Creating online metacognitive spaces: Graduate research writing during the COVID-19 pandemic

Urmee Chakma, Bingqing Li and Graise Kabuhung
Monash University, Australia

This study looks into how a group of graduate research students from an Australian university created online collaborative spaces that facilitated highly productive environments for thesis writing during the global lockdown and travel restrictions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Using virtual meetings and shared digital repositories, these researchers progressed through stages in their writing from the formation of research questions, developing literature review, data collection and analysis and finally writing the discussion, each working on a different topic within the broader field of education. The study found that the regular online *Shut Up N Write* (SUNW) sessions created the conditions that allowed these researchers not only to share their work and solicit critical feedback, but to be aware of their *own* learning styles. The writing sessions became a facilitative ground in which a process and genre approach to writing allowed them to work independently, yet also drawing on advice from others that provided a greater sense of belonging. Using reflective autoethnographic narratives, and by combining genre, metacognition and third space theories, the study problematises these virtual meetings as spaces of inner growth as writers who, while learning from each other, also find their own distinctive voices in developing their theses.

Introduction

Writing is a central part of academic life, especially when it comes to conducting and disseminating research. Academics write for numerous purposes, starting from proposing new projects to sharing findings of their research to the broader research community. For experienced academics, writing to some extent comes 'naturally' due to their continuous practice of writing for publication. However, to aspiring and early-career researchers, as well as graduate research students, academic writing can be an intensely daunting experience, especially when this is done in a language other than their first. This experience of course is also further challenging because it involves the technicalities and mechanics of academic writing - such as systematic and consistent use of tone and register, style, textual and discursive features, and perhaps most importantly, specific genre knowledge. The latter is also culturally and often institutionally situated, posing additional difficulties for those writing for research in higher education for the first time. Also, according to Starke-Meyerring (2004), the struggle in writing is further exacerbated by a lack of explicit writing training at universities which leaves many writers with anxiety and frustration of not being able to write as expected of a researcher.

In this article, the three authors were a part of an ongoing online *Shut Up N Write* (SUNW) group that facilitated a space where they met regularly to stay productive by engaging with each other periodically over a period of five months. Significantly, the group was created during the lockdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in Melbourne, Australia, at a time when all campus academic activities were suspended and

the only way of engaging as a community was virtually in digital spaces. This study aims to investigate how these participants collaborated to improve their productivity and enhance metacognitive awareness of their writing and learning during the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, through a sense of belonging to SUNW community. Specifically, it asks:

> How can online spaces create environments in which metacognitive learning can be enhanced in improving the writing of graduate research students?

In this paper, we start by situating the functional role of SUNW sessions within the context of graduate research writing for a group of postgraduate students at an Australian university. This is followed by an account of the theoretical lenses employed in the study. Three themes that emerged from the authors' autoethnographic reflective journals are then presented, followed by a critical discussion of the findings.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning

As we were writing this paper, the COVID-19 pandemic had fundamentally disrupted normal teaching and learning activities in truly unprecedented ways. After its global outbreak in February 2020, over 90 percent of enrolled students were affected all over the world, according to UN monitoring statistics (UNESCO, 2020). Campuses were temporarily closed and online learning from home became an unavoidable necessity (Liguori & Winkler, 2020). For most students who were used to regular and close connection with instructors and classmates in brick-and-mortar classrooms, these new situations posed challenges to their study efficiency as they found themselves less connected to their former learning communities during the lockdown and curfew (Dhawan, 2020). Limited access to equipment and resources on campus also hindered the process of learning (Hodges et al., 2020). More importantly, the sudden change of delivery mode and accompanying uncertainties exacerbated students' depression and anxiety (Baloran, 2020; Cahusac de Caux, 2019), which caused further lack of engagement, attention to assignments and motivation to study (Dhawan, 2020). It also exacerbated the common problem of time-management, which students often encounter in academic writing in 'normal' times.

Under these circumstances, students needed to come up with creative learning strategies to adapt to these challenges for effective and productive studying from home amid the COVID-19 pandemic. They also needed to develop stronger willpower to stay engaged and at the same time, take care of their wellbeing. For some time in academic circles, SUNW has been known to be an effective method for rebuilding connections among learners and providing a space for keeping their study on track. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no scope to operate face-to-face SUNW, only to conduct such study groups online. While the COVID-19 pandemic triggered an evolution of SUNW from offline to online, in turn, these online SUNW groups provided a new learning space for research students during such unprecedented crises. In the next section, a more detailed introduction to SUNW is presented.

Creating communities of writing practice: *Shut Up N Write* (SUNW)

SUNW is one of several types of writing practices that has become increasingly popular in recent years, especially among graduate and early-career researchers and particularly since the isolating experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been felt on a massive scale (see more details on *The Thesis Whisperer*, https://thesiswhisperer.com/shut-up-and-write/). Anecdotal evidence shows that the popularity of SUNW groups has sky-rocketed (O'Dwyer, McDonough, Jefferson, Goff & Redman-MacLaren, 2017) and if one Googles SUNW, search results will show the abundance of examples from around the world of academics, PhD students organising these writing sessions. The concept of SUNW was first developed by non-academic writers in San Francisco in the late 2000s. Initially, it was an attempt to promote non-academic writing - such as writing for journalists - where writers would meet in a café for a 'solid' one-hour writing, followed by a quick coffee break and then another writing 'cycle'. Since then, universities worldwide reported enthusiasm by graduate researchers, such as PhD students, for SUNW meet-ups (see e.g., O'Dwyer et al., 2017; Mewburn, Osbourne, Caldwell & Khoo, 2014). Typically, SUNW sessions for academic writers can be organised by anyone: in a room where they will write in silence or in their homes connected through the Internet for rounds of an hour punctuated with breaks and brief discussion sessions. Anyone could initiate a SUNW group without any requirement of organisational work or official designation. The format is flexible and adaptive to circumstances and needs of those participants. This is the best feature of SUNWs compared to other more structured forms of academic writing such as workshops.

In order to situate SUNW as a cooperative learning tool (or space), it is important to note that SUNW involves a pedagogical function, in the sense of "creating informal learning opportunities to support doctoral writing" (Mewburn et al., 2014, p.400), as well as a no less important social dimension. This social dimension can be explained using Vygotskian sociocultural theory (1978), which positions learning as phenomenon that happens in a social space through mediation of meaning, dialogue, interaction, collaboration, and sharing and shared values, some of which organically developed and enhanced in our SUNW sessions, as we will see below. Typically in SUNW, participants start writing by setting up goals for the sessions informally; however, they do not usually provide feedback on the writing itself unless someone asks for specific feedback where mediation and dialogue take place through peer scaffolding and learning from the more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978). These two pedagogical and social dimensions are inseparable as they happen together and play complementary roles as we will see in the reflections below.

We could therefore say that SUNW can be seen as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) which for its success relies on an emphasis on the *process* rather than on the end product, or the outcome of the writing, such as a thesis. Mewburn et al. (2014) believed that SUNW promotes flexible, sustainable and productive writing practices with more structured approaches within the research degree experience and that learning can be empowering because it creates a greater sense of agency during the process towards becoming an independent researcher.

Online SUNW sessions during the COVID-19 lockdown

At the beginning of what would be a more than six months lockdown, Author 1, a final year doctoral student in Monash University's Faculty of Education, took the initiative to organise the SUNW group with a group of postgraduate students. To start the narrative in contextualising the paper, below is an extract from her reflective journal.

A journey together towards the light at the end of the tunnel
(Author 1 SUNW narrative)

Almost all of a sudden, I came up with the SUNW idea. I posted a message on *Moodle* inviting students to join me in SUNW *Zoom* sessions once or twice a week, explaining how we'd study together by sharing our concerns and progresses.

I wasn't too hopeful about students showing much interest.

To my pleasant surprise, I immediately received many responses. How exciting, I thought! The first day we all started with setting goals verbally and talking about what we wanted to achieve by the end of the day. We started with a 30-minute cycle followed by a 5-10 minutes break (asking, sharing questions) and then rolling the next cycle and so on. I noticed almost none of the participating students had tried nor did they know anything about SUNW. Yay, finally I'm helping them.

As the first few weeks slowly rolled by, some days there were 8/9 people, whereas, some days only 4/5. Still, we kept working together virtually, and sharing our progresses and concerns. I realised that I was looking forward to seeing these (future) researchers on *Zoom*; I was focused and happy – two very important aspects for a PhD student to be productive. I also felt very thankful to all my fellow online critical thinker writing buddies because we not only discussed our research, we shared what types of movies, TV serials we liked, recipes, jokes and what not! It was truly a space where we socialised as much as we engaged in our own research projects.

In forming the SUNW group, the aim was to create a safe and assuring online environment that would create the conditions to learn from each other without critiquing, competition or feeling guilty. It also aimed at making the act of writing relaxing and enjoyable by participants sharing not only academic work but also discussing issues related to staying positive or 'sane' during the lockdown which saw increasingly stricter restrictions imposed by the State Government of Victoria.

While initially Author 1 took up a teaching-mentoring role in constructing a space that would be conducive to the learning of her students, it soon metamorphosed into one where all participants became equally active, and the interaction became more and more decentralised and equitable. Author 1 found that as the weeks progressed, participants in the group were gradually taking greater responsibility for their learning and becoming independent learners, while at the same time taking up supportive and scaffolding roles for others in the group. As time passed, it became even clearer that the participants became increasingly familiar with the similarities as well as differences in their learning styles, working patterns and writing preferences, through sustained conversations during

'breaks' which punctuated day-long writing sessions. By crowd sourcing their collective habitus (Vygotsky, 1978), they integrated their knowledge and skills acquired through three different culturally diverse learning systems into one virtual space and created a rich and dynamic learning environment, examples of which we discuss below.

The three authors, also the participants of this study, were regular members of SUNW, all social science student-researchers in Monash University's Faculty of Education, who were conducting empirical research projects on different topics as part of an advanced methodology graduate course. Author 1, a final year PhD student had done this course prior to commencing PhD; Author 2 was enrolled in the graduate research unit, as a pathway course for her PhD, while Author 3 was enrolled in the course as part of her Masters degree. For the latter two, the project involved the submission of a 10,000 to 12,000 word thesis at the end of a six-month long term. Students had the freedom to choose a topic of interest for investigation. To qualify for PhD studies, students needed to demonstrate high competence in conducting and understanding their project using empirical research methods and producing a thesis that would include background of and rationale for the chosen topic, a literature review, an account of the methodology and its theoretical as well as practical justification, detailed findings and their critical discussion and the implications and recommendations for future studies. The writing of the thesis would be assessed following the process that resembled that of research journal articles.

To enhance students' ability in doing the given task, workshops were provided by a teaching team (comprising an experienced academic, an early career researcher and a PhD student – such as Author 1) twice a month. The usual classes took place in university classrooms; however, COVID-19 forced all the students and the teaching team to conduct workshops/study from home through *Zoom* meetings.

"Swimmers"

Over time, "Swimmers" became a collective metaphor for us to self-describe ourselves as members in this SUNW group, adopting the common expression of 'sink-or-swim'. At a time of nationwide lockdowns and travel restrictions and little direct contact with our research supervisors, "we envisioned ourselves in many ways as being left to our own devices in the vast turbulent sea that is academia" (Author 1 reflective journal). Success or failure depended entirely on our individual and group efforts and on our own means with little or no external help. As Author 1 reflected,

> We called ourselves 'Swimmers' in the face of the struggles we endured as we navigated our ways into the completion of our theses, encountering on the way challenges, strife, doubt and misgivings intermixed with moments of hope and optimism that we collectively drew from each other.

From a Vygotskian perspective, Chang (2015), who also used the word 'Swimmers' in her study on the learning environment with different levels of language learners, found that students with lower levels of proficiency depended on their advanced peers by scaffolding and interacting with them The successful completion of Swimmers' research projects

marked arriving at the 'shore' of academic success and accomplishment and was a testament to their survival skills as Swimmers. In this study we use Swimmers to collectively refer to ourselves.

In the case of the Swimmers of this study, during the writing process, we were all learning from each other, from the *More Knowledgeable Other* (MKO), not in the least because of the linguistic, cultural and academic diversity - each of us coming from different backgrounds - but also because of the different learning and writing styles that we represented. In other words, paradoxically, the more different we were, the more we were able to position ourselves as the MKO, and the more we learnt from others in the group. Differences then, rather than similarities, enhanced our learning and the more we noticed the differences, the more we learnt from each other. Swimmers, therefore positioned the SUNW sessions as learning grounds offering a community of practice which thrived on the collective differences they brought, differences that enhanced their own metacognitive learning. Next, the theories that have been adapted for this study are explained.

Theoretical positioning

Three main theoretical lenses have been integrated in this study to first problematise and then to understand the complexities surrounding the learning that occurred through the online SUNW sessions over a period of five months. It is to be noted that learning which occurred in the SUNW sessions preceded our theorisation – in other words we did not learn from the sessions because we knew how these theories worked. In writing this paper, as we retrospectively analysed our learning experiences, we could identify three theories namely, genre theory, metacognition theory and third space theory that provided the theoretical lenses that could explain our learning process and help us achieve the end product – completing the project and achieving the goal that we set out at the beginning of SUNW sessions. Therefore, we use these theories in a *posteriori* manner.

First, genre theory helped us understand the complexity inherent in the process of academic writing, a collective term used to describe theoretical and practical approaches that are concerned with how similar situations (in our case writing a graduate thesis) generate typified responses called genres, or 'text types' . These recurrent responses serve as a platform for both creating an understanding based on shared expectations and also shaping the social context (Hyland, 2008). Genre approach also focuses on the audience (in our case the thesis examiner/s), the purpose of the text (contribution to knowledge, presenting new findings, defending methodology convincingly, etc.), the organisation of the text (functions of the literature review, analysis, discussion, etc.), salient language patterns of the text (academic register, APA referencing, use of academic jargon, etc.).

At the same time, the mechanism behind the enhancement of our productivity could be explained by metacognition theory - the theory of knowledge which explains how individuals actively learn, monitor and regulate their own thinking and can condition themselves further to becoming more efficient in learning. The concept was created by John Flavell in the 1970s where he explained that metacognitive strategies are useful to help us study *smarter* rather than *harder* and achieve self-regulation. It is the capacity to

reflect on which cognitive skills we use to succeed in a given task. It generally involves two commonly accepted dimensions: metacognitive awareness, referring to learners' knowledge of the tasks, learning strategies; and metacognitive regulation, which denotes how metacognitive awareness facilitates monitoring and controlling of learning practices. In our case, metacognition was triggered by our observation of how different we were while still learning from each other. Such metacognitive awareness was not just the product of observing others but also the reflective nature of the conversations that were facilitated by these SUNW sessions. Through critically honest introspection and sharing, the sessions became more and more productive as we increasingly knew each other as well as ourselves over time.

Finally, third space theory (Bhabha, 1994) provided a unique lens for interpreting the establishment of a harmonious community of Swimmers, bringing in diverse backgrounds in a 'virtual third space' outside the regular tutorials at university (first space) that were being held online for this advanced research course and outside our physical homes (second space), where students would typically study. The third space emerged as a much needed space because of the pandemic when students had no access to university resources and most were struggling to stay motivated and focused. It is important to remember, however, that 'spaces' in this sense is not confined to physical spaces but looking beyond binaries of first and the second. In this third space, we communicated, discussed and learned from each other through sharing and spending most of the writing time that fostered as an 'anchor' of thesis writing through interactions. Through the SUNW sessions, we also created an environment of respectful negotiation of meaning (Viete & Ha, 2007; Viete & Peeler 2007; Ryan & Viete, 2009) beyond cultural borders; everyone was working on different topics, but, we were optimising our own learning by sharing the different levels of academic writing skills and knowledge - linking to metacognitive learning, as described above.

Method

With the roles as both Swimmers and researchers in the SUNW, we adopted autoethnography in this investigation, describing and interpreting our personal experiences to understand the various dimensions of this collaborative learning community. Autoethnography, as a contemporary method combining autobiography and ethnography, has been regarded as a suitable method to provide a self-understanding and establish the connection between the personal stories and socio-cultural contexts (Pretorius & Cutri, 2019), which is applicable to the current study into the graduate students' experiences of academic writing in the context of the online collaborative group. This method enables us to understand the particularities and multi-facets of SUNW as experienced by various members (Parr et al., 2020) during the COVID-19 situation to answer the research question, related to the influence of the SUNW on Swimmers' metacognition and academic writing. Specifically, by applying reflective narratives and storytelling devices (e.g., narrative voice, create specific representations of experiences and feelings; Adams, Ellis & Holman Jones, 2017), we reproduce the scene and offer insights into the lived experiences in SUNW of the student-researchers who are at the different stages of learning and writing (Leshem, 2020). By this means, this study emphasises

graduate students' voices to investigate how diverse students cooperated to face the challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic and achieve personal growth.

Participants

This research was conducted with the three authors, who were involved in the online SUNW study group. Author 1, the organiser of the SUNW sessions, was writing her PhD thesis and immigrated to Australia 16 years ago from an Indigenous ethnic minority community in Bangladesh. She was a part of this unit's teaching team. Author 2 was a Chinese international student who had enrolled in the graduate research unit, as a pathway course for her PhD study after she had finished her Masters in the UK. Author 3, an international student from Indonesia was in the last semester of her Master of TESOL course. All three participants were student-researchers but had different academic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds and were at different stages of their research projects. Notably, English, the language in which they were doing all their academic work, was their second or third language. The uniqueness of each author provides multiple and divergent perspectives of Swimmers' experiences in SUNW as we will see below.

Data collection and analysis

At the time of commencing this study, each of three authors wrote a retrospective narrative to reflect on what they had expected, thought or did before, during and after the SUNW sessions. These narratives, supplemented with weekly logs for over a period of five months, were open and freehand in nature allowing spontaneous reflections, without the need to write purposefully. For example, Author 1 wrote about the operational aspect of the sessions, while Authors 2 and 3 highlighted their learning experiences as novice researchers in their narratives. Collectively, these narratives would provide thick and raw descriptions of experiential stories (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau & Millette, 2017) which gave voices to personal knowledge (Conle, 2000), drawing on the ways of both *how* they learnt and *what* they learnt through the SUNW group.

These narrative accounts were then collated, selected, and analysed following the steps of recursive data familiarisation, highlighting the key words, identifying the themes and reviewing (Creswell, 2013), focusing on recurrent and persistent themes that emerged, especially concerning the success factors of SUNW. At the same time, concepts from the aforementioned genre theory, third space theory and metacognition provided theoretical insights into interpreting the themes and making meaning of the data. These are outlined in the next section.

Findings and discussion

Despite the diverse sociolinguistic and sociocultural backgrounds of three authors, as well as the different topics of their research, data from the narratives show some commonalities in their individual experiences in SUNW. The three main contributory factors that appeared to be crucial to the positive experiences of the Swimmers as revealed through the narratives are: 1) respectful engagement in the online space; 2) rich and

conducive opportunities for peer-scaffolding within the interaction among Swimmers; 3) metacognitive and self-regulatory enhancement in their writing competence and self-awareness of learning styles.

We note that these factors do not work separately, but in a collective and interweaving manner which involved three stages, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the first stage, the SUNW writing group offers an online "third space" where Swimmers were connected virtually to fulfil the task of academic writing over a sustained period of time. It acted as a conduit to connect real-life academic university experiences with daily online social life. A casual community is thus established where members show mutual respect to different cultures, academic interests and perspectives, which then becomes the base for future stages of learning activities. While building close social bonds with other members in this comfortable, non-judgemental space, Swimmers move to the second stage where informal interaction happens spontaneously rather than in a pre-meditated, deliberate or designed-in way (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Peers constantly exchange knowledge, discuss common problems and make comparisons of different strategies that they find helpful in their academic writing. Less competent participants imitate and apply more knowledgeable peers' statics. As a result, in the third stage, participants of SUNW adopt, espouse and then promote collective understanding of the thesis as a genre, academic writing and self-awareness of learning styles, further enhancing the effectiveness of learning and productivity. In this manner, they achieve an enhancement of metacognitive and genre knowledge of academic writing.
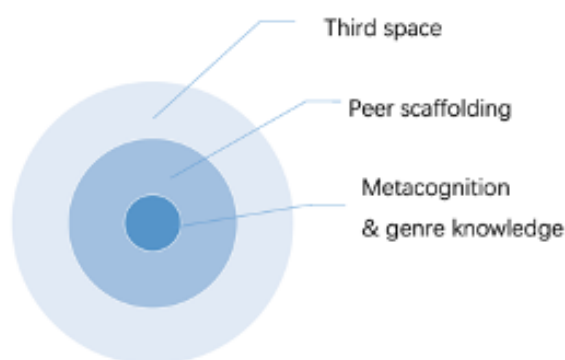

Figure 1: The learning mechanism within SUNW sessions

Each stage develops from the previous one: a harmonious third space is a prerequisite of rich interaction, while self-regulatory awareness and genre knowledge of academic writing are only possible when constant comparisons are made among peers. However, it should be noted that the three stages may not be equally important in improving student researchers' academic writing. Although the establishment of the online space is more accessible and indeed may increase the feeling of general wellbeing, it may merely develop into a purely social community that has no contribution to academic writing. Only when writing is the purposive focus of the SUNW members, ongoing discussion becomes the source of learning; and only when participants start to reflect on the writing and learning

style, the SUNW can serve its pedagogical function of improving future researchers' learning and writing competence. In this way, the concentric circles in the Venn diagram above represent a possible way of conducting informal cooperative learning among peers, step by step from the establishment of a space to the awareness of the self-regulatory skills and genre knowledge. In addition, it also points out core elements of improving academic writing (metacognition and genre knowledge) as well as the paths (peer scaffolding in a third space) needed to achieve it.

In the following sections, each of the important themes will be discussed, along with how these aligned with the theoretical constructs outlined above to provide a critical discussion of the Swimmers' cognitive growth as graduate research writers while engaging in the SUNW sessions.

A close-knit community as an antidote to the COVID-19 studying from home

Studying from home during the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedentedly challenging for the three authors. While the common study venues, campuses or libraries, were closed during the city lockdown, Swimmers were facing struggles with writing alone at home, which was their only alternative learning space. Issues such as the negative feelings of anxiety, difficulty of managing time, lack of motivation, frequent distractions and low productivity aroused. They needed a new place to write since the first space (universities) and second space (homes) failed to offer a productive learning environment during the crisis. As written in the narratives:

> Before joining SUNW, I couldn't go to the campus and had been writing the thesis at home alone. I felt I had to make a series of decisions on what to write and how to write all the time, but I wasn't sure whether my decisions were *right* or *wrong*. Writing became such a complicated task for me that it made me really anxious, especially when I found myself unproductive and frequently distracted. (Author 2)

The SUNW group thus created a third space remedying the deficiency of the first two spaces and making the difficult adaption to the COVID-19 home learning more manageable. This third space, as proposed by Bhabha (1994), turned into a positive and interactive virtual learning environment which encouraged and motivated Swimmers to go beyond what COVID-19 had taken away from them – the university campus experience that allowed real interaction among peers and regular engagement in writing tasks. In addition to this pedagogical function, it also acted as a *social* space where Swimmers connected and bonded by sharing and giving effective support, while being in the privacy of their own homes, that can be understood from some narratives:

> We worked almost every day, creating online proximity, passive accountability, mutual respect and understanding while supporting each other's needs. Gradually, the sessions transformed into a space where I found myself writing a lot more than I could ever imagine during lockdown and these wonderful, dedicated, hardworking future academics/researchers have contributed tremendously both to my writing and my mental health. (Author 1)

> I joined SUNW almost every day because it kept me on track on writing, and it kept me sane because I knew I was not alone working on the research project. (Author 3)

> As I engaged more in SUNW, I found it was more than just a place to write. It was also a safe space where we asked questions, rehearsed presentations or simply had fun. SUNW has changed my previous view that academic writing or studying could hardly be an enjoyable process. It was my space to involve in the community and to have a strong sense of belonging. (Author 2)

In this vibrant third space, Swimmers fostered wellbeing through the writing network, which helped them exploit their potential as writers. The "sense of belonging" they felt in the SUNW group helped them counteract negative emotions such as isolation and anxiety, that are known to often hinder early career researchers' productive academic writing (Cahusac de Caux, 2019; Wilson & Cutri, 2019), and allowed them to engage in a learning environment. According to Wilson and Cutri (2019), in the writing community, peers support the transactional learning process that leads to solidarity and appreciation among members. The solidarity and appreciation of all members that were working on their writing became more and more apparent from week to week as the sessions continued on a regular basis. SUNW succeeded in bringing Swimmers to the completion of their studies and helping them all achieve outstanding grades that they believe would not have been possible without the ongoing SUNW sessions. This result broadly supports previous observations (e.g. Hung, 2019; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Ning, 2013) that the comfortable and supportive social cohesion and interaction facilitate an assistive condition for group cohesion where "think-pair-share" activities can enable successful learning.

The establishment of this space was particularly invaluable but also somewhat surprising considering Swimmers' different cultural backgrounds. No adverse feelings of cultural superiority or being discriminated were experienced among the members as communication among Swimmers was founded on mutual respect from the start. In fact, they fully acknowledged their cultural differences as new identities that were nothing but a unique representation of understanding other cultures. In this way, the SUNW could be regarded as a *cultural* third space for Swimmers to know and understand other cultures as well as to be involved in the multi-cultural communication process. It is a harmonious, equitable and decentralised space where there was no hierarchy or leadership, and everyone participated in similar and various complementary roles at the same time. As Author 3 stated,

> We all came from different backgrounds. We shared the differences between our cultures and found unity in academic writing in SUNW that allowed me to express myself, my feelings and my culture through the discussion of my writing . . . they also have gained a clearer understanding about my home country in such areas. (Author 3)

This finding is contrary to the previous studies (Ghufron & Ermawati, 2018; Hung, 2019), which suggested that diversity in culture, ethics and experiences may result in conflicts among members. For example, a possible explanation might be that the participants in Hung's study were second-year undergraduates while the three Swimmers in this research

are postgraduate student researchers who are interested in cultural differences and presumably had greater social skills in getting along with each other.

Navigation in a multi-layered community

The second theme that emerged from the narratives is about how participants went through the process of learning in SUNW. In essence, meaningful exchange of knowledge happened because of participants' shared focus on writing. As mentioned in three narratives above, Swimmers had the *same* goal of writing theses in education (either chapter/s or the entire document), i.e., practice genre knowledge of academic writing, which was the prerequisite for members to join in and engage in discussions on academic writing and conducting educational research. During various forms of interaction such as discussion, asking and answering, and sharing experience of academic writing, SUNW Swimmers established joint engagement in thesis writing whereby they co-constructed genre knowledge through ongoing negotiation, collaboration and constructive feedback. In other words, what Swimmers exchanged through interactions became the source of learning (Adham, Ha, Mohd Nor & Yazid, 2018). This kind of cooperative talk helped achieve the *intersubjectivity*, a state of joint focus and support (van Lier, 2004; Walqui, 2006) which "signals a state of mutual cognition propitious for the attainment of self-regulation" (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000, p. 59).

However, such knowledge building of genres may always not be effectively accomplished when participants are of similar ability because the sharing of knowledge may not necessarily result in an increase in knowledge (Belland, 2014; Mercer et al., 2004). In SUNW, Swimmers were in different levels of cognition, academic skills and with diverse cultural backgrounds and learning styles, with some more experienced than others. Therefore, when they interacted, various ideas clashed, stimulating Swimmers to learn by constantly comparing their ways of writing and doing research with others. As written in the narratives:

> SUNW was a place to write, smile, write again, and fix the writing and laugh, laugh again and write again. We shared the differences between our cultures (in SUNW) . . . I had a chance to present my ideas about Indonesia through my writing with my peers, and they have given me valuable insights and thoughtful opinions and ideas regarding my topic. (Author 3)

> I found myself enjoying the diversity of group members. I could learn something different from each member . . . We asked questions freely and came up with some feasible solutions through sharing and discussing. We shared good ideas and I found some of them are really compatible with my research. I realised to what extent a thesis could be flexible to write. (Author 2)

These two narratives emphasise that opinions and suggestions given by more knowledgeable others (MKO) triggered authors to improve their own writing skills. That is to say, the MKO assisted other Swimmers by giving guidance and modelling of a successful pattern of genre-based writing, during which learners could participate in more complex cognitive activities and were led to higher levels of cognition in producing better

academic writing. The MKO thus scaffolded other Swimmers towards the outer limits of the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978). Yet, it should also be noted that the flow or the transfer of knowledge from MKO to the less competent happened in a critical way. That is, the internalisation of knowledge, as written by Author 3 and Author 2, was selective because Swimmers did not accept the suggestions blindly but adopted the helpful and compatible ones with their research. It may imply that the inequity of competence increases participants' knowledge by critical peer scaffolding.

It is important to note here that although the participants' writing abilities differed, everyone could take the role of MKO to scaffold others into a higher level of development of academic writing skills in the SUNW group. Author 1 noted that:

> As the senior member in the group, at the beginning it was more like a responsibility on my part. However, this sense of responsibility slowly disappeared once I realised that they had started working just as well without me being there online, such as once when I had to be away for two days for my teaching commitment. SUNW soon turned out to be very productive as participants gained greater confidence in their own learning and eased into the rhythm of writing sessions and breaks.

During the first meetings, Author 1, the only PhD candidate in the SUNW group from the beginning, naturally acted as the MKO to assist other members, who were her students in this unit. However, after several meetings, they could operate independently without Author 1's presence, which represents Author 1's *handover* of the role of mentor. The less competent participants gradually set up their readiness to *take over* the scaffolding roles within the group (Walqui, 2006), since they became increasingly capable of tackling the common problems as their skills of writing had been developed (van Lier, 2004).

Also, each member had their own strengths in writing and conducting research as well as individual views on cultural and educational issues. When they shared perspectives, experience or knowledge, they could trigger others' self-regulation on writing skills. Sometimes, peers collaborated to contribute to the collective increase in competence of academic writing by the means of conflicts and discussions. The fluid roles of more knowledgeable members built confidence in their identity as researchers and writers. In this way, the SUNW is different from prototypical scaffolded environments (such as in real-life classrooms) where scaffolding is mostly unidirectional between MKO and less competent members (Cheng, 2011); instead, it allows mutual scaffolding among group members, even for the higher-level learners, for example, as stated by Author 1:

> I realised that these sessions were for my fellow researchers as much as they were for my own writing, a space where I learnt to become more confident in my writing, but also more honest and introspective in sharing ideas with my session mates.

Becoming more competent academic writers/ learners

The final theme is related to the *end* of SUNW, or what participants gained from the experience of SUNW. By this, we would like to look *beyond* the completion of the thesis

writing, focusing more on Swimmers' overall cognitive enhancement due to the constant reciprocal peer scaffolding, something that would have implications for life-long learning. A common view from the narratives is that the online collaborative study group acted as a useful cognitive stimulus to raise participants' metacognition. SUNW increased writers' *metacognitive* genre awareness of formal knowledge (e.g., the move structure of the text, language use), and rhetorical knowledge (e.g., the purpose of writing). For example, Author 3 reflected:

> Communications with colleagues in SUNW enabled me to reflect on my research methods, the way of developing arguments, shifts of styles. These conversations stimulated me to think more about the patterns of academic writing and writers' control of variation to reinforce their voice. We found unity in academic writing in SUNW. In other words, SUNW is not only a media to study, but it is indeed a media to express identity who *you are* and who you are *becoming*.

Swimmers gradually became more aware of the conventions in academic writing (i.e., genre knowledge, e.g., "patterns of academic writing" or "unity in academic writing") through metacognitive awareness. That is to say, they discovered a smarter way of knowing the requirements of writing a thesis in the SUNW group. At the same time, they practised the knowledge of genre in their writing to find a more personalised style of writing so that they could develop their own voice in writing. For example, Author 2 believed: "I learnt from peers' works and strategies, making decisions on which might be applicable to my style of writing and then using them in practice". Such awareness of genre which they acquired in former discussions monitored new practices of writing theses, by which Swimmers fostered metacognitive regulation. This result might further confirm the association between metacognition and genre awareness in a specific online learning space, consistent with previous research by Negretti and Kuteeva (2011), which showed a group of Swedish undergraduates build their awareness of English for Specific Purposes genre writing and upgraded their ability to compose academic writing.

In addition to increasing of genre awareness, participants also found out their preferred ways of studying during the SUNW sessions - as Author 1 reflected, she became more productive during the COVID-19 lockdown period:

> Gradually, the SUNW sessions eased my anxiety of academic writing and improved understanding of my current position and uniqueness. I am more confident in conducting research and writing a thesis. I was a lot more concentrated and productive during the SUNW compared to when I was writing alone. (Author 1)

In this way, Swimmers became more aware that working together resulted in greater productivity. Engagement in the SUNW sessions also helped participants learn about themselves as researchers and writers, what strengths and weaknesses they held, and what conditions facilitated most productivity for them. This made participants adjust the conditions of learning to best suit their individual goals and purposes, all within the limitations of the online space and the physical restrictions imposed by the COVID lockdown.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the SUNW sessions created a platform for the Swimmers to complete their individual research projects within a given time frame in an entirely virtual environment during a time when they had no option of face to face, real life interactions with their classmates. Consistent with findings from previous research on similar writing groups (Wilson & Cutri, 2019), SUNW fostered a sustained sense of community and afforded support, guidance and scaffolding from the MKO. The stretches of writing sessions, punctuated with interactive breaks which involved abundant metacognitive reflections, resulted in a move from a predominantly *product* approach, where the focus was on replicating the format of a typical thesis, to a *process* approach, whereby the messiness and amorphous nature of the writing was no less important in the production of an otherwise rigorous academic genre – the graduate thesis. The sessions also facilitated the injection of confidence making all participants more competent academic writers.

Perhaps most importantly, given the COVID lockdown, lack of access to real life interactions, the Swimmers made the best of using the opportunity of engaging in the online platform. In return, they became more self-aware of their own learning styles that greatly enhanced the process of completing their research projects for Author 2 and Author 3, while for Author 1 to be able to write more efficiently for her PhD thesis. More importantly, the transfer of mentoring role among Swimmers shows that they have all grown as writers through enhanced self-regulatory skills acquired. Retrospectively, all the writers wondered if such level of engagement in writing would have been achieved had it not been for the SUNW sessions. Academic writing groups, especially in digital spaces therefore can open up powerful sites of support, providing a sense of belonging to an online writing community, guidance and practice especially among new and aspiring researchers, transforming writing - an intellectual activity which is often a solitary practice, into a social one by creating "inter – and intra-peer group bonds" (Mewburn et al., 2014).

We acknowledge that SUNW may not work for everyone, as Author 1 indicated in her narrative. Caution needs to be taken in ensuring a common ground of trust, equitable and respectful participation and negotiation, sometimes accepting and rejecting ideas, and a spirit of learning from each other. As a group, they also needed to agree on the practicalities of how long a session will last and how many writing cycles or rounds there might be. The idea of running ongoing SUNW sessions in 'normal' pre-COVID or post-COVID times might not be viable either; after all the pandemic has made research students' experiences unsettling and stressful in many ways. The Swimmers of this study created the recursive process of SUNW sessions as a creative, fun and relaxed community of practice only because they were able to harmoniously share their experiences, which produced critical writing and allowed learning about other cultures and ways of learning.

However, we believe that the SUNW model used in this article could be used in 'new' normal post -COVID times where we may continue to find ourselves doing more of our tasks virtually. This model might be transferable and useful if replicated or adapted cautiously into other contexts, not restricted to graduate research students or academics but in other situations and contexts where people need to work as a team, working

towards deadlines or/and community-building practices. The paper proposes the model through which a "securitization" can be achieved for a "post-pandemic pedagogy" (Murphy, 2020) which shows clear implications of our study and the model for the future, even when the world goes back to new "normal" - because things will never be exactly the same again. In other words, as indicated by Chowdhury (2021 - forthcoming), what we have learnt from COVID-19 pandemic that added to our knowledge of how we will operate, would be usable in other unprecedented situations in the future.

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Urmee Chakma is currently pursuing doctoral studies and working as a teaching associate in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia. She has been an educator for over 15 years having taught at several language institutes and universities in Australia. Her areas of research interest include Indigenous education, diasporic communities, culture and identity, citizenship studies, power and social justice.
Email: urmee.chakma@monash.edu

Bingqing Li holds a MA in English Linguistics from University College London, the UK, and a graduate degree from Monash University, Australia. Her research interests include English language teaching, integration of technology in education and teacher education.
Email: bingqing.li@monash.edu

Graise Kabuhung graduated recently from Monash University, Australia, majoring in Master of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Her research interests include environmental education, education for sustainable development and religion education.
Email: gkab0001@student.monash.edu