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Developing research-writer identity and wellbeing in a doctoral writing group

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ABSTRACT

Various models of writing groups for doctoral candidates are effective in developing research writing skills. While most groups focus on writing and providing feedback, less is written about groups that focus on empowering the research-writer through social interaction. This paper explores the impact of an ongoing fortnightly writing group as a regulated writing space for promoting wellbeing and fostering research-writer identity among doctoral candidates, whilst developing cognitive and social skills. Eight participants and the facilitator reflect on the effectiveness of this group using collaborative autoethnography. What began as a group of higher degree research students who wanted to develop their research writing skills, became a supportive community of practice which enhanced individuals' confidence to write, their research writing identities and wellbeing. Of significance was the writing expert as a facilitator. The study recommends that institutions value and create regular writing spaces for doctoral candidates to write, discuss their experiences as research-writers and in so doing, address their research writing identity and wellbeing, particularly given current concerns about mental health.

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Introduction

Writing groups for Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidates can foster research writing skills, establish research writing cultures, and support wellbeing (Aitchison and Guerin 2014; Eardley, Banister, and Fletcher 2020; Pretorius, Macaulay, and Cahusac de Caux 2019; Tyndall et al. 2019). Writing groups can encourage productivity and thesis completion through multiple approaches and innovative pedagogical frameworks (Aitchison and Guerin 2014; Bergen et al. 2020; Quynn and Stewart 2021). While some groups focus on providing peer feedback on drafts (Aitchison 2014), others focus on genre and discourse (Li 2014), replicate writing retreats (Murray 2014), or use the informal 'Shut up and Write!' format (Mewburn, Osborne, and Caldwell 2014). These writing groups provide a dedicated space and time where candidates can socially interact and build community (Aitchison and Guerin 2014).

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Our paper examines the impacts that a specific writing group had on HDR participants. A regular writing group was initiated at the Magill campus of the University of South Australia (UniSA) to develop effective and productive writing habits of HDR candidates. This group was loosely based on writing retreats yet had a focus on the research-writer rather than the research writing. A research educator created the group named *ResearchWriters@Magill* (RW@M) to address concerns of HDR candidates in humanities and social sciences, who tend to be isolated (McAlpine and Amundsen 2009) and have low and long completion rates (Main 2014).[1] HDR candidates chose to attend for productivity and inspiration, and many continued to participate as they discovered the benefits of RW@M. Distinctive to the RW@M experience is the creation of a supportive space or environment to encourage open dialogue about HDR research writing through a focus on the relationship between research writing and identity, hence we use the label research-writer. The role of the 'expert' facilitator (Haas 2014) was pivotal in encouraging interaction and initiating discussion about being a research-writer. This paper draws from the voices of eight participants, all PhD candidates, and the facilitator, a trained educator teaching research writing for more than 20 years. Using collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013), together we reflect on the RW@M group as a mechanism to develop writing, establish our research-writer identity, and enhance wellbeing through belonging to a community of practice.

The benefits of doctoral writing groups

Writing skills development

HDR candidates often feel their writing skills are inadequate. These feelings are not individual flaws but rather common to novice research-writers and may be partially addressed through writing workshops (Cameron 2009). This uncertainty may be due to a lack of confidence about writing skills specifically, or may relate to broader concerns about how a researcher should write. Research writing is quite different from undergraduate academic writing as writers receive feedback on multiple written drafts, explore new levels of critical thinking, formulate complex arguments, and have the enormity of writing a thesis (Duncanson, Schmidt, and Webster 2020). Novice scholars are often unprepared for this highly sophisticated level of academic literacy (Aitchison 2014). Anxieties around writing can be accentuated in institutional environments where research writing is not discussed because academic writing is seen as universal and normalised (Starke-Meyerring 2011).

Facilitator-led writing retreats can alleviate writing anxieties to a certain extent and lead to increased productivity as writers become part of a community of practice united by their writing (Cunningham 2022). For example, writing retreats continue to be used in different iterations for writing skills development (Quynn and Stewart 2021). Regular retreats over one year can increase participants productivity and writing confidence (Quynn and Stewart 2021). Nevertheless, more research is needed on why candidates continue to attend writing groups. This focus prompted the research reported in this paper.

Research-writer identity

Researchers have paid a great deal of attention to how HDR candidates develop their identity during candidacy using various labels and definitions. In a systematic review of the literature on HDR academic identity, Inouye and McAlpine (2019) identified key elements which form researcher identity: awareness of voice, knowledge acquisition, autonomy, confidence, and position. Further, Castelló et al. (2020) identified four overlapping dimensions of researcher identity as: 1) being socially constructed; 2) having multiple identities; 3) changing; and 4) developing over time. In other words, identities form over time through action and feedback from respected others, such as a community of research-writers. Researcher identity is connected to one's social identity (Davis and Lester 2016; Inouye and McAlpine 2019) through interacting

with peers and support networks (Mantai 2015). Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, and Militello (2008) and Metz (2001) found doctoral candidates' social backgrounds, including race, class, and gender, contributed to the construction of their identities as doctoral candidates. Additionally, Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, and Militello (2008) explored the collective journeys of developing identities, which points to further research considering group trajectories of doctoral candidates. Yet, there is a paucity of research exploring how writing groups can contribute to the identity development of HDR candidates.

Writing groups help develop writing skills, particularly a writer's voice. Finding a voice and becoming an 'expert' are integral to forming a research-writer identity, particularly for doctoral candidates who often downplay their role as 'expert' (Davis and Lester 2016). A writer's voice is linked to research-writer identity, with Mantai (2015; see also Kamler and Thomson 2014) arguing external recognition influences individual acceptance and validation of such identity. Academic support provided by an expert facilitator can also validate the developing identities of emerging scholars (Coffman et al. 2016). Much of this research has pointed to how HDR candidates negotiate their identity with others and seek validation as 'experts', but little research has examined how they develop as specifically research-writers in the context of a writing group. Thus, in this paper, we consider the impact of RW@M in nurturing research-writer identities through regular discussions about our experiences as research-writers and researchers more broadly.

Wellbeing

In addition to insecurities about research writing linked to a lack of experience and self-doubt, HDR candidates also struggle with isolation (Cameron 2009; Davis and Lester 2016). They are required to balance the demands of research writing with family, work, and other existing commitments which can contribute to ongoing anxiety (Beasy et al. 2020). Such challenges for research-writers at different levels were further exacerbated during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (Ashencaen Crabtree, Sara, and Hemingway 2020).

Connecting with fellow research-writers can help HDR candidates develop confidence and combat isolation (Kozar and Lum 2013). HDR candidates report satisfaction when discussing their contributions in a research community (Wilson and Cutri 2021). Engagement in writing groups motivates candidates to continue their PhD regardless of difficulties, by helping maintain a balance between their experiences and challenges (McAlpine and Amundsen 2009). Academic communities can be a source of empowerment for doctoral scholars and prompt positive wellbeing outcomes such as feelings of 'enthusiasm, inspiration, support, meaningfulness, contribution, belonging, worthiness' (Schmidt and Hansson 2018, 9). Similarly, writing groups also function well to address wellbeing concerns of academics (Eardley, Banister, and Fletcher 2020).

Writing groups can provide a community for HDR candidates with a group's collective identity developing a sense of belonging and shared agency (McAlpine and Amundsen 2009). Creating a thriving community, based on Wenger's theorisation of Communities of Practice (CoP), is dependent on the presence of a safe space, agreed goals, shared food, celebrations of achievements, collaboration over time, academic support, confidence in one's abilities, and improving skills (Wenger 1998). In developing a CoP, Coffman et al. (2016) highlighted the significance of transformational learning, with researcher identities shaped over time as they found their voices through working as a group. Furthermore, such communities of practice can promote wellbeing, for example, by employing mindfulness practices such as breathing exercises (Woloshyn et al. 2022). Studies continue to support the establishment of writing groups for doctoral candidates to foster a research community and develop research capacity (Tyndall et al. 2019). Other research on promoting wellbeing for university students (Priestley et al. 2022) identified similar key principles, namely the need to create an inclusive community to alleviate social isolation and fostering regular positive social interactions. These best practice principles which were present in the RW@M group, we argue, helped to enhance participants' wellbeing.

Regular writing groups which focus on the research-writer rather than the writing process may enhance an individual's research identity and a sense of wellbeing (Eardley, Banister, and Fletcher 2020, 2). Danvers, Hinton-Smith, and Webb's (2019) study of facilitators evaluated their power relations and feminist ethics in creating a supportive pedagogical space to write alongside doctoral candidates they also supervised or worked with in the same department. They concluded that writing groups may 'support the process of both [the] research itself and the identity shifts involved in becoming a researcher' (34). Our paper complements such research by examining doctoral candidates' perspectives by focusing on the writer rather than the writing and the features of the space and facilitator rather than the ethics of facilitating such a space. While existing literature supports the benefits of writing groups for developing research writing and identity and enhancing wellbeing, our research brings together these disparate aims in a community of research-writers for HDRs led by an experienced facilitator. The following section explains how we operated as a collective.

The ResearchWriters@Magill group

RW@M was established by the facilitator in 2018 to complement UniSA's existing genre-based research writing workshops, 'Shut up and write' sessions, and occasional day-long writing retreats. This optional activity was promoted to all HDR candidates via email and the university's skills development website. From 2018 to 2021, there was an approximate total of 40 HDR candidates who attended RW@M, although at each session, typically up to 15 people would attend. The characteristics of the group are described in Table 1, based on Haas's typology (2014). This typology of writers' groups is ideal for reflecting the diversity of such groups and provides a useful tool to describe the variables contributing to our group's operation.

Table 1. Characteristics of the *ResearchWriters@Magill* group.

Dimension	*RW@M* variables
1 Purpose	To enhance research writing practices to improve completion rates and establish networks among HDR candidates. According to the registration portal: 'Each session will have a different inspiration and insight into research writing to discuss. Feel the magic of writing in this space. Participants are always amazed at how "productive" they can be'.
2 Membership	Open to HDR students at all levels of candidature. Students were able to attend on an ad-hoc basis. Students were not required to make an ongoing commitment to attend. Voluntary attendance, with approximately 10–15 HDR candidates attending each session.
3 Leadership	Expert-led by research writing educator of more than 20 years experience. She became increasingly focused on developing strengths of research-writers, including the development of resilience skills.
4 Contact	Face-to-face, then online meetings from March 2020.
5 Frequency	Wednesdays (fortnightly), 12–5 pm. Students were invited (in the registration portal) to 'join the 5-hour opportunity to write in the company of research candidates and network with them around the topic of research writing'. Students were welcome to drop in or stay for the full 5-hour timeslot.
6 Place	A university library room with computer pool of 15 workstations and projection but only two small windows.
7 In-meeting activities	(1) Starting: 30-min writing on personal research topic in silence (2) Introduction: everyone celebrating a research success or discussing a challenge (3) 30-min facilitator-stimulated small-group discussion about being successful research-writers and refining research writing habits (4) 1.5-hour Pomodoro-style writing (25-min writing, 5-min break for ergonomic stretches, movement, chat, refreshment) (5) 15-min break to chat or walk outside or keep writing (6) Another 1.5 h Pomodoro-style writing (7) Optional: 30-min individual consultations with facilitator for feedback on drafts or to ask questions (outside the room).
8 Between-meeting activities	Candidates continued their own research-related writing activities

The format of writing activities and discussion topics about being research-writers was flexible. The group activities and discussions were set up by the facilitator in response to topics which had been raised by the participants themselves. The order of activities (as above in Table 1) was consistent per session with the length of activities modified by the group based on our needs.

Methodology and methods

Data collection

As the researchers were also the participants in this study, we used collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013) to critically reflect on our experiences with RW@M. Autoethnography involves writing and interpreting the self (Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones 2017), and has been used in other writing group studies to privilege the voices of HDR candidates (Pretorius and Cutri 2019; Woloshyn et al. 2022). Collaborative autoethnography invites researchers collectively to interrogate commonalities and differences in their separate accounts, and then discover themes or common meanings in their reflections (Blalock and Akehi 2018; Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013).

All RW@M attendees were invited to participate. Participation involved responding to two prompts (with a limit of 500 words each), namely:

(1) why they attended RW@M sessions and their experiences as a member of RW@M; and
(2) how involvement developed transferable skills as a research-writer (henceforth known as the 'spill-over' effect).

Authors Arnis and Monica facilitated the prompts via email outside of the sessions before compiling them together. Creating the narrative as a collective fostered deeper insight into the benefits of RW@M. As per Blalock and Akehi's (2018) findings, reflection and interpretation of shared storytelling can foster transformative learning as well as individual and collective identity development for HDR candidates.

Participants

In this multidisciplinary and international group, the self-selected authors included eight PhD candidates at varying stages of candidature and from diverse disciplines (refer Table 2), and the group facilitator (Monica) . The authors had a diversity of backgrounds with various work experiences prior to and during their candidature as is shown in Table 2. Shwikar and Arnis were International PhD candidates from Egypt and Indonesia while Vihara was a new migrant from Sri Lanka. Chloe, Katherine, Annette, Carolyn, and Nevena were Australians from both urban and rural contexts, of whom two had extensive teaching experience internationally.[2]

Authors attendance of RW@M ranged from 6 to 21 of the 26 sessions (mean = 13) held between October 2018 and March 2020 (prior to COVID-19 restrictions). While the face-to-face nature of the group was valued, such groups can also be online (e.g. Woloshyn et al. 2022). From March 2020 this RW@M group continued online after the advent of COVID-19 until March 2021 when the facilitator retired.

All authors consented to participate in this research study and collaborated during the writing process by meeting fortnightly, initially face-to-face, and then virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevena had to withdraw during the write-up of this article, due to changing circumstances, but her contributions are valuable, and the author listing acknowledges this work. This paper briefly discusses the experience of writing this paper collaboratively but mentions of working online through the pandemic are incidental and not the key focus of this paper.

Table 2. Relevant demographics of the participants.

Name	Age	PhD Stage	Discipline	Background	Location	Prior professional experience	Tertiary teaching experience	RW@M participation N = 28
Chloe Cannell	20–29	Continuing	Creative writing	Domestic	Urban	Hospitality manager	Casual sessional tutor	10
Vihara Maheepala	40–49	Continuing	Education	Permanent resident	Urban	Secondary English teacher	No experience	21
Carolyn McCosh	50–59	Continuing	Education	Domestic	Interstate	International educator	Casual sessional tutor	10
Katherine McLachlan	40–49	Continuing	Law/ Criminology	Domestic	Urban	Criminologist	Lecturer	10
Shwikar Othman	30–39	Completing	Midwifery	International	Urban	Academic/ lecturer	Lecturer	11
Annette Morphett	50–59	Continuing	Education	Domestic	Rural	Rural primary school teacher	Casual sessional tutor	6
Arnis Silvia	30–39	Completing	TESOL	International	Varied	Academic/ lecturer	Lecturer	13
Nevena Simic	50–59	Commencing	Social work	Domestic	Urban	Mental health social worker	Adjunct lecturer	9
Monica Behrend	60–69	Facilitator	Education & TESOL	Domestic	Urban	International educator	Adjunct lecturer	28

Legend: Candidature stage: Commencing ≤ 0.5 year; Continuing 0.5 − 2.5 years; Completing ≥ 2.5 years
Age groups: 20–29 years; 30–39 years; 40–49 years; 50–59 years; 60–69 years.

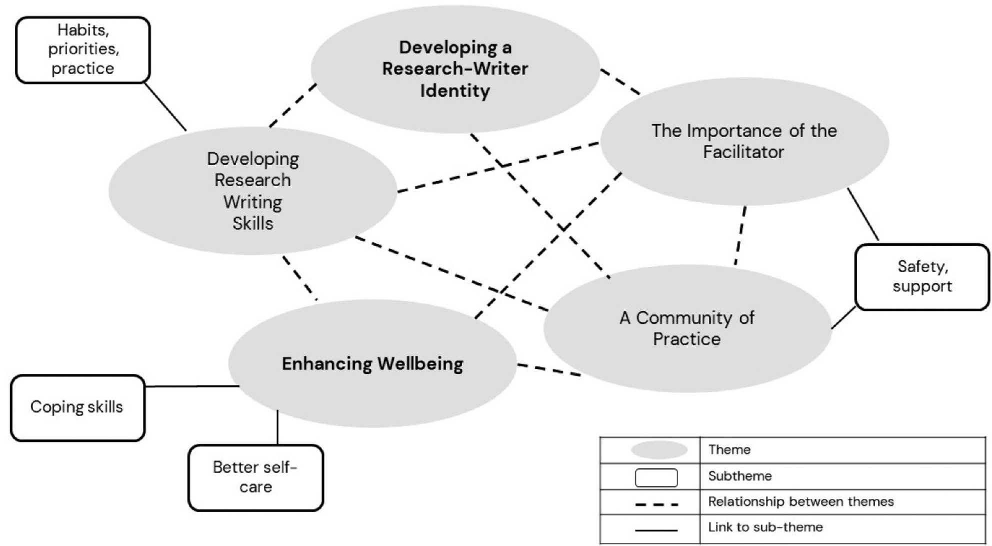

Figure 1. Thematic map.

Data analysis

Shwikar and Katherine used reflexive thematic analysis to identify themes in the data (Braun and Clarke 2019). Both authors were familiar with this approach and volunteered to facilitate the data analysis. This method is used for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun and Clarke 2019). As a research method, Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach is atheoretical and flexible, an advantage when working with multidisciplinary authors.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were used. First, Shwikar and Katherine familiarised themselves with the data. Second, Katherine and Shwikar individually generated initial codes. Third, they independently searched for themes, and collated the data. Fourth, they reviewed the themes in partnership, to confirm the 'thematic map' of the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 87; Refer Figure 1). Fifth, they defined and named the five themes. The themes were then confirmed with the additional authors before the results were drafted. Results of this thematic analysis are reported using excerpts of the participants' individual reflective writings – or thick description (Balogh 2020; Geertz 1973).

Results

The common themes identified were development of both research writing skills and a research-writer identity, enhanced wellbeing, and the establishment of a CoP. While writing the paper, a fourth theme emerged: the importance of the facilitator. Each theme is explored in turn below and we close with reflections on writing this paper collaboratively.

Developing research writing skills

The initial purpose of RW@M was to enhance research writing practices. The facilitator Monica drew from a range of writers' work to encourage candidates to discuss effective research writing strategies. A key research-based text focusing on research-writers post-PhD was Helen Sword's (2017) book *Air and Light and Time and Space*. During sessions many of Sword's suggested activities became

prompts for discussions about being a research-writer. Furthermore, advice about writing from prolific fiction authors (e.g. De Guin, Zuzac) were used for inspiration. Vihara recognised there are various ways of working with the material:

> The [RW@M] is a space for productive writing … [it] depends on the inspiration and motivation which we are constantly provided with through excerpts from well-known research writing guides such as Helen Sword's (2017) inspirational work.

RW@M encouraged participants to establish independent writing habits and strategies. Shwikar noted she developed habits 'such as setting priorities for my study plan and day-to-day agenda'. Arnis replicated RW@M working patterns with her overseas partner via video conferencing to write together for 1–2 hours and 'keep each other accountable'. Similarly, Katherine reported 'I have used some of the specific study techniques at home, like Pomodoro. I … also recognise that 8 hours of desk time is not necessarily any more productive than 2 hours'. Carolyn was inspired 'to focus on writing techniques that I have learnt and thus, as a result, write for greater clarity and coherence in a style that is engaging and conveys my message'.

RW@M also encouraged participants to just write. Rather than labour over the misguided aim of achieving perfection in our writing, Chloe learned that:

> We are likely achieving the best writing so far in our academic lives and yet we also now know that the writing will never be perfect. We can write and edit for however long and it could still have areas for improvement. While many of the words achieved at [RW@M] are likely good, the goal is to achieve by writing something. If that goal fails, success is unlocking an idea for writing or a plan for writing.

As noted by Carolyn, 'the opportunity to write freely without any distractions is also a major benefit … During these sessions I am able to refocus and get back on track, usually completing writing or organising myself again so I can concentrate more fully on my research'. As Shwikar stated, regarding Monica's feedback, '(y)ou squeezed my brain … [your] multi-level feedback and support enabled … [and enhanced] my research writing'. Collectively these new writing skills were not just behavioural, but as theorised by Sword (2017) also artisanal (thinking about the creating process), social (valuing dialogue about writing) and emotional (engaging positively with feelings about writing).

Developing a research-writer identity

By encouraging participants to write in company and discuss their approaches to research writing with one another, RW@M promoted the emergence of identities as research-writers. The participants started to think differently about themselves as research-writers. Carolyn stated:

> … critiquing an author's work through a writer's lens, I have become more aware of the elements of good pieces of writing. Reading different authors' work has assisted me to develop my own writing style. Individual consultation provided the opportunity for discussions about writing which included feedback on the candidate's own text.

Arnis described her growth in self-identity as a research-writer who had ' … not been magically turned into a great research-writer, but at least I knew the pathway to get there, and I am on my way, on the slow line, but on a pleasant ride'. As highlighted by Nevena, RW@M teaches participants to 'practice hearing my own voice, over and over whether in a sentence or two or a future writing plan'.

The group dynamics also fostered the development of research-writer identities. Isolated candidates can lack confidence in their work, compared with those who regularly work on campus, due to having restricted contact with fellow candidates and other on-campus facilities (Kozar and Lum 2013). Annette, who lives in a rural area, drove over 2 hours to attend RW@M, because she always thought she was 'not a writer' until 'the group allowed me to connect with other members of the group and to build my knowledge of academic writing'.

Arnis found that RW@M developed her identity as a research-writer:

> ... among other identities ... (e.g., PhD student, remote mother, long-distant partner, social actor in home country ...). Borrowing James Paul Gee (2000) perspectives in seeing identity, being a researcher in this community enables my affinity perspective of identity or 'A-identities', i.e., the kind of identity built by shared experiences as part of an affinity group, which according to Gee's definition is a group that share 'allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices' (105).

The social aspect of the writing fostered through group discussion about research writing and relaxed interaction during breaks enabled participants be reflexive about being writers, hence fostering their identity as research-writers. The participants had a genuine interest in each other's research topics too, validating one another about the importance of their research and hence the writing of it.

Enhancing wellbeing

Developing identity as a research-writer and member of an academic community was one of a range of benefits RW@M offered participants to enhance wellbeing. RW@M was developed not just to establish 'behavioural habits of getting down to write, it also needs to deal with the wellbeing of PhD candidates and support them into developing effective habits becoming research-writers' [Monica]. Yet the wellbeing benefits exceeded Monica's expectations.

Participants identified spill-over effects of RW@M were transferable skills beyond research writing. They include skills such as 'coping strategies', priority setting, managing difficult situations, reducing guilt about work-life balance, and taking greater steps to actively achieve better self-care. Monica fostered a pleasant working environment through nature footage and images, and regular stretch and refreshment breaks. Participants appreciated these measures and some brought them into their regular working environment. For example, Vihara reported:

> The nature photos and walks have become part of my daily schedule now as a PhD student. My workspace no longer looks like a Frankenstein–inspired artwork of faded bricks, but have been replaced by scenes of natural beauty, which have served to help me relax and feel generally cheerful when I am no longer staring at the computer screen. I also take two long breaks daily to go for 'nature-walks'. These have significantly improved my writing, as well as my disposition and outlook, not to mention my physical health.

RW@M reinforced some of the research writing strategies already appreciated by participants, such as 'the joys of working with others independently and collaboratively ... [where this enthusiasm] spills over into desiring to work collaboratively with others' [Chloe]. This collaboration was also discovered by Annette, who prior to the pandemic had found it 'was difficult to create a community of practice online'. Participants, through social interaction about research writing, found support and 'connection' [Chloe], by 'listening to each other' [Arnis] and 'sharing stories' [Carolyn]. Chloe identified collegiality as central to promoting wellbeing, saying:

> ... the desire for collegiality and/or community with our HDR peers ... helps foster wellbeing and writing productivity which can spill-over to a positive experience as HDR candidates because we make an ongoing choice to prioritise peer community building. If we think of the spill-over as filling our HDR cup up with so much collegiality, productivity and wellbeing-affirming behaviours that it overflows into other areas of our experience as HDR candidates. It reminds us to check in with our HDR peers in our separate offices and encourage them to join our writing group or make their own. It spills over into desiring to work collaboratively with others.

RW@M fostered wellbeing by providing 'emotional and psychological support' [Katherine] through the development of mutual respect, trust, and empathy between group members. Nevena referred to it as 'a safe zone' and Chloe stated, 'We are privileged to hear each other's stories of failure'.

RW@M sessions have also used mindfulness techniques such as breathing and focus (Woloshyn et al. 2022), and the calming effect of nature to promote wellbeing. Images of Australian flora or

a nature *YouTube* were presented during the writing time. The use of underwater images was inspired by one research candidate's knowledge of the calming meditative value of the colour blue (Nichols 2014). One participant reported that the group has fostered:

> A deeper focus on physical and emotional wellbeing, a new awareness of the role played by nature on wellbeing and the knowledge that I am not alone with the problems encountered as a PhD student . . . The nature-oriented slides of native Australian flora used by the facilitator . . . to accompany the motivational and instructional quotes and tips she uses daily to inspire the group have had a calm and soothing effect on me, especially when I arrive at the group quite frustrated with the writing which I am not doing more often than not [Vihara].

By discussing experiences and setbacks, RW@M members learned that their experiences were shared. Most candidates dealt with self-doubt and self-criticism at different stages of their candidature. Vihara found that 'it is not only comforting to know that everyone has common concerns, but it is also a new learning curve, literally influenced by strangers'. Sharing everyday experiences of successes and failures developed participants' resilience. Shwikar found the group allowed her to 'celebrate success as well as failure and develop strategies to re-evaluate the process and find the problem to solve it critically'. To navigate the HDR journey's 'ups and downs', as Shwikar called them, participants must 'practice resilience' [Shwikar] and develop resilience strategies. Monica explicitly ensured 'resilience strategies [were] on the agenda' by teaching strategies from resilience training courses and scholarship. Some resilience strategies practiced were voicing gratitude, expressing emotions, sharing food and using movement. Practising these strategies every session and sharing resources helped participants prioritise wellbeing to better manage their HDR writing experience, and overall life. Katherine learned 'greater self-care' from the group which enabled her to take small or larger breaks from study without feeling guilty.

The facilitator deliberately strove to create a workable space in a small 15-person computer room with only 2 small windows .

> 'I aim to create a welcoming space, a space for important research writing conversations as a group or in sub-groups, and have some inspiration by way of input . . . by making the room a special place' [Monica].

The importance of 'place' included the sanctity of our room and its rituals.

> After months of sharing stories, inspirations, and accounting for goals in writing, that space felt different to me now. It has meaning, it has the aura of interaction, it has the left trace of energy where some PhD students are working on a thesis that was not only engaging but also impactful in the future. I felt the sacredness of the room. I felt welcome in this space, not as a PhD student, but as a PhD researcher and writer [Arnis].

Our mutual connection extended outside of this small research community: for example, a participant's partner bringing baked goods 'aims to support us all' [Monica]. Vihara stated 'there is an atmosphere of care within the space, and the availability of healthy snacks and tea and coffee is not the least of them'. Likewise, the use of food breaks contributed to positive socialising and 'added to this sense of sharing and community that has developed over time' [Carolyn].

In addition to nurturing our bodies with food, ergonomic movement was also prioritised. We maintained our physical wellbeing by stretching and moving together, thereby establishing healthy exercise habits in and beyond the group. Vihara learned:

> . . . [many techniques] about maintaining physical wellbeing, such as correct posture, the importance of regular stretching and the long walk we always have during the single long break in the session. The facilitator makes sure that all the writers go for a walk along with others and never by themselves. This too gives us the opportunity to interact and learn while looking after our physical wellbeing.

In summary, for many participants, RW@M:

> . . . has become a space which has multiple functions on different levels: it addresses the social needs of PhD students on an emotional level; the physical wellbeing of writers who are used to sitting for long periods of time and most of all the writing, which research is all about [Vihara].

RW@M's wellbeing outcomes are absent in previous studies on writing groups, although Murray (2014) cites health research arguing that connectedness and positive emotions influence wellbeing. Nevertheless, the wellbeing of doctoral candidates is gaining attention (e.g. Pretorius, Macaulay, and Cahusac de Caux 2019).

A community of practice

Through regular RW@M attendance, participants gradually developed into a community with established routines, tools, gestures, and rituals (as per Table 1), despite an absent shared research focus. Routine was fundamental to the effectiveness of RW@M. Topics for discussion differed every session and provided 'a platform where [participants] can share their stories every fortnight regarding their successes and struggles' [Annette]. The facilitator introduced the discussion topics so that all participants, including newcomers, could immediately discuss their own research writing experiences. While the CoP routines, tools and gestures remained stable, rituals evolved, involving 'local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter' (Wenger 1998, 125).

Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of CoP were evident within RW@M. First, mutual engagement was reflected in our common purpose to engage and learn from others in a supportive environment. Through our interactions, our individual and collective identities as research-writers were established. Second, joint enterprise served the needs of individual participants as well as the collective group and its success can be attributed to our ongoing commitment to the group to achieve our research writing objectives. While participants may have had individual reasons for attending, the RW@M CoP had a collectively negotiated mission. Third, the community was also established through a shared repertoire of practices, such as writing, exercise and food breaks, facilitator input and reflective conversations.

All members contributed to the RW@M joint enterprise, such that:

> We are united in separate but similar goals ... sharing activities provide opportunities to communicate and engage our own research with an academic audience. These exercises are not only important for meeting research capabilities promoted within our university, they also allow for another form of success: sharing and learning from each other. In our sessions we are provided with an insight into how other PhD candidates face setbacks across a range of fields, levels and experiences ... to support each other in this space ... [We] have created a community of research writers supporting one another's wins, losses and ongoing desire to learn [Chloe].

Participants found RW@M to be 'an excellent place for socialising and networking with other PhD candidates ... [to] support each other and help' [Shwikar]. Katherine stated that 'an unintended or unexpected benefit of [RW@M] is that I have established additional supportive communities, where we all respect and care for each other'. Candidates combatted isolation by coming together physically, sharing ideas and experiences, and supporting each other psychologically and emotionally. Members who often felt isolated in their offices identified that RW@M provided a sense of community that was otherwise absent from their daily workspace.

> I didn't feel like I am a PhD researcher in that office, I just feel like I am a student who is assigned a desk to work. That office felt like a mere place for me, with no shared culture, habit, rituals, meaningful interaction; it is not a space with meaning and sense of belonging. Being friends with some PhD students gave me a sense of support and also solidarity. We check up on each other's wellbeing and we listen to each other's hardships in academic and personal life, which was beautiful [Arnis].

> The sharing and being a part of a writing group has seen me not only develop my skills but has had a significant effect on my mental wellbeing ... I am connecting with others and sharing ideas ... It has been a highlight of my week catching up and connecting with others [Carolyn].

Another strength identified was the diversity of the group who attended.

> I like . . . that the group is very diverse: we come from different schools, different cultures and countries, and yet many of our experiences are similar. The group highlights our similarities and leverages our differences to help achieve our common goals [Katherine].

These common goals also bonded the participants as a community. We learned that:

> Everything we are dealing with is normal, it's rarely a unique experience and other people have had to also address various issues and often have advice about what to do (or not do) and what has been helpful for them. It is a non-judgmental group which I really appreciate. I find it provides me with support in a way that (in my experience) the broader academy does not [Katherine].

The sense of community also came from the communal respect, support and safety offered by RW@M, '(r)espect of diversity, sharing of space and goods fits within a supportive network . . . to practice talking, thinking, and self-expressing' [Nevena]. Participants who joined at different stages felt unconditionally welcomed: 'I felt the sense of community from my very first session' [Chloe]. Individually connecting with others was also seen as 'highly beneficial in making connections with other students and supporting each other in our research' [Carolyn].

The importance of the facilitator

The importance of the facilitator became a re-emerging theme from group discussions following data collection. Participants agreed that Monica aimed to do more than establish effective behavioural habits for becoming research-writers; she ensured that the space was respectful and safe so participants were relaxed to voice their experiences openly and discuss ongoing challenges. Monica's warm and inviting personality enhanced the sense of safety. Annette explained that Monica is '[an] engaging presenter, with a genuine interest and care for her participants . . . [with a] lovely supportive persona'.

Participants could have individual consultations with the facilitator to ask questions, receive feedback or even pilot an interview protocol. While not all participants sought individual time with Monica, the sessions were notably beneficial. Carolyn found the facilitator consultations 'invaluable' and looked 'forward to Monica's insights which inspire me and give me more persistence to keep going on my research'. Similarly, Annette said:

> I find Monica's sessions invaluable. She provides a calm, supportive environment in which to listen, contemplate and discuss a wide variety of areas around all things doctoral writing. Monica's knowledge is broad and deep, and I always learn a lot no matter what the topic she has planned. Her sessions are well-planned, but she is also open to being led by the needs of the group at the time. This is probably what I appreciate the most, as her individual support and guidance she has offered me has steered me in the right direction (even if at the time I had no idea where I was headed).

For Vihara, one of the best things about RW@M was: 'We can actually get immediate feedback and help from the facilitator if we need it. This feedback is always constructive and helpful and personally I feel it fuels our motivation to keep on writing'.

Monica was also involved in discussions as 'our writing colleague' [Nevena] to help identify new 'perspectives' on writing. Her enthusiasm and concern for the students went beyond the role of a mere facilitator, as she sought to inspire, support and mentor (Carolyn) and most of all to fulfill her vision 'to assist students in their journey to complete their PhD' (Annette). Ultimately Monica created a space that responded to HDR candidates' needs by 'providing the connection and support that all researchers need to complete their work to a higher standard and gain confidence and satisfaction in doing this' [Carolyn].

Summary

In writing this paper we moved from writing independently but collaboratively, to writing collaboratively independently. In other words, our writing group met face-to-face to work on our writing, but when we set to write a paper about this experience much of our work was written privately and independently of each other. Using collaborative autoethnography to create our collective narrative revealed further insights about the process of working collaboratively as a doctoral writing group, especially given pandemic restrictions forced us to work virtually for the most part. While our differences offered new ways of thinking and working in our doctoral writing group, such differences proved challenging while writing a paper as a collective. These differences included the various fields, writing styles, stages of candidature, and professional and personal responsibilities, to name a few, which impacted the time and energy everyone could give to writing and editing. From this we realised that aiming for an ongoing 'equal' distribution of work was unattainable. We recognised it came down to what each could give and that would change over time, especially as members of our group completed their PhDs. Negotiating time, leadership, and approaches to writing openly with compassion helped us complete this paper. Our findings of this paper were contributing factors to us writing collaboratively including the openness to developing our research writing skills, appreciating our different researcher and research-writer identities, supporting our individual wellbeing, and working together as a community practice.

In summary, the data identified that RW@M enabled us to develop our skills and identities as research-writers. RW@M became a CoP which celebrated achievements and offered a safe space to discuss challenges while providing participants with strategies and opportunities to enhance our wellbeing. We shared stories, were respectful and empathetic, and practised problem-solving and resilience. Crucial to the success of RW@M was the facilitator's in-depth knowledge and commitment to supporting the development of a community of research-writers.

Discussion

Research writing groups share a common goal to enhance participants' writing. Our doctoral writing group not only developed our research writing skills but recognised our identities as emerging research-writers and nurtured our wellbeing through developing cognitive skills and social interaction. Our CoP had an 'aura' of safety and support that normalised open discussions of challenges, offered strategies to overcome them, and ultimately promoted wellbeing and resilience through shared vulnerability. This openness allowed us to communicate with compassion while writing our paper together online, a finding shared by Woloshyn et al. (2022), who identified additional challenges through collaborative writing in an online CoP. Our CoP transformed us from PhD candidates to research-writers, as also explained by Lassig, Dillon, and Diezmann (2013). By writing independently but together in the same room, we became a productive community that shared successes and struggles as research-writers. Our experiences writing this paper using collaborative autoethnography produced further insights on our individual and collective development, which strengthens Blalock and Akehi's (2018) findings on this methodology's potential for transformative learning for doctoral candidates.

The RW@M group enhanced participants' wellbeing similar to Carlino's (2012) and Verlie et al.'s (2018) research. Carlino's (2012) study on thesis writing workshops found that building support and mutual respect over time allowed for open dialogue on emotional challenges related to writing. Verlie et al.'s 2018, 155) student-led study found writing together provides opportunities to create an 'assembling refuge', have 'nourishing conversations', make 'kin', build community and nurture relationships where participants support and care for one another 'fostering joy and pleasure'. Resilience strategies helped combat the isolation and loneliness often experienced by PhD candidates (Wood and Breyer 2017). This study supports previous research which found candidates are seeking that educational institutions take collective responsibility for candidates' intrapersonal wellbeing, rather than it

being viewed as an individual responsibility (Pretorius, Macaulay, and Cahusac de Caux 2019). Similarly, Beasy et al.'s (2020) study on wellbeing in writing groups supported the need for institutions to provide productive writing spaces. Our university-supported writing group was an effective way to attend to candidate wellbeing so we could, as Pretorius, Macaulay, and Cahusac de Caux (2019, 5) explain, 'flourish emotionally'. Or in the words of Eardley, Banister, and Fletcher (2020, 193), writing retreats 'create collegiate support networks, and for some academics, enable them to nurture and fulfil a key aspect of their academic identity, through which they can flourish'.

We described spill-over effects in terms of self-care and wellbeing techniques, as well as enhanced self-belief in our research-writer identities. Practice changes occurred both within the CoP and in our personal lives, reflecting Galizzi and Whitmarsh's (2019) proposition that changes in one behaviour affect different, subsequent behaviours. As our confidence and capability as research-writers developed, this flowed into other areas of our lives, a finding supported by Pierce, Gardner, and Crowley (2015), who argue that self-esteem within the work-related environment may have spill-over effects on physical and mental health, family relationships, and other environments.

As a facilitated writing group, RW@M had institutional support and was part of the facilitator's workload. Monica developed the writing group in response to HDR candidates' need for a regular dedicated writing group based at the Magill campus. Her position as a research educator at the university and member of our CoP raises questions of power, much like Danvers, Hinton-Smith, and Webb's (2019) explore in their pedagogical approach to a doctoral writing group. We recognise Monica's goals for the group aligns with institutional pressures for timely completion (Main 2014), but ultimately Monica's initiative always centred our needs as participants. Though we cannot separate our desire to write from the external motivations of the demands of higher education and our professional and personal lives, we voluntarily participated in RW@M and sought Monica's input, where relevant, on research writing. The facilitator's expert advice was not used to provide collective feedback on writing, as is typical for many research writing groups (see Aitchison 2009). Instead, Monica focused on introducing habits of successful research-writers (Sword 2017) to develop positive research-writer identity, wellbeing, and connection, and provided one-on-one feedback to participants by request. Monica's caring personality ensured the room was a 'special place' in which a culture of respect was developed, where participants could speak openly and honestly. She also established session routines that were modified according to participants' needs. The unique characteristics of Monica contributed to RW@M's success including her personality and extensive experience in higher education supporting and supervising both domestic and international students across disciplines. We recognise that not every institution has a Monica, but those seeking to replicate our writing group model can reflect on the facilitator attributes we have described such as a supportive persona, collaboration across disciplines, and experience with international candidates. Alongside a suitable facilitator, institutional support is endorsed as a priority (Bergen et al. 2020; Beasy et al. 2020; Coffman et al. 2016). We cannot overstate the importance of institutional support in terms of sufficient resourcing (staffing, space, books, preparation time, etc.) to ensure the sustainability of writing groups do not rely on the goodwill of volunteers.

Our research supports previous scholarship that educational institutions take collective responsibility for candidates' intrapersonal wellbeing, rather than it being viewed as an individual responsibility (Pretorius, Macaulay, and Cahusac de Caux 2019). Similarly, Beasy et al.'s (2020) study on wellbeing in writing groups supported the need for institutions to provide productive writing spaces. Universities can further support students' wellbeing by facilitating social engagement (Priestley 2022) and providing staff support in the form of a facilitator (Cunningham 2022). Our university-supported writing group was an effective way to attend to candidate wellbeing so we could, as Pretorius, Macaulay and Cahusac de Caux (2019, 5) explain, 'flourish emotionally'. This group endorsed good principles of teaching, including facilitating opportunities for positive social interaction and being an inclusive community of HDR candidates with a staff member. These principles have been identified as important for all universities, particularly to address mental health issues for students (Priestley et al. 2022).

Conclusion

This writing group was established to help enhance HDR candidates' writing skills. Nevertheless, RW@M led to some expected and unexpected benefits. What began as a group of HDR candidates who wanted to develop their research writing skills, became a supportive CoP which enhanced individuals' confidence to write, research-writer identities, wellbeing, and resilience. This all occurred in a writing group with a focus on the writer rather than providing feedback on writing.

Our findings highlight multiple avenues to expand upon in future research, such as writing collaboratively online amidst covid-19 challenges and developing research-writer identities through PhD submission. Since the conduct of this research, Katherine, Shwikar and Annette have all completed their studies and received conferral of their PhD, while Chloe and Arnis are close to thesis submission. Future research could expand on other factors contributing to research-writer identity and the evolution of a CoP within a HDR writing group such as age and gender. While RW@M was conducted in an Australian university context face-to-face, the implementation of such a research writing group would be possible in any context.

The RW@M makes a unique contribution to recent literature around HDR writing groups by showing how skills practiced within the space are transferable to our wider professional and personal lives. By encouraging transferable skills or spill-over effects, we argue HDRs developed capabilities that enhanced their confidence to accept a research-writer identity. Our paper highlights the possibilities of informal and regular writing groups to develop research-writers at all stages of candidature. Our experiences provide evidence for the encouragement of HDR candidates to become involved in regular research writing groups. We suggest this approach for HDRs writing a thesis as a strategy alongside genre workshops and other skills development during their candidature. By emphasising the importance of an expert facilitator, this study extends recent literature, for Monica was crucial to the group's success. Facilitators of existing and new writing groups may not share Monica's specific characteristics, but considering their own social and behavioural approach and incorporating the elements of RW@M described in this paper can impact the success of doctoral writing groups. The long-lasting impact of involvement in RW@M is demonstrated in this statement by Chloe, who said, '(t)he HDR experience is small in the scheme of my life so far or my future career but it has a large impact on my life and will continue to do so; [RW@M] seems like an integral part of that experience now'.

Notes

1. Though women make up a slightly higher proportion of humanities and social sciences candidates (Main 2014), the gendered aspect of identity is not a focus of this paper.
2. As a self-selected subgroup of RW@M the fact that all participants were female was unintentional. RW@M did include 5 male participants who attended at various times between 2018 and 2021.

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