



The Teaching-Research Nexus

A guide for academics and policy-makers
in higher education

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Examples from Australian universities

Developing Doctoral Writing Through Writing Groups

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Broad discipline area:

- Doctoral research writing

Year level:

- Higher degree research student candidature, from commencement to completion.

TRN strategy:

- Drawing on personal and institutional research to inform curriculum and pedagogy
- Designing learning activities around contemporary research in the field
- Building small scale research activities into the program
- Conducting and drawing on research into student learning to make evidence-based decisions about teaching

Teaching and learning context:

- Small group classes, both on-going and course-based
- Interdisciplinary groups
- Peer learning facilitated by a language expert

Brief description of the initiative:

This project is for the support and development of doctoral student writing over the course of candidature through a program of peer writing groups facilitated by a language expert. The program of research writing groups has evolved since its origins in 2002 in response to evaluative evidence, so that now two kinds of groups exist: an initial intensive course-based program with explicit teacher instruction on thesis writing, plus; on-going writing groups that meet fortnightly under the guidance of a language expert to share and critique peers' texts. These writing groups are typically interdisciplinary and culturally and linguistically diverse, with a balance of research traditions and early and mature candidates to facilitate mentoring of newer members.

The rationale for the writing group initiative came from a desire to move from a model of writing development as 'crisis control' to a proactive program that

embedded writing with research, acknowledging writing as knowledge-creating rather than simply knowledge-recording. Six years later the program continues to grow and diversify across the university.

The knowledge base that informs the teaching practice for these research writing groups draws on contemporary research and theorising into advanced academic literacy from the traditions of North American College Composition (Prior, 1998; Rose & McClafferty, 2001), the UK models of 'academic literacies' (Lea, 2004; Lillis, 2006) and current Australian research from applied linguistics and academic literacies approaches (Chanock, 2000; Paltridge, 2002, 2003; Starfield, 2003). These fields of inquiry interface with contemporary notions of language that see academic writing as social practice that is developed in specific contexts for specific purposes (Bunton, 2002; Morss & Murray, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Thus research writing group pedagogies intersect with research on peer learning (Boud & Lee, 2005) as well as the burgeoning body of knowledge on doctoral experiences which recognise the importance of writing as site for struggle over the construction of knowledge (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Lee, 1998; Martin & Adams, 2007).

In addition research into the writing group program itself has been a source for informing pedagogy. Since the outset the writing group program has been researched and evaluated by means such as pre-and post testing, external student evaluations of teaching, a major three-part retrospective review in 2007, and on-going student and teacher reflective journaling of learning. These strategies have been integrated into a cycle of review and improvement (the PIRI Cycle) to ensure on-going evidence-based improvements for student learning.

Findings and insights from these studies have been reported on at conferences (HERDSA Conference 2007; AARE Conference 2007; AALL Conference, 2003, 2007; the Writing Research Across Borders, Santa Barbara Conference on Writing Research, 2007; Writing Development in Higher Education Conference, University of Strathclyde, 2008) and integrated into publications (Aitchison, 2003; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Lee & Aitchison, 2008/ in press), and workshops on research writing at various universities (UWA, 2007; Murdoch University, 2007, University of Newcastle, 2007). In this way, research into the practices of writing groups for the advancement of doctoral writing have been disseminated more broadly in the academic community.

The literature shows that successful research outcomes are contingent on high level writing skills, and more especially that writing regularly and in a supportive environment with other researchers is a significant contributor to completions and satisfaction for research students. This project addresses the challenge for universities to create authentic discourse communities for to research candidates that are enjoyable, rewarding and productive learning experiences.

For further details:

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