Supporting Education PhD and DEd students to become confident academic writers: an evaluation of thesis writers' circles

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the pilot of a Thesis Writers' Circles program offered to Education PhD and DEd students at the University of Melbourne in semester 2, 2005. The analysis focuses on the needs of those students that were felt to be well-met by this model of support. Broadly, the paper identifies two distinct but inter-related themes: firstly, the challenge of developing writing skills to a level sufficient to meet the demands of preparing a research thesis; secondly, the importance for research higher degree students of building confidence as apprentice academic writers. In relation to the latter theme, the paper identifies the benefits of community participation and peer-collaboration in working towards the aim of consolidating a thesis-writing identity. It is in this capacity, we argue, that thesis writers' circles have distinct advantages compared with other forms of candidature support, making them a valuable supplement to both conventional supervision practices and generic English language and thesis writing programs. The paper affirms the importance not only of equipping international and non-English speaking background (NESB) students with writing tools and strategies, but also of creating opportunities for all postgraduate research students to receive (and offer) non-judgmental feedback on work-in-progress within a discipline-specific learning and discourse community.

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Introduction

> *Writing and editing is a lonely and bitter business. Collaboration with peers should be encouraged. (Comment by participant in the thesis writers' circle program)*

A broad idea of research education is now generally established within Australian universities, and Research Higher Degree (RHD) programs typically include a range of formal and informal support programs to ensure that graduate students develop key competencies or 'generic skills' (see, for example, Cooper & Juniper 2002; Cargill & Cadman 2005; Gilbert et al. 2004). Recent discussion papers have questioned how research training might best support candidature and completion times, as well as career and workplace oriented skills (Borthwick & Wissler 2003; Harman 2002). The possibility of establishing compulsory generic skills programs for research degrees has also been explored (Borthwick & Wissler 2003; Gilbert et al. 2004). Within this policy environment, and the increasingly internationalized marketplace of higher education, there is particular interest in providing effective and appropriate support to ensure RHD students' thesis writing skills are adequate to the task.

This paper critically evaluates the successful pilot of a Faculty-specific thesis writing support program offered to Education PhD and Doctorate of Education (DEd) students at the University of Melbourne in semester 2, 2005. The Thesis Writers' Circles (TWC) program was facilitated by advisers from a centralised Language and Learning Skills Unit and developed in conjunction with the Faculty's Assistant Dean (International). The focus of our analysis here is the students' perception that this model of support was better able to meet their writing development needs than other forms of thesis writing support – including conventional supervision practices. This led us to reconsider the 'needs' of this student cohort and, in particular, the importance of creating opportunities that enable RHD students to build their confidence as apprentice academic writers. Kate Cadman (1997, p. 12) has persuasively argued that teaching contexts for international postgraduate students should give priority to the 'interplay between knowledge, language and identity' since, in the words of one of her graduate students, 'the process of learning to write in English is, in fact, a process of creating and defining a new identity, and balancing it with the old identity' (1997, p. 3). Our experience of facilitating Thesis Writers' Circles with mixed groups of local and international Education students suggests that the process of 'creating and defining a new identity' in the writing of a research thesis is required of all postgraduate students to some degree; the process is just more acute for those students whose 'old identity' is not informed by extensive academic writing, or academic writing in English.

The student evaluations of the TWC program reported in this paper suggest that this model of writing support is particularly effective in enabling international and local students to explore the 'interplay between knowledge, language and identity' involved in becoming a postgraduate 'thesis writer'. Moreover, our study finds that the benefits of community participation and peer-collaboration should not be overlooked in working to develop students' confidence and competence as academic writers. By combining support for development of writing skills within a discipline-specific discourse community that is 'outside' the students' Faculty, Thesis Writers' Circles enable students to rehearse both writing strategies and techniques, and academic 'voices', in a 'low-stakes' context. It is in this capacity, we argue, that Thesis Writers' Circles have distinct advantages compared with other forms of candidature support, making them a valuable supplement to both conventional supervision practices and generic English language and thesis writing programs.

Why Thesis Writers' Circles for RHD Students in Education?

The students invited to participate in the 2005 pilot TWC program were enrolled in either the Doctorate of Education (research-classified) or PhD Program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. The Doctorate of Education (DEd) is open to candidates who have completed a coursework Masters level program which has not included research training and a thesis. It is normally completed in three years full-time (or 6 years part-time). Students undertaking the research-classified stream must undertake 3 elective subjects, a Doctoral Research Methodology subject and a major thesis of 55,000 words. The PhD is open to students who have completed research training and a major thesis (at least 30,000 words) within a Masters program offered – or deemed to be equivalent to the program offered – by the Faculty of Education. The Masters research training subject, Masters Research Methodology, offered by the Faculty is similar in structure and content to its doctoral level counterpart. However, it should be noted that, while all doctoral level students in the Faculty of Education must undertake formal training in research before they begin their thesis, they do not receive explicit instruction on thesis writing.

In the Faculty of Education most theses are produced within the broad social science tradition: empirical studies involving the collection and analysis of data from human subjects such as students and teachers are generally favoured. Both DEd and PhD students are allocated one or two academic staff members to supervise their theses from the commencement of candidature. Students normally meet with their supervisor(s) on a fortnightly basis to discuss their progress. In broad terms, the focus of supervision sessions has traditionally been most strongly on the content and organization of the thesis, in particular the development of the central argument from one chapter to another and the use of appropriate evidence to support it. More recently, some supervisors have also instituted *ad hoc* reading groups for their doctoral students. Each student distributes a draft chapter or section of a chapter to the other students and the supervisor. The chapter is then discussed by the group the following week. The focus of the feedback to the student is still very much on the content and structure of the chapter, however, rather than how to improve their academic English in terms of grammar and vocabulary at the sentence and discourse levels.

Education students' writing skills can be developed by working with the University's Language and Learning Skills Unit (LLSU) as well as the supervisor. The LLSU provides individual tutorials, where a tutor reads a draft chapter (or part thereof) and then works with the student to improve the quality of the writing, either through the analysis of grammatical errors or the discussion of word choice, structure, argumentation or use of sources. The LLSU also offers generic short courses on thesis writing for students from across the university, from both NESB backgrounds and English speaking-backgrounds (ESB).

It became increasingly evident that there were limitations in the capacity of these existing support options to meet the needs of RHD students in Education. Supervisors' time is limited; as is students' access to LLSU tutorials. Students and supervisors often perceived central university support services to be too generic to meet the discipline-specific task of preparing an Education research thesis. This left students relying solely on supervisors not only for content feedback but also for writing strategies and advice. This is problematic as supervisors do not always consider that it is their role to assist students with the development of their academic writing skills, although it is common practice for them to correct syntactic and spelling errors on draft chapters. Without explanation or instruction, however, mere identification of errors can be demoralizing for students, who learn that their writing is seen as 'faulty' without learning how to 'correct' it. In addition, as Allison et al. note, 'not all supervisors have the knowledge and skills needed to identify exactly what it is that needs to be done in order to improve the comprehensibility of a given piece of writing' (1998, p. 199).

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With these concerns, the Faculty of Education approached the LLSU in mid 2005 about the possibility of developing a program to assist higher degree research students, especially international NESB students, to develop their thesis writing skills. A secondary consideration was a desire to create opportunities for international students to mix with local students. Feedback from international NESB students in the Faculty indicated that they felt isolated, had too few opportunities to work with local native-English speaking students, and struggled to understand and adapt to the implied expectation that RHD students become 'independent researchers'. The Thesis Writers' Circle model was suggested by the LLSU as a possible learning arrangement and the TWC program was thereafter developed collaboratively by the authors to address both RHD students' needs for writing support and the limitations of current support options. Writing groups (Conrad & Phillip 1995) and writers' circles have been successfully implemented at other universities (Lee & Boud 2003), and our program was based in particular on a program developed at the University of Western Sydney by Claire Aitchison (2003). The program designed for the Education Faculty at the University of Melbourne aimed to offer research students a supportive peer-centered environment in which to develop writing skills and confidence through regular discussion and critique of one's own and other students' work-in-progress. It was hoped that the regular structure of weekly circles facilitated by a writing adviser experienced in working with RHD students would provide participants with a basis from which they could undertake ongoing informal discussion of writing processes.

The specific aims of the pilot program were thus to provide:

- A supportive environment for students to discuss thesis-writing issues and explore selected discourse features and strategies
- Opportunities to apply specific writing strategies and approaches to their own work and discuss the results
- A process for students to give and receive regular, constructive peer-feedback on written drafts
- Structured support to develop academic writing skills and students' confidence as academic writers

TWC Program Pilot

The TWC pilot program ran for 8 weeks with each Circle meeting weekly for 2-hour workshops. Students were expected to attend 80% of workshops. Ten students were enrolled in and began the Tuesday afternoon Circle, including five NESB students. Two students discontinued within the first two weeks of the program (one NESB, one ESB) for personal reasons. Attendance averaged 6.4 per workshop. Nine students were enrolled in and began the Wednesday morning Circle, including seven NESB students. Two students discontinued within the first two weeks of the program (one NESB, one ESB) for personal and work reasons. Attendance averaged 6.75 per workshop. The original proposal was to compare the effectiveness of circles in which international NESB students were kept together with circles comprising a mix of international NESB and local ESB students. Ultimately, this was not possible because students' availability determined the formation of two mixed local and international groups.

The Circles were facilitated by Dr Wendy Larcombe and Dr Anthony McCosker respectively. Both facilitators had previous experience teaching writing and English language programs to research higher degree students, individually and in small group settings through the School of Graduate Studies. It was useful that both facilitators had also successfully completed PhD theses within the last five years, although not in the Education field.

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The weekly program included discussion and instruction led by the facilitator on a pre-negotiated topic. The focus topic in each Circle workshop was determined by the students' needs and interests, however each group discussed: thesis elements, purposes and readers; features of academic writing style; literature reviewing and reporting verbs; paragraphing; sentence structures; punctuation and editing. In each workshop, students typically discussed a text-feature or writing strategy relevant to the focus topic, then read and made notes on a partner's work in light of the earlier discussion before exchanging feedback. Each workshop ended with a general question and answer session that drew out and consolidated the strategies used and the observations made in relation to another's work. Students were asked between workshops to reflect on how they might incorporate the feedback and comments from their peer-reviewers and how they might make use of the writing strategy or text knowledge they had discussed.

In line with the aim of creating a program that would be responsive to the needs of participants, students were asked on a pre-course questionnaire (PCQ) to briefly explain why the program was of interest and what other forms of writing development they had previously undertaken. Students' explanations for why they registered for the TWC program focused on academic writing skills, writing in English and the isolation of the thesis writing process. Most comments noted lack of confidence or proficiency writing in a second language or in an appropriately 'academic' style:

> *English is my second language and I don't feel the confidence I would feel if I had to write academically in my first language. So, every 'tool' I can use is very important for me. TWC is a 'tool' for me (PCQ, Respondent 4).*

Faculty support for the program contributed to student interest in one case: '*My supervisor suggested it might be a worthwhile experience to aid my writing skills. I am interested in improving in this area*' (PCQ, Respondent 2). Some students also welcomed the opportunity to talk about their thesis with others, recognizing that this would improve their ability to communicate complex ideas effectively: '*I hope to improve my ways of communicating ideas in my thesis and have the opportunity to talk about my thesis with others*' (PCQ, Respondent 5). Another student was interested in the potential for '*Collegiality. I learn best by being with others who are also learning and sharing*' (PCQ, Respondent 1).

In short, students' reasons for joining the program placed roughly equal emphasis on a desire to improve writing skills and confidence, and the opportunity to work collaboratively and offset the isolation of postgraduate research work. This was taken into consideration by the Circle facilitators who ensured that weekly meetings provided opportunities for participants to get to know one another in a relaxed social environment. The resultant trust and familiarity that developed among group members in turn made the exchange of text and feedback less threatening – an important element in building writers' confidence.

Students' Evaluations of the TWC Program

As the Thesis Writers' Circles were being offered as a pilot program in 2005, they were evaluated using a range of strategies. As recommended by Devlin and Tjia (2004), students who attended the first and last workshops in the series were invited to complete pre- and post-course self evaluations rating themselves on a five-point scale in relation to four themes. Students attending the final workshop were also asked to complete a course evaluation that involved rating their level of agreement with 8 statements about the Thesis Writers' Circles. Four additional open questions elicited written comments. Two focus group interviews were conducted after completion of the program with interested participants from each Circle. It was clear from initial evaluations that student satisfaction with the TWC model was very high.

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The aim of the focus groups was thus to gain a richer understanding of the students' reported perception that the TWC program was better able to meet their needs than the other forms of thesis writing support available at the University. A total of 11 students participated in the focus groups; all three researchers attended these interviews.

Twelve completed course questionnaires (CCQ) were returned. In line with evaluation forms for other postgraduate writing courses offered through the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Melbourne, students were asked to rate agreement in relation to eight statements on a five-point scale (1=Disagree Strongly; 5=Agree Strongly). Average scores are provided in Table 1 below. Although the number of respondents is small, the mean ratings indicate high levels of student satisfaction, especially with the broad objectives of the TWC pilot. Importantly, they are markedly higher than student evaluations of other thesis writing courses offered at the University and taught by the authors.

Education Thesis Writers' Circles Evaluation	Average rating (/5)
1. The content of the sessions was relevant to me.	4.42
2. The duration and number of sessions was appropriate.	3.83
3. It was valuable to read other students' work and giving feedback.	4.25
4. The feedback I received on my writing was valuable.	4.42
5. The weekly meetings helped to motivate me to work on my thesis.	4.67
6. The adviser was knowledgeable about thesis writing issues and resources.	4.92
7. The adviser facilitated the Circle effectively.	4.77
8. Overall, the program was of value to me.	**4.92**

Table 1: Education Thesis Writers' Circles Evaluation

One reason for the comparatively high level of satisfaction with the TWC program might be found in the students' perception that it was effective in improving their writing skills and confidence. Students were asked pre- and post-course to rate on a five-point scale (1=Very Low, 5=Very High) their knowledge, confidence and awareness regarding four aspects of thesis writing. Students were not shown their pre-course self-evaluations before completing the post-course evaluation. The four aspects of thesis writing were:

1. Understanding of effective ways to organize and present written text in Education theses
2. Knowledge of writing and editing strategies that improve the clarity of written expression
3. Confidence as an academic writer
4. Awareness of issues and resources for thesis writers

All 11 respondents rated themselves more highly on scales 1 and 4 post-course. On scales 2 and 3, ten students rated themselves more highly post-course; one student selected the same rating on these scales pre- and post-course.

Participation in the program also raised students' awareness of other writing support options and motivated them to make use of these services. For example, of the 11 students who completed pre- and post-course self-evaluations, only four had previously participated in other forms of writing development. After the program, all 11 students indicated that they would participate in other writing development options.

Qualitative comments provide further insight into the students' perceptions of their writing support needs and the capacity of the TWC program to address these. Comments from four sources were analyzed: responses to open questions on the pre-course questionnaire (PCQ) and the course completion questionnaire (CCQ), and comments from each of the focus group discussions (FG1 and FG2). Two broad and inter-related themes regarding students' needs were identified:

- Students' desire to develop their writing and language skills by acquiring specific tools and strategies that would facilitate their thesis writing and enable them to develop an appropriately academic style (how to develop academic writing skills)

- The process of becoming an Education thesis-writer with the attendant issues of confidence, motivation and isolation (how to join a particular discourse community)

In general terms, it was largely in the capacity of Thesis Writers' Circles to address these intertwined concerns that students considered the program to be more effective than other forms of thesis-writing support.

Specifically, students identified a number of aspects of the TWC program that were useful in terms of meeting their need to develop academic writing skills. In relation to 'tools and strategies', students commented positively on being provided with reference materials and handouts; reviewing samples of successful theses; and discussing ways in which text is organized and presented in particular chapters of Education theses. Advice on how to take a position in a literature review, rather than writing descriptively, and formulating an introduction attracted particular comment. Receiving feedback from other students was also recognized as an important writing development strategy. In particular, peer-feedback was valued as a way of identifying passages or phrasings that may cause reader confusion. A reader with fresh eyes and an interest in the topic is useful, one student remarked, *'because sometimes we take it for granted that our meaning is transparent'* (FG1, Respondent 1). Suggestions for improvement from peer-readers were also welcome:

> *The expectation for me is that I can know the weak points of my writing…[but] when I am writing by myself I cannot see what is the problem with my writing and how can I improve (FG1, Respondent 2).*

The development of writing skills intersected with the process of becoming an Education thesis writer in the practice of exchanging peer-feedback: '*In this workshop I can see how other people can write so that I can compare my writing … also I can compare again with the feedback so I can see what the weak points are with my writing. This is very useful'* (FG1, Respondent 2). Reading others' work thus helped to normalize the learning process that all postgraduate thesis writers are engaged in. Feeling that one is 'not alone' in struggling with thesis writing is itself a means of reducing the isolation of postgraduate research. The routine of attending the TWC program also offset isolation. Supportive and positive feedback from an interested colleague can strongly affect motivation and confidence, as the following respondents observed:

> *I've been writing my data analysis and findings chapter which I found very difficult to write and I've found this group to be very supportive, to be able to come here on a weekly basis no matter how I'm feeling about my writing in general and to have some positive feedback and positive reinforcement. I really don't think I would have got as far in the chapter without that (FG2, Respondent 1).*

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> *Writing should be collaborative. It's lonely and we cannot look at our work… when you see somebody else's work it is easy to pick up the mistakes, but when we look at our own work you cannot see as much. To let somebody else look at our work is a very great thing. We think that our work is not very good but then when we get some feedback it really motivates and encourages us to write more and think it's OK and quite acceptable, to keep writing and gain more confidence (FG1, Respondent 3).*

Indeed, the social and collaborative nature of Thesis Writers' Circles was positively commented on by most respondents, and seen as a distinct advantage of this form of support: *'This program is more useful than others where there is no interaction between participants'* (CCQ, Respondent 4).

The general process, and not only the isolation, of becoming a thesis-writer drew extensive comment in both the questionnaire responses and the focus group interviews. Students were consciously motivated to participate in the program as a means to facilitate this process – for example: '*[I wanted to know] what it means to be a PhD writer because I am about to begin writing very intensively*' (FG1, Respondent 3). For several respondents the Circles' focus on thesis features and elements and on writing strategies and tools (such as word lists and text samples) gave new insight into 'writing' itself:

> *I see it now as a craft. I hadn't looked at it like that before now. The whole process is like learning to be a writer… which I hadn't really thought about. I just wrote and gave it to my supervisor and just hoped she didn't cross out too much. …for me this is a side of the apprenticeship that I have been very ignorant about (FG2, Respondent 3).*

It was clearly important to the participants, however, that the TWC program was not a generic thesis writing course, but rather specifically for Education students:

> *I attended another course on writing … but that was for everyone throughout the University … I find that this particular writing circle is a lot more focused because although we may come from different Units [within the Education Faculty], we come from the Faculty of Education and the focus is on education and in that sense there is a lot of synergy. There is a lot of things that you can do to reinforce each other, to help each other along (FG1, Respondent 5).*

In this respect most particularly, Cadman's insistence that we should prioritize the 'interplay between knowledge, language and identity' (1997, p. 12) when creating teaching contexts for research students comes to mind. Our respondents' comments indicate the value of developing language skills and a writing identity through attempts to articulate the knowledge they have acquired about their research topics and about the general research discipline or field.

Additionally, it was evident that students valued the opportunities created by the TWC program to practise writing skills and strategies with discipline-based colleagues in a comparatively 'low-stakes' environment. Students appreciated the support of an adviser who came from 'outside' the Faculty, and the guarantee, negotiated at the outset, that work exchanged and discussion within a Circle would remain confidential to the participants.

> *I think it is the most useful way/form of support because PhD students need to keep in touch with other colleagues who are in the same study level. It is also very useful to have an expert… to help you, guide you and encourage you without feeling the 'threat' of a supervisor or without feeling that you're going to be criticized for what you don't know (CCQ, Respondent 3).*

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In an enthusiastic discussion in one of the focus group interviews, some students described meetings with supervisors as discouraging regarding a student's writing and thus dampening motivation. However, not all students felt their supervisors were 'threatening'. Some students emphasized that critical feedback from supervisors could also be seen positively as challenging and ensuring standards of work were high. Students agreed that there are specific differences between meetings with supervisors and discussing thesis-writing with peers in a TWC program: *'Normally when we meet our supervisor it is just to get an idea of what we have to do, just technical things'* (FG1, Respondent 3); *'This is more at the micro level; our supervision is generally at the macro level – ideas, organization, not about the particular language'* (FG1, Respondent 2). As one student summed it up, *'The supervisor does a great job, but it's just a different focus'* (FG2, Respondent 2).

That difference in focus of the Thesis Writers' Circles evidently proved enabling and enjoyable. Several participants even described the program as enriching the PhD experience: *'Instead of studying at home and writing, it puts more color in my student life'* (FG1, Respondent 3);

> *One thing I find very fascinating about a group like this is that we got an opportunity to share and to learn from each other…[in doing so] you enrich your mind and that is what the PhD intellectual journey is all about (FG1, Respondent 5).*

There was some evidence in the students' evaluations to suggest that the TWC program had advanced their PhD intellectual journey. In addition to the increased self-assessment ratings on a number of skills and confidence scales, one respondent commented that the peer-feedback and consequent confidence gained through participation in the program had enabled them to become more independent of their supervisor's feedback:

> *I grew in confidence. I came here with draft copies of my work, but I'm at the stage where I'm a little bit more independent now from my supervisor's comments. I can now look at my work, at what she's done, and how she's corrected my work and I just feel that I'm a little bit more independent, whereas I relied on her comments a lot more [previously] (FG2, Respondent 3).*

This we felt to be a very positive recommendation of the TWC program. Clearly, Writers' Circles cannot replace supervision of the research project or supervisor feedback on written drafts of the thesis. But, to the extent that supervisor correction of written text may perpetuate expert/novice relations and thereby inhibit the research student achieving the desired 'independence', a TWC program has a valuable role to play.

Conclusion

The TWC pilot program in Education at the University of Melbourne created opportunities for RHD students to give and receive regular feedback on thesis drafts in a supportive and non-threatening environment. By normalizing the process of developing writing skills to a new level and within a particular discourse community, the TWC program built students' confidence and competence to explore and develop their thesis writing identity. Given that that identity is within a particular discipline, it was important that the program participants were all studying in a single Faculty. It was also important, however, to create a comparatively 'low-stakes' and non-judgmental environment where students could support one another's efforts and communicate enthusiasm and interest for the projects. This was achieved in the 2005 TWC pilot by having the Circles facilitated by experienced writing advisers from 'outside' the Faculty.

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In creating opportunities for peer-collaboration and community participation, TWC programs can be seen to provide a valuable supplement to both conventional supervision practices and generic English language and thesis writing programs. In particular, the pilot program in Education at Melbourne affirms the importance not only of equipping international and NESB students with writing tools and strategies, but also of creating opportunities for all postgraduate research students to receive (and offer) non-judgmental feedback on work-in-progress within a discipline-specific learning and discourse community.

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