

## 23. RESEARCH WRITING GROUPS

### WHY WRITING GROUPS? WHY NOW?

Alongside the expansion of postgraduate research training in higher education, the growth of the global market for these graduates, and increased scrutiny of institutional research by national governments, there has been a burgeoning of interest in the postgraduate experience. At the same time, changing policies and practices require students to complete sooner and publish more during their period of candidature (Lee & Aitchison, 2009; Lee & Kamler, 2008). These factors, and the increasing popularity of qualitative research approaches, together with the ongoing hegemony of English as the international language of research, have implications for writing. And yet as universities accept greater numbers and a greater diversity of students into postgraduate research courses, increasing numbers of candidates are likely to enter doctoral studies unfamiliar with the necessary academic discourse practices.

In transition to non-coursework research candidature, students may find that the literacies acquired as an undergraduate or as a workforce participant are inadequate or even inappropriate for thesis writing. Other students may also have less than optimal opportunity to engage in the discourses of their research inquiry. For example, unlike students undertaking team-based quantitative research in the sciences, humanities and social science doctoral students often initiate and undertake highly personalised research which they conduct independently. For such students working in isolation, opportunities to discover, practise and develop the necessary new literacy skills may be unduly dependent on the quality of supervision.

The writing challenges for those engaged in qualitative research can be an additional burden and source of considerable anxiety. Among qualitative researchers there has always been a relatively greater awareness of the place of writing in research, as issues of epistemology, language and representation have long been the subject of theoretical attention and debate (Richardson, 2000). Even those who normally regard themselves as skilled writers may need writing support, as qualitative research places “particularly heavy demands on writers” (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005, p. 189). Not surprisingly, the literature suggests that non-native speakers of English experience even greater challenges and, on this basis alone, may well avoid qualitative research altogether (Flowerdew, 1999).

Given the particular epistemological and textual demands of qualitative research within the context of changing doctoral education, it is not surprising that there appears to be uncertainty about how best to support student writing. Yet at the same time there is evidence of considerable innovation in this area (Boud & Lee, 2009).

In this chapter I highlight one of these initiatives, namely writing groups for thesis writing. The chapter begins with a brief history of writing groups and an outline of the framework of academic literacies within which writing groups can be theorised. I then describe different models for thesis writing groups and reflect on the value of writing groups specifically for qualitative researchers. I explain how writing groups can be a powerful tool for dissertation and thesis writing for qualitative researchers. This chapter draws on my research and experiences as an academic literacy teacher, and as such incorporates theory and practice, self-reflection, and the many voices of my writing group participants.

#### WRITING GROUPS FOR DOCTORAL EDUCATION

In Western tradition, at least in the humanities, writing has largely been regarded as a solitary endeavour. The pedagogy of writing together in groups stands in stark contrast to this; yet writing groups have a long history. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) describe how Mikhail Bakhtin depended on his writing group for the development of his thinking as much as for improvements in his writing, and writing groups are known to have existed in academic settings since the beginning of the 19th century (Gere, 1987). Writing groups experienced a resurgence in tertiary institutions in the USA during the late 1960s and 70s as part of the student-centred learning and process writing movements, where they were taken up as pedagogies especially for developing undergraduate writing in rhetoric and composition (Gere, 1987). Recent literature suggests that writing groups have again become a popular and effective mechanism for the support of academic writing (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Lee & Boud, 2003; McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006; Murray & Moore, 2006).

When writing is seen as social practice rather than an individual skill, there are different implications for how we theorise and how we teach writing. Since I first began running thesis writing groups in 2002, I have attempted to record, research and theorise my practice. The groups I have been involved with are sites of social interaction organised in relation to the principle of peer review (Boud & Lee, 2005) for the on-going development of “community” that is built on and sustained around practices of research writing. These writing groups are self-determining in that they adapt and evolve according to the unique needs of the members over time (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). In earlier work, Alison Lee and I identified key pedagogical principles of identity, peer review, community and “normal business” at play in successful writing groups (Aitchison & Lee, 2006), and much of our ongoing work continues to build on these observations.

A useful frame for understanding how writing groups work is the notion of “academic literacies”. Academic literacies constitute an approach to language that builds on decades of practice, research and theorising from North American disciplines of *Composition and rhetoric*, from *English as a second language* and from *Applied linguistics*. This approach takes a broad view of literacy and of how learning and teaching occur within complex social systems, incorporating issues of epistemology, power and identity (Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2006). Writing is considered