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NETWORKS, NODES AND KNOWLEDGE

BLOGGING TO SUPPORT DOCTORAL CANDIDATES AND SUPERVISORS

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For those charged with the responsibility of developing postgraduate supervision in a knowledge society, social media offers possibilities for new ways of expanding the reach and quality of academic support. Against a background of rapid change in doctoral education worldwide – greater diversity in doctoral candidates, new types and formats of theses, and intensifying pressures to measure research outputs – those working in this field are starting to reconfigure their role in different ways. The impact of these changes on doctoral writing and those who support fledgling researchers through their candidature is still to be fully understood (Lee & Danby 2012). However, we do know that doctoral writing support is additionally provided beyond supervision (by peers, academic developers, learning advisors), and increasingly the mode of ‘instruction’ is through digital social networks (for example, see Charles 2015). Academic developers, language and literacy specialists and writing teachers are increasingly players in this field: advising supervisors on the wealth of online resources and in their own right as consumers and participant co-creators of knowledge online.

We endorse the movement towards widening support beyond the supervisor dyad as beneficial (Golde & Walker 2006), perhaps essential, for academics with increasing supervision workloads. This chapter builds on a previous article (Guerin, Carter & Aitchison 2015) to explore the development of one such form of support for doctoral writing – a cross-institutional blog started in 2012 and designed to build a networked community of academic language and literacy specialists, supervisors and students with shared interests in this topic. Drawing on the theories of ‘participatory pedagogy’ (Siemens & Matheos 2010), we reflect on our experiences of entering this online environment, the practices we have established, and how this work positions us in relation to those engaged in supporting doctoral writing. We see blogging as

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an effective model for supporting those engaged in researcher education – doctoral candidates, supervisors, academic developers and learning advisors – as we move into the future of postgraduate supervision in the knowledge society.

SEEKING A COMMUNITY

One of the major challenges for those engaged in academic development for doctoral education is the often tenuous position this work occupies within university structures and the prevailing institutional ethos of the relationship between teaching and research. Many academic developers, writing teachers and learning advisors in the field of doctoral studies find themselves working in relative isolation, caught between the competing demands of management, academics and students (Clegg 2009). Added to this is a constantly shifting environment in terms of changes in the form of the doctorate, changes in the motivations for and expected outcomes from undertaking doctoral studies, and changes in the organisational structures that provide support for doctoral candidates.

Those working with doctoral candidates must necessarily engage with what amounts to a sea change in doctoral education (Nerad & Evans 2014) that raises a whole set of pedagogical challenges. Such transitions are often difficult. The social isolation of doctoral study can be demoralising (Ali & Kohun 2007; Zamel 1999); uneven access to cultural capital affects doctoral success (Cotterall 2015); novel scholarly identities come into play (Chan & Dimmock 2008); and for many, writing in English is challenging (Paltridge & Starfield 2007). More than ever before, doctorates are undertaken by adults who combine work and part-time study (Evans 2010), and by women (Carter, Blumenstein & Cook 2013), all of which brings particular stresses to inflect the doctoral experience. Then, the thesis itself is changing: increasingly, theses are with or by publication (Guerin 2016), or are practice-based (Aitchison 2015; Winter, Griffiths & Green 2000) or performance-based (Ravelli, Paltridge, Starfield & Tuckwell 2013).

Pedagogy for the support of doctoral writing must accommodate these wider ranging needs and identities; those engaged in developing and delivering those pedagogies often find themselves isolated in their attempts to find answers to these emerging circumstances. However, despite the challenges of instability and discontinuity, this changing environment can also open up a positive space for a community of educators who provide writing support for those engaged in doctoral education. Such a community can share information about effective practices in members' work, thus contributing to the professional development of writing teachers and learning advisors – and do that outside the constraints of institutional structures.

Establishing a community

With this context in mind, in 2012 Claire suggested establishing a special interest group (SIG) focused on doctoral writing at the Australian Quality in Postgraduate Research (QPR) conference, inviting others to help in setting up such a group. Cally and Susan were interested, along with Inger Mewburn who had already established *The Thesis Whisperer*, an academic blog for thesis writers. The prospect opened the chance to create connections between educators who work with doctoral writing, who are often located in small centres and units, and who have few colleagues with whom to share ideas and practices. Structurally isolated within institutions, these advisors and developers are mostly set apart from the disciplines and are vulnerable to recurrent restructuring with negative impacts on their developing expertise, institutional recognition and personal confidence. A SIG on doctoral writing could provide a focal point for a community of practitioners, sustaining and inspiring members through the connections afforded by Web 2.0 technologies.

The *DoctoralWritingSIG* was prompted by the interest of 40 or so QPR conference attendees. This was the audience for whom we initially wrote our blog posts, unsure of whether attention would wane, wanting to keep it alive with interesting scholarly posts that invited comments. As scholars we were already familiar with the work of those attending the conference; much of that research had provided a framework within and around which our own scholarship and practice had grown. Nonetheless, Web 2.0 media have global reach, and we realised fairly quickly that there was broader take-up than the largely Australasian QPR cohort. This audience expanded exponentially, revealing that our QPR colleagues were a sample group indicative of a larger global community. Worldwide there were many others who shared our interests; our blog activity brought them and their work in the field of doctoral writing to our attention.

Academics actively providing support for doctoral students were our initial envisioned audience. Although we have come to realise that doctoral candidates are the bulk of our readership, the wider multi-layered community of doctoral writing stakeholders remains our target group. As is common in Web 2.0 environments, most of those who engage with the site are consumers rather than producers, using the blog as a resource for doing and supporting doctoral writing. Nevertheless, over time we have acquired more active participants, contributors and commenters that engage as a community of practitioners.

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A networked community of reflective practitioners

In attempting to establish a community of practice for those supporting doctoral writing, we are conscious of the value of regarding these educators as a community of reflective practitioners. Key to undertaking such an academic development role within universities is a capacity for reflexivity (Rowland 2007; Sutherland 2013); in our context, this means that practitioners constantly need to reflect upon and reassess the ways in which they can best support those charged with the educational responsibilities for doctoral studies. The critical reflection demanded by Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory is frequently summoned in discussions of academic development, calling us to interrogate not only our content, but more particularly the processes and premises upon which our work is based (Kreber 2004). Opportunities to do such critical reflection in collaborative spaces can enhance the value of this activity for individual practice and for institutional change (Kennelly & McCormack 2015).

Our reflections on building a community of practice are also informed by the pedagogical philosophy of 'connectivism' proposed by Downes and Siemens, among others (Cormier & Siemens 2010; Downes 2012; Siemens & Matheos 2010). 'Connectivism' posits that, especially in the 21st century, "knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (Downes 2012:9). Hence, connectivism describes and explains the informal learning that characterises the sharing of knowledge in a digital environment in which networks connect learners with each other; where learners look to each other (instead of to established 'authorities') as reliable sources of information; and where learners are active participants in the creation of knowledge in their field through contributions to digital and social media such as websites, blogs, Facebook and YouTube (Downes 2012; Siemens & Matheos 2010). We see the *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog as a forum that can encourage "open participatory practices" (Siemens & Matheos 2010) that allow members to contribute to knowledge creation in their community of practice. Importantly for us, connectivism recognises the informal learning that operates outside institutional hierarchies, and is based on principles of sharing and of collegiality.

Connectivism brings together constructivist approaches to learning that focus on the social aspects of creating meaning and the technology that facilitates interactions between community members and their various networks. Taking the metaphor of the 'network', we can see that the nodes or 'hubs' in the network might be bodies of knowledge or information; people who act as 'containers' of knowledge and ideas; or resources, such as blogs, websites, books and journals. The kind of social network

created by a blog community can provide opportunities to share ideas about what is valuable – in this sense, a blog might act as a ‘hub’ or node that brings together people and ideas that can in turn feed back out into wider networks (Siemens & Matheos 2010). Given our interest in building connections between people, and connections between ideas, connectivism articulates a focus for our reflections on what we hope to achieve with the *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN ACADEMIA

The emerging literature on digital technologies in doctoral education mostly extols the potential of social media while continuing to show that its uptake amongst the general academic population and within the doctoral sphere is slow (Dowling & Wilson 2015; Sumner 2012). The literature promises that digital technologies are central to the future competitiveness of universities, and thus, national organisations such as the Research Council in the UK and Vitae (<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/>) are promoting the cautious embrace of social media in research. It is now widely recognised that social media tools offer a means to change the way research is conducted (eg for collecting data and collaborating), measured, reported and disseminated (Sumner 2012). Social media can be incorporated across all the domains of doctoral education: the everyday practices of researching, writing, communicating and training; it can be integral to researchers’ relationships and networks – between the student and supervisor and beyond; and integral to the building of the researcher’s public identity and profile (Dowling & Wilson 2015).

And yet, it would seem the uptake and use of social media is mixed, with some studies showing conflicting information regarding user demographics: some younger ‘Gen Y’ users are prolific and confident users, others doggedly resist. However, by far the most engagement is by users rather than producers of social media content (Gu & Widen-Wulff 2010). A recent study by Dowling and Wilson (2015) showed that among doctoral scholars (who are routinely pressed for time) there is a reticence to adopt newer digital technologies, especially where they encounter supervisor skepticism or resistance, and lack confidence, skill and avenues for support. Supervisor support is crucial, as are training and support (Carpenter, Wetheridge & Tanner 2012; Sumner 2012).

A smaller but nevertheless powerful literature that describes how social media is being used by doctoral scholars and academics is beginning to emerge. Ward and West (2008) describe blogging as a tool used for reflection by doctoral students, and established academics and researchers are also documenting uses of blogging – for reflection, sharing and profile and community building (Gruzd, Staves & Wilk

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2012; Steel, Cohen, Hurley & Joy 2012; Mewburn & Thomson 2013). Since the launch of *DoctoralWritingSIG*, there has been an exponential growth in blogs concerned with the doctoral experience. Early examples were mostly student-initiated (eg *ThesisWhisperer*, *PhD2Published*), but increasingly institutions and/or private providers are entering the space (eg *DoctoralNet*). *patter*, a blog written by Pat Thomson, is one example of an established academic who regularly writes about doctoral scholarship. As far as we know, the *DoctoralWritingSIG* remains one of very few that seek to share practices and reflections of those who support doctoral student writing.

As a forum for this kind of exchange, social media allows more immediate and wider discussion than traditional methods of dissemination such as scholarly conferences or journals. More than a virtual staffroom, blogging is a virtual conference in its international scope and collegiality. It can build international collegiality, the development of academic friendships that to us often feel like the richest aspects of our professional lives. While there is much discussion of web-based classroom practices, there is still relatively sparse documentation of the lived experiences of informal learning through social media networks. In this lively sphere of communication, there is scope for better understanding of how we can best facilitate the learning of doctoral candidates discovering how to write about their research.

WHAT IS THE OUTCOME?

In just on three years, we have published over 140 posts, mostly written by Claire, Susan and Cally as the founding co-editors, but also by a number of guest bloggers. Some guests we have approached directly, inviting them to write a piece on a particular topic; others have responded to more general invitations to contribute; and yet others have offered their own ideas. It is this engagement and communication with our community that we most appreciate and enjoy. The site has had over 188 000 views (13/09/2015), which is certainly not massive compared to many well-established blogs, but very satisfying for an unfunded niche interest group like ours. There are fewer comments responding to posts than we had initially imagined, but we have discovered this is usual for blogs; however, engagement with the ideas can be measured in other ways, for example, metrics that record 'likes', retweets and reblogs. And we continue to grow: there are approximately 1 200 active followers through e-mail and WordPress, and about the same number who follow through Twitter (13/09/2015). We are also learning about the power of related social media for the dissemination of the blog. For example, a post warning about the behaviours

of completing doctoral candidates was picked up by Facebook and that week increased average views by more than three times to nearly 5 000 views.

The post on the etiquette of the thesis acknowledgments page remains the most viewed, perhaps because there is little advice given on this topic, and yet thanking appropriately is so important at the end of the lengthy project, both for the doctoral candidate and those who have supported her/him during the project. The post with the most engagement through comments tackles the emotional challenges of being both a doctoral student and a mother. We realise that the chance to reflect on these issues away from the demand for academic rigour and objectivity of formal journal articles is empowering.

Our reach has been global, with virtually every country in the world home to readers who have looked at our posts. The USA has had the highest number of hits, then the UK, followed closely by Australia. Next is New Zealand, then Canada and India. We now have some readers in China where we are led to believe that firewalls make it difficult to review international sites.

A guest post by Sioux McKenna from Rhodes University in South Africa (24/8/2015) reached a wider African audience than we have previously managed to connect with, generating new followers and commenters. That post was subsequently taken up by the online newspaper, *The Conversation Africa*, thus reaching out to an even broader readership. Although by far the highest number of African hits on the website are from South Africa (around 2 500), we have had readers from nearly every nation on the continent. The blog allows us to connect with African colleagues who share our interest in doctoral writing in a part of the world where governments are vigorously pushing an agenda to build research capacity and increase the number of doctorate holders. While the African context might seem very different from what we three are familiar with in Australia and New Zealand, there is a great deal of reciprocal learning facilitated by this blog: it has become clear that there is much more we have in common than divides this community of scholars and academic developers, as we all seek to better understand how to operate in a globalised and internationalised higher education system.

Topics

In three years of blogging, the topics explored in the *DoctoralWritingSIG* can be loosely grouped under the following categories: practical aspects of thesis writing; feedback on writing; digital technologies; researcher identities and experiences; and negotiating research cultures. While the material in some posts crosses over between these closely linked topics, this structure indicates the breadth of writing

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concerns faced by doctoral candidates, and the areas in which those supporting them can offer useful intervention. The percentages offered below are necessarily approximate – in a dynamic situation where the blog continues to grow and develop, these statistics keep changing. However, a snapshot of the current patterns gives us a general idea of the overall trends.

Over half of the posts to date are directly focused on practical aspects of thesis writing. These are equally divided between conceptual issues (eg thesis structure, choices of theory, literature reviews, authorial voice, writing style, finalising the thesis, and examination) and posts aimed at unpacking issues related to writing processes (eg the challenges of finishing the thesis, collaborative writing, and establishing writing habits). There is also a small group of posts in this category that explores the nuts and bolts of grammar and the mechanics of writing. Just over 10% of other posts directly address issues surrounding the giving and receiving of feedback – a perennial concern for doctoral writers, supervisors and those engaged in supporting writing development. A further small group of posts, many of which are written by guest bloggers, focuses explicitly on digital technologies that can aid doctoral writing, and we would expect this section to continue to grow.

The remaining 30% of the posts are divided between posts related to researcher identities (around 18%) and research cultures (around 12%). The substantial number of posts exploring ideas around the emerging identities of doctoral writers points to our commitment to the concept of writing as a social practice, and the intimate relationship between writing, emotion and subjectivity. The validity of this focus is further confirmed by our guest bloggers who take up related discussions, as well as the comments we receive from readers. The complexities of learning to negotiate research cultures, particularly the world of academic publishing, is explored in the final group of posts, connecting the individual writing a doctoral thesis with the broader community as an early career researcher.

Reviewing this range of topics, we realise how much our *in situ* teaching experience informs our posts, and how much the blog site provides a space for critical reflection on our teaching and learning.

BLOGGING AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog has become a place where we as editors and authors of posts are pushed to become particularly active reflective practitioners as teachers. While blogs are now well established as a means to encourage reflection on learning in undergraduate work (see, for example, Yang 2009; Killeavy & Moloney 2010; Sharma 2010; Sim & Hew 2010; Jackling *et al* 2015), this approach has not

yet been so widely taken up by those supporting doctoral education. The reflective aspect of blogging is one that we increasingly appreciate.

We notice how writing for this blog has developed our capacity for (and focus on) reflective practice as part of our daily work lives. In communicating with our readers, we use the blog to pass on useful ideas and information, and also to explore dilemmas we face in our work. Some posts provoke and challenge accepted practice, critiquing standard beliefs about how things ought to be done, or questioning inherited 'knowledge' about writing and research identities. This doing and reflecting reinforces our usefulness as writing teachers, catalysing our reflexivity as we pay attention to the events, concerns and challenges around us. Engaging in the blog itself facilitates our work as reflective practitioners by opening up spaces for writing. Indeed, the urgency of being accountable to one another for providing material for regular postings pushes us to think harder and write much more than previously. Being driven to be articulate and to share our thoughts around our work – including our self-doubt – is a form of peer development that we regard as appropriate to our professional context.

It is hoped that our attempt at reflective practice will also encourage our peers to join in with these reflections, through guest authoring, by commenting on posts, by initiating corridor conversations with their workmates, or by reflecting on how these ideas interact with their own planning and preparation for working with doctoral candidates and their supervisors. This sharing of ideas with other members of the community acts as a form of distributed leadership in that all readers are invited to collaborate and contribute to developing knowledge about related concepts and practices based on their own reflections, critiques and challenges (Jones, Hadgraft, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland 2014); these combined insights can be taken up by others across and beyond their own institutions, others who then continue to contribute to further collaborative development of those ideas. Through this mechanism, academic developers, academic language and literacy specialists, supervisors and students can become part of a networked community of reflective practitioners with the *DoctoralWritingSIG* providing one node of connection that reaches out in a multitude of directions.

CONCLUSION

We certainly recommend blogging, convinced that it is helpful for supervisors and students when doctoral support is widened, and making the case here that it is also valuable for language and literacy experts and learning advisors to actively join this digital discussion. We note too that it is both promisingly immediate – talk is

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fresher when it has not had to crawl through lengthy peer review – and yet ironically a place that fosters critical reflective practice. There are many benefits. However, we warn that establishing a blogsite is a substantial undertaking, and needs to start with a clear sense of the focus and purpose of the site; Anselmo's (2015) advice on developing an 'editorial mission' provides a useful guide for thinking through some of the issues. A blogsite also requires a considerable time commitment to write posts or to solicit posts from guests, to provide feedback to authors, and to develop new content on a regular basis. The site will need continuous maintenance and improvement if it is to engage a lively community. Some technical expertise is required to manage the online infrastructure, although this is becoming more and more accessible to novices as platforms like WordPress and Weebly provide user support to encourage uptake of their software.

Through our practice, we have come to understand that entering this digital environment and becoming participants in social media requires active engagement with broader communities in the forms that those communities prefer. Thus, we have recently become more attuned to using Twitter – not only to inform potential readers about our posts, but also to pass on interesting material to our followers about what others are doing in relation to doctoral writing and doctoral education more generally. In our initial naivety about how social media operates, we had underestimated the importance of the reciprocal nature of such activities; now we are conscious of the value of playing this role as a hub or node in the network of knowledge and information being passed between individuals and communities.

Originally we had hoped to build a digital, networked community of practice around doctoral writing to share information about our learning. We have found that the blog seems to work well as a contemporary platform for building community around academic development. Blogging provides a greatly expanded repertoire of exchange and networking across traditional boundaries of discipline, space and time. It enables supervisors to work more closely with academic writing teachers, their students and other academic colleagues by hooking into digital networks instead of needing to schedule real-time, in-person appointments. On a more personal level, writing a blog with peers offers the deep satisfaction of working collegially and collaboratively with like-minded scholars on an ongoing basis. When these peers are outside one's own institution, the focus can be entirely on intellectual issues. Open, collegial connectivism is a tonic in what can otherwise seem to be an isolating workplace, made risky by exposure to sudden restructuring.

As we continue to develop a vision of what social media can offer those engaged in doctoral education, and the associated values and work practices this might

entail, we reflect critically on how our collaborations around supervision can help develop the kinds of research cultures we want more generally. By exploring our individual and collective experiences with social media, it has become clear that our core values in this endeavour focus on collaboration and collegiality. In this sense, then, our experiments with social media have heightened our awareness of the importance of distributed leadership in higher education and the related advantages of dispersed responsibilities for developing the writing skills of doctoral candidates in this environment. Traditional institutional hierarchies become less relevant in the knowledge production afforded by social media; in their place, we increasingly see ways in which the horizontalised structures of peer learning can provide opportunities for academic development (Boud & Lee 2005) in the knowledge society. Academic developers, academic language and literacy specialists, supervisors and students are all likely to benefit from sharing their insights and learning through social media.

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