



Fostering scholarship in doctoral education: Using a social capital framework to support PhD student writing groups^{☆, ☆☆}



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ABSTRACT

The shortage of nurse scientists in the United States complicates nursing's ability to sustain research-intensive environments, build knowledge for translation, and advance nursing science. More emphasis is needed on the preparation of PhD doctoral students to better equip them for a career of scholarship. Four recent PhD graduates participating in a writing group, examined the influence of social capital on their ability to develop capacity for scholarship. They found that a strong social factor supported their efforts to engage as scholars, be accountable for their writing, and make contributions to the research community. Although the writing group provided a space to practice scholarly writing and increased scholarly productivity, the experience was transformative in building capacity for scholarship. This article includes recommendations for academic leaders to both create and support writing groups within doctoral nursing programs using a social capital framework. Strategies are provided using the three dimensions of social capital: structural, relational, and cognitive. Investing in strategies that build social capital within a community can directly impact the advancement of science by elevating capacity for scholarship.

Introduction

The shortage of nurse scientists in the United States complicates nursing's ability to sustain research-intensive environments, build knowledge for translation, and advance nursing science (Broome & Corazzini, 2016). To address this shortage, more emphasis is needed on the preparation of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) students (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011). Specifically, curricular innovations are necessary to prepare these students for a career of scholarship (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2010). Recent pedagogical strategies have emphasized the need for innovative considerations in PhD programs (Armstrong, McCurry, & Dluhy, 2017; Bova, Perry, Kane, Morris, & Fain, 2018). Thus, academic leaders should invest in strategies to build capacity for scholarship so students and graduates are equipped to be productive scientists (AACN, 2010; Broome & Fairman, 2018).

In particular, academic leaders should consider how supporting writing activities might build capacity for scholarship in students. Doctoral students need communities of support where opportunities to practice scholarship can be fostered. These opportunities are situated within spaces where doctoral students can write and learn together

(Tyndall, Flinchbaugh, Caswell, & Scott, 2018). These spaces should promote scholarly learning, development of writer/researcher identity, and reflective practice (de Caux, Lam, Lau, Hoang, & Pretorius, 2017; Kumar & Aitchison, 2018; Wegener, Meier, & Ingerslev, 2016). Doctoral writing groups can provide this critical space.

Doctoral work can be a lonely journey for many students evoking feelings of isolation and insecurity (Starke-Meyerring, 2014; Wegener et al., 2016). However, writing groups can support the development of professional relationships that can transform writing from a solitary experience to a social practice (Olszewska & Lock, 2016). Ensuring a social dimension exists in doctoral curriculums can positively influence student experiences as they embark on the PhD journey. Intrinsically, investing in these social activities can cultivate continued networks and relationships for graduates transitioning to scholars in academic settings.

Writing groups have been shown to accelerate dissertation completion (Maher, Fallucca, & Mulhern Halasz, 2013) and assist with dissertation dissemination (Lehna, Hermanns, Monsivais, & Engebretson, 2016). Despite their pedagogical value, writing groups may be difficult to sustain without the necessary communities of support from academic leaders. In a survey of doctoral students in 11

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research-intensive universities, less than 9% received support through the use of a writing group (Starke-Meyerring, 2014). Writing groups have the potential to increase scholarship in doctoral students and support collaborative scholarly environments when situated within supportive communities.

The social influences on the ability to increase scholarship have been examined through the concept of social capital (Abbasi, Wigand, & Hossain, 2014). Social capital factors, such as an individual's network of scholars and their frequency of collaborations, have been positively correlated with scholarly productivity (Abbasi et al., 2014). Social capital may help explain the relational competencies and scholarly connectedness doctoral students need as they transition to the role of nurse scientist. The purpose of this article is to describe our experience with participating in a writing group and discuss the applicability of social capital as a framework to promote communities of scholarship within doctoral education programs.

Theoretical framework

Social capital refers to “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). The characteristics of social capital, as discussed by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), feature trust, sharing knowledge, interdependence, collaboration, and structure. One of the functions of these characteristics is productivity, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence (Coleman, 1988). Another function is continuity (Putnam, 1993, 1995), as the embeddedness of these features tend to be self-reinforcing and cumulative, facilitating collaboration in other unrelated tasks. Sustaining the characteristics of social capital are generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000) and that networks of relationships constitute a valuable resource for conduct of affairs (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

These characteristics of social capital are found within three distinct dimensions: structural, relational, and cognitive (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. The structural dimension of social capital refers to the pattern of connections between individuals and networks. The relational dimension of social capital refers to those assets which are created and leveraged through relationships. Finally, the cognitive dimension of social capital refers to those resources which represent shared understanding, interpretations and systems of meanings between individuals achieved through shared language and narratives. These three dimensions are highly inter-related and facilitate the combination and exchange of knowledge.

Time, interaction and interdependence are important for the development of social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Time is necessary, as each of the three dimensions of social capital depend on stability and continuity. To maintain high levels of social capital, particularly within the cognitive and relational dimensions, interaction is essential. Interaction occurs through sustained contact and conversations to support the development of networks, trust-based norms, and cooperation. Interdependent viability encourages exchange between individuals and the social capital which ensues from mutually dependent exchange.

Background

In an effort to support scholarly productivity and dissemination of dissertation work, four recent PhD graduates formed a writing accountability group (WAG). We became familiar with each other's research through peer review activities as doctoral students and developed strong relationships as we matriculated together through the curriculum. In addition, our group relationship was strengthened as all members were novice researchers and new tenure track faculty at the same university. Our writing group began as the result of peer

discussions following a college-sponsored lecture on the impact of WAGs while we were doctoral students.

Initially, our group attended a planning session to discuss purpose and structure for the group. We mutually agreed that increasing professional writing habits and scholarly productivity would be the group's purpose. Meetings were facilitated in a hybrid manner to include both face-to-face and online sessions via Zoom web-based conferencing. One member reserved rooms within the college of nursing for face-to-face meetings and coordinated virtual meeting invites for online meetings. Follow-up emails and calendar requests were sent for each planned meeting. The agenda for each WAG meeting included three elements: 1) updates on writing projects from each group member (15 min), individual writing time (30 min), and 3) reporting of outcomes from individual writing time and goal setting for the upcoming week (15 min).

Our group met for one academic year; meeting weekly for 1 h during each semester. We scheduled our weekly meetings earlier in the semester to avoid end-of-semester activities that tend to require a great deal of faculty attention. Although each member committed to attend at least seven of the ten sessions, we found commitment to be high as evidenced by few absences. In the fall semester, each group member worked on individual writing projects. However, we decided to write collaboratively in the spring semester to produce this manuscript. The powerful experience we felt through this writing group compelled us to share our outcomes and personal insights and discuss potential implications for doctoral education and professional scholarly writing communities.

Outcomes

During the academic year, our WAG group worked on a total of 29 scholarly products. These scholarly products included abstracts ($n = 7$), grant proposals ($n = 3$), manuscripts ($n = 9$), and dissemination of work via poster or podium presentations at various professional conferences ($n = 10$). At the end of the academic year, our individual scholarly products were in various phases of the writing process. However, the seven abstracts, the three grant proposals, and five of the nine manuscripts were submitted for peer review. As a group, we submitted a manuscript for publication and an abstract that was accepted for presentation at the AACN Doctoral Conference.

In addition to our products of scholarly work, each member's personal writing habits improved through the process of “wagging.” Central to the intention of WAGs is the personal accountability for productivity, which was evidenced by our active participation in the WAG meetings. We found that goal setting and weekly progress reporting motivated individual accomplishment each week and peer accountability. Each member of the group developed a sense of social responsibility for scholarly progress. Further, to meet targets each week, members of the group developed and refined their own processes for structuring writing time into their faculty appointments.

Discussion

Writing groups have been shown to increase scholarly productivity in both doctoral students and early career academics (Dwyer, Lewis, McDonald, & Burns, 2012; Maher et al., 2013). Although our writing group provided a space to practice scholarly writing and increased our scholarly productivity, we found our experience transformative in building our capacity for scholarship. Similar to the literature, we found the social space created within our writing group provided a deeper purpose for writing as scholars who desire to generate meaningful research beyond meeting scholarly quotas (Johnson, Roitman, Morgan, & MacLeod, 2017).

Through our writing group participation, we reflected upon the influence of social capital on our ability to develop capacity for scholarship. We found that a strong social factor supported our efforts to engage as scholars, be accountable for our writing, and make

contributions to the research community. Thus, we recommend the use of a social capital framework to support writing within doctoral nursing programs. This support can be created through the use of writing groups guided by the three dimensions of social capital: structural, relational, and cognitive.

Structural

The structural dimension describes how social capital is created within a network, including relationships between individuals and the social system. Students transitioning into doctoral education require introduction to these structural relationships. Specifically, an introduction to the interpersonal relationships, or network ties, is necessary for the exchange of knowledge between individuals within a community. Writing groups can provide a structure for both network ties and configurations to occur which are critical for doctoral students learning within collaborative educational environments.

Writing groups within doctoral programs can provide a structure to introduce students to the various ways in which individuals can write within the context of the larger community. Networking within writing groups can be formed among student peers (Kumar & Aitchison, 2018) or a combination of faculty and students (Lehna et al., 2016; Maher et al., 2013), interdisciplinary writing groups (de Caux et al., 2017), and groups writing collaboratively on topics of shared interests (Healey & Matthews, 2017). Additionally, formation of writing groups can be structured based on common goals or similarities such as writing to publish (Dwyer et al., 2012) or doctoral students self-identifying as first-generation scholars (Roulston, Teitelbaum, Chang, & Butchart, 2016). Based on our experiences, a cohort writing group might be a first approach for students to network due to their similarities of coursework, writing competencies, and research experience.

Along with providing a structure for networking to occur, considerations should be given to the configurations of these networks. Network configurations might include the processes and procedures for conducting writing groups. For example, members should give careful consideration as to whether or not the group meets online (Kozar & Lum, 2015), face-to-face (Murphy, McGlynn-Stewart, & Ghafouri, 2014), or even a hybrid format similar to our group. Writing groups can be time-limited (e.g. semester) or structured as a writing retreat with more intense writing (Olszewska & Lock, 2016). It is important to note that the structure of the writing group has implications on the development of social networks as the group matriculates through doctoral studies. Therefore, online and retreat formats may not be ideal for students early in their studies who are trying to build social networks.

Determining processes and procedures can be driven by the purpose of the group. Writing groups have several purposes which can offer support to doctoral students at various stages of their studies and post-graduation. For instance, if feedback is critical for group members, writing groups can be a mechanism for peer review (de Caux et al., 2017). Alternatively, members who need to connect with others to stay productive may find writing groups a space for support and accountability (Wardale et al., 2015). Writing groups can be structured to support collaborative writing (Healey & Matthews, 2017; Ness, Duffy, McCallum, & Price, 2014) and/or writing based on individual projects (Maher et al., 2013).

Relational

The strength of relationships within the relational dimension of social capital influences the likelihood that individuals will engage with each other. Doctoral education is an opportune time for students to engage and maintain relationships with other research scholars. The structure of these relationships can be cultivated through the use of writing groups. In particular, social capital can be developed within writing groups through building trust, establishing shared norms and expectations, and identification with the community.

Students are more likely to engage in a writing group when there are high levels of trust among the members. Trust in writing groups can be cultivated through small group sizes, longevity, and similarities within the group members (Bosanquet, Cahir, Huber, Jacenyik-Trawöger, & McNeill, 2014; Lassig, Dillon, & Diezmann, 2013). Doctoral students have reported difficulty in both initiating and maintaining writing groups (Starke-Meyerring, 2014). Furthermore, when doctoral students participate in writing groups without formal course credit, there is often a lack of commitment hindering trust among members (Roulston et al., 2016). Hence, we recommend faculty-driven student writing groups that are embedded within coursework during the early phases of doctoral studies. Faculty oversight can support participation until trust is developed and the writing group sustains itself. These groups can be student-led; however, faculty may choose to provide processes and procedures for the groups.

We suggest that trust can be fostered in a faculty-driven writing group in which students participate in peer review of writing products for a particular course. As PhD students, we were introduced to and participated in a peer writing group using the *Critical Friends* method. This method facilitates critical dialogue in a supportive intellectual community using a six-step protocol with a facilitator and presenters (Costantino, 2010). Questions for the presenter, intended to foster scholarship, occur within a conversation of mutual trust and encouragement.

Similar to findings cited in the literature, we found writing among peers facilitated comfort and honesty in the evaluation of our own writing and giving feedback to peers (Aitchison, 2014; de Caux et al., 2017; Wegener et al., 2016). Some have suggested this process of writing among “equals” may facilitate both increased confidence and scholarly productivity when compared to writing with senior researchers (Kent, Berry, Budds, Skipper, & Williams, 2017). Although writing groups are often formed to increase the rate of scholarly productivity, these groups can develop into “safe places” for members to connect on a deeper level (Johnson et al., 2017).

Writing groups are grounded by norms and expectations which may include blocked meeting times that are ‘sacred’ for writing combined with separate meeting times for socialization (Wardale et al., 2015). Some have found the need to create writing spaces off campus to meet the group's needs (Johnson et al., 2017). Norms and expectations have also included collegiality and reciprocity among the group (Dwyer et al., 2012) and an open-mindedness to peer learning and critical feedback (de Caux et al., 2017; Olszewska & Lock, 2016). When collaborative writing approaches are used, authorship guidelines and writing obligations should be discussed to keep members accountable (Ness et al., 2014). Additionally, monitoring the group's output (Wardale et al., 2015) and setting attendance requirements may need to be considered.

Relational dimensions are necessary to facilitate student development of both individual identity and identification with the community. Specifically, doctoral students are re-shaping their identity as they transition into the role of nurse scientist. This identity shift intensifies as students attempt to situate themselves within the context of the larger research community. To facilitate a sense of belonging, PhD students need positive experiences that promote socialization within the research community (Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017). Writing groups can provide opportunities for socialization as students develop as researchers and position themselves as a new member of the community. This development of identity in writing groups can be formed early on as students relate to other doctoral students sharing the same experience (Kumar & Aitchison, 2018; Lassig et al., 2013) and as they transition to building their researcher identity (Wegener et al., 2016).

Cognitive

The experience of moving from the periphery of the scholarly community is influenced by social dimensions as students reposition

themselves as new members within the discipline (Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2017). In particular, the cognitive dimension of social capital embodies the meaningful communication that occurs among members. This meaningful communication requires acculturation to the research community through shared language, narratives, and tacit knowledge.

Writing groups can help establish shared language and narratives, and gives students an opportunity to practice disciplinary discourse (Lassig et al., 2013) that varies from the discourse occurring in clinical practice. Other processes of writing groups, such as peer review, are customary practice in research communities and is often dependent on tacit knowledge (Aitchison, 2014). How doctoral students are acclimated to the shared language, narratives, and tacit knowledge within the research community has the potential to influence student experiences and whether these experiences prepare them for careers as productive scholars.

It is highly recommended that writing groups be embedded within doctoral education rather than an ad hoc approach to support doctoral writing (Starke-Meyerring, 2014). Embedding writing groups in coursework provides students with an opportunity to pilot various types and structures early in their doctoral studies to explore which are most helpful. As students transition into the dissertation phase, writing groups can be student-driven allowing students to be active agents within their research communities (Aitchison, 2014; Murphy et al., 2014). Student-driven writing groups can provide opportunities for engagement with a network of scholars consisting of both student peers, research faculty, and other researchers within their areas of interest.

Writing groups may also be of importance to the development of doctoral students who plan to assume or maintain faculty positions after completing their PhD. These students may find themselves with a whole new set of challenges as they acculturate to the research community. Academic cultures can be riddled with pervasive competition, sabotaging, silencing, and other behaviors contributing to incivility among colleagues (Goldberg, Beitz, Wieland, & Levine, 2013; Peters, 2014; Peters & King, 2017). This incivility siloes faculty from each other, deviating from nursing's caring and collaborative traditions (Heinrich, 2017). Writing groups may facilitate the institutional change necessary to support doctoral students and future faculty by creating "homes" aimed to foster their capacity for scholarship (Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & O'Meara, 2008, p. 162). We suggest that writing groups can be one such "home" when strategically situated in academic settings.

Conclusion

The preparation of PhD doctoral students needs more emphasis to better equip them for a career of scholarship. In particular, doctoral students need communities of support to foster the capacity for scholarship. We suggest the implementation of writing groups, using a social capital framework, as an avenue for academic leaders to cultivate a new generation of nurse scientists. Investing in strategies that build social capital within a community can directly impact the advancement of science by elevating capacity for scholarship. Using writing groups to build relationships among scholars can help break down competitive barriers, thus creating a pipeline of researchers committed to engaging within the research community.

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