

# The Power of Writing in Community: Being Seen and Supported in an EdD Journey

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores how writing in community for EdD students can be pivotal in helping them succeed in their academic journey. Considering existing research, three UC Davis CANDEL EdD (Capital Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership) students and recent alumni use a case study approach to highlight the ways writing in community was instrumental to their own journeys and enhanced their sense of belonging. This essay highlights the challenges faced by the EdD students, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. They leaned into the transformative power of writing in community and use vignettes to detail their personal experiences. They showcase the power of critical friendship that encouraged vulnerability and connection within their group and catapulted them towards dissertation completion. The essay also recommends institutional support for specific interventions to further writing in community in all EdD programs.

## KEYWORDS

*EdD students, critical friendships, community writing, sense of belonging*

Writing a dissertation is a challenging endeavor due to the necessity of constant editing, writing, and focus required. It can be an isolating experience where doctoral students may feel alone with their research. Recognizing the unique challenges inherent in this process, establishing a structured and supportive writing community can be beneficial for EdD students. Research demonstrates that writing in community can help to develop scholarly identities as writers and provide much-needed social and emotional support (Maher et al., 2008) creating an environment that aids in dissertation completion.

Opportunities for writing in community can enhance well-being and support doctoral students in their EdD journeys. Stevenson (2021) suggested there are “negative emotions associated with writing...particularly acute in the first stages of our academic writing careers” (p. 719) and that writing in community in retreat-style settings can counter this negativity. One group of doctoral students who participated in writing groups while working on their dissertations suggested that without the support of their writing colleagues, their “work would have been much more difficult” (Maher et al., 2008, p. 274). Additionally, Maher et al. (2008), suggested writing in community can support the peer-review process which can lead to a richer understanding of the iterative and dialogic process of writing the dissertation.

White and Nonnamaker (2008) shared that doctoral students across all disciplines need opportunities to connect to create a strong sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is important to consider in regard to EdD writing communities because it describes the sense of connectedness one has to their environment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Current research has focused on the student experience particularly (Settles-Tidwell, 2021), leaving out the experiences of higher education professionals engaged in EdD programs.

The development of EdD programs has led to an increased number of scholar-practitioners resulting in a distinct category of professionals who are also students. Although they are professionals, the need for belonging and community is still an important component of their educational experience because they are students too. These dual identities are especially pronounced in those who are higher education professionals and students pursuing their EdD. Higher education professionals serve key roles on campus and are often responsible for creating and increasing students' sense of belonging (Rush & Olivier, 2021). It's important that EdD programs foster this sense of belonging for their own students considering the dual roles as students and working professionals in educational systems. EdD students can benefit from experiencing what a strong sense of belonging feels like so we are better equipped to create belongingness for the students we serve.



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This essay will use a case example to explain the benefits of writing in community and provide suggestions for structure and support that an EdD program may offer. The case study will describe the experiences of members of the UC Davis Capital Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership (CANDEL) cohort as we developed and implemented writing practices that sustained our dissertation work over two years. Suggestions for strategies that EdD programs can implement will be shared including supported writing retreats and curricular design to support the writing process. Lastly, we argue the long-term benefits of writing in community as a strategy to enhance sense of belonging among scholar-practitioners to amplify voices for continued contributions in academic settings such as publications and conference presentations.

## WRITING IN COMMUNITY FOR EdD STUDENTS

The aim of this article is to emphasize the importance of writing in community for EdD students, as it contributes to an increased sense of belonging and positively impacts dissertation completion timelines (Story, 2013). Previous research has indicated the value of writing in community for doctoral students (Maher et al., 2008; Stevenson, 2021). An essential element that research has begun to explore is the COVID pandemic and its impact on doctoral students, with an additional focus on dissertation writing specifically. This literature review briefly highlights research regarding community writing in EdD programs in order to better understand the case study and recommendations.

The current research on sense of belonging within higher education has been focused on students and creates a gap regarding the experiences of higher education professional staff who are also students (Settles-Tidwell, 2021). Sense of belonging is an important element to consider in regard to EdD writing communities because it describes the sense of connectedness one has to their environment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Considering the COVID-19 pandemic which perpetuated isolation and feelings of loneliness for many (Graham et al., 2022) an increased sense of belonging for EdD students in a hybrid learning environment is paramount. Graham et al. (2022) described online learning as a “lonely business.” The shift to online learning, due to the pandemic, highlighted the difficulties in creating a sense of belonging among EdD students. The authors also suggested the following things to aid in creating a sense of belonging: program structure; cohort model; connection spaces; acknowledgement of a student’s identity; family life; and work life.

Writing in community can help with accountability and offset the isolation that EdD students may experience while completing their dissertation (Hamann & Wunder, 2013; Graham et al., 2022). Hamann and Wunder (2013) emphasized that graduate education can be lonely. Their research demonstrated the collegiality and peer accountability that helped graduate students persevere and persist through critical friendship and collegiality provided by the cohort experience (Hamann & Wunder, 2013). Storey (2013) described a critical friend as: “a person who provides constructive critique through a mix of both support and challenge” (Heller, 1988 as cited in Storey, 2013, p. 1). Participants affirmed the value of meeting regularly to review dissertation work, write together, and engage in peer review processes embodying the critical friends model (Hamann & Wunder, 2013). This element of critical learning, peer review, and enhanced writing confidence through community writing was affirmed in research by Maher et al. (2008). Participants credited

the skills learned in the writing group as a platform to write and present in other venues (Maher et al., 2008).

Research by Maldonado et al. (2021), uplifted the value of weekly writing sessions for EdD students in which “initial feedback suggests the writing sessions supported students’ dissertation progression and established a sense of community and social support” (p. 13). Similar to the CANDEL program, the doctoral program discussed by Maldonado et al., is for working professionals that had to shift to online delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The weekly writing sessions were implemented through the program with designated two-hour time blocks complete with tutorials, writing tips, goal setting, and designated writing (Maldonado et al., 2021). Students who participated in these writing sessions were able to connect with others across cohorts, build community, and experience a valuable level of social support that enhanced their experience (Maldonado et al., 2021).

We used the key concepts of writing in community, sense of belonging, and critical friendships to undergird our work. Ultimately, these concepts were what propelled us forward to establish our writing community groups and lean on them for support, camaraderie, and powerful tools for dissertation completion. In embracing these principles, we discovered a source of resilience and motivation, empowering us to overcome obstacles and emerge as stronger scholar-practitioners.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT – OUR WRITING COMMUNITY

Progressing through a doctoral program, and dissertation completion, involves a great deal of stamina and focus. Considering the CANDEL program focuses primarily on working professionals, there is a constant negotiation of time and energy between being a full-time student and work demands. With this in mind, implementing designated time for dissertation writing is paramount.

We developed our community writing groups with this intentionality at the forefront: we needed accountability and support to aid us in the writing process. Our specific community writing group formed organically during our second year of the program as our specific dissertation topics began to take shape in coursework. As we struggled to formulate our research questions and confirm our specific methodology and conceptual frameworks, it was clear we needed support from one another as cohort mates. When we asked what support may look like, one person shared they needed collaborative working time to stay focused and engaged. We threw out the offer to support by connecting a few nights a week over Zoom. Eventually, this became a routine where two of us would meet regularly over Zoom typically 3-4 nights per week, and more if needed. This routine continued until we successfully completed our dissertations, prepped for commencement, and celebrated all of the milestones in between.

In addition to our Zoom meetings during the week, we also organized and scheduled designated in-person writing retreats in order to write together, engage in peer review, and be in community with one another throughout the process. The invitation for these writing retreats was open to our full cohort. For our first writing retreat we rented a house for the weekend in a location that was central for many of us. We created a schedule for the weekend, cooked food together, and connected about our research topics, areas where we needed support, and created tangible next steps to tackle before the



next writing retreat. This first writing retreat was amazing and set the tone for how we would support one another as a cohort.

One of us had the brilliant idea to request funding from the UC Davis CANDEL program for future writing retreat options on campus at UC Davis. We wrote a proposal together and it was accepted! This institutional support helped to cover the cost of food during the writing retreat, and hotel stay for those who did not live in the area. The CANDEL staff also organized mentorship opportunities from alumni who came on-site to do peer review and share wisdom about their experiences with dissertation writing.

In addition to these writing retreats that were open to the full cohort, the three of us also scheduled writing weekends where we met at UC Davis for community writing on a monthly basis. We would typically write together on a Friday and Saturday, using a schedule as a guide to keep us accountable. After writing on Friday, we would get together for dinner and enjoy time socializing. It was a great way to offset the strenuous writing process and gave us the chance to connect together as friends. Our specific experiences are outlined below in vignettes through the lens of critical friendships in action.

## CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP IN ACTION

We experienced significant value from engaging in community-based writing, collectively for the three of us and expanded networks across the cohort. These specific anecdotes were captured as we reflected about our individual experiences. The positive impacts of writing in community is outlined through our author vignettes below. These takeaways highlight the value of connection, vulnerability, and partnering together for learning, peer-review, and successful doctoral program completion.

### Author 1 Vignette

COVID had a huge impact on the EdD experience for us. I was excited to join the CANDEL program because of the in-person element of the program, along with other unique factors such as the cohort model and an amazing group of faculty. However, COVID quickly transformed CANDEL into a virtual experience for the first 1.5 years of the program. This came as a shock, and resulted in increased feelings of isolation that were already perpetuated during the pandemic. I often questioned the ability to connect with cohort mates and experienced imposter syndrome which was exacerbated by the virtual-only engagement and high demands at work due to COVID and crisis response.

There was a positive shift once the transition from virtual to in-person classes happened. Being physically in the same space with my cohort mates helped to form a stronger sense of connection. We were able to read the room and see when cohort mates needed additional support. There were also more opportunities to express when we needed help on an individual level. This caused a significant shift in the cohort experience for me. Moments of vulnerability, as well as giving and receiving help, catapulted relationships and eventually led to writing partners and friendships within the cohort.

There were two colleagues that I connected with and we formed a trio. The three of us supported each other with writing, frequent zoom check-ins, in-person or virtual writing retreat weekends. This support we created for ourselves eventually led us to huge milestones in our dissertation processes. We kept a schedule

for writing and shared accountability. We were focused, and also realistic; sometimes life was happening and we needed to be flexible at times. We quickly learned to play to our strengths with community writing. For example, I was clear about when I needed an editor, thought-partner, or citation support and there was always someone to rise to the occasion. We also celebrated the wins! Whether it was writing a paragraph or a page, or solidifying our references and citations, it was pertinent to celebrate the wins and milestones for each other.

Most importantly, while we had the support for us as a trio, there were many other connection points to the rest of our cohort mates to ensure we extended this support to others. We planned a few overnight retreats where we cooked together and bonded, and also had writing retreats on campus at UC Davis. We kept the momentum going to make great progress on our dissertations and participate in commencement ceremonies with many members of our cohort.

### Author 2 Vignette

We chose the CANDEL program at UC Davis for a variety of reasons. One of the primary reasons was because it was an in-person program while many EdD programs are completely or have components that are online. However, COVID forced a change and we were all online. Despite the distance, our cohort was able to form solid connections. As one of the only people familiar with campus protocols, I helped my peers navigate things like: paying for parking, accessing the campus internet, COVID testing guidelines, getting student ID cards, and any other UC Davis specific questions. In my first year, I felt empowered and had a lot to offer my cohort. That all quickly changed during my second year when personal and professional challenges significantly impacted my ability to show up. I showed up to a Saturday class and shared how hard things were in our regular check-in. After that class two classmates stepped in to offer their empathy and support; thus the trio was born. They asked how they could help and what I needed. I shared that I needed someone to do work with, more community, and accountability to someone other than myself. One of them was able to meet with me a few nights every week on zoom to do assignments together. The three of us connected on weekends in person and via zoom to check-in, write together, and provide encouragement. Our time together became a lifeline, providing academic support, and a profound sense of understanding and connection.

One of us was the primary catalysts for the first writing retreat which was at the end of our second year. They created a group and spearheaded finding a rental home and setting the tone for what was a productive time writing with colleagues. We had daily agendas and regular debriefs at each stopping point to discuss our progress and offer each other support and feedback. What began as a single retreat evolved into regular writing weekends and Zoom sessions. We were able to invite others from the cohort to join us; reinforcing the sense that we were all on the journey together. As a trio, we were able to move beyond simply writing and also became friends who celebrated personal, professional, and academic success as well as lifted each other during trying times as well. There were times when connecting with the trio was the one lifeline that helped me keep moving forward despite various challenges.

Because we spent so much time working together and discussing our research and progress, we were all familiar with each other's work we would share journal articles that might be beneficial

for their research. We also asked each other questions and had dialogues about our methodologies and frameworks. These conversations gave us opportunities to discuss our work with folks who were familiar with it, but who also felt comfortable probing and asking questions to get us to think more deeply or differently. There was no shame or fear in our group. We were able to show up authentically wherever we were in the process and leave better than we were with more done and/or a solid plan to keep moving forward. I credit my ability to finish the program to the strong support that came from my peers and our writing times.

### Author 3 Vignette

In a world of ever-expanding choices for online doctoral programs, I chose the UC Davis CANDEL program because I knew I needed to be an in-person student. The small cohort model that the program has developed appealed to my value of learning in community. With the beginning of my journey in CANDEL coinciding with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the abrupt shift to online learning was disappointing to say the least. With the excellent support of our faculty and the open-minded nature of my fellow colleagues, we began to create community even in this online format.

As a sense of normalcy settled in, including in-person courses, and we progressed in our coursework, it became clear that I was going to need a strategy for the process of writing a dissertation. Leaning again on my value of learning in community I sought out others who may be interested in a writing retreat in between our second and third years of the program. I also initiated the idea of requesting funds to support this idea. In July 2022 seven CANDEL colleagues rented a home in a quiet rural area to focus on the beginning of our dissertations. We shared food and ideas and we continued to build on the sense of community that we had begun to create in the classroom. Later that summer there were two more writing retreats, one of which was sponsored by the CANDEL program upon our request.

These retreats included more of our cohort and then expanded to other kinds of writing community supports. Colleagues who were from similar geographic areas got together on a regular basis in person. Other CANDEL students created standing Zoom writing times. The CANDEL program leadership saw the significance of this approach and sponsored a multi-cohort retreat the following year. Though not everyone participated, and not everyone participated in the same way, it was clear that writing in community was both desirable and effective for many of us in this EdD program. The value of trusted community and accountability in relation to a writing practice was demonstrated through these many strategies. For me, the development of a trio, myself and the two authors, was invaluable. The sense of support, the encouragement to keep going and the practical nature of a set writing practice in community kept me moving forward.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Using current research and our own experiences described in this article, the following recommendations are offered to enhance the experiences of EdD students in terms of community writing. Institutional supported writing retreats and intentional coursework options to aid in the dissertation experience should be implemented to support the writing process. Writing retreats hosted by the EdD program could be one day or multi-day, and held at specific time

frames throughout the program. Support could include the provision of food, funding for hotel stays and transportation costs, and inviting alumni to engage in collaborative support and/or peer review.

Curriculum within the EdD program could be adjusted to specifically focus on dissertation writing and actively incorporate writing communities early in the program. For example, coursework can embed practices such as utilizing writing center professionals, structure classes in a way that requires writing partners or groups, and intentionally creating space for cohort members to engage in peer review. More time in courses that are 7-8 hours long could also be set aside for writing specifically, as the course in the third year of the CANDEL program was designed to do. An optional course for those in the post-dissertation proposal phase could be established for those who want additional support with their specific dissertation elements (e.g., coding, thematic analysis, implications for policy and practice). Intentional curriculum design could also build in summer writing retreats in between each year of coursework. The CANDEL program already begins with a summer leadership institute, a week-long experience to begin the program for each cohort. Using this as a model, a summer writing retreat that is for multiple cohorts could benefit the dissertation writing process and thus help students to completion.

We argue the long-term benefits of writing in community as a strategy to enhance the sense of belonging among scholar-practitioners may be helpful to amplify the voices of EdD professionals. This may include continued contributions in academic settings, such as publications and conference presentations where scholar-practitioner perspectives are not often the majority. Writing in community helps to develop "critical and collaborative reading and writing practices" (Maher et al., 2008, p. 267). Furthermore, it encourages extended contributions to research, publications, and content. As outlined in research by Maher et al. (2008), participants in writing groups developed skills and brought their learning "into other forums, such as presenting at conferences and publishing journal articles" (p. 267). This directly links to a sense of belonging as students move through the EdD process and beyond. It's important for voices and perspectives to continue to be heard within academia, and for Doctorate of Education graduates to be welcomed as researchers, authors, and presenters.

### CONCLUSION

Our journey through the CANDEL program was not simply an academic journey, but a testament to the power of collaboration and critical friendship. As recent doctoral students in an EdD program, the importance of community-based writing for EdD students cannot be understated, especially in a doctoral program for full-time working professionals. Writing in community can increase a sense of belonging and support doctoral students in their EdD journey towards dissertation completion and beyond. Furthermore, it has catapulted us to submit to publications and conferences together as a way to continue the community writing process as we grow and evolve as scholar-practitioners. Our trio came together due to unexpected challenges but became a symbol of support and encouragement. We were able to connect with our peers, expand our writing community, and create an even broader collaborative community that was pivotal to our success in the program. Finally, it was not simply about completing the program, but the relationships formed, lessons learned, and the persistence we found within ourselves and each other. We know that community-based writing



will continue to help us in our scholarly endeavors. As we progress in our personal and professional lives, we value the critical friendships established through our writing communities and advocate for the same support to exist in all EdD programs.

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