



Learning together through collaborative writing: The power of peer feedback and discussion in doctoral writing groups

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the power of collaborative peer feedback within doctoral writing groups by examining the effects of the feedback process that was implemented as part of a book project. Using *communities of practice* as a guiding theoretical framework, we identify that participants discovered how working together helped them foster collegiality, trust, and collective learning. Furthermore, writing group members felt that collaborative peer feedback helped them develop a shared repertoire and understanding of academic writing and publishing. Participants perceived collaborative peer feedback as a way to improve academic writing proficiency, build self-esteem, and foster confidence. Importantly, participants saw the experiential learning process applied in this book project as a way to discover previously tacit understandings or obscure practices in academia. Consequently, the findings of this study demonstrate that collaborative peer feedback within a safe space can foster learning-focused feedback when students are active and reflexive agents in the feedback process.

1. Introduction

Academic writing is a key metric of success for doctoral students (Lam et al., 2019; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). Increasingly, doctoral writing has also extended beyond producing a traditional thesis into the genre of academic publication and the incorporation of these published works into theses (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Lam et al., 2019; Solli & Nygaard, 2022). However, academic writing and publishing are fraught with complexity and often-times tacit knowledge (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Clarence, 2020; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). It has also been previously demonstrated that academic writing is a form of identity work (see, e.g., Chakraborty et al., 2021; Clarence, 2020; Hradsky et al., 2022). In this study, we define academic identity as “the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, who we are not, and who we would like to be or should be in academia” (Pretorius et al., 2022, p. 7). This definition highlights the dynamic and constant (re)construction of a person’s academic identity through their interactions within academia, while also acknowledging both individual agency and the influence of power (Hoang & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Since authors write themselves into their writing, critique of written work can affect academic identity (see,

e.g., Chakraborty et al., 2021; Clarence, 2020; Hradsky et al., 2022). This highlights the importance of considering the affective domain of academic writing (Clarence, 2020; Hradsky et al., 2022), particularly when providing feedback on doctoral students’ written work.

In this study, we define feedback as “a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies” (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1315). This definition emphasises that feedback is not predominantly a teacher-focused endeavour where students are informed of their strengths and weaknesses; rather, feedback can come from various sources (e.g., peers, friends, or family) and is a dialogic process (Carless & Boud, 2018; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Zhu & Carless, 2018). Importantly, this understanding highlights a student’s key role in making sense of and using feedback to improve future work (termed feedback literacy, see Carless & Boud, 2018).

Literature highlights that feedback on writing for doctoral students can help them construct their authorial voice, learn about disciplinary conventions, and engage in reflective practice and self-assessment (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019). Research has also highlighted that feedback can be seen as a pedagogical practice in doctoral supervision,

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involving a feedback relationship between student and supervisor (Bearman et al., 2024; Chugh et al., 2022). This feedback relationship is perceived as productive when it is collaborative, respectful, suitable in terms of content, and balanced in terms of how it is delivered (Bearman et al., 2024; Chugh et al., 2022). Peer review on publications has also been explored, with doctoral students viewing this type of feedback as a necessary part of the publication process (Adamek, 2015). This demonstrates the importance of feedback in the doctoral education space.

Peer feedback among university students is gaining increasing attention in the literature (Byl & Topping, 2023). Yet, doctoral students' primary source of feedback on their academic writing often remains their supervisors, journal editors, and reviewers (Bearman et al., 2024; Chugh et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021). Receiving feedback on academic writing can also be emotionally charged, and research indicates that feedback can, at times, be seen as a "critical incident", triggering complex and negative emotions for doctoral students (Geng & Yu, 2022, p. 2). Caffarella and Barnett (2000) reiterated the emotional dimensions of receiving feedback but also showcased the critical role that feedback from peers and faculty plays in developing doctoral students' academic writing. Importantly, studies have stressed the importance of peer feedback among doctoral students in demystifying the academic writing process, improving writing proficiency, and mitigating anxiety and other negative feelings toward writing and publication (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Ciampa & Wolfe, 2020; Conn et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2019; Wilson & Cutri, 2019). This highlights the need for educators to develop feedback practices which aim to improve academic writing in a safe and collegial peer environment. In particular, there is a need for feedback to become more dialogic, where doctoral students can share their feelings and confusion while negotiating meaning (Geng & Yu, 2022).

2. Purpose and context of the present study

There has been increasing interest in the benefits of writing groups as spaces for collaborative learning for doctoral students (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2019). One relevant component of doctoral writing groups is that they can act as a space where writing becomes a social practice (Chakraborty et al., 2021). These safe spaces help students develop their academic identity through collegial peer feedback and support (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022). Our study extends work in the field of assessment and feedback by focusing specifically on the influence of peer feedback within a doctoral writing group setting, an area which has been neglected in the literature.

The second author of this paper (Lynette) is an experienced facilitator of doctoral writing groups. These groups involve reading and providing feedback on written work together with sharing discussions to identify areas for improvement. Learning about academic publishing is a crucial aspect of these groups. For example, over the last seven years, Lynette's writing group members have written literature reviews (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakraborty et al., 2021; Cutri et al., 2021), empirical research papers (Hradsky et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2019), and academic books (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2022; Pretorius et al., 2019). This study focuses on one of these book projects.

During 2018–2019, two of Lynette's writing group participants approached her to design a project to teach doctoral students about publishing academic books. The resulting project led to the publication of a book titled *Wellbeing in doctoral education: Insights and guidance from the student experience* (Pretorius et al., 2019). For this book project, writing group participants were asked to write an autoethnographic book chapter about the most important skills they acquired during their PhD. Autoethnography is a methodology that allows for subjectivity, where researchers explore personal experiences to illuminate cultural phenomena (Adams et al., 2022; Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius, 2022; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019). In this study, we use the term *experience* not as a unit of analysis. Rather, we use it in the more general sense to describe an occurrence that left an impression on a participant. In particular, we

focus on the learning that occurred as part of this experience, not on analysing the experience itself. By applying this methodology in the book project, the editors created a space where the participants could share their most important discoveries during their research journeys. The authors of this paper (Basil and Lynette) were two of the three editors of the book.

An important aspect of participation in the book project involved a process of feedback and revisions through the sharing of drafts with other writing group peers, as well as extensive peer review by the editors. The feedback provided included suggestions at an individual word level (e.g., spelling/grammar), the sentence or paragraph level (e.g., sentence length, connections between sentences, or ensuring the presence of quality topic sentences), and the structure level (e.g., overall flow of the argument or connections between ideas and sections). Feedback also included more conceptual content, such as comments on concepts or frameworks used in the study and suggestions for further reading. The final versions of the chapters were also externally peer-reviewed before publication.

This study explores the creation of shared knowledge during this academic book project. We investigate what participants learnt as part of the book project in terms of both feedback received from and provided to others. We also examine our journeys as co-editors and feedback providers. Our research question, therefore, is:

"How do the practices of collaborative writing and peer feedback provision in a doctoral writing group community reflect and contribute to the development of a shared repertoire and understanding of academia?"

3. Theoretical framework

To explore our research question, we applied communities of practice as the theoretical framework in this study. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 11). We purposely chose this framework because we consider doctoral writing groups to be the embodiment of communities of practice as they reflect three interconnected components of a community of practice: *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. Additionally, the communities of practice framework underscores our definition of academic identity, highlighting how our engagement with our community shapes our understandings of ourselves and our places within our academic domain.

Domain refers to a shared commitment to a particular interest which gives the community of practice a shared identity and common focus (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). As noted earlier, participants in the writing groups meet to collaboratively improve their academic writing through a safe space of authentic learning (Chakraborty et al., 2021). Participants discuss suggestions for improvement as a group, fostering an environment in which all participants learn from the feedback provided (Chakraborty et al., 2021). In many ways, the peer-based learning in a doctoral writing group is a continuous process of reading, discussion, and reflection. In this way, the writing group becomes a site of academic social practice (Chakraborty et al., 2021). In this study, therefore, domain refers to the book project and a shared commitment to improve academic writing through collaborative peer feedback.

Community refers to the members working together in a way that fosters caring relationships characterised by trust, support, commitment, and an understanding of the group members' areas of expertise (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). Consequently, community enables mutual engagement and collective learning (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). Research has highlighted that doctoral writing groups create a collegial space where students develop their academic identity through the trusting relationships built in the group (Hradsky et al., 2022). In this way, writing groups encourage students to constantly reflect on their own understandings

(Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017). This builds rich learning experiences that inspire learning and foster an environment of empowerment and a sense of belonging (Hradsky et al., 2022). In this study, therefore, community is reflected through the supportive and constructive dialogic feedback in the writing groups (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Chakraborty et al., 2021).

Practice refers to the group members working together to develop a sense of ownership and a shared repertoire of resources, stories, actions, discourses, concepts, and perspectives (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023; Wenger, 1998). In this way, practice anchors the learning that occurs through members' actions as a source of lived experience and a safe space to experiment with new ways of knowing (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). Writing groups incorporate extensive opportunities for participants to collectively co-construct personal knowledge through experience (see, e.g., Lam et al., 2019). By modelling the academic writing and feedback process, the facilitator helps students gain insights into how academic writing and peer review are actually done, contributing to feedback literacy (Chakraborty et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022). For example, Lynette regularly shares draft documents she is writing, explaining to the writing group what she aimed to achieve with that text. She also models how she would provide feedback to herself, highlighting errors in logic, poor phrasing, lack of evidence, or other academic language and literacy issues. This helps to normalise the concept of writing as a process and helps students learn how to critique their own and others' written work. In this study, therefore, practice is reflected in how participants developed feedback literacy through participation in the collaborative peer feedback process and how they incorporated the feedback to improve their academic writing.

Some limitations of the communities of practice framework should be noted. Firstly, the framework emphasises collective and shared learning but does not fully account for the influence of power within these communities (see, e.g., Contu, 2014; Fox, 2000; Handley et al., 2006; Roberts, 2006). As Roberts (2006) notes, "members who have full participation will have a greater role and therefore are likely to wield more power in the negotiation of meaning" (p. 627). This was an important consideration in our study, as it has been previously shown that doctoral students experience marginalisation and disempowerment within academia (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). To address this concern, we note our previous work highlighting the importance of the role of the facilitator in creating a safe writing group environment (see Chakraborty et al., 2021; Hradsky et al., 2022). We ensured that our practices within the writing group created a safe and inclusive space for peer feedback and discussion, thereby establishing a culture of trust and reducing the impact of unequal power relationships (Hradsky et al., 2022). In this way, we created a space where "power relationships inevitably exist, but they do not come in the way of learning, by, with, and from everyone" (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 67).

Secondly, communities of practice can be considered as over-emphasising collective or shared co-construction of knowledge while neglecting individual learning (see, e.g., Handley et al., 2006). This is important because we have previously shown that a shared publication project results in both collective and individualised learning (Lam et al., 2019). Consequently, practice within the communities of practice framework should involve the development of meaning and shared identities, where there is "a distinction between emic [meaningful to me] and etic [meaningful as observed by others]" (Handley et al., 2006, p. 651). To ensure meaningful participation and practice in our community of practice, we sought "ways to weave an individual's story into group conversations" (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 136). This was possible because the chapters that were discussed within the writing group were autoethnographic in nature, allowing the authors to share their experiences and individualised learning with other participants. In this way, the discussion of individualised learning contributed to further shared knowledge co-construction.

4. Methodology

4.1. Ethics

Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee approved this project (approval number 19306). All participants were informed about the nature of the study from the outset and provided informed consent to participate in this project. Participants chose their own pseudonyms, which are used throughout this study to protect participant confidentiality.

4.2. Research paradigm

This study is situated within a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism emphasises that people's realities are constructed and reconstructed through interactions with others (see Lincoln & Guba, 2016). This was important in our study, as the knowledge co-creation which occurred in the book project involved a process of both individual interpretation and collaborative co-construction. Constructivism is also closely related to our communities of practice framework since these groups of individuals come together to develop a shared repertoire of understanding (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). Therefore, in this study, we aimed to explore how our experiences of the collaborative peer feedback process (re)constructed our understandings of both our participants' and our own subjective realities. By exploring participants' experiences through a constructivist lens, we highlight the impact of establishing communities of practice where peer feedback can help transform students' learning within the doctoral education space.

4.3. Research design

This article is the third in a series of scholarly publications from a more extensive mixed-methods study designed to explore the wellbeing of PhD students (for the other studies in this project see Pretorius, 2024; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). The more extensive study followed a concurrent triangulation mixed-method design, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This was accomplished through an online data collection strategy incorporating a survey and email-based conversations (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). This paper presents previously unexamined data from a series of open-ended qualitative questions within the online survey, interwoven with the experiences of the authors of this paper.

4.4. Research participants

This study employed purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002) to recruit 29 PhD students from a large research-intensive university in Australia, as has been previously described (see Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Participants in the study were at various stages of their PhD candidature and were from predominantly social science disciplines (Arts or Education). One participant (Azu) was from a medical science discipline and, while we acknowledge that there are different disciplinary norms, this participant was not excluded from the study for two reasons. Firstly, this participant had previously studied a humanities-based degree (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Secondly, excluding this participant would go against the study's purpose of privileging the voices of PhD students (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). The demographic details of the 29 participants from the more extensive study are presented in Table 1.

Of the 29 student participants in the more extensive study, 17 were both chapter authors and peer reviewers. Six participants (Keisha, Mary, Melani, Melissa, Sally, and Tam) acted only as peer reviewers during the book writing process. The other six (Anna, Cassy, Em, Lindsay, Melody, and Rami) did not contribute to either writing or peer reviewing others' work and are consequently not included in this paper's data analysis.

The two editors (Basil and Lynette) wrote several chapters in the

Table 1
Participant Demographics.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Ethnic Origin	Domestic/ International	Stage in PhD Candidature
Anna	Female	Australasia	Domestic	First Year
Henry	Male	Middle East	International	First Year
Mary	Female	East Asia	International	First Year
Rami	Female	South Asia	International	First Year
Cassy	Female	South Asia	International	Second Year
Em	Female	East Asia	International	Second Year
James	Male	Middle East	International	Second Year
Melani	Female	Middle East	International	Second Year
Melissa	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Second Year
Natasha	Female	Australasia	Domestic	Second Year
Reza	Male	Southeast Asia	International	Second Year
Azu	Male	East Asia	Domestic	Third Year
Cora	Female	Europe	Domestic	Third Year
Harry	Male	Australasia	Domestic	Third Year
Keisha	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Lindsay	Female	Australasia	Domestic	Third Year
Liz	Female	East Asia	International	Third Year
Memet	Male	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Noni	Undisclosed	Undisclosed	International	Third Year
Pippi	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Rasta	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Sally	Female	Australasia	Domestic	Third Year
Sonia	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Vivian	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Third Year
Cherry	Female	Southeast Asia	Domestic	Recent Graduate
Joseph	Male	Europe	International	Recent Graduate
Robert	Male	Australasia	Domestic	Recent Graduate
Sheldon	Male	Southeast Asia	International	Recent Graduate
Tam	Female	Southeast Asia	International	Recent Graduate

Note: This table was previously published in “Notions of human capital and academic identity in the PhD: Narratives of the disempowered” by Lynette Pretorius and Luke Macaulay, *The Journal of Higher Education*, copyright © 2021 The Ohio State University, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com> on behalf of The Ohio State University.

book and also provided peer feedback throughout the process. As such, this paper also includes the reflections of the two editors. Table 2 presents the demographic data for the two editors.

4.5. Data collection

4.5.1. Participants’ experiences

The PhD student data discussed in this paper were collected through a survey designed to prompt participants to reflect on their own experiences of being part of the collaborative book project. The survey was

Table 2
Editor Demographics.

Editor	Gender	Ethnic Origin	Role in Book Project	Role in Writing Group
Basil	Male	Europe	Co-Editor, Chapter Author, Feedback Provider	Writing Group Member
Lynette	Female	Southern Africa	Co-Editor, Chapter Author, Feedback Provider	Writing Group Facilitator

administered online using the Google Forms platform. In particular, we focus on the following open-ended questions:

1. How did you contribute to the *Wellbeing in Doctoral Education* book project?
2. Why did you choose to write a chapter for the *Wellbeing in Doctoral Education* book?
3. Why did you choose to write a chapter on your specific topic?
4. What did you learn about yourself as a result of writing your chapter?
5. What did you learn from reading other students’ written work?

For the first question, participants could highlight whether they wrote a chapter, read others’ work and provided peer feedback, or did not participate in the book project. This question was included primarily as a method to navigate through the survey, as the more extensive research study explored several aspects of the writing group, not just the book project. The other four questions were designed to encourage participants to consider their motivations for participating in the book project and explore what they learnt through the writing and collaborative feedback process.

Participants took part in the book project for various reasons, but overwhelmingly, they chose to write their chapter because they wanted to share their experiences and help fellow students. For example, Pippi highlighted:

My chapter was inspired by my conference paper. [...] as my chapter drew on my personal experience during my candidature, I wished to make it published with the hope that it might resonate with the experience of others who had completed or are completing a PhD. It might also help inform supervisors and prospective PhD students.

Regardless of their main motivation, students expressed hope that sharing their experiences would help other PhD students. This demonstrates that the writing group participants had a shared *domain*, the first element of communities of practice.

4.5.2. Editors’ experiences

In order to explore our personal experiences of the feedback process as editors of the book, we used a simple reflective prompt strategy, which has been previously described (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Pretorius & Ford, 2016) The reflective prompts used in this study were:

- What happened and what did you do?
- What were you thinking and feeling at that time and how do you feel now?
- How has this experience informed your future feedback practice?

To record our reflections, we followed the same strategies described by Pretorius (2024) and Pretorius (2022). We started our journeys by conversing with ourselves and each other on Zoom using our reflective prompts. These self-reflective conversations were supplemented by WhatsApp discussions and email, particularly when we sought clarification about particular concepts. We also conversed while writing the manuscript through Google Doc comments. This helped us deepen our reflections on what we were thinking and feeling both at that time and now. As previously noted, academic writing is identity work. Consequently, the manuscript writing process was an essential component of our reflections, helping to refine our understandings of our experiences. We also consulted relevant documents (including the peer review comments on drafts of chapters) regarding our recollections. Finally, we engaged in our own form of peer review by sharing our work with our writing groups. This helped us identify where we needed to provide further contextual details to clarify meaning. Our personal stories, therefore, represent the amalgamation of ideas from Zoom, WhatsApp, email, and Google Doc conversations, as well as the additional thoughts and experiences we remembered while writing the manuscript.

4.6. Data analysis

Responses to survey question one were quantified numerically to identify how many participants were authors and how many were peer reviewers. The qualitative responses to the other four questions were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis aligns with our research paradigm, with the themes representing our shared and co-constructed knowledge developed through the book project.

We familiarised ourselves with the dataset by reading and re-reading the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Each author coded the responses to highlight important points within each response (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Items were coded inductively by analysing the raw data to develop codes through our own reflexive interpretations. Items were also coded deductively using concepts from the communities of practice framework. We discussed these inductive and deductive codes to generate initial themes, which were further refined to tell the story of our data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The constructed themes were thus representative of both semantic and latent content. The researcher’s reflexivity is crucial to the reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As such, we incorporated our experiences throughout the manuscript to explore the themes we created with a reflexive lens. To conduct the initial thematic analyses of our own experiences, we coded our reflections into themes using the same inductive and deductive methods used for participants’ responses. To illustrate our coding and theme creation process, we list one quote in Table 3 and the way it was coded into a theme.

The methodological rigour of our study is a key strength of our research design. We established the trustworthiness of the data analyses through researcher reflexivity, agreement between co-researchers, triangulation between different participants and multiple data sources, thick descriptions of the data, and the provision of quotes from the participants’ and the editors’ stories. We also trialled the use of the new AI thematic analysis software Ailyze (<https://www.ailyze.com/>) to see a different perspective on the key ideas mentioned in the editors’ reflections. Our AI analysis further helped to demonstrate the trustworthiness of our coding strategy, as it highlighted key ideas similar to those of the themes we had constructed.

Initially, we planned to separate our experiences from those of the student participants in the paper. However, through the analysis process, we determined that the themes from our stories were representative of the themes we constructed from the participants’ responses. Therefore, we present the themes in our paper as an interweaving of both the participants’ and our own experiences during the book project.

5. Findings

Five themes were constructed in this study. The first theme (“same, same, but different: everybody has a story”) underscores a dual realisation among participants: while everyone brings distinct and unique life stories and perspectives to the table, there is a profound commonality in the challenges and experiences they share, particularly in the

Table 3
Constructing A Themes From A Quote.

Quote	Codes	Themes
“I learnt that I was part of a larger body of students struggling to create new ideas while also maintaining a healthy life-work balance. I also learnt that many, if not all, students go through some bout of anxiety or self-doubt (often referred to as “imposter syndrome”).”	I am not alone, wellbeing, work-life balance, same stories, imposter syndrome	I am not alone: Everyone has problems

context of writing and self-reflection. The second theme (“I am not alone: everyone has problems”) is related to the first, highlighting the transformative power of shared experiences in academic settings. By recognising the commonalities in their struggles, participants felt that they were able to foster a supportive community that valued openness, mutual support, and collective growth, ultimately enhancing their PhD journey and personal development. The third theme (“writing is hard, but feedback helps”) highlights how constructive collaborative feedback was perceived as a way to alleviate the challenges of writing, promote skill development, and foster an encouraging community where participants could thrive as scholars. The theme reflects a broader pedagogical principle: that through shared struggle and supportive feedback, individuals can grow significantly in their academic and professional endeavours. The fourth theme (“you can learn a lot from looking at others’ work”) showcases the importance of co-construction of knowledge, where the provision of feedback on others’ work helped participants develop their own writing. Participants felt that they had not only improved their writing and expanded their knowledge but also gained a deeper appreciation for the collaborative and communal aspects of academic work, challenging traditional views of scholarship as a solitary endeavour. Finally, the fifth theme (“experiential learning makes hidden practices visible”) encapsulates the transformative educational journey participants underwent through the collective experience of writing an academic book and engaging in a collaborative peer review process. This theme emphasises the revelations participants experienced through the power of hands-on and collaborative work. Participants discovered that this type of collaborative work helped them uncover the implicit norms and practices within academia that often remain unspoken or overlooked. It is important to note that the created themes were often interconnected, highlighting the complexity of academic writing and the feedback process.

5.1. Same, same, but different: everybody has a story

The first theme (“same, same, but different: everybody has a story”) reflects that reading and providing feedback on the work of their peers was a revelation to participants. Sonia, for example, highlighted that “everybody has [a] different story, which is both fascinating and surprising to take as a lesson”. This theme is closely linked to the *community* element of the communities of practice framework because it emphasises how shared experiences and reflections contribute to a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. This theme also touches on identity within the community of practice, as participants had to navigate both their personal and academic development. In essence, this theme captures the paradox of individual uniqueness and universal shared experiences, emphasising the importance of reflective writing and feedback in encouraging participants’ personal growth, understanding, and sense of community.

Participants perceived this shared experience of uncovering commonalities amidst diversity as a gateway towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of one another’s viewpoints, thereby helping them to build a sense of community and collegiality within the group. James, for example, noted that “they were all similar to each other and at the same time different from each other and unique. I liked everyone’s worldviews and look out”. Reflections from participants also highlighted that they experienced personal growth and self-discovery. For example, Harry noted, “I also learnt that I could be doing a lot more to better take care of my wellbeing regarding my expectations of time. However, through reflecting on my experiences of this, it is easier said than done”.

The discussions and feedback process revealed that, despite the differences in individual stories, there were underlying universal experiences and challenges in academic and personal development for participants. This was also emphasised in Lynette’s reflection, where she highlighted that the participants’ chapters told stories that could be categorised into three clear categories.

I then worked with the two co-editors to get the people who were part of the writing group to submit some abstracts for what they would like to write for a book chapter. When we received these abstracts, I was quite surprised because they actually fit quite neatly into three categories.

In the final version of the book, the chapters were organised as “understanding yourself, understanding your experiences, and understanding others” (Pretorius, 2019, p. 4). This categorisation of book chapters illustrates how shared experiences can serve as a foundation for building trusting and supportive relationships within a learning community. Together, the theme of “Same, same, but different” represents the participants’ discovery that fellow students experienced very similar situations (e.g., challenges in establishing their academic identity) despite their different backgrounds. The process of sharing and reflecting on individual stories within a community helped members articulate and reshape their identities in academia.

5.2. *I am not alone: everyone has problems*

The second theme (“I am not alone: everyone has problems”) highlighted participants’ discovery that they were not the only ones experiencing challenges during their PhD, reflecting both the *community* and *practice* elements in the communities of practice framework. Azu, for example, highlighted that “some of the chapters were quite personal. I learnt that I am not alone suffering in my own issues during the journey of becoming a PhD”. By reading about the personal and academic hurdles faced by their peers, participants came to understand that their struggles during the PhD journey were not solitary experiences. This was not only comforting but also educational, as it provided them with a broader perspective on the ways in which individuals navigated the doctoral journey.

The theme also relates to the problems participants experienced with their academic writing. For example, participants discovered that many students had different writing issues or personal challenges. Joseph, for example, highlighted that he learnt that most students experience imposter syndrome, while Pippi described perfectionism as a major obstacle that may have prevented her from adequately expressing herself in her academic writing. Participants felt that acknowledging these shared experiences helped to alleviate feelings of isolation and the stigma associated with academic and personal challenges. As Harry admitted, “I learnt that there are many students experiencing a variety of challenges as they conduct their PhD research. I am relatively privileged in terms of the challenges I face”.

Importantly, this discovery encouraged students to develop better practices in their own journeys. As Joseph highlights, “this helped me realise that I was not alone and that coming together with other students, whether through writing groups or other support networks, helped establish healthy practices that promoted confidence and a life-work balance”. This was echoed by Memet, who notes reading the work of others taught him that “I need to continuously learn about my writing and reflect on my strengths, weaknesses, and my environments. Also, I learned that people need to be strategic to balance between academic and non-academic life and activities”. Joseph’s and Memet’s reflections underscore the value of community and support networks in overcoming common challenges. Realising that they were not alone in their struggles encouraged students to adopt healthier practices, promote confidence, and strive for a balance between academic obligations and personal life. This collective understanding helped participants build a supportive environment that encouraged open discussions about challenges, strategies for improvement, and the importance of self-reflection.

The shared acknowledgement of challenges and vulnerabilities served as a foundation for building stronger relationships among students. Participants felt that it created a sense of belonging and mutual understanding, which is vital in academic settings that demand competitiveness and individual achievement. By recognising the

commonalities in their struggles, students were able to experience a supportive community, which they felt ultimately enhanced their PhD journey and personal development.

The realisation that challenges were widespread also encouraged a culture of openness and support, facilitating collective learning and problem-solving for the participants, which are central to the communities of practice framework. Furthermore, the common challenges and solutions in this theme contributed to the development of a shared repertoire of resources and strategies for overcoming academic and personal obstacles, reinforcing the community of practice’s collective knowledge and practices. These were also shared with others through the final publication of the book.

5.3. *Writing is hard, but feedback helps*

The third theme (“writing is hard, but feedback helps”) represents a sentiment which was universally expressed throughout both the participants’ and editors’ experiences. Participants acknowledged the inherent challenges of academic writing, such as structuring arguments, maintaining a critical rather than descriptive approach, and crafting coherent paragraphs. These challenges are a common part of the academic journey, underscoring the need for support and guidance.

Participants found the experience of receiving collaborative peer feedback very useful in improving their work. For example, Melissa highlighted that collaborative peer feedback helped her identify the difficulties she faced in her academic writing, particularly in terms of writing “good paragraphs” and writing critically as opposed to in a descriptive manner. Cherry encapsulated the feelings of participants when she noted that “writing is really hard, but finding a good friend who knows you and always listens to you is very important. This critical friend can be really helpful because they can reflect and articulate your ideas in a better way”.

It was clear that participants saw the collaborative peer feedback process as a way to help improve their academic writing skills. This was one of the main goals of the project, as highlighted by Lynette:

I also think that the process of getting them to get feedback from their writing group peers was really useful in that it helped both them and their peers see how to construct writing, bring across your ideas to others, and request and receive feedback from comments. Overall, I think this was a really great experience and the feedback that the students provided was very positive.

The process of giving feedback as an editor was not necessarily easy. This was encapsulated in Basil’s story, where he lamented:

As a co-editor of the book who was finalising his doctoral thesis, I remember how challenging it was to provide feedback to colleagues from a variety of disciplines. Each had their own writing style and approach to academic writing, and at times it felt difficult to evaluate their work. This was because I knew that I was bringing my own subjective view on the chapter they had spent hours writing. However, I realised [it] was also my responsibility to make sure that the book, through regular peer review and the implementation of peer feedback, was transparent and of the best quality possible for academic publication purposes.

The editors’ experiences illustrate the educational aspect of feedback, both in improving the work and developing a more nuanced understanding of academic writing across different disciplines. In this study, feedback was a space for learning, trial, and error, facilitated by a supportive community that valued growth and development. Participants felt that the project created a supportive environment where they were safe to experiment with their writing as well as make and learn from mistakes. For participants, this safe space was vital for encouraging open communication, vulnerability in learning, and willingness to engage deeply with the feedback process.

Feedback from peers, editors, and external reviewers was perceived

as playing a crucial role in students' revisions and improvements of their work. The act of giving and receiving feedback directly engages with the *practice* component of the communities of practice framework. It was through these interactions that members refined their skills and contributed to the community's body of knowledge. Through the iterative process of receiving, interpreting, and acting on feedback, participants felt that they not only enhanced their academic writing skills but also built confidence and self-esteem. The feedback was not just corrective but also affirmational, recognising the potential and effort of the writers. Furthermore, the artefacts produced from this feedback process (e.g., revised writing, peer feedback critiques) serve as reifications of the community's practice, solidifying abstract concepts into tangible examples of academic discourse and improvement.

5.4. You can learn a lot from looking at others' work

The fourth theme ("you can learn a lot from looking at others' work") was also represented in many of the students' responses. For example, both Mary and Melissa underscored how examining the work of others facilitated a deeper understanding of effective writing techniques for them, from sentence structure and vocabulary choice to argumentation and academic style. By observing diverse writing styles and identifying their own areas of weakness, participants were able to refine their writing, making it more coherent, critical, and academically rigorous. Melissa explained:

I learned many things. First, I learned different styles of writing like how to start a chapter or an introduction. By reading other students' work, I realised my own mistakes. For example, writing good paragraphs. I realised that my paragraphs are not good paragraphs. Also, I got ideas how to use academic words in writing, how to build an argument, and how to be critical and not descriptive.

The process of giving and receiving feedback in a writing group context not only helped participants improve their writing but also taught them about different styles of writing. For example, Natasha learnt about "differing writing styles and ways in which narrative can be constructed". This inspired her to "write more in this manner". These types of interactions helped participants foster a productive exchange of ideas, encouraging them to learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Content knowledge also seemed to improve as a result of reviewing the academic work of peers. Participants thought that engaging with peers' work exposed them to new concepts, theories, and methodologies. For instance, Tam noted "I learnt different research designs and methods (quantitative and qualitative) and ways to review literature as well as to structure theoretical framework". This aspect of the collaborative process not only filled knowledge gaps but also encouraged participants to broaden their intellectual horizons and engage more deeply with their disciplines.

As editors, we also found that the collaborative peer feedback process taught us a lot. Basil's reflection elucidates how participation in the collaborative feedback process reshaped his understanding of academic writing and review. This helped him recognise that even early-stage doctoral students can provide valuable and constructive feedback, challenging traditional notions of academic authority and expertise.

My involvement coloured my future feedback practice in interesting ways. Firstly, it eradicated the idea that only seasoned academics (e.g., established professors) could critically review academic work. I learnt that by the time a student commences their doctoral degree, they already have the ability to offer constructive feedback on both the content and form of the work we produce. At the time, this was a revelation. However, in hindsight, it is common sense.

Moreover, Basil's insight that academic writing is inherently collaborative, involving many individuals in the creation of a polished work, underscores the communal nature of scholarly endeavours.

Secondly, my involvement in the book project taught me that academic writing is almost always a collaborative process. Even in the case of chapters or articles written by a single author, numerous individuals are involved in reviewing and "constructing" a polished final version that will eventually go on to contribute in some way to the state of the art. This simple insight helped me view academic writing not as a solitary ascetic practice but as the work of a community.

Basil's reflection also reveals a nuanced understanding of feedback as a multi-dimensional tool for intellectual engagement.

Lastly, I learnt that feedback can assume many forms and shapes. It does not need to be binary (e.g., do/do not do the following in order to improve your work), but it can also be multi-dimensional (e.g., a provocative question that is intellectually engaging and leads to new insights and ways of structuring an argument). We should, therefore, avoid producing feedback that is reductive in nature. The end goal of peer feedback should be to expand and deepen the already elaborate work that is being carried out.

This theme illustrates that learning can occur through observation and engagement with others' work, key aspects of the *domain* and *practice* components of communities of practice. The theme also highlights participants' individual learning trajectories within the community as they moved from peripheral participation to more engaged and competent roles through the adoption and/or adaptation of observed practices and knowledge. Feedback, as experienced by the participants, went beyond simple rules of what can and cannot be done in academic writing. For the participants in this study, feedback was embraced as having a broader role in stimulating critical thinking, inspiring new insights, and fostering creative approaches to academic writing.

5.5. Experiential learning makes hidden practices visible

The final theme ("experiential learning makes hidden practices visible") showcases that the experiential process of writing a book together, as well as providing and receiving feedback, helped participants discover previously tacit understandings or obscure practices in academia. Furthermore, through her collaborative work with her two co-editors, Lynette developed an understanding of how to propose a book to publishers and work to collect expressions of interest from potential chapter authors. As Lynette highlights, "I did not know anything about writing an academic book. So, in many ways, I was learning with them". Lynette's journey from a novice to someone familiar with the intricacies of proposing and compiling an academic book illustrates how experiential learning can demystify the academic publishing process.

Participants discovered that there was no single correct way to write academically. For example, Robert learnt that there was flexibility and the potential to engage broader audiences beyond their specific fields of study. This exploration encouraged participants to experiment with their writing styles, addressing diverse audiences, and incorporating personal and authorial identity into their texts. For example, both Melissa and Natasha learnt about the expectations of the institution or academia more broadly. Overall, engaging in collaborative writing projects was a crucial learning mechanism. Participants perceived this project as a way to facilitate a deeper understanding of how to co-create academic content, manage dynamics within writing teams, and incorporate diverse perspectives into a cohesive piece of work.

Importantly, participants felt that the collaborative nature of the book writing and feedback process allowed them to take control of their own learning through reflective practice. Participants like James, Memet, and Noni found value in reflecting on their strengths, weaknesses, and the broader context of their work. This reflective practice extended beyond the individual to include interactions with supervisors and collaborators, which participants perceived as helping them enhance their communication and self-awareness. For example, Noni

expounded the benefits of reflective practice, noting how “actually reflective practice can be useful when interacting with supervisors. I’ve been using reflective practice as an individual/personal practice, not a group practice”.

In essence, the final theme highlights how experiential learning through writing and collaboration helped participants elucidate the tacit knowledge and hidden practices of academic life. This exemplifies how practice evolves through doing, reflecting, and sharing. The experiential learning in this study encouraged participants to explore academic norms, enhance their personal and professional skills, and engage in reflective practice. This, participants perceived, ultimately contributed to their development as scholars and writers. Moreover, participation in this collaborative endeavour was also credited with enhancing members’ understanding of academic publishing, a vital domain of knowledge within academia. This process not only benefited participants’ individual growth but also strengthened the academic community by fostering a culture of openness, mutual support, and shared learning, thereby enriching the community’s practice.

6. Discussion

It has previously been shown that doctoral writing groups are effective because they create environments where students learn to view writing not as a solitary endeavour but as a social practice (Chakraborty et al., 2021). This paper extends these previous findings by highlighting how focused effort on a particular collaborative task within a writing group can encourage the development of a community of practice in the doctoral education space. This is a particular strength of this study, as it further illustrates the power of peer feedback in a doctoral writing group environment. Furthermore, our paper extends the work of Lam et al. (2019), who demonstrated that collaborative work on a paper can lead to both collective and individualised learning. Our work highlights that this occurs through the community of practice that develops when participants work together towards a common goal, something which the book project in this study represented. Through participation in writing group meetings and regular interaction around a common goal (i.e., producing an academic volume), participants felt that they were able to effectively use collaborative peer feedback to help them build confidence in their skills, but they learnt most from reading others’ work and providing feedback. This common focus (*domain* in the communities of practice framework) allowed individuals to concentrate on finalising the chapters they had committed to writing.

Over the course of the book project, *community* played a pivotal role in the writing groups. It has been previously demonstrated that these types of groups can create safe spaces for students to develop their academic identity and foster a sense of belonging (Hradsky et al., 2022). The findings described in this study demonstrate that students discovered that they were part of a wider community where everyone had their own stories and problems. Contributing authors and editors were able to establish long-lasting relationships built on trust, support, and understanding. This was often reflected in the stories the authors shared with one another - either in person or through their written work. In fact, many of the participants continue to work with one another on various scholarly projects even after graduating with their PhDs.

Importantly, participants found that the experiential learning in this collaborative peer feedback environment was valuable in making hidden practices visible. Exposure to peer feedback helped to contribute to participants’ heightened awareness of the academic writing process, different writing styles, and the role that feedback plays in developing one’s writing quality. Participants also felt that they had improved their content knowledge, authorial identity, and voice in their writing. These elements positively informed the *practice* of participants involved in the book project, allowing them to use their lived experiences of collaborative feedback within a safe space to experiment with new ways of knowing.

As highlighted in studies such as Panadero and Lipnevich (2022),

student characteristics and context play an important role in the feedback that is generated and processed. Since the book project described in this paper dealt with the doctoral student experience, there was a significant overlap between the subject matter and the authors. Through collaborating on a book project, participants found that they were able to learn more about their individual differences (e.g., prior disciplinary knowledge or self-regulated learning) in ways that encouraged their own reflection and growth. Panadero and Lipnevich (2022) also emphasise the importance of creating optimal conditions for the implementation of feedback (e.g., timing and guidelines). In the case of our book project, we incorporated collaborative peer feedback at a critical juncture (after the creation of a first draft). Contributing authors were then given enough time to implement their feedback prior to submitting a revised draft, which, in many cases, was incorporated into the final version of the edited volume. Overall, the careful design of the collaborative peer feedback process within the writing group environment contributed to the book project’s overall success.

Finally, participants also perceived the book project as a way to improve their feedback literacy through demonstrated exposure to, and increased familiarity with, collaborative peer feedback in the safe space. Teachers play a vital role in students’ feedback literacy, particularly in terms of the design of learning experiences and the provision of guidance and coaching (Carless & Boud, 2018). Importantly, teachers must design learning environments that encourage students to act upon feedback while also reflecting on and improving feedback practices in an iterative manner (thereby demonstrating teacher feedback literacy, see Carless, 2023). In our project, we designed our learning environment to reduce the power hierarchy often associated with feedback practices by allowing the feedback to be discussed within the writing group environment (see also Chakraborty et al., 2021). Therefore, the editors’ feedback literacy throughout the book process encouraged a writing environment which provided a safe space for learning-focused feedback.

There are two important limitations to our study. Firstly, while our study represents the experiences of quite a large number of participants for a qualitative study, these experiences have not been explicitly linked to the experiences they wrote about in their individual chapters. This was done to protect the confidentiality of the participants but does limit the dataset as the additional reflections within the book chapters may have been valuable sources of contextual data about their perspectives on certain topics. Secondly, this paper does not describe any of the negative aspects of the collaborative peer feedback process from the students’ perspective. We had not intended to prompt only positive comments. Rather, participants chose on their own to only provide positive comments about their experience of participating in this project. Additionally, anecdotal discussions with participants were overwhelmingly positive, further emphasising the value they found in the community of practice. However, negative aspects, such as the affective challenges of receiving a large amount of feedback on written work, may have been illuminated if follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted.

7. Conclusion

This paper explored the power of the collaborative peer feedback process within the doctoral writing group space designed to help participants better understand academic book publishing. We asked, “How do the practices of collaborative writing and peer feedback provision in a doctoral writing group community reflect and contribute to the development of a shared repertoire and understanding of academia?”. Our findings underscore how collaborative practices within doctoral writing groups can significantly contribute to creating a communal learning environment where academic writing skills, feedback literacy, and a nuanced understanding of academia are cultivated. We show that participants felt they had enhanced their writing skills, improved their feedback literacy, developed their capacity for reflective practice, and built their academic identity development and confidence. Further, our

study illustrates the importance of unveiling previously implicit norms and practices within academia. For participants, this demystification of academic practices contributed to a broader and more nuanced understanding of the academic landscape, enabling them to navigate it with greater confidence and insight. Finally, we demonstrate how the practices within doctoral writing groups were seen as a way to foster a sense of community and collegiality that extends beyond individual projects. Participants experienced this environment as a space that encouraged open dialogue, mutual support, and collective learning, aspects which we believe were critical to fostering an inclusive and supportive academic culture.

The findings of this paper align with Carless and Boud (2018): students play a central role in making sense of feedback and using feedback to improve their work. We extend this assertion by underlining the key role that peers can play in terms of shaping each other's academic writing through feedback in a safe space. As peers, the participants were seen as important members of the community of practice who shared intellectual resources in order to benefit one another and establish meaningful relationships. Through our collaborative peer feedback practices in the writing groups, we were able to reduce the impact of power dynamics often associated with feedback provision, helping to build a safe space where participants felt they could trust their community. Together, our findings demonstrate that collaborative peer feedback within a safe space such as a writing group can foster learning-focused feedback when students are active and reflexive agents in the feedback process.

Our study, therefore, has four key contributions to research on feedback, particularly within the doctoral writing group setting. In this study, participants perceived peer feedback as a way to 1) enhance their academic writing skills; 2) catalyse both personal and professional growth; 3) provide emotional support because it was not seen as criticism, but rather an essential part of the academic journey; and 4) encourage reflection for learning. Importantly, our study also has three key contributions to research on feedback literacy: 1) doctoral writing groups can help participants develop feedback literacy; 2) doctoral writing groups can encourage participants to integrate diverse perspectives and critiques into their work; and 3) feedback literacy should be seen as connected with the construction of an academic identity because it can help doctoral students navigate their place within the academic community, negotiate their academic personas, and articulate their scholarly voices with greater confidence and clarity.

In conclusion, in our study, the practices of collaborative writing and peer feedback provision within doctoral writing groups played a crucial role in helping participants develop a shared repertoire of academic writing skills, feedback literacy, and reflective practice. These activities were perceived as contributing significantly to participants' understanding of academia, enabling them to navigate its complexities with greater confidence and competence. Our findings affirm that such collaborative practices should be considered invaluable in helping to encourage a supportive, engaged, and reflective academic community.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Basil Cahusac de Caux: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lynette Pretorius:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

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Raw data relating to this project are protected by confidentiality as a consequence of the sensitive nature of part of the dataset. As a result, the full dataset is not available. Queries regarding de-identified data or research methods employed to examine the data should be addressed to Dr Lynette Pretorius.

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