained data and develop broader perspectives.

We recommend that universities create accountability, peer mentorship, and collaboration programs online for their doctoral students, as well as encourage their doctoral scholars to organize such programs themselves. Often, institutions are skittish about students organizing any kind of program for themselves, but ‘third space’ initiatives like this could support academic identity development (Carr et al., 2020; Watermeyer, 2015; Whitchurch, 2008) and uniquely achieve what institutional programs, with any number of resources or staff, cannot achieve. This is because there is a sense of comfort and confidence, and even privacy and confidentiality, that virtual peer groups can provide. The dynamic of power and equality becomes quite significant at the doctoral level; to foster students’ social/epistemic agency as emerging scholars, professors and institutions should provide or authorize peer support groups and programs. Informal and online writing group initiatives can be a humble but powerful tool in the toolset of doctoral education, especially in low-resource contexts but also anywhere.

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