



Factors to consider when designing writing groups for off-campus doctoral candidates

Olga Kozar

Department of Linguistics
Macquarie University

Juliet F. Lum

Office of the Dean, Higher Degree Research
Macquarie University

In this paper, we outline factors to consider when organizing writing groups for off-campus doctoral candidates, identifying possible design options and the broader considerations that should inform which options are taken. We begin by reviewing issues typically faced by doctoral candidates pursuing their degrees at a distance, such as social isolation and limited access to resources and communities of practice. We then draw on prior studies on doctoral education to discuss ways of meeting the logistical, sustainability and pedagogical demands to be considered by institutions seeking to improve the experience of their off-campus doctoral candidates. We argue that writing groups conducted via CMC tools have the potential to address a number of the issues identified and conclude by outlining a framework capable of informing relevant stakeholders in designing writing groups for off-campus doctoral candidates.

Keywords: doctoral writing groups; off-campus doctoral candidates; computer-mediated communication

Off-campus doctoral candidates

Many issues are faced by doctoral candidates pursuing their degrees at a distance. Many of the issues are similar to those faced by on-campus candidates (Cotterall, 2011), such as mastering the discourses and conventions of candidates' respective disciplines. However, these are compounded by challenges that come as a result of limited exposure not only to research resources (Deem & Brehony, 2000), but also to the "faces" of the academic community into which they are being inducted. Social/psychological issues such as feelings of isolation are much stronger for off-campus doctoral candidates than for those on campus (Chiang, 2003; Evans, Hickey, & Davis, 2005; Katz, 1997), leading to a perception amongst the former that they are working only with their supervisors (Albion & Erwee, 2011). This sense of disconnection and isolation has been found to be a major factor in doctoral candidates' decisions to discontinue candidature (Ali, Kohun, & Cohen, 2006).

Prior research comparing perceptions of on- and off-campus PhD candidates reveals that off-campus candidates have a lower view of their abilities, skills and knowledge (Lindner, Dooley, & Murphy, 2001), and student satisfaction surveys reveal that they also tend to be less satisfied with their overall doctoral experience. When asked to rank their satisfaction with doctoral supervision, intellectual climate, skills development and infrastructure, external PhD candidates in a large metropolitan Australian university have consistently reported lower levels of satisfaction than internal PhD candidates (Macquarie University, MUSEQ-R survey). This is a worrying trend, particularly in an age when an increasing number of candidates are choosing off-campus modes of study.

Of the many skills that need to be developed by doctoral candidates, one that induces much anxiety is mastering

the language of the academy (Cotterall, 2011); this “high-stakes” skill is necessary not merely for reporting research findings, but for creating a scholarly identity (Kamler & Thomson 2006). Strong writing skills are essential for PhD candidates if they are to present their research persuasively in a complex, extended written document (the doctoral thesis/dissertation), gain acceptance in a community of academic practice, and increase their productivity and self-efficacy as academics (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Kahn & Scott, 1997). Contrary to the assumption that PhD candidates commence candidature with highly developed academic literacy skills, many struggle with the scholarly writing process, and highlight thesis writing and writing for publication as the areas in which they need most training and support (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000).

Tertiary institutions tend to respond to the need for thesis and publication writing training by offering writing courses and workshops, and providing print and online resources. In addition, running research writing groups has been identified as a highly effective method for equipping PhD candidates with not only academic writing skills and rhetorical awareness, but also skills in research collaboration and research project management (Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Ferguson, 2009; Rose & McClafferty, 2001). Furthermore, such groups also afford an opportunity for PhD candidates to form a sense of community, which has been commonly highlighted as preventing attrition and improving the experience of doctoral candidates (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Unfortunately, however, interactive, hands-on research writing support initiated by institutions tends to be delivered face-to-face (FTF), and is usually run on campus, which has precluded the participation of off-campus PhD candidates; this has been particularly the case with the delivery of research writing groups.

Both of the abovementioned problems – limited access to research training and social isolation – have important ramifications on off-campus doctoral candidates’ productivity and well-being, but can potentially be addressed through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology which enables synchronous and asynchronous contact with peers and facilitators. Indeed, the potential of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) technology to improve the experience of distance learners has been frequently highlighted in the literature (Albion & Erwee, 2011; Eastmond, 1995). SCMC tools such as Skype and Collaborate have previously been noted as viable alternatives to FTF meetings between off-campus doctoral candidates and their supervisors (Cotterall, 2011; Walker & Thomson, 2010). Furthermore, studies have shown that SCMC-enabled meetings can heighten social presence and decrease doctoral candidates’ feelings of isolation (Erwee & Albion, 2011). Clearly, these tools hold considerable potential for running writing groups for off-campus doctoral candidates and should be used by institutions for improving experience of off-campus doctoral candidates.

Design of writing groups for off-campus doctoral candidates

Many factors need to be taken into account when planning writing groups for off-campus candidates. For CMC-enabled writing groups to constitute a viable response to what are perennial issues for geographically dispersed HDR candidates (namely, thesis writing challenges and social isolation), they need to simultaneously meet logistical, pedagogical and sustainability considerations. Since off-campus doctoral students are likely to have multiple work-related or family commitments which may limit their availability for participating in CMC-enabled writing group, it is important that the timing of the meetings is appropriate and suitable for all group members. Furthermore, considering that one of the main goals of the group is to assist participants in improving their peer review and research writing skills, it is critical that the writing groups should be run according to sound pedagogical principles, for instance, encouraging joint meaning-making through interaction and negotiation (Palincsar, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, the ideal CMC-enabled writing group for off-campus candidates would not be prohibitively costly or place unreasonable burdens on the institution or students to set up, as the use of expensive software or high demands on the participants’ time would likely render this practice unsustainable in the long-term (Sterling 2001).

These considerations are not exhaustive and the design of the group can be influenced by other factors. In an attempt to tease out what the three considerations involve, we propose a tentative framework which conceptualizes the complex nature and variety of potential types of writing groups for off-campus doctoral candidates, and could be used as a useful starting point for those considering their implementation. Figure 1 below summarizes a set of options for those designing writing groups for off-campus doctoral candidates, classified into three characteristics: the group’s locus of administration, its level of facilitation, and its mode of delivery. These three characteristics are described in turn below.

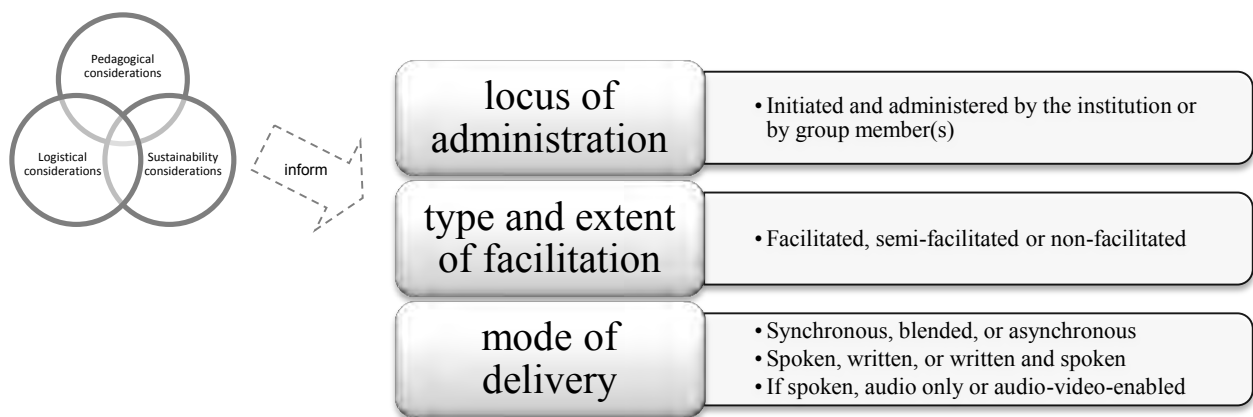


Figure 1: Design options for distance writing groups, informed by wider considerations

A doctoral writing group’s locus of administration includes but is not restricted to its locus of initiation. A group may be initiated, promoted and overseen by an institution or someone representing the institution (e.g. a centralized unit of a university, a particular faculty, department or research group, a supervisor), or by participants of the group (in this case, doctoral candidates) themselves. Literature and empirical observations (for instance, Huang, Chen, Olmanson, Sung, & Kim, 2010; Mercer, Kythreotis, Lambert, & Hughes, 2011) have reported instances of both types of groups in FTF settings, and one could expect that the dynamics, interactional patterns and the functioning of the groups will differ between institution-administered and student-administered writing groups. For instance, it is likely that the former would be run based on prior institutional experience, whereas the latter would feature a higher concentration of role and procedure negotiation among the participants. Furthermore, the locus of administration could have an impact on the group’s sustainability: participants of student-administered writing groups may have a greater investment in the group and thus be prepared to devote more time and energy to ensuring that it continues than those who have had the group established by an external party. On the other hand, the logistical challenges and investment in time involved in identifying and connecting sufficient numbers of remotely-located students into a cohesive writing group would in most cases be assumed more readily by an institution than by individual students.

Related to locus of administration is the type and extent of facilitation provided to a group. Both FTF and SCMC-enabled writing groups may be run with or without the help of an “expert” (or at least experienced) facilitator, who manages the discussion and scaffolds the work of the group. The facilitator may have specialist knowledge and expertise in research communication, in the discipline(s) to which group members belong, or in both. While we would call groups with an external expert present “facilitated”, the absence of such an individual from meetings does not render a group “non-facilitated”. A group may be facilitated in the start-up stage by an expert, who later withdraws, effectively weaning the group of his/her guidance; the facilitator could then be invited to return on occasions when the group requires his/her advice or guidance. Furthermore, print/online resources (such as short video tutorials on various academic writing issues, guidelines for managing group dynamics, written advice on how to seek and give feedback appropriately, editing guides and rubrics) can be made available by institutions to help doctoral candidates establish and run their own writing groups; a good example of such resources is RMIT’s Research Writing Group kit (RMIT Study and Learning Centre 2013). We would call groups that are facilitated only in the start-up stage or that use such learning resources “semi-facilitated”, reserving the term “non-facilitated” for groups that neither include the guidance of an expert at any stage nor draw on resources designed for use in writing/peer-learning groups. From certain perspectives, the guidance of an expert facilitator in a doctoral writing group has pedagogical and logistical advantages; for instance, meetings can be structured to focus on specific writing issues or to meet certain explicit learning outcomes, and facilitators can take responsibility for setting up and managing meetings, selecting and setting up software and equipment for SCMC-enabled groups, and reminding members of meeting times and document circulation dates. On the other hand, non- and semi-facilitated groups may surpass facilitated groups in terms of both pedagogy, as they encourage learning autonomy and ownership of learning outcomes, and sustainability, as they require fewer human resources to implement and support. More research is needed to investigate the dynamics and relative advantages of differently facilitated writing groups.

A third and very important set of decisions which designers of distance writing groups need to make relates to the mode of delivery or channel of communication through which feedback and discussion will be conveyed.

Should communication amongst members be synchronous or asynchronous or a blend; spoken or written (typed); and if spoken, then audio-video-enabled or audio only? Modern technology offers a host of tools, both freeware and licensed, which make all of these options possible, but the selection of a particular tool should again be informed by logistical, sustainability and pedagogical considerations. Logistical considerations include accommodating for the number and locations (time-zones) of group members; ensuring access to necessary hard- and software; and catering for different connection speeds and technical competencies (e.g. typing and navigation speeds) of group members. Sustainability considerations also impact these logistical decisions, since generally more cost-effective and simpler technology configurations are more sustainable. To be pedagogically sound, a mode of delivery would need to be selected such that members have sufficient time to review others' texts and can contribute to discussions freely and equally during meetings, and that feedback is respectfully delivered, comprehensible and itself amenable to analysis and critique. Clearly, empirical studies are needed to determine the effects that various technological configurations actually have on group dynamics, learning outcomes and user satisfaction levels.

Conclusion

This paper has identified a number of decisions that need to be made when designing writing groups for distance doctoral candidates. Outcomes of these decisions will determine three characteristics of the group: its locus of administration, the type and extent of facilitation or external support on which it relies, and the channel or mode of delivery through which communication takes place amongst the group members. While these characteristics will clearly have an influence on the dynamics of the writing group, they need to be made with broader considerations in mind, namely those of logistics, sustainability and pedagogy. The challenge for stakeholders seeking to set up (S)CMC-enabled writing groups is to determine the most appropriate tool(s), the optimal group size, and the most suitable type and level of facilitation so as to best meet the needs of their off-campus doctoral candidates. There is clearly a need for empirical research on the dynamics and the experiences of distance writing group participants, to provide educational researchers and practitioners with information on the implementation of various types of groups. Such research would be highly beneficial for those working in doctoral education.

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Author contact details:

Ms Olga Kozar, olga.kozar@mq.edu.au

Dr Juliet Lum, juliet.lum@mq.edu.au

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