Studies in Continuing Education, 2013
Vol. 35, No. 3, 299–314, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2012.746226

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Student or scholar? Transforming identities through a research writing group

Carly J. Lassig*, Lisette H. Dillon and Carmel M. Diezmann

Centre for Learning Innovation, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

(*Received 15 July 2012; final version received 31 October 2012*)

This article explores the role a writing group played in influencing the scholarly identities of a group of doctoral students by fostering their writing expertise. While the interest in writing groups usually centres on their potential to support doctoral students to publish, few studies have been conducted and written by the students themselves. Using a situated learning perspective on identity, we explore the connection that emerged between our perceptions of ourselves as developing expertise as scholarly writers and the function of the writing group as a dynamic space for transforming our identities. Findings show that our writing group served as a flexible and interactive Community of Practice (CoP) that shaped critical and durable shifts in identity amongst members.

Keywords: doctoral pedagogy; scholarly writing; identity; writing group

Introduction

Amidst current debate about the changing face of doctoral education, little is known about the effectiveness of different methods of preparing students to develop and sustain their identities as scholarly writers. Generally, discussions about maximising the individual and collective capacities of doctoral students seldom focus on understanding the relationships and networks that support scholarly writing beyond traditional thesis production. However, there is an increasing demand for a shift from doctoral 'programmes' to doctoral 'pedagogy', which accounts for relationships between learners (doctoral students) and teachers (most often, doctoral supervisors), and their co-produced knowledge (Danby and Lee 2012).

Recent interest in exploring the link between writing-in-progress and the development of a scholarly identity has potential to inform the ways that doctoral students build a sense of capability in order to sustain their progress during the PhD experience (Baker and Lattuca 2010; Kamler 2008). In particular, the prospect of writing for publication engenders anxiety among postgraduate students who find the processes involved in becoming published to be both mysterious and daunting (Cuthbert and Spark 2008; Kamler 2008). Yet doctoral graduates now face tightening competition for placement within and beyond academia that requires increased reliance on the 'evidence' of the publication of refereed papers during candidature (Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke 2009; Kamler 2008). Despite the mounting

*Corresponding author. Email: cj.lassig@qut.edu.au

pressure on students to publish early in order to build their publication track record, institutions both in Australian and international contexts report relatively low publication rates among doctoral candidates (Kamler 2008; Lee and Kamler 2008). However, finding ways to foster the quality and output of scholarly writing from doctoral students remains elusive. This suggests it is timely to investigate beyond the mechanics of writing for publication and organisational aspects of writing groups during doctoral candidature, and further examine the nuances of interpersonal interactions and subjective processes of 'becoming' writers. In response to a need to better understand how doctoral students are shaped as writers by their academic experiences, this article reports how identities as scholarly writers can develop within a writing group as a particular Community of Practice (CoP; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998).

While writing groups have been variously described in recent times as a means to reshape the power of learning as a social experience and to shift focus from the traditional relationships with supervisors (Baker and Lattuca 2010; Maher et al. 2008), few publications give doctoral students' own perspectives (Maher et al. 2008). In order to understand the connections between students' development in writing and their scholarly identity, work is needed that explores the types of networks and relationships that shape doctoral students' identities (Baker and Lattuca 2010). We join a growing group of scholars who argue that writing groups can play a role in engaging students early in the doctoral process and support them becoming successful scholars thereby attesting to the value of such groups as a force for shaping identities (Aitchison 2010; Aitchison and Lee 2006; Lee and Boud 2003; Maher et al. 2008). This article focuses on our perceptions as students (Dillon, Lassig) whose identities as scholarly writers were altered through sustained involvement in a writing group initiated by our doctoral supervisor (Diezmann). To maintain focus on the student perspective, we purposefully employ the student voice throughout, but also incorporate commentary by our supervisor. By framing our experiences as students, within an identity perspective, our intention is to offer an exposition of how we functioned as a group and how the group contributed to our transformations from students to scholars.

Linking identity development to participation in writing groups

The term 'identity' has diverse meanings. However, regardless of personal or collective emphasis, identity is widely recognised as a powerful construct in determining and guiding the life trajectories of groups and individuals (see Schwartz, Luyckx, and Vignoles 2011). Generally, identity is viewed as an interactive process between the individual and their social context. It comprises not only 'who you think you are' (as an individual and/or collective) but also 'who you act as being' (Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011, 2) within your interpersonal and intergroup interactions, as well as the social recognition (or not) that these interactions receive from others.

Writing groups for doctoral students are an emerging phenomenon, and the practices within different groups can address the often unmet needs of students to bolster their stakes as scholarly writers (Aitchison 2009, 2010). There are various benefits that flow to members of writing groups, but they have the common purpose of seeking to build writing skills (Aitchison 2010; Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke 2009; Maher et al. 2008). One important aspect to emerge from the phenomenon of writing

groups is the key role that identity development plays in activating the desire and supporting the capacity among students to build academic proficiency (Lee and Boud 2003). The increasing interest in identity formation within academic settings appears to be closely interwoven with the extent to which individuals are strengthened (or not) by their social and scholarly affiliations (Baker and Lattuca 2010; Hodge et al. 2011; Jawitz 2009). As a tool, Lee and Boud (2003) describe the writing group as an important catalyst for helping students to forge new and sustainable academic identities that assist them to navigate through the challenges of writing for publication. In order for this to happen, it is important to recognise academic writing as 'complex disciplinary and identity work' (Kamler 2008, 284) that requires more than one-off experiences and short-term programmes that focus solely on instrumental skills. As an alternative to short-term measures, we endorse the strong connections already made in the literature between writing groups and thinking or knowledge production (Aitchison and Lee 2006), as well as the enduring social-emotional benefits derived from engaging in a peer-based writing culture (Maher et al. 2008). The advantages of writing groups are thus shown to extend well beyond the functional aspects of academic writing, in that they can serve as a critical space for the development of scholarly identities within academic environments that have grown increasingly competitive, complex and challenging.

The CoP: offering a privileged arena for identity construction

Since a writing group is fundamentally a communal activity, we examine identity from a social learning perspective using the theory of Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) that assumes identity is shaped by participatory social practices. A CoP is a group 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' (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 5). From the CoP perspective, identity development and becoming knowledgeable or skilful within a community are part of the same process (Lave 1991). While the concepts of CoP theory have been widely applied in academic settings for mindfully engaging individuals in transformative experiences through active participation (Cousin and Deepwell 2005; Dye et al. 2010; Hodge et al. 2011; Jawitz 2009; Monaghan and Columbaro 2009), it is Wenger's (1998, 2000) attention to identity that we find most applicable. According to Wenger, the connection between identity and practice is so close that they each represent 'mirror images' (1998, 149). Because of this mirroring effect, the merging of identity and practice is not limited to our social discourse but becomes a very complex interweaving between ourselves and our daily lived experiences. In particular, Wenger's (1998, 2000) conceptualisation of group participation emphasises both individual agency as well as human connectedness in the emergence of knowledge and in the constitutive effect on identities. Since all social exposure could be described in such a way, Wenger (1998, 2000) a functioning CoP is distinguished by the three requirements of *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise* and a *shared repertoire*. When all three requirements are in place, a balanced combination of formal and informal practices produces a level of learning that influences who we are, so that the tangible outcomes of a CoP lead to evolved identities.

While acknowledging that any learning we do by ourselves contributes to our identities because we are eventually altered by it, Wenger (1998) asserts that the social energy that comes from group participation has a particularly sustaining effect on our identities. For instance, within the context of the doctoral journey, the notion of becoming a scholarly writer is viewed as inseparable from the engagement within a social milieu that prizes effective participation in an intellectual community. Therefore, while group participation provides the impetus for what is possible, expected and desirable in terms of being a person who goes forth as, for instance, 'the holder of a doctorate' (Wenger 1998, 162), there are also associated aspects of self-awareness and self-reflection. In this way, Wenger (2000) links self-awareness with the shared repertoire developed through 'dense' interactions. For example, the use of a shared language about scholarly writing enables self-reflection that leads to seeing oneself in new ways and forming different self-representations. Similarly, Fitzmaurice (2011) found that fostering a culture of certain values and beliefs is more likely to influence identity formation among emerging academics than a focus on instrumental aspects such as output. Hence, the argument is that we actively produce our identities through belonging to Communities of Practice that locate us in a social landscape where our beliefs and values, as well as what we attempt to know and understand, can be successfully sustained and motivated.

Given the diversity of individuals and their experiences now found in doctoral education in Australian universities (see Pearson et al. 2011), the sense of belonging offered by the CoP represents an important opportunity for personal and professional growth. Beyond the obvious development in visible competence that people seek from group membership, there are intangible aspects that go together to support identity, such as relationships, a sense of belonging, a spirit of inquiry and professional confidence (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). Indeed, in rapidly changing environments, a functioning CoP can offer a 'home for identity', where connections made and the professional development that can ensue transcends changing landscapes (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 21). Paradoxically, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) assert that the stability of belonging to a CoP allows for greater flexibility in the face of shifting demands. Due to the typically extended nature of a CoP, the engagement of members over a longer term (as opposed to one-off learning experiences) allows for the development of different possible identity trajectories. However, the aspect of temporality within a CoP also assumes that the group will dissolve when it no longer meets the needs of its members, thereby providing flexibility not only in the accommodation of diversity but also in duration.

Overall, a CoP represents 'a privileged locus' for the creation of knowledge through mutual engagement (Wenger 1998, 214). We propose that ongoing participation in a writing group can serve as a unique space for facilitating a more rapid and meaningful transition from identities as 'doctoral students' to 'scholarly writers', that is, those who can publish, and who can develop and sustain their scholarly identities.

Context of the study and our research writing group (RWG)

Our doctoral supervisor's interest in improving the quality of her students' writing led to her initiation of a RWG as a strategy and a forum. The broad aim of the RWG

was to develop our writing expertise with little initial expectation by student members that the journey to proficiency would alter our own and others' perceptions in relation to our scholarly identities. The core group consisted of one university professor and five doctoral students in the field of education whose research focused on a broad range of issues, from early childhood to tertiary education. We all had one supervisor in common (Diezmann) – the professor who formed the group – but also had one or more additional supervisors. There were multiple challenges facing our group. These included: irregularity of meeting times; the rarity of all members being available for every meeting; our different thesis topic areas and methodologies; being at different stages of our research/thesis writing; and students who joined and left at various times, depending on their candidature progress and other commitments. Hence, we needed the RWG to have sufficient flexibility to accommodate our needs while simultaneously supporting each member of the group to become a scholarly writer. Throughout the remainder of this paper, the five doctoral students involved in the current investigation are referred by the initials 'DS' and the numbers from 1 to 5 (DS1, DS2, DS3, DS4 and DS5). The characteristics of the five doctoral students are presented in Table 1.

Our RWG had three key components comprising group sessions, an email group and our individual writing. The group sessions were central to the RWG and included: instruction and practice of writing skills, processes and strategies; a focus on elements of scholarly writing; and discussion of non-technical aspects of writing (e.g. ethics, authoring) that was led by our research supervisor. Other aspects of the sessions were more collaborative, with the lines blurring between those at different levels of expertise. This was particularly evident in sessions where members shared a sample of writing to receive feedback, or when the group jointly constructed a conference paper documenting the effectiveness of the RWG (see Lassig et al. 2009). Between group sessions, an email group kept all members informed about the group sessions, and provided the forum to share writing, feedback and reflections. The final, and most important, component of the RWG was how our individual writing improved within the context of the group sessions and email group. It was expected that we actively reflected on knowledge and skills we learned from the group sessions and the feedback we received via emails from each other, and applied them to edit the current individual writing and author new sections of our writing. Primarily, this was for the purpose of the doctoral thesis; however, the RWG also assisted students who wrote scholarly journal articles or conference papers, providing opportunities for us to share our research and network with other researchers and community members. These three complementary components of the RWG (group sessions, email group

Table 1. Research writing group: doctoral student characteristics.

Group member	Gender	Age group	Ethnicity	English is the first language	Part-time or full-time study
DS1	Female	56–65	Australian	Yes	P-T
DS2	Female	36–45	Australian	Yes	F-T
DS3	Female	26–35	Australian	Yes	F-T
DS4	Female	46–55	Australian	Yes	P-T
DS5	Male	36–45	Papua New Guinean	No	F-T

and individual writing) all played a significant role in supporting the development of our scholarly writing and were designed to overcome the multiple challenges we faced in our doctoral candidature.

Design and methods of this study

A narrative methodology was used to suit our focus on identity and transitions. Personal narratives are well-recognised tools for constructing, exploring and analysing identity – especially within dynamic and specialised settings (Bamberg 2011). While our general aim was to capture the shifts in self-evaluations that might occur as we strove to fit into the larger picture of *scholars*, we needed a focus. Hence, in addition to our regular narrative accounts (discussions, emails and everyday informal conversations), as an end-point for our data gathering, we responded to a probe from our supervisor: 'How has being a participant in the Writing Group influenced you as a writer?' Our responses thereby rounded out the array of narrative accounts that were gathered progressively.

Data for this paper were thus drawn from two time points. The first data were collected approximately one year after the group's formation (Phase 1), and involved written reflections focusing on the effectiveness of the RWG and its value to us thus far. The second data collection point was another year later (Phase 2), but this time more open in its focus being a general written reflection on the influence of the RWG on group members. Data were analysed using an inductive, thematic approach that revealed the areas of significant influence on members' identities as scholarly writers. The remainder of this paper discusses these findings and reflects on how they might be explained by a situated learning theory – Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998, 2000) – in order to emphasise the nuanced social and collaborative nature of the group in supporting the transition from student to scholar.

The RWG as a site for identity transformation

Despite our obvious individual differences and the challenges of competing time pressures, the RWG provided a rich site for the development of a scholarly identity. Concurring with similar findings (e.g. Aitchison 2009, 2010; Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke 2009; Kamler 2008; Maher et al. 2008; Lee and Boud 2003), our data revealed several key areas of positive growth flowing from our group collaborations that may not have emerged without participation in the RWG. Our point of difference is to explore the themes of group identity, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and personal and professional growth using Wenger's (1998, 2000) focus on mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire and how they linked to our transformation in distinctive ways. By transformation, we mean the 'shifts' made in key areas of identity at an interpersonal and intrapersonal level that were directly attributable to participation in the sustained community of our writing group. These transformations will now be discussed through the CoP lenses of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement: developing a sense of community over time

Mutuality within communities generally refers to a sense of reciprocation that develops in a group as a result of the social sharing and the trust that emerges as a result of ongoing interaction. Our conceptualisation of mutual engagement aligns with Wenger's (1998, 2000) notions of the formation of 'social capital' that fosters a feeling of comfort and honesty, as well as a sense of connectedness. Due to the isolationist effects of the doctoral process, such connectedness might be simpler to describe (and to wish for) than to enact. As observed by Hodge et al. (2011), the transformative effects on identity that result from participation in communities are a gradual and unpredictable process that can be more challenging than students expect. However, there is little doubt that the emphasis on 'knowing each other' that accompanies mutual engagement created an atmosphere and invited a level of comfort within our group that was not available through our regular membership in the broader academic community. Importantly, the formation of bonds of trust in each other's ability to contribute, as well as a personal sense of trust in each other, emanated from the slow building of an atmosphere that encouraged deeper levels of participation. Concurring with Baker and Lattuca's (2010) assertion that learning and identity development in doctoral study are iterative, it was the continuing participation in the scholarly activity of writing that promoted our identity development.

As we engaged more freely in conversations that included the sharing of insecurities and the occasional gossip, our increasing levels of disclosures about our struggles and goals led to what Wenger (1998) calls more 'dense' participation. In other words, it was the subtle power of atmosphere and the significance of informal personal exchanges that enabled us to participate more fully. As one group member affirmed, having the time for reciprocal trust to develop was a key ingredient for her final assessment of the experience:

> I think the group's atmosphere is the foundation of its success. We have developed a sense of trust and supportiveness in which our supervisor and peers acknowledge and utilise each other's diverse backgrounds, experiences and abilities . . . (DS3, Phase 2)

The solidarity we felt from sharing the unique experience of doing a doctorate was particularly important in the early stages in terms of establishing a group identity among members with diverse backgrounds, knowledge and prior experiences. Homogeneity is not required for mutual engagement (Wenger 1998, 2000), and a sense of our group identity was based on the connectedness we felt through our shared experiences. It was relieving to many of us to know that we were not the only one feeling a particular way about our writing or the doctoral journey, as also articulated by this student:

> The RWG has made doing a PhD a more social and enjoyable experience. PhD research is usually a very individual and personal activity that can feel quite isolating. So I appreciate the opportunity to network with other students and talk about our experiences. (DS3, Phase 1)

Overall, the PhD experience became more enjoyable, less isolating and allowed us to network with other students who were all facing similar issues. Over time, this developed into a sense of community within the group, creating a space for scholarly growth.

While any discussion of mutuality suggests that the group was always positive, it is important to include the significance and value of addressing any tensions that emerged. As can be expected within the complexity of group relationships and mutual engagement, there will be intellectual disagreements, tensions and failures as well as successes (Wenger 1998). It should be emphasised that a harmonious and happy environment is not always present in, or necessary for, an effective CoP; this reflects the reality of life and relationships (Wenger 1998). For example, the issue of whether collaborative writing groups are truly collaborative and represent all group members' viewpoints, styles and personalities were questioned in Dye et al.'s (2010) study. Some participants in a collaborative writing group felt 'a sense of suppression of individual writing identity' in jointly constructed documents (Dye et al. 2010, 298).

In our self-study of the RWG, this suppression of writing identity was not evidenced at Phase 1, possibly due to having only one completed, joint published paper (Lassig et al. 2009) that had been discussed and written over a considerable period of time, with different types of input from various members. However, at Phase 2, some members recognised that writing styles, interests and theoretical stances were not uniform throughout the group. The goal of the group was not to merge all our writing into one style; it was to enable us to become scholars who could write independently and collaboratively. Nevertheless, one member reflected that our differences may have impeded our aim of being truly collaborative:

> . . . I suspect we are not yet properly 'collaborative' – at least it is not what I feel. We still go off and work independently on our writing and I think we have a long way to evolve in order to be able to really challenge and lift each other. (DS1, Phase 2)

As evidence of the need to continually negotiate within a community, a second attempt to collaboratively write a paper, targeting a highly ranked journal, was less successful. Our inability to integrate everyone's ideas and styles impeded progress and appeared to suppress some members' writing identities. The article was never completed. This experience, in addition to the reality that some group members who soon completed their doctorates no longer held the motivation or time for the RWG, resulted in only two student members of the group (who felt their writing identities and ideas were compatible) electing to write this current paper with their supervisor. Rather than viewing this as negative, our supervisor asserted that 'the RWG was dynamic and ebbed and flowed according to the needs of students. Hence, changes in how to proceed and who would co-author are positive'. Moreover, although the original group paper was not completed, the intent of reporting our experiences as students in the group is achieved with this paper focused on identity from a situated learning perspective. This decision reflects the 'flexibility' inherent in the group, where interested group members could reframe what they were doing and create a more focused scholarly contribution on the value of the RWG.

Joint enterprise: enhancing competency and self-efficacy

An important aspect of our group was negotiating its processes and goals, committing to these as a group, and all group members being accountable for their role in achieving our goals. Within a CoP, this is referred to as joint enterprise (Wenger 1998). Our work within the group was initially shaped by our supervisor's

goals for improving our writing so we could complete a quality thesis and publish, which she said 'was underpinned by the view shared that research is a community endeavour which should be disseminated widely'.

Her goal was reflected by our tertiary institution which advocates that students develop the skills to contribute to the university's research publication output. However, while our RWG was not a self-contained unit outside of the demands and constraints of the broader context, we negotiated our own way of achieving those goals, which included a group that did not always follow traditional roles (e.g. of students and supervisors) within the institution.

The joint enterprise of a CoP is not determined by an external mandate or individual member (even one with significantly more power, such as a supervisor); there are still collective, negotiated practices and responses (Wenger 1998). Two major outcomes of the RWG, which resulted largely due to our joint enterprises, were increases in competency and self-efficacy. Studies of writing groups for doctoral students are still limited; however, there are previous studies exploring the types of skills learned in these groups and the increases in writing confidence (e.g. see Aitchison 2009, 2010; Caffarella and Barnett 2000; Ferguson 2009; Maher et al. 2008; Mullen 2003). Considering our RWG from a situated learning perspective – Communities of Practice theory – provides a different lens for discussing this cognitive and affective growth.

The RWG's overall shared goal and commitment was to improve our competency as scholarly writers:

> We all had the same aim: to develop our scholarly writing. I think that the format and structure of the RWG has allowed us to develop a greater range of skills and knowledge in a shorter time than if we were working alone! . . . I think critical to the process was our commitment to the group and the supportive environment that we created. (DS2, Phase 2)

The shared commitment and mutual accountability required for a joint enterprise (Wenger 1998) were underscored by both the group's format for learning writing skills and the congenial, supportive environment typical of a CoP.

Part of our negotiation within the joint enterprise was regarding our roles in various tasks, which differed from our roles in the conventional student–supervisor relationship. In keeping with other trends towards collaborative forms of supervision, our group was characterised by a more 'partner-like' relationship (Stracke 2010, 2) between students and supervisor that challenges notions of peers as being students only. Typically, as doctoral students, we would write something that was then commented on by our doctoral supervisors. However, in the RWG, the division between supervisor and student was blurred; students shared the role as 'editors' as well as writers, and the supervisor became a 'writer' in addition to being an editor:

> The academic supervisor invited the doctoral students to provide feedback on an article she was preparing for publication. The feedback was warmly received by the supervisor and shared among members for further reflection. (DS4, Phase 1)

> Being able to write collaboratively provided a valuable opportunity to observe my supervisor in the role of 'writer' (instead of in her usual role as 'editor' of my writing). (DS3, Phase 2)

The role changes began with the supervisor providing an opportunity for us to edit her work, and progressed to writing collaboratively where the supervisor and students worked together to write and edit a joint, refereed paper (as described in DS3's excerpt). The paper (Lassig et al. 2009) was accepted at a major national conference of research in education, which was celebrated as an indication of our ability to work together to complete a joint enterprise and of our enhancing competency.

For our first joint conference paper, as well as this current journal article, sometimes we drew upon particular theoretical perspectives about which some student members knew more than others in the group (including the supervisor), thereby elevating them to the level of expert. This shift in expertise changed our identity in terms of the scope our relationship with our supervisor who, especially early in the doctoral candidature, was usually in the role of expert while, as students, our identity was closer to that of a novice. Becoming someone who not only had expertise, but could also effectively communicate their knowledge and share it with peers and more experienced scholars, contributed to shaping our growing sense of self as expert and scholar. This development and awareness of growing expertise was one of our supervisor's goals for the group, as stated in her commentary of our reflections:

> It was important for members of the RWG to believe in their abilities. Hence, group sessions provided a reality check where students began to realise that in some areas they were more capable than their peers, or indeed supervisor, and in other areas their peers could assist them.

This contribution of the RWG's activities to our growth in expertise and sense of self as a scholar corroborates findings reported by Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke (2009).

These transformations in role and identity, in addition to improvements in writing competency, were intertwined with changes in self-efficacy over time. Self-efficacy is defined as our judgements about and confidence in the skills we possess (Bandura 1986, 1997). Initially, the RWG had a negative effect on self-efficacy for some group members because they felt others were better writers than them; however, increases in competency led to increases in self-efficacy. The changes in writing self-efficacy were perhaps most pronounced for DS5, for whom English is a second language. In Phase 1, DS5 said his main concern as a student was his confidence to write his doctoral thesis. He commented on how the RWG – whose other members were all native English speakers – reduced his confidence:

> Sometimes, I get discouraged when I compare my level of writing with those of my group members. (DS5, Phase 1)

As time progressed, he recognised how the RWG had ultimately strengthened his confidence levels:

> The process we were going through the group guided my confidence each time I return from the group meeting to work on my PhD . . . The experience I've gone through with the academic writing group will definitely boost my personal confidence of writing conference papers or journal articles in my country – something I would struggle to start with despite my PhD qualification. (DS5, Phase 2)

An important point to note in this excerpt is that in addition to enhancing his confidence in his ability to write his PhD, DS5 believed these developments in his writing efficacy would endure when he returned to his home country and that his new-found confidence as a writer would motivate him to continue publishing, and later to mentor others to publish. This group member appeared to show the greatest improvement in his self-efficacy throughout his PhD, which he largely attributed to the RWG.

While the extent to which the RWG affected writing ability and self-efficacy differed among members, in part due to the presence of a range of other important influences and experiences, the group did play a significant role. According to Bandura's (1995) social cognitive theory, enhancements in RWG members' scholarly writing self-efficacy through our joint enterprise can be particularly attributed to personal and group mastery experiences, as well as vicarious experiences of success through our peers.

From a CoP perspective, developing our identities as both competent and confident scholarly writers can be explained via the following three qualities necessary for a strong, 'healthy identity', namely 'connectedness', 'expansiveness' and 'effectiveness' (Wenger 2000). First, the RWG increased expertise and efficacy through development of enduring and deep connections that enabled us to work towards shared experiences of success. Second, beyond participation in group tasks, our identity as capable, efficacious scholarly writers expanded and crossed boundaries to our PhDs, and, for some members, to individual publications or work environments. Third, our identities as writers empowered increasingly effective and valuable participation in, and contribution to, the RWG and other scholarly activities. In short, our joint enterprise gave the RWG a focus, motivation and sense of commitment and accountability, which engendered experiences to enhance both scholarly writing competency and self-efficacy.

Shared repertoire: cultivating self-awareness within the group

As the third requirement of a CoP, the development of a shared repertoire relates to our group capacity to discuss and organise our goals and progress. Since any group inevitably involves multiple perspectives, use of a shared repertoire refers to the accumulation of routines, concepts, vocabulary, stories, activities and so on that the community adopts as its own practice (Wenger 1998). Our data show that shared knowledge of a language for discussing our writing contributed to our identity as a group of scholarly writers by improving communication about writing within the group. In addition to the informal aspects of our conversations, the RWG established a common discourse for discussing the writing skills and conventions we had learned in order to maximise the quality of our interactions.

Development of shared language to discuss writing was introduced early in the group. In the earlier phases, this was used within the more formal writing group sessions:

> The enhanced learning experience . . . stems from the development of a common discourse and shared critiquing of each other's writing in a social context of mutual trust . . . (DS4, Phase 1)

The above comments indicate the merging of social and emotional elements, such as trust within our interpersonal exchanges, in a way that facilitated how we experienced knowledge. The notion of the RWG as an enhancement resonates with other work examining professional development among PhD students that identifies the need to understand which programmes serve as 'enhancement practices' (Scacham and Od-Cohen 2009, 288). In our experience, the extended opportunity to build a shared lexicon for addressing skills and emotions acted as a sense-making process. As time progressed, we also used this lexicon to discuss writing outside of meeting times:

> The RWG has provided me with a network of individuals with whom I share a common language and experience and can discuss writing problems both within and outside the formal RWG sessions. (DS4, Phase 2)

The writing discourse became a natural way of talking about our work, which was not limited to use within RWG meetings. The shared repertoire, which includes shared language and ways of working, provides the resources for effective meaning-making (Wenger 1998). This, along with our common interest of scholarly writing, contributed to group cohesion.

Within the supportive environment, and using the shared language we learned, one of the key roles of group members was to provide feedback on each other's work. Group members valued the opportunity to share our concerns and writing, and to receive constructive feedback:

> The group . . . has become an important peer group where one can get constructive feedback . . . the RWG creates another audience. Once the relationships in the group were established it became a [sic] easy to share work, accept feedback and provide feedback thus getting many more informed perspectives. (DS2, Phase 1)

The above excerpts emphasise the temporal aspects of a CoP where time is needed for a shared language to develop to a level of becoming a functioning 'resource' for negotiation (Wenger 1998, 82). Learning to critique each other's work caused initial discomfort because 'writing is very personal' (DS2, Phase 1), and this hesitancy or anxiety was found in other studies of doctoral student writing groups (e.g. see Caffarella and Barnett 2000; Maher et al. 2008). Moreover, the general importance of developing a writing vocabulary for effective writing groups has been also documented (e.g. Aitchison 2009, 2010; Lee and Boud 2003). In particular, Aitchison (2009, 2010) proposed that observing more experienced peers and acquiring a language for talking about writing (part of what we refer to here as a shared repertoire) are a way of encouraging better student critique of each others' writing. Similarly in the RWG, once these resources were established (i.e. we learned *what* to say and *how* to say it), the development of mutual engagement was strengthened to the extent that relationships within the group became 'easy' (DS2, Phase 1). Our data show that growth in skills and confidence boosted our capacities to talk about writing, thus giving 'coherence' (Wenger 1998) to the different levels of writing proficiency within the group and to the diverse perspectives that emerged.

It was through the combined effects of shared repertoire, mutuality and joint enterprise that we were able to straddle the dual roles of participants and researchers.

As both insiders and observers, not only did we have ongoing access to rich data, but we built sufficient trust to ensure a high level of credibility for the perceptions that were expressed. Despite the benefit of our insider perceptions, they come with the associated risk of potential bias. Unable to eliminate this risk in full, we alerted readers to it early in the paper by specifying our insider roles as students and supervisor.

The continuing and *dis*continuing story

As a final appraisal, we focus on two aspects of our experience as members of a doctoral students' writing group: the usefulness of a situated learning perspective for examining scholarly identities in the future, and the limitations of our group as a transformative catalyst. In terms of our identities, while there is little doubt that the RWG provided us with a level of learning participation that changed who we were as scholarly writers, the complexities involved in accounting for our own interiorities were not so easy to explain as a product of situatedness. As a special-purpose group, the interactive relationship between scholarly identities and scholarly expertise involved an intermingling of our personal desires and opportunities to intensely practise the activities most relevant to effective writing. Wenger (1998) asserts that identity formation involves a need to produce and to publicly demonstrate tangible skills that 'refract' our identities. It therefore follows that our growth as competent writers occurred as we engaged in actual practices (e.g. proofreading, editing, collaborative writing, publishing conference papers, giving and receiving feedback, modelling and peer-management). While these actual practices were tangible outcomes of our community, it was the nature of the interactions that most impacted our collective gains in confidence and competence and that elevated the writing group as a distinctive identity-changing experience.

Transformations in self-awareness and self-efficacy are less easy to explain solely by CoP theory. Many of these transformations might have been spurred by the RWG. However, they did not necessarily occur during the group sessions, and the changes were also interrelated with a range of other complex personal issues, experiences and inner dialogues with ourselves. For instance, the final words of one member's reflection perhaps point to the need to better understand the personal aspects of motivation and desire that are an intrinsic aspect of self-definition that go beyond skills acquisition:

> There is a part of writing that impacts 'who' I feel I am – not just as an HDR [higher degree research] student but as a person who needs to enjoy the process of writing as something really worthwhile. (DS1, Phase 2)

Our experiences thus resonate with broader calls for the integration of different approaches in order to capture the richness and complexity of identity (Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011), notably within academic settings. As a future direction, we suggest a focus on the underlying processes at work as individuals actively construct identities in concert with their social learning contexts, such as their engagements within specific-purpose groups and their impacts. While a CoP approach seeks to avoid the 'individual–social dichotomy' (Wenger 1998, 145), it may leave little scope for adequately addressing the inevitable questions that arise

around the agentic role of the individual and his/her different motivations. Consequently, the experiences in our group tend to confirm the view that a situated learning perspective does not always account fully for the emotional and transformative aspects of students' participation in university networks (Hodge et al. 2011). In terms of the effectiveness of our RWG, we therefore act as voices for the group in cautioning against the conflation of writing groups as a panacea for issues of disconnection and anxiety that impedes scholarly self-definition among doctoral students.

Conclusion

This article presented a nuanced account of the interactive relationships that characterised our writing group and provided empirical evidence that student engagement in writing groups can directly promote scholarly identity. We addressed specific identity-related issues – group identity, personal and professional growth, and enhancements in self-awareness and self-efficacy – and framed them in terms of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, in an attempt to describe and to make sense of our identity transformations in becoming scholarly writers. Findings are in three main areas. First, we showed that the group demonstrated connectedness through our aligned commitment to achieving writing competence, an important dimension of identity within a CoP (Wenger 1998, 2000). Second, we achieved a supportive environment in the RWG that included: academic, social and emotional support; building relationships with diverse people that led to our commitment to the group's goal; mutual trust; and appreciation and application of group member's diverse contributions. Third, our group identity as a mutual support group (not just a writing group) encouraged a positive and enjoyable sense of community for all members that enhanced our individual scholarly identities. Therefore, the connectedness we experienced highlights the value of encouraging engagement in extended learning communities such as writing groups.

Our findings are potentially generalisable beyond the field of education. Although all RWG participants were researching in the same overarching discipline, our specific areas of study varied considerably. Thus, the focus remained on writing and scholarly development rather than the topics of our theses. By removing the need for shared disciplinary expertise, writing groups in any discipline can focus on the 'shared business' of writing. Our proposed contribution would align with findings about the success of multi-disciplinary writing groups in contributing to higher degree research students' and early career academics' scholarly development (e.g. Boud and Lee 1999; Cuthbert, Spark, and Burke 2009).

In sum, while the situated learning perspective did not always account well for the emotional and transformative aspects of our participation, our findings provide an important insight into the value of engendering a culture of mutuality among doctoral students. Importantly, our experiences suggest that the longer-term opportunity for scholarly engagement provided by a RWG overcomes isolationism. A writing group CoP diverges from the traditional orthodoxy that views a doctorate as a 'trial' that an individual must complete independently to 'earn' their title. Ultimately, we are able to continue our journeys as scholarly writers having achieved more robust identities as 'successful' writers through the contribution that a writing group made to our metamorphosis from students to scholars.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge our fellow RWG members (Mary Lincoln, Jill Fox, and Zui Neofa) and QUT staff who assisted us within the group.

References

Aitchison, C. 2009. Writing groups for doctoral education. *Studies in Higher Education* 34, no. 8: 905–16.

Aitchison, C. 2010. Learning together to publish. Writing group pedagogies for doctoral publishing. In *Publishing pedagogies for the doctorate and beyond*, ed. C. Aitchison, B. Kamler, and A. Lee, 83–100. New York: Routledge.

Aitchison, C., and A. Lee. 2006. Research writing: Problems and pedagogies. *Teaching in Higher Education* 11, no. 3: 265–78.

Baker, V., and L. Lattuca. 2010. Developmental networks and learning: Toward an interdisciplinary perspective on identity development during doctoral study. *Studies in Higher Education* 35, no. 7: 807–27.

Bamberg, M. 2011. Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity. *Theory and Psychology* 21, no. 1: 1–22.

Bandura, A. 1986. *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. 1995. Exercise of personal and collective efficacy in changing societies. In *Self-efficacy in changing societies*, ed. A. Bandura, 1–45. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bandura, A. 1997. *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman and Company.

Boud, D., and A. Lee. 1999. Promoting research development through writing groups. In Proceedings of the Australian association for Research in Education. Melbourne, Australia. http://www.aare.edu.au/99pap/lee99719.htm (accessed March 2, 2012).

Caffarella, R., and B. Barnett. 2000. Teaching doctoral students to become scholarly writers: The importance of giving and receiving critiques. *Studies in Higher Education* 25, no. 1: 39–52.

Cousin, G., and F. Deepwell. 2005. Designs for network learning: A communities of practice perspective. *Studies in Higher Education* 30, no. 1: 57–66.

Cuthbert, D., and C. Spark. 2008. Getting a GRIP: Examining the outcomes of a pilot program to support graduate research students in writing for publication. *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no. 1: 77–88.

Cuthbert, D., C. Spark, and E. Burke. 2009. Disciplining writing: The case for multi-disciplinary writing groups to support writing for publication by higher degree by research candidates in the humanities, arts and social sciences. *Higher Education Research and Development* 28, no. 2: 137–49.

Danby, S., and A. Lee. 2012. Framing doctoral pedagogy as design and action. In *Reshaping doctoral education: International approaches and pedagogies*, ed. A. Lee and S. Danby, 3–11. London: Routledge.

Dye, V., M. Herrington, J. Hughes, A. Kendall, C. Lacey, and R. Smith. 2010. Collaborative writing and *dis*-continuing professional development: Challenging the rituals and rules of the education game? *Professional Development in Education* 36, no. 1: 289–306.

Ferguson, T. 2009. The 'write' skills and more: A thesis writing group for doctoral students. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 33, no. 2: 285–97.

Fitzmaurice, M. 2011. Constructing identity as a new academic: A moral endeavour. *Studies in Higher Education*. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2011.594501

Hodge, P., S. Wright, J. Barraket, M. Scott, R. Melville, and S. Richardson. 2011. Revisiting 'how we learn' in academia: Practice-based learning exchanges in three Australian universities. *Studies in Higher Education* 36, no. 2: 167–83.

Jawitz, J. 2009. Academic identities and communities of practice in a professional discipline. *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no. 3: 241–51.

Kamler, B. 2008. Rethinking doctoral publication practices: Writing from and beyond the thesis. *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no. 3: 283–94.
Lave, J. 1991. Situating learning in communities of practice. In *Perspectives on socially shared cognition*, ed. L. Resnick, J. Levine, and S. Teasley, 63–84. Hyattsville, MD: American Psychological Association.
Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lassig, C., M. Lincoln, L. Dillon, C. Diezmann, J. Fox, and Z. Neofa. 2009. Writing together, learning together: The value and effectiveness of a research writing group for doctoral students. In Proceedings of the Australian Association for Research in Education. Canberra, Australia. http://www.aare.edu.au/09pap/las091458.pdf (accessed February 20, 2012).
Lee, A., and D. Boud. 2003. Writing groups, change and academic identity: Research development as local practice. *Studies in Higher Education* 28, no. 2: 187–200.
Lee, A., and B. Kamler. 2008. Bringing pedagogy to doctoral publishing. *Teaching in Higher Education* 13, no. 5: 511–23.
Maher, D., L. Seaton, C. McMullen, T. Fitzgerald, E. Otsuji, and A. Lee. 2008. 'Becoming and being writers': The experiences of doctoral students in writing groups. *Studies in Continuing Education* 30, no. 3: 263–75.
Monaghan, C., and N. Columbaro. 2009. Communities of practice and students' professional development. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 20, no. 3: 413–24.
Mullen, C. 2003. The WIT cohort: A case study of informal doctoral mentoring. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 27, no. 4: 411–26.
Pearson, M., J. Cumming, T. Evans, P. Macauley, and K. Ryland. 2011. Capturing the diversity of different Australian doctoral candidates and their experiences. *Studies in Higher Education* 36, no. 5: 527–42.
Scacham, M., and Y. Od-Cohen. 2009. Rethinking PhD learning incorporating communities of practice. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 46, no. 3: 279–92.
Schwartz, S., K. Luyckx, and V. Vignoles, eds. 2011. *Handbook of identity theory and research.* Vol. 1*, Structures and processes.* New York: Springer.
Stracke, E. 2010. Undertaking the journey together: Peer learning for a successful and enjoyable PhD experience. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 7, no. 1. http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol/7/iss1/8 (accessed March 2, 2012).
Vignoles, V., S. Schwartz, and K. Luyckx. 2011. Introduction: Towards an integrative view of identity. In *Structures and processes.* Vol. 1 *of handbook of identity theory and research*, ed. S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, and V.L. Vignoles, 1–27. New York: Springer.
Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wenger, E. 2000. Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization* 7, no. 2: 225–46.
Wenger, E., R. McDermott, and W. Snyder. 2002. *Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.