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## Plotting a Path Forward: Towards a Supportive Graduate Writing Program

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# Plotting a Path Forward: Towards a Supportive Graduate Writing Program

## Abstract

Writing centres in Canada have an important role to play in aiding dissertation writers in the planning and composing of doctoral work. While doctoral writing support may challenge the conventional offerings that are currently provided in more traditional undergraduate writing centre environments, there is nevertheless a demonstrable need for this form of support. This article reviews the effectiveness of a writing support program with an attention to questions of genre, metadiscursive awareness, disciplinary conventions, and the program's capacity to assist dissertation writers with completing large sections of work through building feelings of self-belief and self-advocacy. By analyzing survey results, the author argues that a focus on writing process and reflection at the PhD level can be instrumental in building momentum towards completion through overcoming social isolation, by increasing students' agency and ownership over the project, and in building graduate-level writerly confidence.

Les centres d'écriture au Canada ont un rôle important à jouer en aidant les auteurs et les auteures de thèses à planifier et à rédiger leur travail de doctorat. Bien que l'aide à la rédaction des thèses de doctorat puisse remettre en question les offres conventionnelles qui sont actuellement proposées dans les centres d'aide à la rédaction pour les étudiants et les étudiantes de premier cycle, il existe néanmoins un besoin manifeste pour cette forme d'aide. Cet article examine l'efficacité d'un programme d'aide à la rédaction en s'intéressant aux questions de genre, de conscience métadiscursive, de conventions disciplinaires et à la capacité du programme à aider les auteurs et les auteures de thèses à terminer de grandes parties de leur travail en développant des sentiments de confiance en soi et de défense de ses propres intérêts. En analysant les résultats de l'enquête, l'auteur soutient que l'accent mis sur le processus d'écriture et la réflexion au niveau du doctorat peut contribuer à créer un élan vers l'achèvement en surmontant l'isolement social, en augmentant l'agence et l'appropriation du projet par les étudiants et les étudiantes, et en développant la confiance en soi des écrivains de niveau supérieur.

## Keywords

doctoral support, writing centres, self-advocacy, rebuilding confidence, isolation; soutien au doctorat, centres d'écriture, défense de ses propres intérêts, rétablissement de la confiance, isolement

The past two decades have witnessed a growing awareness of the need to support graduate student writers, and to address the challenges facing dissertation writers in navigating both the initial stages of the PhD—including coursework, examinations, and proposals—as well as the dissertation proper (Aitchison, 2009; Lee & Boud, 2003; Lindsay, 2015; Simpson et al., 2016). In this pursuit, part of the dilemma facing supervisors and graduate administrators is that faculty often hold “incorrect assumptions” that PhD students are expert communicators in their disciplinary fields when they begin the PhD (Madden, 2020). A similar position holds that if PhD students do not have mastery of high-level writing skills by the time they begin their doctoral work, this gap should be filled by often overtaxed supervisory faculty in their work with dissertation writers (Simpson, 2016; Coffin et al., 2003). While some students may be successful in achieving their writing goals without support, many are not in such a position, and the absence of support tends to reward those who have had the expectations of dissertation writing made clear (Casanave, 2016).

A common student-centred approach in addressing this situation has been to organize peer-led writing groups. There is ample evidence that writing groups assist in building scholarly identity, mitigating social isolation, and offering accountability structures (Aitchison et al., 2012; Bergen et al., 2020; Daniels et al., 2013; Guerin, 2013; Vincent et al., 2022). Yet oftentimes, these groups rely on a voluntaristic model wherein students hold the full responsibility to self-organise for their groups to be effective and long-sustaining. Guided, as they are, by a communal approach to writing (Lindsay, 2015), these groups undoubtedly contribute to the process of burgeoning intrinsic motivation (Fegan, 2016), which promotes agency in the broader processes of writing, including planning, researching, revising, etc. However, a downside to the voluntaristic approach is that the onus falls upon dissertation writers themselves to navigate the exigencies of long-form writing and the multiform and distinct processes it involves, which graduate students are largely unfamiliar with or struggle to find their bearings in, and which has been made more challenging in an increasingly competitive and precarious academic environment (Bal, Grassiani, & Kirk, 2014). And while writing groups can be very effective in helping writers deal with common challenges, such as social isolation and accountability, in the absence of experienced direction in peer-led groups, it is not uncommon for dissertation writers in such groups to find they lack much-needed guidance in the genre of academic dissertation writing (Lee & Aitchison, 2009).

Perhaps the largest drawback with the self-organising model is that it sections off the possibility, and perhaps even the right, of PhD students to have a guided and structured learning experience that helps them move beyond feelings of inadequacy, even when those may be validated by their cohort in self-organised models. In response, the York University Writing Centre created a program in 2019, the PhD Café, that organised structured writing groups led by a graduate writing specialist, featuring moderated group conversation coupled with four 1-1 one-hour sessions. These PhD Cafés were designed with the aim of supporting dissertation writers to complete large sections of work, whether dissertation proposals or chapters, and build writerly capability through attention to questions of genre, metadiscursive awareness, disciplinary conventions, etc., in order to increase feelings of self-belief and self-advocacy. This article evaluates the degree of success of the combined programming, particularly in its potential to help students build writing momentum and strengthen their beliefs in their writing capacities. While our internal reviews show that students participating in the program are completing benchmarks at higher-than-average rates, this article seeks to examine in more detail the affordances of a guided and scaffolded structure in assisting PhD writers to make substantial writing progress. In this regard, this paper focuses on identifying those key support aspects which most significantly contribute to student progress, and the extent to which these supports translate into heightened

student self-confidence and self-advocacy abilities. Specifically, while the article details some of the key problems that dissertation writers experienced prior to participating in the PhD Café, some of the positive take-aways from the intervention include 1) overcoming isolation, 2) increasing agency and ownership over their project, and 3) building graduate-level writerly confidence.

## **PhD Café Structure**

An environmental scan of graduate-level writing supports at the pan-university level showed an uneven or lower level of the support infrastructure than what might be expected. This fact, coupled with relatively low PhD student 1-1 registrations in the Writing Centre, were central determining factors in the design of the PhD Café. The PhD Café sought to combat the isolation of PhD writing by offering a communal space to write together for three hours, weekly, for eleven weeks. These three-hour meetings were largely writing sessions organised into four “pomodoros” of roughly 25-30 minutes, with regular breaks in between. The writing sessions were bookended by the “Check-In” – 30-40-minute conversations led by the graduate writing instructor on a variety of topics central to PhD writing (ranging from chapter or proposal writing expectations to navigating supervisory relationships to building productive routines) – and the “Check-Out” – a relatively brief (5-10 minute) opportunity for students to share their successes or challenges of the day. Every three weeks the PhD student participants were scheduled for a 1-1 with the graduate writing instructor wherein they would discuss goal-setting strategies, track any writing-related issues they felt free to share, and share pieces of in-process writing. The PhD Café was immediately over-subscribed, so spots were limited to students in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies. Strong preference was given to those in their 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> year of studies, those at the Proposal stage, or those who had reached candidacy, as opposed to students in their 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> year in the process of completing course work and comprehensive exams.

## **The Survey**

The literature regarding Canadian examples of doctoral writing support is as of yet not fully developed. While there are significant similarities between the Canadian and American doctoral programs, caution should be reserved in eliding the differences between the two, especially as regards differences in status perception between universities, this resulting in large measure due to the lack of private universities in Canada (Acker & Haque, 2015; Baker, 2013). In order to broaden the available research on doctoral writing support in Canada, a survey of those students who had taken part in York’s PhD Café was sent out to all former participants over a three-week period between September and October 2022. After ethics approval was obtained, the data on which this study is based was collected through a 52-question online survey conducted via “SurveyMonkey” (SurveyMonkey.com). The survey was emailed to 147 dissertation writers who had participated in the PhD Café at one point over the past three years and four months (May 2019 – August 2022). Of the 147 invitations that were sent out, 89 responses were recorded (60.5%). The dissertation writers who had enrolled had completed their course work, and the vast majority (>95%) were either at the proposal stage or had achieved candidacy. The survey was developed with the Likert scale questions, and each question was followed with a comment section to allow for further qualitative elaboration. The survey contained four sections. The first section, “Prior to the PhD Café,” concerned the experiences and impressions around dissertation support that students had previously made use of, if any, and the expectations that students brought to the PhD

Café; the second, “Evaluating the PhD Café,” examined the PhD Café constituent parts, including the opening 30-minute discussion or “Check-In,” the round-up of how the writing day went or “Check-Out,” and the four 1-1s that the students held with the graduate writing specialist. The third, “Your Progress Post-PhD Café,” examined the students’ reflections on their writing post-participation in the PhD Café; the final fourth section, “Recommendations Post-PhD Café,” solicited the students’ feedback regarding the running and organising of a future PhD Café.

### **Methodological Limitations**

While the 60.5% response rate provided a significant benchmark, some limitations in the gathering of data do exist. As the survey was sent to students who had participated in the PhD Writers Café over the previous three years, the experiences and judgements of the students may be less accessible over time. That is, a student who has completed the Café three years prior may be more subject to recall bias than a student who has participated over the previous year. Similarly, a student who has completed their dissertation may view the Café in a more positive light, whereas a student who has not completed their studies may have attached negative emotions to the dissertation experience and may be less likely to engage with the survey or less likely to hold the Café experience in a positive light. The limitations in the latter case may be reduced as the absolute majority of emailed Café participants would have been, at a maximum, in their seventh year of doctoral studies, and thus still within the expectations of completion times. Recall bias may be more likely to exist since students were asked to reflect on their emotions and perceptions of doctoral preparations in the early years of coursework, etc. For a majority of participants, this meant reflecting on experiences that happened between five to seven years prior, allowing for attitudes to harden, become less reliable, or become subject to retroactive revision in light of subsequent experiences.

### **Surveying the Terrain**

This programming has been offered at York University, Canada’s 3<sup>rd</sup> largest university in terms of student enrolment, making it also one of the larger universities in North America, with an especially diverse student population. When designing the PhD Café in the Fall of 2018, it was assumed that students would hold strong perceptions of unpreparedness, in part due to a general inattention to writing in doctoral work (Lee & Aitchison, 2009). This assumption was confirmed throughout the survey, although differently expressed at specific moments during the PhD process. Students’ strong perception of unpreparedness was particularly striking given students’ proximity to the group or organization that could be providing mentorship or guidance. The goal in the first section of the survey was to get a better-defined understanding of the dimensions of unpreparedness as experienced by dissertation writers as well as their self-diagnosis regarding how those perceived gaps in preparation manifested throughout their writing processes.

Many of these perceptions of ill-preparation originate quite early in students’ doctoral studies, and some of the shakier conceptions of self-confidence predate the student’s entry into their doctoral work. The reasons why graduate students reported lower levels of self-confidence are not immediately obvious, however. Oftentimes writers’ self-confidence fluctuates as they undergo their graduate education. For those dissertation writers who are subjected to forms of discrimination, for instance, the sapping of confidence may begin or be compounded by the invalidating effects of explicit or implicit disqualification or invisibility, as is often the case for

multilingual or underrepresented social groups in the academy (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Knezz et al., 2022; Woolston, 2022). as well as conflictual or ineffective supervisory relations, change of disciplinary orientation where students may be unfamiliar with the rhetorical and genre conventions of the new discipline, etc. Despite this, writing groups can be impactful in increasing confidence and registering higher levels of agency (Achadu et al., 2018), even if their affordances are experienced unevenly given the inequities of a variety of forms of discrimination that impinge upon the differential positionality of dissertation writers, a process of negotiation central to the success of writing groups (Phillips, 2012).

Writing groups can also be fundamental in the building and exercising of academic skills, including project-management skills, attention to forms of professionalization, designing and organising a multi-hundred-page document, scaffolding and independently researching, etc. The concept of academic skills does bring in any number of questions with regards to academic socialisation, and any perceived deficits that students might carry with them or have reinforced throughout the first few years of doctoral study (in the Canadian case the norm being that the first two years are occupied by course work and qualifying exams). While the process of acquiring and making use of these skills will contribute to and change their academic identity (Guerin, 2013), there is nevertheless the sense of being “stalled” in this regard, as students are increasingly unable to find their bearings (in part due to any combination of a lack of support and mentorship, the reproduction of historical biases and forms of discrimination, etc.) and students may not experience the benefits of being active participants in the process of meaning-making in the academy (Lea & Street, 2006). Academic literacy approaches wherein “language is seen as a socially situated discourse practice” (Aitchison, 2009, p. 906) speak to the gap in understanding the social contexts into which their dissertation work will move after their course work, and as they enter the proposal stage and throughout the attendant professionalization process, although there is no guarantee that this process is one that all students will engage in. Further, any confidence gap that exists is not “naturally” bridged over the course of their studies, when little if any scaffolding through the course phase of doctoral studies is offered. This was expressed no more strikingly than in the responses around expectations of institutional supports, or lack thereof. While an effective supervisory committee—one that facilitates a predictable framework, meets regularly with the student, and provides formative and timely feedback—will undoubtedly assist the student in feeling institutionally “held” through the arduous process of dissertation writing (Aitchison et al., 2012), it is a common assertion among dissertation writers to feel “cut loose” after course work, comprehensive exams, or the proposal stage. This is particularly consequential if we view a department as the “home base for participation in a highly diffuse and distributed disciplinary community” (Paré et al., 2011).

The mismatch between graduate student expectations of support and the resources actually on offer may be partly explained by the departments’ assumption that their advisory role is limited to explicating graduation requirements (e.g. number of courses, specifics of examination processes and the form of dissertation proposals that needed to be followed), and that the dissertation proper (form, length, objectives, how-to, etc.) is the domain of graduate students and their committee members. Thus, vital information that may prove determinative in a student’s academic success is often systematically left implicit (Kittle-Autry & Carter, 2015; Starke-Meyerring et al., 2011).

The presumption that students have been adequately prepared while undergoing their doctoral studies—and the concomitant implication that any perceived challenges in the process of dissertation writing arise from their particular or individual “deficits”—is one of the debilitating misconceptions that students need to revise in order to assume full agency of the process. This

perception may help explain why dissertation writers, often assumed to know how to handle the struggles of long-form writing, frequently evince high levels of anxiety and “Impostor Syndrome” surrounding their academic abilities and academic success (Watson & Betts, 2010). Contributing to the feelings of Impostor Syndrome are the high levels of isolation that students typically experience in graduate programs. While the COVID pandemic may explain some aspects of this isolation in the recent experience of dissertation writers, roughly 1/3 of the participants were registered pre-pandemic, and roughly half of those who had joined during the pandemic would have had at least one to two years of pre-pandemic candidacy.

### **The PhD Café: Affordances and Challenges**

One of the central goals of the PhD Café was to offer dissertation writers a collaborative space where they could discover, develop, and sharpen their writing and academic skills to assist them in getting closer to a completed and defensible dissertation. Through a 12-week process (11 weeks plus a reading week), the Café design staged and modelled introspective and reflexive writing practices, including but not limited to: considering target audience and achieving appropriate and desired academic registers, increasing metacognitive awareness of macro and micro writing practices and strategies, planning productive routines that relieve pressure and maintain focus, and establishing effective communication processes that enhance revision processes. In this regard three main benefits were clearly expressed throughout the survey: 1) an overcoming of the isolating experience of the dissertation process, intensified by the pandemic; 2) an increase in expressed sense of agency; 3) an increase in expressed sense of confidence in their ability to meet the challenges of dissertation writing, both writerly and, more broadly, academic.

### **Overcoming Isolation**

Drawing on the ample literature on the benefits of writing groups, it was assumed at the program design stage that bringing writers together should reduce some of the social isolation they experience. Yet merely sharing a space with other graduate students is insufficient. Thus, through conversation, the dissertation writers built a sense of belonging to an academic community (Beasy et al., 2020), sharing similar challenges and identifying common difficulties (Guerin et al., 2013). As one respondent commented, “Recognizing that this was a collective process was very helpful.” As demonstrated in Table 1, almost all participants noted a positive overcoming of the isolating factors of dissertation writing.

**Table 1**  
*Sharing Experiences and Overcoming Isolation*

Response options	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all
Did hearing about other students' experiences during the Check-In help overcome the isolation of dissertation writing?	50	30	19	0	1

While understanding that the difficulties associated with dissertation life are not confined to oneself can be empowering, this is just the starting point in a process designed to build students' sense of ownership and agency over their projects. Including participants from a wide array of fields of study was key in building a non-competitive environment (Cuthbert et al., 2009) that offered opportunities for collaboration and the identification of common trans-disciplinary challenges.

A central feature of the PhD Café consists in the guided discussions that open each session addressing topics that are broad enough to relate to the diverse experiences of graduate students writing in various disciplinary fields at different stages of the dissertation process. The Check-Ins were useful in unpacking the expectations and challenges of writing a dissertation and in fomenting agentic engagement in the process through the formative influence of a supportive community that entrenches and embeds notions of process and scaffolded academic development. Of note is the fact that 96% of the students found that these modes of collective engagement increased their accountability and aided their progress.

**Table 2**  
*Accountability and Progress*

Response options	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective
Did you find the accountability structure of the Café effective in helping you make progress?	44	39	13	4	0

Sharing in a social space where one's writing skills are validated, developed, reflected upon, and productively interrogated, coupled with discussions about genre and discipline-specific conventions and expectations of the dissertation exercise significantly increased writerly confidence. This was evidenced in the higher proportion of responses that noted increased confidence in writing skills due to the community-oriented approach of the PhD Café.

**Table 3**  
*Communality and Skill Comfortability*

Response options	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	None at all
Did the communal aspect of the Café make you feel more comfortable with your writing skills?	23	25	39	7	6

Operating with a narrow understanding of isolation, one which may be addressed by bringing students together in person or online, may contribute productively to the process of writing a dissertation (Fegan, 2016). This is ultimately limited in overcoming isolation without if not joined with a focus on building the writerly confidence necessary to pursue a project that



heavily leans on “learning through writing,” given that this process “occurs mostly in isolation” (Mewburn et al., 2014, p. 403).

In this regard, the “Check-Out” provided a chance to reflect more broadly on the process of writing, but also to ground oneself in relation to the experiences of others. An equal number of students (64%) noted that they “appreciated the opportunity to share [their] success and struggles” and felt that the Check-Out “contributed to a sense of community,” with 80% feeling appreciative about “hearing how others were doing.”

**Table 4**

*Sharing Successes and Struggles*

Response options	I appreciated the opportunity to share my successes and struggles	I appreciated hearing how others were doing	I did not find the Check-Out beneficial at all	I thought the Check-Out contributed to a sense of community	I felt the Check-Out added pressure to my Café experience
Did you find the Check-Out (where students shared how their writing day went) valuable?	64	80	1	64	10

*Note.* Students instructed to choose all that apply.

While the pressure of sharing and learning about others’ day progress may be an example of “positive peer-pressure” (Achadu et al., 2018), sharing can be difficult if the experience has not been as productive as one would have hoped. Listening to others’ ups and downs, though, does help provide a greater understanding of the common aspects of the journey, as one commentator notes by writing: “It validated my own experience as okay.” Part of this process consists in measuring one’s progress, and hopefully allowing opportunities to recalibrate one’s approach to writing when necessary (also a theme of a key Check-In discussion). Most respondents found this to be the case, but not overwhelmingly so. The Check-Out was a brief yet effective strategy to spur reflection on the writing process, and amongst other benefits, in overcoming isolation.

**Table 5**

*Effectiveness of Reflection and Understanding Process*

Response options	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective
Was the Check-Out effective in helping you reflect upon and understand your writing process?	16	33	42	8	1

While no discrete element of the PhD Café can by itself help students overcome isolation, the cumulative and recurring nature of this intervention does help to displace these feelings.

## Increasing Agency

While the Check-Ins and Check-Outs offer opportunities for reflection on writing habits, routines, and processes that are often beneficial for dissertation writers, the 1-1s afford writers the opportunity to narrow in and discuss their own processes and drafts, shifting the focus away from the collective and comparative discussions to the specific issues of, among others, their own work's genre and structure. The 1-1s are an added benefit and dissertation writers are often surprised at their efficacy. While dissertation writers are often attracted to the concept and practice of writing in groups, they are unsure of the relevance or benefits of the 1-1 to their own work, at times viewing a Writing Centre as a remedial space for novice writers with seemingly basic concerns, such as sentence level writing, such as editing, style and other mechanics of writing (Mannon, 2016). Nevertheless, they recorded quite unambiguously positive results regarding these 1-1s appointments, an effect of the intrinsic interlacing of macro and micro processes of writing that formed the basis of the 1-1 relationship.

**Table 6**  
*Writing Mentorship and Goal Progression*

Response options	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective
Did you find the 1-1 effective in helping you make progress towards your goals?	72	23	5	0	0

These are no doubt positive indicators, and a clear finding that individualised support is necessary in ensuring a committed sense of momentum in the project, and also a rebuttal to the misconception that the Writing Centre is a space for sentence-level revision, important as those may be.

The 1-1 appointments constitute an important opportunity to encourage graduate student populations to make use of the multiple resources the Writing Centre can offer them. Fundamental to the pedagogical approach of Writing Centre instruction is the commitment to a horizontal, collaborative, and dialogic interaction that differs greatly from the hierarchical power relations that typically characterize supervisor/student relations. In 1-1 spaces, students are reminded that they are the experts on their projects and in charge of the direction of the discussion. Thus, from the instructor's perspective, a twofold measure of success is that 1) the student becomes aware of their own agency as they assume a more consciously directive position in the course of the discussion, and 2) the student places emphasis in their own powers of self-advocacy, and in claiming ownership and agency of their studies more broadly. This certainly requires practice, as the more common impulse might be to reproduce dominant pedagogical practices and cede power over to the expert/instructor. In reclaiming this space, agency is exercised not simply as the ability to do as one chooses, but more importantly, as an expanded ability to reflect on and mediate the social and academic expectations and interactions of the institution within which one is situated. As KerryAnn O'Meara notes using the work of Rhoades et al., "the pursuit of their degree will be influenced by their individual identities and interactions between those identities and their academic department and institution" (O'Meara, 2013, p. 2; Rhoades et al., 2008). Here we see

again the importance of the social dimension of the dissertation process, one involving the negotiation of complex knowledge networks and power relations, particularly those which help to build a dissertation writer's academic identity (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018).

While it is encouraging that students found the 1-1s unambiguously effective, more useful is their appreciation of the fact that they could determine the path of the conversation through the dialogic nature of 1-1 writing mentorship (Nordlof, 2014). That fundamental aspect—that they can claim ownership over the focus of the 1-1 and safely express feelings of insecurity or vulnerability (Danvers et al., 2019)—is vital in creating long-term success while reversing some of the learned passiveness that characterizes the unequal power relations of the supervisor/committee/departments and supervisee relationship. When students were asked about the levels of confidence they felt in “taking direction over the conversation,” the results were again unequivocal.

**Table 7**

*Writing Mentorship and Ownership*

Response options	Extremely confident	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Not so confident	Not at all confident
During the 1-1s, how confident did you feel in taking direction over the conversation?	44	38	16	2	0

This confidence also translated into a reversal of the hesitancy that many graduate students often express about visiting the Writing Centre. Students noted a greater openness to delving deeper into the writing process and recorded better learning outcomes because of this.

**Table 8**

*Writing Mentorship and Understanding Process*

Response options	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective
Was the conversational nature of the 1-1s effective in helping you understand your writing process more deeply?	61	32	6	1	0

However necessary it may be to voice one's concerns and questions freely in the supervisory/committee relationship, this may not always be possible, or perhaps more importantly, it may not *feel* possible. The PhD Café went some way in helping students reorient themselves as agents of their own academic process. When asked if the PhD Café was effective in helping students advocate with their committee, the majority noted a benefit.

**Table 9***Programming Efficacy and Feelings of Self-Advocacy*

Response options	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not so effective	Not at all effective
Was the Café effective in helping you better advocate for yourself with your committee?	21	31	38	9	1

Interesting here is that the largest segment, 38%, opted for “somewhat effective.” The challenge herein is one of the most daunting, and it is not surprising that of the 52 questions in the survey, this question produced the highest amount of qualitative responses provided in lieu of one of the above options. Here, students wrote about either having an effective and beneficial committee relationship pre-existing the PhD Café, while others noted that the committee responded negatively when students implemented self-advocacy practices, as students captured in the following: “It made me feel more confident and request what I needed from my advisor, which did not receive a supportive response”, “my committee had other ideas,” “stubborn supervisor,” etc. That the committee was not always responsive may not come as entirely surprising to those familiar with graduate writing support. In part this may be due to long-standing and persistent practices that promote and reinforce the perpetuation of unequal power relations, which have subsequently been intensified through the use of surveillance practices (e.g., annual “progress” reports) which further replace the conversational and dialogic aspects of supervision with “management” functions (Bansel, 2011). Interestingly, the question that provided the second most frequent qualitative commentary also relates to the role of the PhD Café in increasing student advocacy.

**Table 9***Feelings of Self-Advocacy after the Programming*

Response options	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	Not at all
Have you found it easier to advocate for yourself in most or all facets of your work after the Café?	21	27	45	6	1

These results suggest that self-advocacy remains a significant challenge for students, and while the needle was clearly moved, an institutional approach may be necessary to re-balance supervisory relations in the direction of a more horizontal pedagogical orientation.

A similarly longer-term issue revolves around the complex and problematic ways in which the “expert mentality” filters through to the role of dissertation writers. Self-advocacy can be a determinant in the dissertation writers’ vision of success, not merely in terms of completing their degree, but in terms of completing the dissertation that they wish to complete. In order to achieve this, a key focus of the PhD Café has been to raise questions around whether the committee is

working for the benefit of the student, what are the dissertation writer's expectations of the committee (and vice-versa), and how the committee should be properly configured to most effectively support the writer's progress, and their developing agency and expertise. When asked what impact the PhD Café had in helping to positively reorient the writer towards the supervisor/committee, the responses were encouraging.

**Table 10**

*Programming Efficacy on Impact of Committee Relationship*

Response options	It was great to begin with	It still remains challenging	I have used the entire committee more to my benefit	I can express my needs more clearly	I understand better what I need	It was about the same
What impact did the Café have in helping you reorient yourself positively towards your supervisor or committee?	14	24	14	46	63	12

*Note.* Students instructed to choose all that apply.

A challenging relationship with the supervisor or supervisory committee hinders the dissertation writing process (Crawford & Probert, 2017), yet in enhancing confidence in one's writerly situatedness as well as in one's ability to express one's supervisory expectations may increase the degrees of freedom one experiences as a dissertation writer. Given the already diagnosed power imbalances characteristic of most supervisory relations, finding ways to increase student self-advocacy continues to be a steep challenge.

### **Building Confidence as a Dissertation Writer**

Most of the Check-In discussions begin with the facilitator addressing a well-documented issue that dissertation writers commonly face. While the Check-Ins actively and repeatedly invite student involvement, the facilitator often prepares prompts to lead and guide the discussion. While there is no "expert" in the room, there is a clear need for leadership from an instructor who is aware of the broader expectations in dissertation writing and able to encourage reflexivity about writing, a process that is often absent in the formation of dissertation writers (Mercer et al., 2011). This seems to be producing the desired effect. In answer to the question as to whether the discussion topics were "helpful in clarifying the dissertation process," the responses were mostly positive.

**Table 11***Discussion Topics and Dissertation Clarification*

Response options	Extremely Helpful	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not so helpful	Not at all helpful
Did you find the discussion topics dealt with in the Check-Ins helpful in clarifying the dissertation process?	44	39	15	2	0

The question implicitly addresses how an expanded understanding of the broader dissertation process transfers to the student's actual writing process. When asked if the Check-In aided reflection on their writing processes, it became clear that the discussions were filtering down, considerably enhancing situated awareness and "know-how" of the individual writing process.

**Table 12***Writing Discussion and Increasing Writing Reflection*

Response options	Extremely helpful	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not so helpful	Not at all helpful
Did the Check-In discussion help you to reflect on your own writing process?	41	39	14	5	1

Significantly, this presence helps provide a structure in which students can feel both supported and safe to express themselves openly, a process which increases the possibility and willingness to receive and integrate constructive criticism. This has the potential to "stage" the process of navigating feedback from the committee. As Guerin et al (2013). have noted, this form of feedback "builds confidence in one's ability to improve the work and attain the expected standards" (p. 76).

**Table 13***Effects of Mentorship and Group Discussion on Practice*

Response options	I became more aware of my writerly patterns	I became more aware of my discipline's genre	I became more confused as to my discipline's expectations	I became better able to plan my work	I was able to establish better writerly routines	I became more reflective about my practice	I became less reflective / No real change
What effect did the 1-1s and the Check-Ins have on you as a writer?	60	32	5	58	55	73	3

*Note.* Students instructed to choose all that apply.

That writing groups can serve to build academic and writing skills has been well established (Larcombe et al., 2007; Aitchison, 2009; Bergen et al., 2020), and this response adds to this insight by pointing to the potential longer-term effects that collaborative writing practices and discussions and dedicated 1-1s carry forth.

Developing academic skills in the PhD Café has translated into higher levels of confidence, in part through the effects of peer discussion of writing experiences (Parker, 2009), and the attendant feeling of a renewed insight into one's ability to complete a dissertation. Two responses stood out as important indicators of both enhanced self-confidence and a renewed sense of belief in the student's ability to complete the dissertation writing process. Firstly, on the question of student progress post-PhD Café, the results pointed towards a lasting impact.

**Table 14***Post-Programming Level of Progress Satisfaction*

Response options	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
How satisfied were you with your dissertation progress after the Café?	40	51	7	2	0

This expressed feeling of success and forward momentum was particularly telling in the response to the question of whether the PhD Café participation has made it more or less likely that the student will finish their dissertation.

**Table 15***Perceptions of Café Participation on Completion*

Response options	Very likely	Likely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Unlikely	Very unlikely
In your estimation, do you believe your participation in the Café has made it more or less likely that you will finish your dissertation?	51	36	13	0	0

Interestingly, this question prompted a high number of additional commentaries, with several writers noting that the PhD Café was instrumental in their ability to finish, and others noting the challenges associated with the global pandemic as factors that have stalled their progress. As similar research has shown, positive peer-learning processes can significantly assist in getting students closer to the defence (Stracke, 2010), and the placing of the student at the centre of their research can, with institutional supports, make the PhD a more meaningful and self-fulfilling experience (McCulloch & Bastalich, 2023).

**Conclusion / Moving Forward**

As noted above, one of the identifiable gaps expressed by students was the feeling that they had untapped potential in growing their academic skill set, and that the graduate department and other graduate-studies-oriented institutions often fell short in aiding them in this pursuit. The PhD Café seemed, in part, to fill that gap, or at least made some progress towards bridging it. Most of this partial success should be attributed to the PhD Café's consistent emphasis on understanding the genre expectations of the field that students are working in, on deliberately reducing the guesswork out of their academic lives, and on helping them situate themselves more centrally in their project. Acquainting them with models of successful dissertations that are relevant to their projects has been particularly useful in giving more direct articulation to concerns that students have in planning and building their own proposals and chapters, skills vital in moving towards academic completion. The PhD Café seems to have been successful in this regard.

**Table 16***Programming and Academic Skills Development*

Response Options	Extremely useful	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Not so useful	Not at all useful
Was the Café useful in developing your skills as an academic writer?	21	45	30	4	0

Because of budgetary constraints, student participation in the PhD Café has been limited to one round per student. If we are aware that factors such as social isolation are determining factors in PhD writers not completing their studies, offering opportunities for sustained



participation will most likely result in continuous progress. In terms of returning to and making use of Writing Centre services, the responses are unequivocal. There was a resounding sense that the PhD Café was effective in its tasks, and 82.5% stated that it “exceeded expectations,” with 17.5% responding that the PhD Café “met expectations.” If permitted to join the PhD Café again, some 86% responded “definitely would,” 11% “probably would,” and 2% “definitely would not,” although those 2% clarified this was due to having finished their studies. Similarly, students would recommend participation to other dissertation students “always” (92%) or “usually” (8%). A key area where improvements could be made is finding ways to have students continue to make use of the Writing Centre, given that only a relatively smaller number of participants (22%) made use of the Writing Centre for a 1-1 appointment with a writing instructor post-PhD Café. While dissertation writer participation in the Centre is generally very small, there is a considerable opportunity to further expand the positive effects of the PhD Café.

The sociality built into the PhD Café space is definitely a draw, as is the sense of being part of a program of support that moves beyond the individual sphere. This may help us understand why 78% of participants do not visit the Writing Centre again, but almost all writers express desire to re-enroll in the PhD Café. There may also be a situation that the return to isolation post-PhD Café may make it difficult to reach out for support on a continual process, whereas the PhD Café was a guaranteed commitment to the writer throughout a given term, a process which, at least for a time, counters the “sedimented practices” that make moving forward so challenging (Lee & Boud, 2003). Whatever the trying circumstances, the PhD Café has gone a long way in attenuating the debilitating sedimented practices that make thriving in the dissertation life so challenging.

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