

Writing a thesis? How to make a writing group work for postgraduate women

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Although Masters (by thesis) and PhD degrees are *research* degrees, their successful completion requires candidates to *write*. And writing a thesis, especially in Humanities or Social Sciences, involves producing text, much of which never makes it to the final copy. Writing requires a complex set of skills developed primarily through rewriting. But for many thesis writers, committing words to paper (or screen) and producing ‘the thesis’ can be the most challenging part of thesis completion. Even though students who progress to a thesis have successfully written their way through undergraduate degrees and postgraduate papers, the thesis is often the first sustained writing project students undertake. Amongst academics, the formation of writing groups is a recognised strategy for developing research potential, improving writing confidence and enhancing writing productivity (Cornell & Samuels, 1994; Lee & Boud, 2003; Morss & Murray, 2001). While there is a substantial literature around the theoretical and substantive issues of academic writing, this article is focused on our experience forming a writing group as students completing our PhD theses. We detail the workings of our group, and offer thesis writers practical guidance on how to start and maintain a writing group that supports postgraduate women to write, and to complete their theses.

There are plenty of useful advice books for thesis writers. However, these books often address an idealised ‘turbo student’: the individual ‘who can succeed in the shortest possible time with few demands on institutional resources’ (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). We certainly read and discussed these advice books, and shared them amongst ourselves (see for example, Bolker, 1998; Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Rountree & Laing, 1996). But none of us was ‘that subject’. Like many women postgraduates, we had begun our theses as ‘mature students’. Our own ‘thesis stories’ were set against backdrops of (often unexpected) change in our own lives, and those of people close to us. Time had to be elastic, and often our writing was secondary to the

other events and demands upon us. For each of us, our thesis work combined periods of part-time and full-time study as our changing circumstances permitted. Nevertheless, we all did complete our theses. What we think most useful in terms of finishing was the formation and participation in a writing group: a group that focused on concrete 'strategies for producing text' (Morss & Murray, 2001) while at the same time, providing us with a 'reading and writing community' (Aronson & Swanson, 1991).

For postgraduate women, writing groups provide many of the same benefits that academics have identified as flowing from participating in a group. Writing groups offer opportunities to produce text through sharing practical writing strategies, goal setting with peers, and the general support shared through writers meeting socially (Morss & Murray, 2001). They assist in demystifying the writing process by identifying writing as a slow endeavour involving multiple drafts, and by providing opportunities for the regular 'monitoring' of one's own writing progress (Cornell & Samuels, 1994). They can also provide a guaranteed critical 'pre-readership', and thus consolidate a shared writing culture (Cornell & Samuels, 1994) that develops participants' identities as writers, and exposes the 'gap between [idealised] writing processes ... and the real contexts and practices of writers' (Morss & Murray, 2001). In addition, we think that writing groups are especially valuable for women postgraduate students. They are a 'space' within the university, an environment still experienced by many women as a 'chilly climate' (Leonard, 2001), to form non-hierarchical pedagogical and personal relationships to learn about writing, researching, and the experience of thesis 'production'.

In our view, the expectations for thesis writers and experience of thesis writing remains shaped by the individualistic discourses that dominate university culture. These discourses elide both the influence of women's experiences outside the university on their academic careers and identities, as well as how women (and their research interests) are differentially perceived and treated within it (Leonard, 2001). Aronson and Swanson (1991) use the metaphors of insider/outsider and margin/centre in describing their experiences as feminist postgraduate students 'to stress the connection between gender and *position*[and to] evoke the unequal distribution of power and privilege' (Aronson & Swanson, 1991). Like these authors, by virtue of our presence in thesis programmes we were 'insiders'.

But as feminist researchers and as students we each felt, at times, 'outsiders'. In the following section we use the metaphor of insider / outsider in our personal accounts of our experiences as PhD students prior to the formation of the writing group. We then describe what we actually did as a group, and why we think our group was successful in getting – and keeping – us writing.

Joining the writing group

We established the writing group when we were all at similar stages in our thesis projects. We had all completed our field work, and were all beginning to write much fuller drafts of thesis chapters. In those early meetings, we often talked of the context of our experiences as doctoral students, but more especially the challenges of transforming our 'data' into theses. Each of us had embarked on research informed by feminist politics, and we shared a connection with the Gender and Women's Studies Department at our university (Hee and Vicki completed their PhDs in Women's Studies, while Lesley was supervised by an academic from Women's Studies).

Hee: My decision to undertake a PhD emerged over a period of time, and followed a long break from academic study. I had left university following the completion of a Masters degree in psychology and two years of clinical psychology training in the mid 1980s. I eventually looked elsewhere to understand the dissonance I felt about how positivist psychology constructed meanings about women's experiences and realities. During the break from university, I became immersed in lesbian feminist politics which offered an alternative and more congruent way of understanding women's social positioning and the power relations that underpin women's lives. With this experiential background, and a baby in tow, I shaped up a research topic addressing some of the issues I had encountered in clinical psychology and offering alternative paradigms for understanding women's lives and wellbeing within a socio-political context.

Undertaking a PhD in Women's Studies meant working in a context where my world view was understood and legitimised. Women's Studies also provided a place to be an insider and explore competing epistemological and theoretical perspectives. However, my alliance with Women's Studies was also a source of marginalisation, positioning me as an outsider in terms of mainstream (academic and clinical) psychology. In particular, the highly regulated nature of clinical psychology meant that there were few spaces for transgressing the borders of 'legitimate' knowledge. Taking a feminist critical position was particularly

marginalising, and within clinical psychology circles, I was frequently required to defend my position as an ‘outsider’ critiquing the dominant discipline. Despite this academic positioning, the early years of my PhD were a particularly rewarding time. I was a part-time student with a healthy work-life balance and accessible childcare. I was constantly learning in a context where my ideas were validated and my supervisor was both interested in my thesis topic, and unafraid to challenge the establishment. As time progressed however, the institutional and financial pressures to complete the PhD weighed heavily. I subsequently enrolled full-time. This coincided with a detrimental change to my financial situation, and I felt the full brunt of life as both my parents passed away. I also developed a long-term illness. The shift in financial, social and health circumstances had a significant bearing on my PhD progress. However, this shift also coincided with the establishment of the writing group. The group became the site where I could develop ideas, gain greater understanding of social constructionist and post-structural theories, and come to terms with the increasing complexities required to write a PhD. The writing group thus became central in sustaining my writing over time, in supporting me through the emotional process that accompanies writing a thesis, and ultimately in enabling successful PhD completion.

Vicki: I recall that naïve assumption I had at the beginning of the PhD process – imagining it would take me three, perhaps four years, to conduct the research and write it up. Like dominant representations of the idealised postgraduate student, I pictured myself working steadily and independently, producing quality results with minimum support and maximum self-discipline. It was not until my second year of enrolment that the enormity of the thesis process became apparent. In sum, my doctoral experience was incredibly different to my experience completing a Masters degree. The differences ranged from being single to being in a committed relationship; from being relatively healthy to being diagnosed with a (non-threatening) heart condition; from having no dependents to experiencing pregnancy, stillbirth, motherhood and studying with a young child; from living on student financial support to ‘running out’ of my three year scholarship monies and needing part-time and full-time employment to fund the remaining four and a half years of study.

Due to these experiences I found it necessary to apply for both extensions and a suspension. While I obtained the extra time needed, I recall the frequent feeling of being an outsider to the ‘usual’ academic mode of PhD completion. Although my experiences ‘outside’ the university were significant ‘life events’, there was always a nagging feeling of using them as an ‘excuse’ to gain more time. At the same time,

my status as an insider felt increasingly compromised: most of the time I worked from home and did not 'occupy' a university space, I was enrolled in a department that on many occasions throughout my enrolment had to 'defend' its existence within the university, and my supervisor left the university – resulting in a fractured relationship with the bureaucracy during the latter years of my enrolment. It was the writing group that helped me reclaim the sense of being an insider. Through participating in the writing group I became that PhD student that I had read about in thesis writing guides. That student was someone who talked about, and wrote about ideas. In the writing group, I had a place to talk about my thesis, and to really feel like a PhD student.

Lesley: My thesis experience was shaped by a number of changes in my paid work, parenting, and in the research itself. I enrolled as a part-time thesis student combining my doctoral research with full-time work (at what was then a polytechnic), and at the time of enrolment, living with my teenaged daughter. Progress in completing my thesis was hastened by changes in my employment situation. As I was completing some early data collection, the polytechnic I was working in announced it was to be 'merged' with another university. Becoming an employee of a university meant major changes in both my everyday work, and my positioning within the university environment. As a university lecturer, 'doing research' suddenly became much more central to my job. The PhD took on a new significance, as did the need to finish it, although my 'new' employer was generous in supporting my doctoral research. On two separate occasions I was the recipient of research awards funded by my employing university, enabling me to 'buy out' of much of my teaching. I also met new colleagues who were experienced researchers and very generous in sharing their experience with me, and I was introduced to an academic women's writing network. Nevertheless, I did sometimes feel I wasn't seen as a 'real academic' by other colleagues because of my route into the academy, and my status as a researcher often felt marginalised in the context of these relationships.

Throughout the time I was working on my thesis, opportunities to meet other postgraduate students from the university where I was enrolled lessened. Changes in the wider university meant the department I was enrolled in was restructured and my original supervisor retired. The staff-student seminar programme was suspended at about the same time, and there was no organised bringing together of the departments' thesis students. Being a part-time postgraduate student, an employee of another university, and having a (very experienced) 'replacement' supervisor from outside of the department all contributed to both a real and imagined

marginality in terms of meeting other students, and having opportunities to talk with peers about my research and thesis writing.

Most of the time, doctoral research feels lonely. In retrospect, my experience was shaped by an ongoing tension between the isolation that ensues from the formal requirement to (individually) ‘contribute to knowledge’, and a need for a community to share, with peers, the experience of postgraduate work. Although in the early years of enrolment I worked hard at the busy work of ‘doing research’, I often felt an outsider. The experience of community that was so important for my own sense of ‘being a student’ came later, through participating in the writing group.

How the writing group worked

In preparing to write this article, we talked together about what we did as a writing group, and why we think it worked. The account that follows comes from those discussions, summarising how we organised our group and the practical and intellectual processes involved in our meetings. In reflecting back on how the group started, and how we established our processes, we each talked of how it always felt like a ‘good’ process. We think this is because we remained open to renegotiating what we did with our meeting time. Nevertheless, two things remained fixed throughout: focusing on the writing; and the expectation (and practices) of reciprocity between us. Finally, in reflecting back on our experience, we realised that none of us discussed in any detail the workings of the group with our individual supervisors. The group was something that we ran ‘outside’ the institution of the university, and outside the parameters of our individual supervision-student relationships.

As noted earlier, forming our writing group coincided with being at a similar stage in the thesis process. We had all completed our field work and were ready to ‘write up’. Before we started meeting regularly we had preliminary drafts of various chapters, but the beginning of the writing group roughly coincided with us all beginning writing what for each of us would become our ‘thesis’. Being at a similar stage in the research and writing process was an important factor in being able to establish and sustain an effective writing group. We were working from different theoretical and epistemological frameworks, but we shared an interest in feminist research. Further, having broadly similar political views, and all having children for whom we were the sole or primary caregiver, meant we had a lot common.

We met at regular intervals. In the early stages we met monthly, but as we each moved towards completion, we shifted to meeting fortnightly. Despite the changes in duration between meetings, we always met on the same day of the week, at the same time in the evening, and usually at the same place (the home of one of the group members). No one else but us attended our meetings, and they were always an uninterrupted time, dedicated to the group and our writing. Within the group we discussed not only the writing process, but also the challenges each of us experienced writing, and in being writers. The group was a regular time when our experiences of writing as situated within particular sets of circumstances could be shared, along with the research and writing skills we each brought to the group.

Each meeting followed a similar pattern. We would always begin with a hot drink, and would continue to drink and eat snack foods (that we all contributed) throughout the meeting's duration. In the early days we ate a lot of chocolate biscuits – by the time we had all submitted our theses, we were eating rice crackers, hummus, and raw nuts! Every meeting had an agreed 'agenda', and after half an hour or so of talking more generally about our lives, we would move on to 'writing business'.

In the early days, we were less skilled at finishing the meetings. Often, we would talk on for much longer than we had planned, and each of us had experiences of becoming too tired to work the following day. These experiences led us to develop a more formal approach to running our meetings, agreeing the focus for each meeting before we met, and agreeing and keeping to a finishing time. Once we established this pattern, the meetings became much more productive in terms of what we achieved during the meetings themselves, and in keeping us writing between meetings.

At every meeting, we focused on written work: 'concrete' text on a page. Sometimes we would look at the work of one of us, other times at two or all of us. It was important that we looked at each others' work, rather than just talk about writing in the abstract. This was a shift. When we first began meeting, we talked about our writing in relation to what we had been reading. However, very early on we decided to actually read each others' writing, and 'expose' our own. Up until that point, our supervisors had been the only people who had 'seen' our theses 'as text'. This next stage meant revealing to each other not only our writing skills, but also 'evidence' as to our

authenticity as doctoral students. This was a big step for each of us, yet in order for the group to work, it had to happen.

Preparing for meetings

We always prepared for the meetings. One of us would photocopy the writing to be discussed, and would send this out by post a week or so before the meeting as we needed time to prepare. In the early days, we would send our own copies out, or send copies by email, but sometimes this meant we would be working on different versions or different layouts of documents. In retrospect we think that one person taking responsibility for getting all group members the same copy of the draft under review is essential to getting the most out of the writing group process.

At each meeting we were either reviewers, or writers, and sometimes both. As reviewers, we would prepare written comments to share with the writer at that meeting. As reviewers, we each had different preparation styles, but we all tended to write some comments directly onto the writer's draft. Reading the writing of other thesis students is time consuming, especially when you are working on your own thesis. Nevertheless, the commitment to reading the work under review before the meeting was non-negotiable, and we doubt that any writing group can work with participants who do not have the time or the commitment to prepare in this way.

At the meeting

Our meetings revolved around a 'feedback process'. Sometimes reviewers gave general feedback: comment on the general structure of the piece; sought clarification where the piece sat within the wider thesis; offered observations or comment about the general tone of the writing; and so on. During these times, the writer would also take notes. 'Proper' feedback was much more focused than this however. The reviewers would take turns to comment, paragraph by paragraph, on the writing being reviewed. At this stage the writer would record the feedback on their copy of their work, but would also receive the reviewers' drafts (often with written feedback on them) at the end of the meeting, in part to ensure confidentiality.

Generally, the comments we made as reviewers focused on the writing rather than on the substance of the theses themselves. Although we sometimes talked about our specific thesis argument,

in the main we accepted each others interpretation of our own thesis topics. While we shared a common interest in epistemological and theoretical matters, there were points where we could have had major disagreements. Rather than spend time on these, we concentrated on the writing (although this was sometimes a difficult distinction). Our shared goal was completion, and despite being interested in each others' topics, our focus was to support each other to write about our own ideas as clearly and competently as possible.

Focusing on the writing meant that, in general, as reviewers we contained our suggestions to practical ways of clarifying the writer's intentions. Sometimes reviewers would ask 'what do you mean?' or 'can you say that differently?' These types of questions kept the writer focused on their writing and thinking about ways that they could improve it. Sometimes the reviewers' suggestions were more concrete. Reviewers might suggest different words, phrases, identify gaps that needed expanding, and so on. All feedback was 'provisional'. In other words, although as reviewers we often gave quite specific and concrete suggestions, agreeing with and incorporating the feedback was always the writer's prerogative.

For writers, receiving feedback was a valuable, but not necessarily easy experience. After we had got over our initial hesitations in showing our writing to each other, we became more comfortable listening to reviewers' comments. Generally receiving feedback was a positive experience, but at times it could be overwhelming, and we worked hard as a group to keep each other 'intact'. During particularly intense sessions, we would take the time to reflect on how each of us, as either writers or reviewers, was feeling. None of us left a meeting feeling that the feedback we had received was damaging to either our sense of self, or our identities as thesis writers.

Often feedback on the same piece of writing was different from each reviewer. This was because we had different feedback styles, and we each tended to comment in more detail about different aspects of writing. Sometimes these differences would be in conflict, and sometimes complementary. Sometimes too, reviewers' feedback differed from feedback the writer may have received from their supervisors. Because feedback was provisional, and all decisions about our own writing were our own, resolving conflict in feedback was generally left to the writer. We sometimes explored conflict in our feedback as reviewers (and in reviewers'

and supervisors' feedback) but more often simply acknowledged it and 'moved on'.

Sometimes the feedback was not what the writer wanted to hear. Typically, this would be reviewers' comments that identified writing that needed a lot more redrafting than the writer thought, or around writing that the writer wanted in the thesis but the reviewers thought might be superfluous. At moments like this, the writer might take time in the meeting to 'defend' their position. However, because the feedback was always respectful, it more often gave us opportunities to clarify our writerly intentions, rather than construct barricades around our work.

Even though when we formed our writing group we were at similar stages in our theses, we all had different ways of working at our writing. None of us had experience in authoring such a large piece of work as a PhD thesis. The writing group became a very important site for sharing strategies to develop ourselves as writers. One of the most important strategies we developed was sharing goal setting. Because we planned each meeting in advance, we each needed to have some idea of what we would be working on in the near future and when it would be ready for the group. This would involve a group discussion with each of us telling the others our medium term goals, and negotiating whose work would be ready for reading at which writing group session. Sometimes we would have the writing planned for the group several months in advance. In this way we could set personal goals, and we could set informal 'deadlines' for each other. The very practice of articulating what we were expecting to finish, and when, was a very useful strategy for each of us to keep our writing 'going'.

The group was also a place where we shared writing tips that we picked up through reading books about writing, talking with our supervisors, or working with other writers. Often sharing tips would come up in the general business of the meeting. Sometimes reviewers might also suggest a writing tip to improve the writing or encourage the writer to read their writing in a different way. As a group, we also benefited from Lesley sharing strategies she learned while attending writing retreats for academic women (Grant, 2003, 2004, 2006; Moore, 2003). Often we shared ideas about managing the place of writing in our lives and how to meet our writing goals. We also shared writing affirmations and techniques that we used when

writing was difficult, and encouraged each other in trying different writing strategies always with the same purpose: to 'keep writing'.

Although focused on writing (indeed, on actual text) the group was also an important site for sharing the personal experience of being doctoral students. Supporting each other as writers, but also as women with a lot of other 'things happening' was essential. While each of us remained (and remains) adamant that as a group, we 'focused on writing', in practice we always began each session with at least half an hour 'catching up' with each other. These moments were often intense, and sometimes surprisingly intimate. Each of us was negotiating important biographical events and transitions alongside our PhDs over the time we were writing. At the same time, mundane and everyday things also had an impact on the time we had to write, and our experiences of the writing process. Sometimes we talked about our paid work, or our experience of the university bureaucracy, or our children and their everyday experiences. These things needed to be talked about because they were so significant in shaping the material, emotional and intellectual contexts of our work. Generally we either 'listened' – were simply present to hear each others experiences; or supportive in the sense of offering ideas and suggestions that were solution focused. Although we talked about just about everything, we tried not to get 'bogged down' in these sorts of discussions. We each valued the support offered through the group, and at the same respected and maintained each others' personal integrity as we talked about the intricacies of our lives. These sorts of discussions were always confidential, and there was a mutual respect within the group for each other, and for each others' unconditional right to privacy.

As each of us moved towards completion, the type of personal support we offered each other became much more practical. When someone was finishing, the other two were available by phone for a quick call for advice about their writing, or simply to share the experience. Each time someone was finishing, the others would also provide food and other assistance with the minutiae of thesis completion. We also provided personal support after completion. We each experienced the moment of 'submission' as emotionally intense, and the precursor to a period of emotional and physical exhaustion. Talking to each other about this experience was very valuable, especially as many of our friends seemed to somewhat erroneously

assume that the elation we each felt when handing in our theses would continue uninterrupted afterwards.

Concluding comments

Reading and talking about each others' work helped us develop expertise in writing; we became more practised in the concrete processes of producing text and more confident in our writerly identities as we each, in turn, successfully completed our PhD theses. In addition, our writing group was a place where our identities as postgraduate students consolidated as we negotiated the ambiguities of being both 'student' and 'researcher', and 'insiders' and 'outsiders' within the university.

Sue Middleton notes the PhD experience is situated within a discursive web that constitutes both the various subjectivities of our 'scholarly selves', and the broader meanings and materialities that shape the experience of doing doctoral research (Middleton, 2001). Indeed, our experience of writing our PhDs echoes the complexities Middleton identified in her research into the doctoral experiences of Education students. However, for each of us, our location within or proximity to Women's Studies further complicated our individual 'thesis stories'. In part this was because we had begun writing our theses in a time of intense change in New Zealand universities. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the consolidation of managerialism and the corporatisation of New Zealand universities meant that our institutional location was often precarious. Jenny Coleman has written of the impact of 'masculinist economic and corporate culture' on the academic discipline of Women's Studies over the past decade or so (Coleman, 2001). Nevertheless, by virtue of our being doctoral students we had some 'insider' status and our pedagogical relationships with our supervisors remained intact. Similarly, it was our association with Women's Studies that enabled us to meet, form and develop a writing group that suited our needs and interests as feminists. None of us identified with the 'Darwinian discourses' (Acker & Armenti, 2004) that position academic success as the outcome of 'a fierce kind of individuality in which the strong survive and the weak fall by the wayside' (Grant, 1997). However, we consider current changes in the sector are likely to disadvantage women like ourselves completing research degrees as part-time and 'mature' students. There are very real pressures now for postgraduates

to complete theses within increasingly foreshortened timeframes despite international evidence to suggest that completion times are gendered (Leonard, 2001). Indeed, time limits are a governance technology that will not only have detrimental effects on women's access to doctoral programmes, but also on the types of research questions women postgraduates pursue.

There are a number of factors that we consider important in relation to the success of our writing group. Particularly significant was our focus on writing – on actually producing text, and sharing that with each other. Our shared commitment to the group, to writing, and to each of us completing our theses, were key factors in the sustaining the group over a relatively long period. Being committed meant we read each others' writing at various stages: pieces in development, emerging chapters, and sometimes, many different drafts of the same chapter. This meant that we had to 'know' each others' thesis, and retain others' overall thesis in mind to ensure effective review. Given this, participation was not always easy. Reading and giving feedback on the writing of others was time-consuming, as was attending regular meetings. Maintaining the integrity of the group by remaining respectful and sensitive to others could also be challenging. Also important was a regular and routinised approach to meetings while also making time for us to talk about our experiences as postgraduate women in a wider context. These practices interrupted dominant academic discourses that construct doctoral candidature as an individual endeavour, and interrupted the dominant subject positions available to us as 'individual' PhD students, with 'individual' supervisors, each pursuing our own 'individual' research interests. Thus, our writing group was a site for learning about writing, researching, and 'being' doctoral students outside of the formal institutional structures of the university.

For supervisors supporting students through the thesis writing process, we offer the following suggestions. If your students form their own writing group, respect their participation in the group and see it as complementary to your role. Do not become a group member. We think that students need to develop non-hierarchical pedagogical relationships within the university, and supervisor participation would always prevent this no matter how collegial the supervisor-student relationship might be. We each had supervisors who knew little about the workings of our group, but were always supportive of it. This

was important to us. In practical terms, supervisors can also provide access to institutional resources that writing groups require, especially photocopying, envelopes, and postage. Circulating by 'snail-mail' writing on 'real paper' ensures all members (writers and reviewers) have the same version of the writing (textually and in terms of page layout), and have access to the writing of others irrespective of the operating status of their personal printer.

Although each of us had different experiences during our enrolment in our doctoral degrees, the group became the focus of our thesis writing experience. In retrospect, we have talked about how it seemed almost by accident that we developed a collaborative approach to improving our writing, and a supportive environment where we could talk about (and when necessary, respond to) the challenges experienced as women postgraduates working within the gendered culture of the university. Although it is possible, even likely, that we would have completed if we had not formed the group, it definitely opened up new spaces to develop our writing, and explore the possibilities of alternative postgraduate identities in particularly productive ways. We could locate and talk through our experiences inside and outside the university, but also actively develop relationships that were both intellectually challenging and personally rewarding. We learned a lot from each other, and most importantly, we completed our theses.

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