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Doctoral students' collaborative practices in developing writer identities

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Article abstract

En route to their final thesis examinations, doctoral students face continuous challenges. These include institutional, instructional, personal, and social issues (Cotterall, 2011). These challenges can cause students to question their competency and ability to complete their programmes, despite any previous academic successes. Developing effective and productive writing habits may be the most demanding task facing research students. Academic writing is particularly challenging where students experience conflicts between their developing writer identities (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010) and the duties or responsibilities related to their lives outside the research programme: as carers; parents; or as new arrivals unfamiliar with the language and cultural conventions of a country or institution. We draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) description of Communities of Practice to outline the collaborative efforts undertaken by two doctoral students when developing their academic writing skills and writer identities. Both identify as immigrants to Australia: one has English as a second language; the other has returned to university (in a new country) after a 30-year hiatus. Developing academic writing identities has involved creating an English-speaking identity/self to overcome second language and cultural differences as well as to manage extensive challenges in terms of negotiation and navigation of academic writing practice genres. Although supervisors provide writing development guidelines, in this paper we focus on the nurturing support provided via the student community to overcome the different challenges presented during the PhD journey. Adopting an auto-ethnographical approach, we outline our individual challenges when developing writing identities and address the ways in which creating a collaborative support group has helped us improve writing style and productivity. It is in these circumstances – where individual needs extend beyond the readily available resources – that a peer-led community of practice can offer the necessary support and collaborative activities to enhance the learning experience of all participants. The group dynamics have evolved alongside developing writer identities as the nature of the support required changes over time and with experience. Creating this collaborative community has contributed to the development of wider-ranging linguistic, writing, technological, emotional, and social skills that extend above and beyond the remit of the PhD programme.

Article

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Abstract

En route to their final thesis examinations, doctoral students face continuous challenges. These include institutional, instructional, personal, and social issues (Cotterall, 2011). These challenges can cause students to question their competency and ability to complete their programmes, despite any previous academic successes. Developing effective and productive writing habits may be the most demanding task facing research students. Academic writing is particularly challenging where students experience conflicts between their developing writer identities (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010) and the duties or responsibilities related to their lives outside the research programme: as carers; parents; or as new arrivals unfamiliar with the language and cultural conventions of a country or institution.

We draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) description of Communities of Practice to outline the collaborative efforts undertaken by two doctoral students when developing their academic writing skills and writer identities. Both identify as immigrants to Australia: one has English as a second language; the other has returned to university (in a new country) after a 30-year hiatus. Developing academic writing identities has involved creating an English-speaking identity/self to overcome second language and cultural differences as well as to manage extensive challenges in terms of negotiation and navigation of academic writing practice genres. Although supervisors provide writing development guidelines, in this paper we focus on the nurturing support provided via the student community to overcome the different challenges presented during the PhD journey.

Adopting an auto-ethnographical approach, we outline our individual challenges when developing writing identities and address the ways in which creating a collaborative

support group has helped us improve writing style and productivity. It is in these circumstances – where individual needs extend beyond the readily available resources – that a peer-led community of practice can offer the necessary support and collaborative activities to enhance the learning experience of all participants. The group dynamics have evolved alongside developing writer identities as the nature of the support required changes over time and with experience. Creating this collaborative community has contributed to the development of wider-ranging linguistic, writing, technological, emotional, and social skills that extend above and beyond the remit of the PhD programme.

The challenges experienced

This paper is written by two female doctoral students. As women in society, we have faced what most women have: discrimination; sexual harassment; and external expectations that we model societal norms of behaviour – that we are caregivers first, willingly sacrificing any intellectual or economically-driven pursuits when our biological clocks start ticking. As women in teaching, we have struggled with different challenges: lowered opportunities for promotion; being asked about personal matters in job interviews (e.g., childbirth plans and the impact of our menstrual cycles); being expected to manage full-time jobs alongside child and/or elder care; as well as household management (e.g., cleaning, shopping, paying bills and arranging repairs). This article outlines some of the compensatory strategies created to balance the demands of caring with those of scholarly work. We are not only writers and researchers-in-training, but also female teachers, workers, and carers. In short, our writer identities are created in response to *all* the activities we engage in, not just our work in research and writing. These elements are acknowledged in Figure 1 (below):
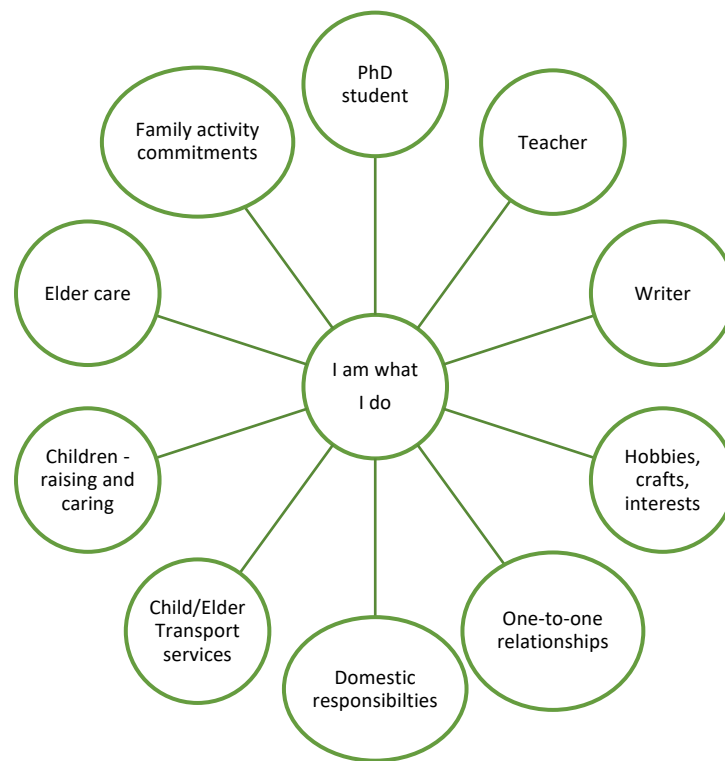
Figure 1. Visual summary of the multiple identities influencing female PhD candidates

Mature students and international students form two of the larger minority groups in Australian tertiary education. The term 'mature student' varies in its global interpretation. In the UK and Australia, mature students are defined as those who are over 21 years when starting an undergraduate degree and over 25 years of age at the onset of postgraduate studies (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2021). Fleming and McKee (2005) defined a mature student as an individual who is 23 years of age when commencing a degree. Jackson (2019) elaborated on these definitions to provide a snapshot of the demographic data associated with Australian tertiary education. Over a million domestic students are enrolled in one of the 39 Australian universities and almost 500,000 international students. Of these 1.5 million students, 4% pursued a postgraduate research degree, 65.1 % studied full-time, 40% were over 25 years old, and 58% were female students. However, Education is a feminised area and over 70% of teachers are women (Kelleher, 2011; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017). This learning environment differs from most courses, where the gender ratios are less extreme. Coming from these two under-represented groups – mature and

international students - has contributed to the development of our writer identities in that the institutional support we have received has been generic and not tailored to our specific needs.

Globally, PhD programmes are recognised as a pinnacle of excellence. Completing and passing the final thesis examination signifies that PhD candidates have developed rigorous research skills, an excellent command of academic language conventions, and the ability to structure a convincing argument that is supported by empirical data and research literature. The ability to clearly communicate what they know to any audience is also an assumed part of the skills involved. Completing a thesis within the allocated timeframe demonstrates students' passion for their subject matter and commitment to finishing their project regardless of the inevitable highs and lows. These statements appear to be part of the unspoken regulative practices of academia and are sometimes incomprehensible to outsiders. Away from university, a candidate's friends and family members may tell a different story: of distraction from the here and now; long hours in front of the computer; an inability to concentrate on meals, laundry, or the other elements associated with a care role; inability to be physically and/or emotionally present at school events; and of involvement with new friendships rooted in academia that are otherwise unconnected to the candidate's other world(s).

Institutional challenges

The main challenges for both domestic and international mature students lie in negotiating the unwritten procedures associated with an academic institution (Cotterall, 2011). This begins with recognising how and when it is acceptable to question procedures which those within the institution may take for granted. Academic conventions "may not always be explicitly conveyed to first-year students, but they are implicitly understood by academia" (FitzPatrick et al., 2021, p. 137). Identifying who to ask for help, and in what circumstances, is a key element that is not always outlined in induction seminars. While a lot of information is available online via university websites, the unspoken regulative discourses (Bernstein, 2000) may be a complicating factor where a prospective student is a non-native speaker. Bernstein describes regulative discourse as the routines and institutionally based rituals that constitute the knowledge and conduct governing the behaviour of students and lecturers alike (Bernstein, 2000). Difficulties can emerge regarding the paperwork accompanying applications for research degrees, as students may not present themselves effectively without insider knowledge. Similarly, the search for the right supervisor can be equally challenging where students lack awareness of the supervisor's research paradigm and how this will influence

the supervisory relationship (Stouck & Walter, 2020). Second language speakers, mature students, and immigrants are disadvantaged from the outset (Ramsay et al., 2006).

Cotterall (2011) argued that a doctoral study is a unique mode of institutional learning that typically includes formal and informal elements, proceeds through instruction and autonomous discovery, and can be both deeply individual and perfectly social. In practical terms, institutional challenges include issues such as enrolment processes and the extent to which prior learning is acknowledged, assessed, and recognised (Oliver et al., 2012).

Supervisors and   universities may assume   that approved entry   into   the   PhD programme indicates that students are able to perform and write at the level required for this degree program (Cotterall, 2011). Frequently, this view is shared by students who begin their programs believing they are good writers. However, initial feedback from supervisors is not always positive (FitzPatrick et al., 2021). The difference between performance and the university's requirements can sometimes be significant.

Instructional challenges

Instructional methods can vary by subject discipline, teacher's preference, and mode of delivery, and both instructional modes and cultural expectations of the student/teacher relationship serve to frame the learning experience (Bernstein, 2000). This can be challenging for students and teachers where expectations and boundaries are not made explicit. These expectations became particularly significant following the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and the accelerated use of multimodal delivery styles (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). For both authors, the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown created additional challenges. Firstly, supervisory and peer review sessions were unexpectedly moved online. Managing these moves required both confidence and technological skills. On a technical level, various platforms were trialled prior to a consensus to move forward with MS Teams for university-based meetings. Technical difficulties marked many meetings during the trial period, forming a significant distraction from the tasks at hand. This was further exacerbated by the expectation that participation in an online learning event should involve both speaking and engagement with the "comments" trail. Since spoken English can be significantly easier for second-language learners to manage when expressing themselves quickly or responding to comments, the expectation to engage in a multimodal environment adds a significant level of difficulty.

As working from home became the new normal, the care-related challenges also increased. This was particularly noticeable where "instructional challenges" also involved writing work and

concurrently supervising children learning at home. For Nicola, the pandemic lockdown involved supervising three children engaged in online schooling while simultaneously collecting data for her Masters research project and writing that dissertation. Although some aspects of the parent role within a home-school relationship remained the same, the move to online learning exposed an unanticipated need in younger children for constant adult supervision. Sitting nearby and modelling writerly behaviours was not effective. Adult supervision during online learning meant adopting the role of a teacher's aide to keep children on task and engaged. Time previously allocated for academic writing was replaced, ironically, with the additional challenges associated with instructing children as they navigated their online learning experiences.

Individual, social and identity challenges

Both authors experienced challenges in developing productive writing habits and an effective academic writing style that met university requirements. Academic English writing conventions have changed over time (Hyland & Jiang, 2017; Kaufhold, 2015), a feature which was challenging for Nicola on returning to university after a 30-year hiatus. These changes include the structure for developing a rationale and related research questions, conventions about where and how to use quotations, submitting electronic versions of papers, citation styles, and the use of plagiarism checkers. Carla was challenged by the need to learn two Englishes – everyday speech and academic English. She also struggled with writing conventions such as the use of cohesive devices, punctuation, idioms, and figurative language. As a native Spanish-speaker, a particular struggle involved adjusting sentence length to match English conventions. Danzak noted that Academic English generally uses embedded clauses or elaborated noun phrases to condense information at a phrase level while Spanish uses nominalisation (changing verbs to nouns) and grammatical metaphor to condense information (Danzak, 2020).

Traditional perspectives of the writing and doctoral journeys describe both processes as solitary and lonely (Cotterall, 2011; Fergie et al., 2011). Within the research field, emotions seem to be omitted from discussions of doctoral experiences (Lee & Williams, 1999). However, research students need more than intellectual support to complete their doctoral degrees (Cotterall, 2013). PhD students experience what has been described as a rollercoaster of emotions and may reasonably expect universities to provide the necessary emotional support (Cotterall, 2013) to ensure they complete their studies. International students and mature students are arguably two of the more marginalised groups of university students (Ramsay et al., 2006; Stouck & Walter,

2020) given the language barriers and co-occurring commitments which limit their engagement with peers as well as their studies.

Developing a writer voice during the PhD journey involves the emergence of both academic and writer identities (Cotterall, 2011, 2013). Writing and the scholarly identities of doctoral students have been explored and described in different ways and with different components. Cotterall (2013), for example, included living on a reduced income as one of the ingredients to construct a scholarly identity. Burgess and Ivanič (2010) suggested that studies around identity construction need to consider the time frame and the sociocultural issues involved. Identity "is subject to tensions and contradictions; is in a constant state of flux" (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010, p.232).

External stimuli from ongoing interactions with people also influence the writer's identity development and writing practice. Tensions and contradictions in the writer's personal life may spill over into their writing and influence the linguistic resources they choose to employ in the writing process (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010, p 237). Similarly, the readers' experiences will influence how they interpret the writing and how they perceive the writer within and alongside their writing.

FitzPatrick et al. (2021) suggest the affective domain influences the development of writing identities because positive feelings about the content and process of writing can catalyse productive and effective writing development. While we agree that this holds true for writing development, the interplay between the doctoral student's personal identity and their academic identity involves a complex array of sometimes contradictory emotions: It is possible to feel positive about emerging academic success and simultaneously feel frustrated about personal struggles. This interplay of contradictory emotions adds tension and complexity to the academic writing experience. Co-occurring challenges in a student's personal life are not always constructed as excuses for missing deadlines or difficulties engaging with peers. However, these personal challenges can shape the way students' academic identity develops, the types of support they recognise as needed, and whether they are willing to seek support. A doctoral student's academic identity is linked to their writing identity, given the need to produce both a thesis and, in some programmes, concurrent academic publications.

Theoretical framework

Our combined interest in communities of practices arose in response to Whatman's (2017) chapter detailing the establishment of online communities of practice for a sports coaching community. While the contexts and the participants' specific needs differed, the similarities allowed us to recognise and

codify our developing practices. This codification helped us to critically consider the impact of our activities on our emerging academic identities and our writer voices. A deeper understanding of the underlying concepts of communities of practice was essential to the codification process. We draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of communities of practice (CoP) to explore and explain the collaborative interactions that encouraged the development of our academic writer identities.

Lave and Wenger (2016) explained communities of practice as people who share a strong interest in an activity or topic and who learn better through regular interaction. This shared concern or passionate interest governs how peers organise themselves in formal learning settings and apply that knowledge outside the classroom. We interact and attune with one another in the world; and, intentionally or not, we learn during that process. "The concept of practice connotes doing, but not doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do" (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). When time passes, the practices developed within the group become their property, so it is logical to call them communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

A community of practice (CoP) is a thinking tool that helps us become more aware of the institutional frameworks and boundaries around us, identifying how and where boundaries can be pushed as we develop new insights (Lave & Wenger, 2016). CoP is a democratic strategy that can be used to overcome the oppression and inequality international students constantly experience while moving towards micro-social change (Gonçalves et al., 2021). Micro-social change involves taking baby steps towards community development. For example, students might start by developing a safe learning partnership within their closest community space, building membership as they gain knowledge and confidence. This group membership later supports them when they might otherwise feel stressed, marginalised and hopeless. When specific activities work, students might share their repertoire of activities with the larger community. Actions could then be replicated on a larger scale. CoP works as an important tactic to empower group members, encouraging them to overcome their struggles and challenges (Gonçalves et al., 2021; Whatman, 2017). Three components are required to identify a group as a CoP:

- **A domain** – where the group members have a strong shared interest (building the required skills to finish doctoral dissertations)
- **A community** – where group members engage in specific activities related to the domain. These activities allow members to learn from each other and interact during the learning processes. Although we are part of larger communities, this paper concentrates on the

collaborative activities we created through pair work to improve academic writing, linguistic awareness, and technological communication.

- **A practice** – the specific set of shared activities which the community members develop in response to the domain. The repertoire of activities might include stories, tools, and experiences developed over time. In our case, the practices include regular (mostly online) meetings, "blablita" texting, emails, and activities inside the larger community of students (see Tables 1 and 2 below for the range of activities used). We use "blablita" to refer to texting practices designed to establish vocabulary or technological requirements, idioms or figurative language use and memes to enrich meaning. "Blablita" is a variation on "blah blah" and is consistent with Chilean Spanish adaptations of both English idiomatic vocabulary and the use of "-ita" to indicate something small. These texting practices required highly contextualised knowledge of each other's theses to be understood.

Learning is a daily, lived experience that is central to human identity (Lave & Wenger, 2016). Social participation is required for learning and involves individuals actively participating in community practices. Participation aids   the construction of identity   through   these communities. Lave and Wenger (2016) claimed that people's identity continually changes by engaging and contributing to their communities' practices. Developing communities of practice in our learning site helped us rethink learning and find ways that supported us individually, collectively, and organisationally. Mutual engagement in communities of practice also provided us with the context to develop common sense solutions to problems (Wenger, 1998). Forming a community of research students around the domain of PhD educational research has helped us to negotiate the development of our academic writing identities.

Autoethnography as Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative method that offers opportunities to share thoughts and stories detailing descriptions of experiences. Autoethnographies highlight the emotional weight that experiences carry (Gallardo & Gindidis, 2020). With particular attention to performance and embodiment, autoethnography enacts "a way of seeing and being [that] challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other" (Denzin, 2006, p. 422). This method serves to represent the constant struggle of traditions, the legitimation, representation, and praxis in research (Denzin, 1997; Holman Jones, 2005).

Autoethnography offers the opportunity to step aside from a linear narrative positioning as it offers spaces for "other's" knowledge where stories can be told, retold, broken, and realigned (Spry, 2006). As two immigrants to Australia, we needed to push boundaries in order to validate our knowledge and position from outside the hegemonic groups. Autoethnography offers a transformative method that considers our bodies, lives, contexts, and cultures. Furthermore, the subjects of autoethnographies are doing, speaking, and understanding beings, yet "incomplete, unknown, fragmented and conflictual" (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008, p. 788). Therefore, we admit and acknowledge our experiences as subjective and incomplete, but rich, rigorous, and emotionally therapeutic (Ellis & Adams, 2014).

As a community of practice, we initially created a writing group of two (Cotterall, 2011, 2013). This has since become embedded within a larger writing group of six PhD students and our supervisor. The OWL group (Other Writing Lab) meets weekly for 30 minutes to share writing extracts for feedback or to discuss writing-related issues. The OWL participants also attend a larger sociology of education reading group entitled the PCPR (pedagogic code and pedagogic rights) group. This group meets fortnightly to share insights and responses to journal articles selected as part of a collaboratively constructed curriculum. Initially arising within the University Education higher degree by research (HDR) Department, this group has now extended to include participants engaged in education research around the world. PCPR group participants also engage with other, interested students and academics in a SLACK-based community supporting asynchronous conversational threads around social justice issues and thesis writing. The various communities of practice and their interconnections are visually displayed in Figure 2 (below):
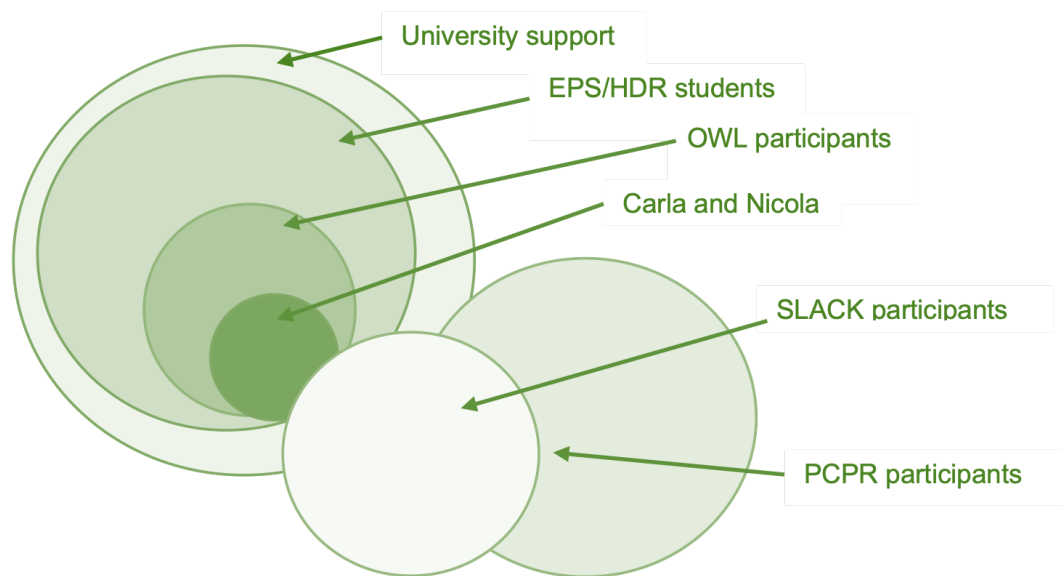
Figure 2. Visual representation of the interconnecting communities of practice supporting academic writer identity development

We used the activities outlined in Tables 1 and 2 to develop a sense of community that helped to construct our writer identities while equally contributing to the construction of our scholarly identities. This paper comprises three sets of data: our personal stories, our mutual (Nicola and Carla) emails, and "blablita" text messages. These activities resulted in the development of wider-ranging writing and technological skills that have proved essential in managing our PhD journeys. Institutional ethics approval was not required as autoethnography is classed as a self-study.

Table 1. Practices contributing to wider-ranging writing skills

Activity	Advantages
Blablita – texting for language and technology support	Builds on strongly contextualised knowledge of the research project to reframe questions and provide quick answers. Fast response limits drop in cohesion during the writing process. Develops vocabulary and subject specific knowledge consistent with a wider range of subject matter. Encourages interdisciplinary awareness.
Hot-desking – a space-saving business practice which only allocates a desk when a worker needs it for a specific task. Workers have no dedicated space of their own, rotating physical positions to reflect the projects they are working on, their role responsibilities or the frequency of their onsite attendance.	Conflicting familial or care commitments required the ability to write in short bursts and in multiple locations. Enhances organisational skills - all elements required for ongoing work are kept portable and accessible. Offers opportunities to explore alternative means of productive writing, including the use of speech-to-text apps.
Online peer-to-peer writing discussions	Sharing screens to comment on the development of specific paragraphs or sections of a thesis. Multiple iterations allowed us to consider how an argument was shaped within the writing.

Table 2. Practices contributing to wider ranging technological skills

Activity	Advantages
Use of interconnecting software across multiple devices	Developing flexibility in the methods used to write – dictation, writing on multiple devices with everything stored on the cloud.
Learning to save to the cloud so data and multiple iterations aren't lost	All elements of the writing process (including ideas generation and initial note taking) needed to be stored in the same place, electronically, so that nothing is ever lost. This included the use of alternative 'trash' options, so that all elements could be retrieved at any time.
Experience facilitating a doctoral and postdoctoral reading group (PCPR)	Developing technological dexterity to manage Teams, Zoom, and similar applications while concurrently using PowerPoint to support discussions within the group.
One-to-one peer tuition relating to new software and systems navigation	Providing solution-focused support that met the student's needs as they arose. Information was more relevant and more easily retained than could be provided in a generic training session.

The components of my identity as a doctoral student—Carla

As a Spanish-speaking international student, I have continuously struggled to communicate with my peers and supervisors in everyday English. Thesis writing requires a strong command of Academic English, which is substantially different from Academic Spanish. I needed to acquire two Englishes simultaneously: the everyday language and the academic language. These challenges are heightened by existing cultural barriers, including the behaviours, customs, and expectations of relationships that we bring with us to a new country. Where cultural behaviours and expectations do not easily mesh with the dominant group's expectations, alienation can impact on learning and communication until an effective community of practice is established.

Developing effective support networks and a sense of community impact on the overall student experience and are frequently cited within the literature as contributing to student satisfaction (Stouck & Walter, 2020). However, the efforts made to build communities vary with the student population. I was challenged by the changing opportunities for building CoP between universities. I undertook my Masters Degree at a larger university in Australia where international students make up 40% of the student population (Monash University, 2021). Extracurricular clubs, programmes, and workshops reflected international students' needs. At my current university, the international student population approaches 20% and support availability seems to reflect that difference (University Rankings, 2015-2021).

I moved from Chile to Australia alone, leaving family and friends behind. Consequently, there were no Spanish speakers to provide emotional or practical support. I was immersed in Australian English and had to adapt and develop 'better' social skills to get to know people and find a new 'adoptive' family to share important dates and holidays, and for company or help when required. Adaptability has become an integral part of my identity. Without it, I would not have completed my Masters thesis or moved on to Doctoral studies. Adapting to a new environment with limited support and help also influenced my writing identity. In the absence of my familiar support networks, I needed to adapt to my new reality and develop new emotional resources.

To learn vernacular English, I attended social and sporting activities in and outside the university (e.g., talks, movies, social gatherings, soccer team). However, dating was the most effective activity for improving my English. I put myself out there on dating apps and acquired a significant English vocabulary including slang and idioms. This made it easier to establish rapport with my peers and supervisors.

I used different tools to address academic language issues. Attending university-based postgraduate workshops and seminars was only somewhat helpful. The most frequently used resource has been a doctoral peer who is a native English speaker with a background in education, linguistics, and editing. As part of our language-related community of practice, we have developed a 'text-a-friend' partnership that we call "blablita." This grew out of initial explanations about the scope and nature of our individual research projects, shared readings of key theoretical articles within the PCPR group, and detailed discussions about how and where our research projects aligned or intersected. These early activities helped to construct the background knowledge required to use texting as a form of intellectual shorthand during the thesis writing process. For example, if I doubt my translation of a concept or idea, I text Nicola. Sometimes, my translation is close to an English idiom, so the texted conversation establishes the correct nuances I am seeking. Where the translation does not make sense, I explain the concepts. We explore word choices (synonyms), developing a richer understanding of both academic and vernacular English in the process. For example, *establecimientos dos por uno*. In Chile, a "dos por uno" school allows students to follow a condensed timetable and complete two years of schooling in one year: a route attractive to students wanting to follow vocational training as it allows them to complete their compulsory education earlier. When I needed to write about this concept, the literal translation – two-per-one school – needed to be unpacked before Nicola could support me in finding the most appropriate words. In doing so, we were able to make closer comparisons between educational options available in both Australia and Chile, increasing our mutual understanding of the political and philosophical challenges within both school systems.

Regular meetings via Teams (platform) also improved and extended our collaborative writing practices. The platform is used for online communication, asynchronous writing, sharing files, and inspirational asides related to the tasks at hand. For instance, a 15-minute conversation during the development of my methodology chapter generated insights into the language I used to describe the teacher participants in my research project. This was a valuable discussion given that most aspects of my data collection process took place in Spanish. I needed to organise the data and ideas in Spanish before transforming and translating material into English. Double-checking meaning at word, phrase, and sentence levels was essential to develop a chapter that made sense to my supervisors. Additionally, many Spanish idioms and phrases have no direct English translation. Our language-focused discussions and peer checking of writing eased the initial draft process, allowing supervision

sessions to concentrate solely on philosophical and pedagogical developments rather than grammatical issues.

Although the university has general forms of support offered to international students, these are not always relevant or appropriate to the individual student's needs. However, both my peers and my supervisors have been very supportive. The School of Education and Research Centre's reputation for its focus on social justice issues has attracted a relatively large number of international postgraduate students. My supervisor has helped us to build our skills and experience through a variety of activities which have contributed to critical and social language skills development. For example, the PCPR reading group offers opportunities to engage in shared reading and discussion of specific papers. This challenges both the construction of ideas and our ability to articulate how these papers are reflected in our written work. This discursive reading group generates different perspectives, understandings, and insights from specific articles. The group is also a safe space, providing opportunities to practice communicating in academic English. The opportunity to facilitate the PCPR reading group for a semester empowered me to develop practical skills that supported and extended my academic identity. Similarly, short-term research assistant contracts allow doctoral students to function as apprentices, working alongside senior academics. Working with two different academics on two contracts has afforded me with introductory, practical experience of the tasks expected of postdoctoral researchers.

Reviewing "blablita" texts, I noticed that I struggled to communicate fluently in both Spanish and English at particularly stressful times. Nicola was able to offer alternate solutions to my dilemmas. She also advised: "You probably should write your thesis in Spanish and then translate afterwards." We ended up laughing when we imagined the complications involved, including the additional funds, time, and efficient translators needed to make that solution work. Our bonded relationship and collaboration have become essential for us as we complement each other in knowledge and support each other when needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the necessity for students to work from home and simultaneously increased the impact of the caring role. Although the caring role is an assumed part of a woman's identity, this role became heavier during the pandemic lockdown. When the pandemic lockdown began, I got stuck in Chile. A three-week holiday stretched into two years. I became my nephew's official carer as his mum is a health care professional who could not work from home. Adopting a childcare role distracted me from writing my dissertation and severely limited the energy and motivation I needed to write. Conflicting commitments limited my ability to write how and when

I wanted, making it necessary for me to learn how to juggle my commitments and write in short bursts.

There is no easy answer to managing a childcare role alongside doctoral studies. I attempted different practices, new schedules, changing habits and re-organising times for various activities. None of these attempts were very effective. Furthermore, people around me/my family expected me, as a woman, to clean and care for the baby, run the house, do the shopping, and still work. I knew this because our house schedule included baby's care; my family members would do their tasks leaving the child in the house, where I was the only responsible woman adult remaining. His mum would leave me instructions, and the baby would ask me for food. No university-based community of practice could have helped with this issue. Creating a community of practice has helped me overcome different challenges by providing solutions that have contributed to my student and writer identity. Being true to myself and my heart, I cannot omit the inclusions of my writer identity: linguistic and cultural issues, emotional barriers, and social expectations (caring role) contribute to my current identity as a writer trying to complete her dissertation. However, arriving at this position has not been easy. I have needed to think and rethink what I have gone through over these years.

The components of my identity as a doctoral student—Nicola

Although English is my first language, I experienced similar difficulties to Carla when I engaged with academia on returning to fulltime study after a 30-year hiatus. Despite being classed as an international student as an undergraduate in the UK, negotiating enrolment as a mature-aged domestic student in Australia appeared more alienating. A critical element in this process involved the recognition of prior learning. When I first applied to enter the PhD programme, I had an honours degree plus three postgraduate qualifications recognised in the UK as being of Masters equivalency. I was also a published author and an experienced ghost-writer in commercial non-fiction. However, I couldn't share evidence of the quality of my academic writing. The dissertation produced as part of my postgraduate certificate in education had remained unopened and unread for over ten years. The solitary hard copy version was lost during the journey to Australia.

I was advised to take a step back and do a Masters in Education and Professional Studies before moving forward to apply for the PhD programme. At the time, this was a humbling experience, as my self-perception involved pride in my previous academic achievements and the belief that university qualifications were both internationally recognised and timeless. I did not comprehend the extent of the changes to academic writing conventions that had occurred since I originally left academia. Nor

did I recognise how much I had changed as a writer. I did not understand how academic practices might vary over time, across disciplines, and between countries. I needed to adjust to the practices of electronic submission of assignments, plagiarism checkers, using academic journal articles instead of relying on library books, sourcing those articles electronically, switching from Oxford to APA citation styles, new online platforms integrated into the learning environment (Collaborate, Teams, and Zoom), citation management systems (Endnote and Mendeley), and changing classroom practices in the delivery of face-to-face classes.

The step back into the Masters programme proved essential to the emergence of my academic writer voice and my participation within the developing CoP. Without taking that step, I suspect I would have become another statistic: one more part-time, mature-aged student who, while passionately interested in their research project, never completes their research degree (Torka, 2020).

I view the emergence of my academic writer voice as a staggered process which was dependent on a combination of invisible and visible pedagogic practices (Bernstein, 2000) enacted by my supervisors and my peers within the CoP. Bernstein suggests invisible pedagogies are associated with flexible modes of instruction which are highly contextualised. Visible pedagogies are more formal and hierarchical, supporting a clear power structure which differentiates between teacher and learner. Activities which began as visible pedagogic practices within the supervisory relationship were then strengthened and reinforced while becoming less visible within the CoP. For example, a shared metalanguage around linguistic concepts and grammar allowed my principal supervisor to give explicit, verbal guidance about the technical changes required to shift my writing style to align with current expectations. Providing this set of syntactically explicit guidelines minimised the potential emotional impact of extensive corrections, creating a consistent framework from which to build constructive writing habits. Concurrent conversations with peers made me realise that the nature of these guidelines was both unusual and dependent on that linguistic metalanguage. While I still receive phrase-level corrections, these are now less prominent following that initial guidance.

Having implemented those guidelines, I was able to contribute more effectively to the CoP by reframing the ideas for my peers. This took place in less formal settings and represented an invisible pedagogic practice where discussion sessions were not constrained by time, were highly contextualised within my peers' research projects, and focussed on the specific phrasal and grammatical resources used in Australian, British, and world Englishes that are not consistent with academic English. These peer-to-peer discussions were also framed as collaborative learning

opportunities as we discussed how each member's study concepts and methodologies could be expressed effectively for supervisory consumption. In this respect, my peers provided one-to-one practical lessons in how contemporary researchers construct theoretical frameworks and apply them to a research problem. This allowed me to bridge the gap created by the passage of time since my previous engagement in academic writing. The discursive elements of our sessions were also necessary to help me align with my peers' thinking and view their research from their perspective, easing the communicative process as we explored the best ways of expressing thoughts in writing.

Within our developing community of practice, Carla's support has been instrumental in keeping me focussed and engaged with academia. Addressing the technical challenges related to academic work has been daunting. While I was intellectually prepared to manage a change in citation style, I struggled with new software, learning platforms, submission, and citation management systems. Navigating these technical challenges stretched beyond our "blablita" practices and required one-to-one tutoring support. This was made more challenging when Carla was in the data production phase of her research project and working in Chile. To address my low level of technical expertise, Carla used a range of pedagogic practices designed to overcome the mental blocks I'd created around these issues. These included modelling specific processes via shared screens, providing explicit step-by-step instructions which were contextualised to solve identified problems, then reinforcing my understanding through a series of short tasks which were immediately relevant to my requirements, playful (and therefore highly motivating), and gradually increasing in complexity. This proved substantially more effective than the standardised training programmes available elsewhere. In this way, she moved me from an unhappy novice to a somewhat confident one when it became my turn to facilitate the PCPR reading group.

The primary carer's role is a significant obstacle for women returning to education at any level (Power, 2020). It offers both opportunities and challenges for the families involved. Children see their mother committing to self-improvement through education and putting significant hours into the "homework" process as they complete their dissertations. Mothers struggle to balance the conflicting demands of the multiple identities they are creating. Time management skills are emphasised, as parents juggle academic commitments with childcare and role responsibilities. Practical adaptability became an essential skill for success as I learned to carry my laptop everywhere and to write in dentists' offices, hospital waiting rooms, outside music lessons, or while sports practice took place. While I had some experience of hotdesking in commercial settings, I viewed this as a less effective mode of working because I had little control over the environment and was easily distracted.

However, the urgency of academic deadlines combined with the need to juggle care responsibilities with limited writing time meant that I learned to focus on writing in any setting. It also meant identifying and addressing my preferred methods of procrastination. These included continuous editing practices and prolonging the self-regulatory tasks required prior to writing.

Findings

Although we came to both the PhD programme and the academic page from different locations, positions, and backgrounds, we faced similar challenges in our doctoral journeys. The collaborative solution to these challenges contributed to the construction of both our writer and academic identities. We divided the challenges into linguistic and technological barriers as the factors that were immediately critical to the development of our writer voices. However, adjusting to new pedagogical practices and sociocultural expectations has influenced our identities in more subtle ways – the impact of these elements is unlikely to be fully realised until thesis completion.

We began a community of practice couched within two other communities: the larger university community with its particular ways of doing things and a mid-sized community comprised of doctoral students and supervisors within the School of Education and Professional Studies. Creating and building a community around developing a writer identity was enhanced through peer interaction and collaborative practices. The primary community (of two) helped us to engage effectively with both the larger communities, building confidence in our emerging identities. We began to be recognised by our peers and supervisors as an organised community that worked to surmount the barriers faced as international and mature-aged doctoral students.

Developing our writer identities within the community of two allowed us to negotiate and trial the elements that contributed to our writer and academic identities within the larger communities. We negotiated our lexical and syntactical choices, our figurative language devices, and our behaviours and customs before employing these to establish ourselves within the larger (university) community. Less effort was required within the mid-sized community as this group shared common characteristics beyond a dedicated workspace: most are full-time students conducting research focused on social justice issues. Many are bilingual international students and a large minority share at least one supervisor.

Pedagogical practices established by specific supervisors encourage widening participation in university groups. We were encouraged to contribute to group reading activities that challenged both conceptual knowledge and available linguistic resources. As student confidence rose and

communication began to flow freely, these supervisors established links to other, international communities of practice. Doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers, and professors carrying out research in similar fields around the globe began to participate in the PCPR group(s). Their generosity in sharing their thought processes and responses to theoretical and philosophical discussions has enhanced the learning journey, helping to develop a clearer understanding of the processes and unspoken rules of academic writing.

We acknowledge that universities offer a range of opportunities for students to meet and to take the first steps in establishing their own communities of practice. However, it is possible that supervisors are in the best position to facilitate the introduction of pairs or groups that could help each other to develop effective and productive writing habits. In practice, a CoP works best where all parties are aware that their contributions are equally valued.

Both author/participants found the impact of the caring role was the most significant aspect affecting academic writing, especially during the pandemic lockdown. While doing the writing itself was already challenging, the pandemic kept women inside the house. 'Working from home' in these circumstances meant juggling academic work with care roles, home-schooling requirements, and domestic management. One outcome appears to have been a familial and sometimes societal assumption that we (women) were now available physically to cater for others' needs *first*. This experience aligns with Atkinson-Graham et al's views that "care is often a site of ambivalence, tension, and puzzlement" (Atkinson-Graham, et al., 2015, p. 738). Ingram (1998) argued that writing collaboratively is a social process where attention should be drawn to the role of gender as this task has not yet been fully understood. She argues that gender represents a structural force in influencing interactional styles and modes of collaboration when writing. To fully comprehend our own identity, we need to explore and understand our (dis)advantages when participating in collaborative writing groups, researching, and writing a thesis.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ivanič argues that "the only way an apprentice member of a community can learn to become a full member is by copying, adapting and synthesising from the work of other members" (1998, p. 4). This argument holds true for most forms of writing – and explains the importance of reading widely in order to write effectively. However, becoming an effective member of the academic writing community appears to require additional elements. This includes access to the writing processes

adopted by more experienced members of the academic community, witnessing the various drafting stages, and collaboratively exploring the linguistic resources available.

Our findings concur with illustrations in the existing literature. Ramsay et al. (2006) indicate that international and mature students prefer more emotional, practical, and informational support as opposed to generalised language support or editing services (p. 247). We literally get lost in translation – Carla remains challenged by linguistic issues and Nicola continues to struggle with technological issues. To be effective, the support offered to international and mature students needs to be personalised and relevant to each student's circumstances and writing context. Generic support, while easier for a university to supply, cannot always address the issues individual students identify as critical to their immediate progress. For example, standard English language support is more likely to provide guidance relating to grammar and punctuation, whereas a student may need an exploratory discussion on figurative language in order to enrich their writing. It is in these circumstances – where individual needs extend beyond the readily available resources – that a peer-led community of practice can offer the necessary support and collaborative activities to enhance the learning experience of all participants.

Our experience indicates that an effective community of practice around developing writer academic identities benefits from a strong sense of comradeship devoid of competitiveness because "students learn to write as they socialise themselves into the academic culture with the guidance of their supervisors or other faculty" (FitzPatrick et al., 2021, p. 137). In our case, although our research fields are significantly different, we can concentrate on supporting skills development, enhancing individual strengths, and learning to view the PhD programme as a route to whole-person development: one in which we learn to appreciate the long-term value of the skills gained and start to consider how these skills can be strategically applied in the development of a post-doctoral career. There are no limits to a doctoral student's capacities and capabilities when they find their writer voice and recognise opportunities to apply their skills across multiple fields.

The activities we used to improve our writing also reflect other findings in the literature. FitzPatrick et al. (2021) stated "with suggestions, feedback, modelling, shared writing experiences, and formal and informal assessment, doctoral students are enculturated into scholarly writing through relationships with their supervisors, other faculty, and peers" (p. 138). Though these findings reflect some elements of our experience, the potential impact of emerging communities of practice around collaborative writing and academic writing development needs further research. Conflicting demands on a supervisor's time emphasise the need for doctoral students to be self-

directed and independent learners. This suggests that effective communities of practice may not only reduce a supervisor's workload but also offer the individualised support necessary for both international and mature-aged doctoral students to move successfully through their programmes of study.

The impact of caring roles and responsibilities appear to be continuously ignored within the literature related to the PhD journey. These aspects of daily life interrupt writing and affect the development of our writing and scholarly identities. The guilt associated with being distracted also impacts on our abilities to balance work and homelife.

Developing a community of practice has helped us to face and solve many unexpected difficulties. Without a community of practice, we don't know how we would have navigated our challenges. Lockdowns and isolation have affected everybody, so contact with peers has been vital for research, language, and emotional support, and to feel a part of the larger, university community of practice.

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