

# When shutting up brings us together: Some affordances of scholarly writing groups in the neoliberal university

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HDR writing groups have been a standard offering in many universities for some time, encouraging a collegial space for furthering the writing practice of staff and students. A writing group variation known as ‘Shut Up and Write’ (SUAW) has become popular, with its intense writing ‘pomodoros’ intersected by short social breaks. The SUAW model does not include peer reviews of writing; instead it offers a quiet, communal space for scholarly writing. As a writing oasis, SUAW seems to be effective by virtue of people simply being together and writing in the same physical space. Indeed, as Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) noted, writers “will be more apt to do the solitary work of writing if they surround themselves with other writers pursuing the same goal” (p. 18).

This paper discusses the practice of a SUAW group in an Australian university, in which Higher Degree Research students meet weekly to further their progress as academic writers. While the university underwent a major restructure that included a significant reduction in staff numbers, the SUAW group maintained regular attendance and a spirit of encouragement, with group members acknowledging each other’s advances and celebrating achievements, from ethics approval to thesis submission. The broader context of this scenario is the neoliberal policy framework in higher education which, among other impacts, has meant that funding for student services is being continually squeezed (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2012; Warburton & Macauley, 2014; Phipps & Young, 2015). This paper argues that as a result there is an increasing need to support HDR students, among others, in ways that are cost and time-effective. Scholarly writing groups, while not sufficient as a stand-alone support, can add value to the PhD journey through provision of skills development, social contact and other affordances.

**Key Words:** Doctoral writing groups, neoliberal, affordances, collegiality, resilience.

## 1. Introduction

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This paper discusses the practice of a SUAW group in an Australian university, in which Higher Degree Research students meet weekly to further their progress as academic writers. While the university underwent a major restructure that included a significant reduction in staff numbers, the SUAW group maintained regular attendance and a spirit of encouragement, with group members acknowledging each other’s scholarly advances and celebrating achievements, from ethics approval to thesis submission. The broader context of this scenario is the neoliberal policy framework in higher education which, among other impacts, has meant that funding for student services is being continually squeezed (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2012; Warburton & Macauley, 2014; Phipps & Young, 2015). This paper argues that as a result there is an increasing need to support HDR students, among others, in ways that are cost and time-effective. Scholarly writing groups, while not sufficient as a stand-alone support, can add value to the PhD journey through provision of skills development, social contact and other affordances.

## 2. Scholarly writing groups

There has been growing interest in finding ways to support both undergraduate and postgraduate students in their studies, from English language and study skills support, to autonomous and semi-autonomous writing circles. This comes about as part of a broad movement to foster independent learning in higher education students, but it is also argued (Klopper & Power, 2014; Hil, 2012) that declining levels of government funding to universities means it is imperative to provide low-cost support mechanisms for students. One popular development in the suite of student supports is the writing circle or group. Commonly pitched at Higher Degree Research (HDR) students, there are a number of variations in the structure and practice of postgraduate writing groups. However, a common pattern is that HDR students and research-active staff meet regularly in a convivial location (on or off-campus) to write and/or discuss their scholarly writing.

One variant of the HDR writing group, known as “*Shut Up and Write!*” (SUAW) has become popular as a relatively non-interventionist support mechanism for PhD students and other scholarly writers. This paper discusses one such group based at an Australian university. While the phenomenon of doctoral writing groups has been well-examined in recent literature (e.g. Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Nairn, Cameron, Anakin, Juntrasook, Wass, Sligo, & Morrison, 2015), this paper considers the effectiveness of the scholarly writing group in the context of a global higher education landscape that is now dominated by neoliberal policies. It argues that because of the particular impacts of corporatized higher education on staff and students, there is a greater need for resilience and collegiality in higher education. Scholarly writing groups have been shown to increase writing output (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014), but this paper investigates whether further affordances may accrue from participation. To do this, it examines a writing group that contains approximately even numbers of students and staff, with staff participants comprising sessional tutors and continuing full-time staff. The common thread among the participants is that all are completing or (in a small number of cases) have very recently submitted their HDR theses. Among this cohort are also HDR students who recently weathered a major university restructure. Despite being a non-interventionist group without peer review processes, the writing group has persisted and even doubled the numbers of regular participants in the year following the restructure. This paper considers some of the affordances offered by such groups, including the building of resilience, collegiality and reflexive practice in the context of disruption and uncertainty brought about by neoliberal policies including university restructure.

As part of this investigation, six participants from a research-intensive, metropolitan university in Victoria were interviewed to investigate their experience of value in the SUAW group, and these responses indicate a broad agreement that regular participation in SUAW not only helps their writing output, but augments the doctoral experience in other ways also. Scholarly writing groups provide an important source of support for HDR students that can mitigate some of the harsh excesses of the corporatized university.

### **3. The neoliberal context in higher education**

Neoliberalism is a form of governmentality that is common in many global institutions, including higher education. As universities in many countries now operate as corporate entities, many of the premises that underpinned university governance and operations have been reshaped to fit a market model, in a process often termed the “commodification” of education. This is defined as “the process by which the economic overtakes ... institutions and aspects of social life” (Shumar, 1997, p. 55) and in which specific characteristics are valorised: privatisation, free trade, and deregulation (Giroux, 2014).

A number of researchers have expressed concern about the commodification of knowledge and the impact this is having on university missions (e.g. Torres, 2011; Kauppinen, 2014; Ingleby, 2015). It is also argued that market principles have led to a decline in discipline breadth (Hil, 2012), as subjects are attenuated or closed down, particularly in the humanities (Lea, 2014). The linking of knowledge-production with market logic is a matter of concern for some, as the commercialisation of knowledge is seen to potentially compromise the pursuit of truth:

In the cultural climate created by the spread of market logic throughout society, the encounter with truth that is a central feature of education is increasingly difficult to achieve (Connell, 2013, p. 109).

Given the extensive changes to higher education governmentality, it is likely that academic identity has also been affected in the process, and this has been examined at length in the literature. In the globalised university, university staff members are increasingly obliged to assume the role of service providers as well as maintaining their traditional teaching and research roles. This might include attendance at ‘Customer Service’ training programs, for example, in order to better facilitate the needs of student stakeholders (Saltmarsh, 2011). A number of research studies in the last 10 years have pointed to the negative impact of neoliberal policies on higher education staff-members. For example, it has been argued that, “professors and lecturers shared a deep-seated antipathy to a market ethos that reduces higher education to a narrow economic function” (Winter & O’Donohue, 2012, p. 565). This has engendered a market subjectivity in students and staff, so that they are “expected to be active, responsible, self-governing, and entrepreneurial in making gains for themselves” (Varman, Saha, & Skalen, 2011, p. 1164). Market subjectivity is also thought to affect social cohesion in universities, including, among other concerns, a diminishing concern for social connection and an inability or unwillingness to adopt critical perspectives (Varman et al., 2011, p. 1164).

The impact of neoliberalism on the student experience in higher education is a relatively under-researched area, with most publications examining either policy areas or staff experience of neoliberalism. However, where this issue has been discussed, there is some agreement that the impact of neoliberal policies on the student experience has on the whole not been a positive experience. Student academic identity has been reframed through a corporate management lens so that they are seen, and encouraged to see themselves as, ‘consumers’ or ‘customers’ (Winter & O’Donohue, 2012; Barnett, 2012; Ball, 2012; Lawson, Sanders, & Smith, 2015; Ingleby, 2015). As such, they are “no longer perceived to be potential contributors to the public intellectual capital of the nation, but instead as private investors seeking a financial return in the form of enhanced employability skills” (Naidoo & Williams, 2015, p. 212). It appears that many university students themselves are not satisfied with aspects of contemporary higher education, or their configuration within it. University students from a range of countries including Chile, Australia and the United Kingdom have protested widely against the neoliberalisation of higher education over the last two years (Giroux, 2014; Phipps & Young, 2015).

### **4. The HDR experience**

That PhD scholars are in for a long hard research and writing slog has been acknowledged widely and for many years in the literature. It is also understood that Higher Degree Research (HDR) writing can be a lonely and isolating experience, with few that really understand what PhD writers are doing other than the writers themselves and their supervisors. While these are normative expectations for PhD writing, there has long been a recognised need for supporting HDR stu-

dents, particularly in developing their scholarly writing practice to expected HDR standards. However, changes to the global higher education climate have meant that support for HDR and other students must now fit within compromised budgetary constraints. Despite this, writing well at university, and later professionally, is a valuable life-asset, bearing ‘trophies’ in a system that rewards those who publish frequently with grants, accolades, awards, career establishment and promotion. For doctoral students who are also academic staff-members, such as three of the participants in this study, there is a powerful incentive to improve their writing skills, particularly when preparing to further their careers in the academic workplace; for these, a strong publication record is crucial (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014). However, in universities that have undertaken restructures, as many have, it is common for staff – many of whom are casually-employed tutoring HDR students – to experience hectically busy workweeks, with heavy teaching and marking loads.

## 5. Challenges of HDR writing

Published literature suggests that collegial writing can be an empowering experience for students and staff alike. However, PhD candidature is the widely acknowledged to be a lonely endeavour, as most of the research and writing labour is conducted in solitude. Researching a narrowly defined topic as most HDR or scholarly writing does, it is unlikely that one finds ‘companions’ along the way; hence the challenge can be one of intellectual isolation, as well as the many solitary hours spent struggling with ideas, structure and text. Somewhat unsurprisingly, attrition is an ever-present possibility in HDR candidature, and a constant problem for university managers. Doctoral attrition figures in US colleges have been estimated at 50% (Cassuto, 2014) and are thought to be similar in Australia (Maher, Fallucca, & Halasz, 2013, p. 193).

PhD isolation and lack of social contact have been discussed extensively in the literature, and many of these publications emphasise the importance of personal connection in the HDR experience. For example, it appears that personal connection on the research path plays an important role in galvanising the writing process, particularly with supervisors. There is some evidence that even when doctoral candidates do experience good supervision and progress, a lack of social contact can create unhappiness (Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014). When this social isolation is combined with anxiety, the context for successful learning, research and writing can become impoverished. Yet, according to Mewburn et al. (2014), this is not an uncommon experience for doctoral students, as “the process of learning through doing writing occurs mostly in isolation” (p. 403). This reinforces the need for robust support mechanisms in HDR writing.

The establishment of collegial relationships and other forms of social contact is acknowledged to be strategically important in higher education, for both staff (Thornton, 2011) and students (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). However, there is some evidence that collegiality has been eroded in the neoliberal university (Hil, 2012; Bal, Grassian, & Kirk, 2014). Thornton (2012) goes so far as to suggest that corporatisation “by its very nature ... is destructive of collegiality” (p. 131). Positive collegial relationships, on the other hand, have the dual advantage of both counteracting the effects of unhappy or stressed workplaces, and being “fundamental to the development of a successful career” (Jackson, Andrew, & Cleary, 2013, p. 2). However, the development of friendships or collegial relationships can consume time and energy, and may be perceived by the doctoral candidate as a luxury that disrupts his or her PhD and work commitments. On the other hand, working in isolation can also mean bypassing opportunities for peer support and idea-sharing repositories, including exposure to different presentation and argumentation styles (Daniels, 2013). Apart from the supervisors, there are typically few people in the PhD student’s world who are likely to be able to provide feedback or comment on the writing (Daniels, 2013).

## 6. Advantages of the SUAW model

Clearly, a writing group model in which there is no expectation that peers will either read or critique each other’s work must have something else going for it, and consistently high attendance numbers in international SUAW groups attest to this. For example, a California-based um-

brella SUAW group that formed in 2007 has over 3,800 writers registered, with an average of 18 attending local SUAW ‘meetups’ each week (<http://www.meetup.com/shutupandwritesfo/>). One advantage of the SUAW model over more interventionist writing group models is that most attendees are not obliged to ‘do’ anything before attending, in contrast to a more traditional writing circle, where members are regularly expected to read and annotate peers’ papers before the session. Clearly the ‘no-prep’ model works well for very busy participants, particularly in a pressured academic environment where staff and students are expected to perform and produce almost constantly. Nevertheless, there is considerable agreement that the process of coming together to write individually produces beneficial results, including higher publication rates and improved morale (Mewburn et al., 2014; Batty & Sinclair, 2014; Guerin, 2013).

## **7. Doctoral student motivation in the wake of neoliberalism**

The dramatic changes to higher education, driven by technological developments and neoliberal governance, have in turn transformed the way that students interact with and perceive the university, their studies and their professional trajectories. The transition to blended and fully online course delivery in higher education has been one of the significant drivers in changed student behaviour, with many enrolled students choosing to engage virtually with their studies. Although online education is usually agreed to be effective if well-managed (Myers, Jeffery, Nimmagadda, Werthman, & Jordan, 2015), the drop-out rate in fully online courses remains high, a phenomenon largely attributed to isolation and lack of social contact (Lehmann & Conceicao, 2014). This suggests that interpersonal contact has a significant impact on student well-being and retention. However, HDR students are frequently obliged to contend with challenges beyond social isolation. The competitive environment has made academia a more insecure environment in which to work and study (Bal, Grassiani, & Kirk, 2014) and this is thought to increase extrinsic motivation levels of both staff and students. In this process, academic identities have been dramatically reconfigured, so that “One’s sense of value is ... intimately tied to the economic value of one’s knowledge” (Bansel, 2011, p. 547). Peters (2008), on a similar note argued that where neoliberal policies are “deeply entrenched in universities”, the motivation to pursue research may become extrinsically-focused (p. 87). The effects of extrinsically-focused neoliberal policies on HDR students can be counter-productive to sustained writing practice and high motivation. For example, the prospect of not getting a job or being made redundant as a result of not publishing has been identified as likely to induce a sense of paralysis in the HDR writer (Nairn et al., 2015). This suggests that scholarly writing needs to be aligned in some way to intrinsic motivation rather than external pressures.

The impact of extrinsic motivation on well-being has been shown to be, on the whole, negative: it produces less satisfaction and lowers self-esteem (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). In a longitudinal investigation into motivational triggers for creativity, the researchers concluded that extrinsically-focused work, such as working for reward, “can be damaging to both intrinsic motivation and creativity” (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010, p. 674). People whose goals are mostly extrinsic (for example, promotion or extra pay) are said to experience lower levels of psychological wellbeing, including depression, narcissism and anxiety. Interpersonally, they are more likely to experience relational conflict than those people who are more intrinsically motivated (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). The scholarly writing group, by its nature a voluntary undertaking, is powered by intrinsic motivation and can provide an important counterpoint to an otherwise predominantly extrinsically motivating environment.

## **8. Student experience in the neoliberalised university**

The experience of university students in neoliberal universities has not received significant attention to date in the literature, but two senior Law academics recently examined the “neoliberal learning experience” of Law students in Australian universities. They found a number of negative characteristics associated with completing a Law degree, including high stress-levels due to managing work-life balance, and a prevailing spirit of competitiveness and consumerism (Baron, 2013, p. 273; Thornton, 2012). Of course, it is likely that these effects have been a constant in Law degrees for many years. However, Baron (2013) argued that these features not only cor-

related with student distress (p. 280), but also speculated that there may be a “causal link between the growth of neoliberalism and the rise of distress” in Law students (p. 280).

Although Law students are known to be under considerable pressure throughout the Law degree, it is evident that these features also apply to the learning experience of students in other disciplines. University league tables (a feature of neoliberal policy regimes) ensure perpetual competition for enrolments between universities, and competitive behaviours in students. There is some evidence, derived from four European studies, of a link between neoliberal policies (such as self-enhancement and competition) and “the adoption of context-specific competitive performance-approach goals, which predict the condoning of cheating” (Pulfrey & Butera, 2013, p. 2153). Although most universities have strong measures in place to reduce or eliminate plagiarism (e.g. text-matching software such as Turnitin), it is noteworthy that breaches of academic integrity remain “rife” in Australian and other universities (Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace, Walker, McGowan, East, Green, Partridge, & James, 2014, p. 1152). This may in part be due to the phenomenon of competitive self-enhancement that appears to have been widely internalised in university students, leading to ‘flexible’ responses concerning academic integrity protocols.

Although HDR students can face challenges, they can also be effective agents in their own training, with some researchers arguing that “the experiential role of the student in the development of their doctoral training and the social interactions encountered within this process, are just as essential as the more traditionally structured supervisor-student relationship” (Mercer, Kythriotis, Lambert, & Hughes, 2011, p. 153). The *Shut Up and Write!* group, with its structured social time between writing episodes, affords rich potential for discussing the research and writing experience, and developing reflexive awareness in the process (Mercer et al., 2011). This in turn develops research capacity in doctoral students. Scholarly writing groups can also provide a powerful form of community, which helps to build resilience against the sometimes-fragmented nature of the university environment. Voluntary, mutual commitment to the writing process creates a sense of purpose that can then push the writing forward, powered by intrinsic motivation (Lindsay, 2015) to complete writing tasks. It can be a potent experience to congratulate a writing-group colleague on submission of his or her PhD, after working alongside them for months or years; this no doubt also stimulates the urge to make progress oneself. In light of a marketised higher education sector in Australia that is continuously under threat of further government funding cuts, it is worth considering further potential advantages of low-cost, low-stakes groups that embrace social connection and celebrate the small triumphs of long-distance writing.

## 9. The *Shut Up and Write!* group

Self-directed writing groups are not for everyone; many early researchers in particular prefer targeted feedback and critique as the central aim of an HDR writing group, and there is evidence that they can be highly effective for building students’ writing confidence (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014). Peer-to-peer learning can be an empowering experience, “creating the space for students to experience a greater sense of agency—which is important in doctoral education where the aim is to develop an independent researcher” (Mewburn, Osbourne, & Caldwell, 2014, p. 404). Mewburn et al. (2014) describe writing circles and peer-to-peer groups as “semi-structured learning environments, whereas SUAW can be called a ‘movement’ that is “performed, not delivered” (p. 404). As performance, self-directed writing groups do not deliver to an audience; their power seems to rely on the shared knowledge that participants are together physically but focused on their individual writing, with social breaks.

The writers in this SUAW group in its current form comprise around 15-20 postgraduate students from a variety of disciplines; most are completing PhDs. Around half of these are also academic staff, in the sense that they are employed as sessional tutors on a semester basis. Facilitation is provided by the academic director of a university-wide research unit. It is a multidisciplinary group with some cultural diversity, although there is a slight predominance of Anglo-Saxon heritage participants. At each weekly 2.5 hour session there are usually between fifteen and twenty attendees, reflecting the ebbs and flows of demand through the academic semester. Participants meet in a quiet area on campus that is dedicated to postgraduate students. New participants appear regularly, and other participants move on, with a core of about ten peo-

ple who have attended for between one and two years. The structure of *Shut Up and Write!* on this campus is that participants write in 25 minute episodes, with short bursts of social conversation in the three 5 minute (and one 25 minute) breaks. Most participants are HDR students in various stages from first-year candidature to those who have recently submitted PhDs.

After participating in SUAW for over a year at the university in which I work and study, and acknowledging my own sense of value from the experience, I wondered what it meant for other participants in this group. Steady participation rates had been maintained through the difficult period of the restructure and its aftermath, and a distinct sense of community prevailed at each meeting. With many interpersonal connections and knowledge streams disrupted as a result of the restructure, I was curious as to why this group maintained its commitment and enthusiasm. To investigate this, I decided to interview a limited number of participants, inquiring into their experience of writing in the SUAW process. After ethics approval was obtained for the project, I devised a simple four-point questionnaire that inquired into the subjective experience of group members in SUAW. The key research question was: “What value do you derive from participation in SUAW?” The responses from six participants cohered broadly around their primary reasons for attending SUAW regularly: social connection and writing productivity.

As can be expected from a small group of people who meet regularly, social connection has increased over the two-year period in which the group has met. With this has come a more informal and relaxed sense of community, as participants get to know each other. Conversations during the breaks are usually related to the writing process in some way, encouraging reflexive self-awareness around the writing process. However, social talk is also important, and in the university restructure period, this often took the form of debriefing and information-sharing. A further brief ‘sharing’ time at the beginning of each session keeps the group members in tune with each other’s processes, and contributes to the sense of connection and collegiality. As one SUAW participant (a staff member as well as HDR student) commented:

In the department I work in, it’s quite rare to talk about your research ... whereas, to just show up [at the writing group] every week, it means someone can go, “Are you still working on that book draft? How is it going?” That’s a terrific kind of collegiality, and I think it encourages a self-reflective practice as well.

Members of this SUAW group commented on the “quarantining” of time for the weekly SUAW meeting, and how this augmented their sense of focus and unity when writing together. According to one member (a PhD student and continuing staff-member), collegiality was an important part of being in SUAW.

You feel like you’re part of a group, and that helps to take the sharp edges off the anxiety of doing this kind of work. It could feel quite meaningless if you just worked on your own all the time.

Another participant (HDR student and casual tutor) acknowledged knowing fellow candidates for whom doing the PhD was “really lonely”, with motivation being a key factor. However, for this participant the issue of motivation had been resolved by regular attendance at SUAW “... because I’ve found my community and I’ve found ways to get myself out of that through going to SUAW”. She acknowledged that her week was planned around coming to the SUAW sessions, because she found them to be “really productive; I want to have stuff ready to do on Thursdays, because every time I come I’m really productive”. These comments suggest that the combination of social connection and writing productivity do help to build resilience.

## **10. The affordances of a scholarly writing group in the globalized university: some findings**

The limited review of participants undertaken for this study cannot provide definitive answers about why people attend writing groups such as SUAW. Nevertheless, the six participants interviewed all spoke emphatically of the social connection that kept them returning weekly to SUAW, as well as the steady sense of making progress in writing. This was true for HDR students, including students who also tutored, and full-time continuing staff who were also com-

pleting PhDs. The proposition that the writing group helped to create a sense of resilience to neoliberal policies in participants was not affirmed among full-time HDR candidates, for whom the university restructure and changes to higher education governance were not salient issues. However, for participants who were staff members as well as HDR students, a sense of resilience derived from regular participation in the writing group was expressed in terms of resilience in the face of the competitive corporate culture of neoliberal higher education and also in respect of the isolation that so many PhD students experience.

For HDR students, the complexity of completing a doctoral degree is likely to be further exacerbated by the tensions of the university environment, with its continual threats of restructure, uncertainties around casualised employment, and – often – overworked or unavailable supervisors (Hil, 2012). Although there are not many calls for a return of the “Learning for learning’s sake” credo, it may be that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, so that we are now faced with a higher education system that is dominated by economic values and corporate interests, resulting in a system that is narrowly instrumentalist. In this respect, the widespread uptake of scholarly writing groups in Australian universities has created a welcome opportunity for developing or extending collegiality, as well as developing participants’ writing practice. In the SUAW group discussed here, resilience, reflexive capacities, social networking, collegiality and pleasure appear to have enriched the writing experience of HDR students. An HDR student and academic staff-member of this group stated she found the experience of being in the group “incredibly helpful and useful, so I’ve kept coming ... and scheduled my teaching and everything else around it”. She explained that the value of the group for her was located in two elements: the social and collegial elements the writing group afforded, and the structure of the session itself, which allowed her to take a defined break every 25 minutes and talk to fellow researchers, often involving “informal problem-solving and workshopping when you hit a research problem”.

The literature on postgraduate, scholarly or HDR writing groups is in broad agreement that such writing groups are beneficial for the participants. Mewburn et al. (2014), for example, maintain that “There is much untapped potential in the *Shut up & Write!* model to promote sustainable, flexible and productive writing practices within the research degree experience” (p. 401). The benefits are apparently not limited to a narrow span of academic production, but can be life-wide, “through the early career researcher period and beyond, enriching scholarly practices beyond the PhD” (Mewburn et al., 2014, p. 401-402). Bringing like-minded people together to write in physical proximity to each other acts as a mutual catalyst for writing practice and community-building. Indeed, in a different context, the positive effects of working in shared-cultural groups has been suggested as a means of fostering self-esteem and resilience, to the degree that “the mere fact of partaking in a similar experience and of sharing a similar narrative may provide a buffer in the form of social support” (Hall & Lamont, 2013, p. 147).

Pleasure, often unexpectedly, can also enrich the writing process in SUAW and similar writing groups, and counter-balance the oppressive focus on productivity that dominates higher education literature. Indeed, the shifts in academic identity can be both nuanced and pleasurable, including “moments of jouissance where there is considerable pleasure in the practice of intellectual skills and insights” (Hughes, 2011, p. 623). Other writers concur that pleasure is a vital component of writing groups (Nairn et al., 2015; Dwyer, Lewis, McDonald, & Burns, 2012). Nairn et al. (2015) add that although the sense of pleasure derived from writing, “might feel elusive for many academics, actively fostering pleasure in writing can act as an important counterpoint to, or subversion of, the logic of productivity” (p. 599). This may be due to the contradictory nature of research identity in higher education institutions, where academic employee job descriptions include research time, and university funding is allocated through publications; however, the time to complete the research is often difficult to claw out of intensely busy workloads. Yet, with much university writing aimed at productivity measures, it is important to reclaim the possibility of pleasure in writing, as “writing groups can be a space in which discourses of pleasure inform discourses of how best to do academic writing in new university contexts” (Dwyer et al., 2012, p. 130). It is in this sense that the scholarly writing group, SUAW, can be seen as both a support mechanism for writing development, and a form of resistance and resili-



ence in the neoliberal university where a person's value is increasingly measured in economic terms.

## 11. Final thoughts: The scholarly writing group as an alternative community

In the last decade, as university restructures have become commonplace in Australian higher education, cost-cutting has resulted from decreased government funding and a heightened focus on productivity and profit. Such phenomena can have powerful effects on staff and students of the institution, and it seems evident that scholarly writing groups such as *Shut Up and Write!* can play a valuable role in supporting HDR students and other scholarly writers. One HDR student who was also a staff member recounted the difficulties associated with being part of a massive university restructure, and of the resulting need to create an alternative workplace community:

We had a really difficult time [during the restructure]; it was a very fearful and stressful place to be. So ... building other forms of community, where you keep coming back to, 'This is the work we do and we're just going to sit down together and we're going to work together' ... We're actually here because we care about this stuff. It has been a way to just limit engagement with the ridiculousness, and just get on and do our research.

Scholarly writing groups such as SUAW cannot resolve the tensions and dilemmas of a commodified education environment, but they may be able to create 'oases' (Wardale et al., 2014) of scholarly production and collegiality. The writing group discussed in Wardale et al. was strengthened by an explicit commitment among its participants to keep the writing group time as a priority, with members fending off encroaching appointments; it eventually showed an increased scholarly output, but also placed high value on collegial relationships in the group. In the SUAW group discussed in this paper, the often-complex processes of PhD identity and scholarship can be articulated in a supportive environment, and difficulties or challenges aired with fellow travellers. In contemporary university environments that are subjected to fragmented policy measures, it is important to remember "that which the University can alone do and do best, to enable people to think" (Ball, 2012, p. 19). Apart from their other affordances, scholarly writing groups can be good models for the practice of focused scholarly writing and thinking.

This *Shut Up and Write!* group seemed to thrive on the ability of its members to stay motivated, keep writing and keep talking while the tension and discomfort of a major university restructure went on around it. As one (staff) participant commented,

The university is employing all these carrots and sticks that are supposed to make you hide in your little hole and come out bearing glorious publications, but that's not what works for me. But being part of a community that writes and that engages, that does motivate me.

In the year following the restructure, participant numbers in this SUAW group have remained stable at around 20 people each week, providing testimony that the writing and social processes inherent in the SUAW structure have some value for each of the participants; indeed, it is an engaging environment. Student engagement at university is the Holy Grail of university marketing departments, as it is apparently "positively associated with desirable student outcomes such as achievement, satisfaction and retention" (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2014, p. 481). However, engagement of anyone's attention, motivation or desire is not usually attained without providing something of value in return, and in the case of doctoral writing groups, the value that keeps participants returning is a mixture of affordances: scholarly writing progress, social nourishment, resilience, enhancement of reflexive capacities and the simple pleasure of writing.

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