

“Publish or no degree”: Cultivating a scholarly writing group for Indonesian master’s students of English education

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ABSTRACT

In line with the increasing institutionalization of scholarly publication as a graduation requirement for graduate students around the world, the use of a community of writing practice to support students navigate their publication endeavour has begun to receive attention from academic supervisors and graduate researchers. Despite the burgeoning interest in this topic, there has been little empirical evidence on master’s students’ experiences and perspectives of working within such writing groups at an Indonesian university. This phenomenological case study intends to fill this lacuna by elaborating on the process of a writing group’s establishment and development for master’s students of English education and exploring their perceptions of participating in such a community of practice (COP). Findings indicate that the writing group served as a flexible and participatory COP that produced critical and enduring alterations in identity as scholarly writers amongst participants. Specifically, their perceived transition into academic writers involves three aspects: knowledge of the values of scholarly publication, construction of a scholarly identity, and demystification of the publishing endeavour. This study’s findings can be utilized to inform other master’s and doctorate programs, as well as academic professionals seeking interventions to assist their students’ productive writing.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the ever-increasing globalization and marketization of higher education have accelerated international competition in the higher education sector and are driven by the passionate pursuit of global university rankings. Because institutional research output and quality, as measured by the number of publications and citations, play such a paramount role in the ranking system (Çakır *et al.*, 2019; Tian & Lu, 2017), governments around the world have catalysed the quest for world-class universities by enacting the 'publish or no degree' policy for students pursuing their advanced degrees (Lee, 2014; McGrail *et al.*, 2006). As a consequence, research output has become increasingly institutionalized by higher educational institutions around the world as either a graduation requirement or an expectation of graduate students. This publication pressure has placed graduate students under mounting and unprecedented pressure.

The importance of publishing scholarly work has become more apparent for graduate students currently enrolled in master's programs, where students are typically required to publish their research findings in the form of articles published in peer-reviewed journals upon graduation from their respective programs (Lathif, Nurkamto, & Kristina, 2021; Lei & Chuang, 2009). A similar phenomenon could also be observed in the context of Indonesian higher education (HE) institutions, which regulate masters' students to publish papers in nationally accredited journals, popularly known as Science and Technology Index (SINTA) journals, as a requirement for degree conferment. Publishing SINTA papers has gradually become a crucial factor in master's degree conferment for Indonesian master's students over the last decade since the introduction of the Indonesian government about the obligation of scientific publications for bachelor, master, and doctoral students (Fithriani & Salmiah, 2022). The publication requirement engenders high pressure on master's students as having no scholarly article published in nationally accredited journals during their study time means the students do not meet the university's publication requirement to obtain a master's degree.

To address the challenges posed by graduate students' excessive pressure to produce research outputs, higher education institutions are more likely to support the development of graduate student writing through research and writing-related programs, including writing groups, which are typically initiated by departments or individual supervisors. Grounded on Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of 'legitimate peripheral participation' in 'communities of practice' (COP), a community of writing practice typically consists of two components: an effective writing program and a professional development program, such as 1) setting goals and expectations; 2) requiring regular writing; 3) creating social support through the encouragement of peers and the sharing of experiences and feelings about writing; 4) encouraging monitoring of progress towards

personal goals; 5) providing feedback on multiple drafts, and 6) providing a facilitator who acts as a mentor to encourage and support mentees (Boice, 1990; Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006; McGrail et al., 2006; Weaver, Robbie, & Radloff, 2014).

Ample empirical evidence has shown that writing groups are to support graduate students in their publication endeavour and facilitate their maturation into published scholars (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Ciampa & Wolfe, 2020; Kent *et al.*, 2017). However, despite the rich literature on the use of writing groups to support graduate students improve their scholarly writing, little is focused on the cultivation of a writing group in order to best support graduate students in their publication quest and facilitate their maturation into published scholars. In addition, previous studies on graduate writing groups commonly involved doctoral students, whereas very little has been written about master's students' experiences of working within such writing communities, particularly in the Indonesian HE context.

Furthermore, the target participants of this current study are master's students of the English education department. The publication obligation for this particular demography of participants is quite unique and arguably more challenging as they need to publish their papers in English in lieu of their first language, Indonesian, either in nationally accredited or internationally reputable journals. Since previous studies have shown greater challenges encountered by graduate students writing in English as an additional language (EAL) in other countries such as Hongkong, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Thailand (Al Fadda, 2012; Cheung, 2010; Huang, 2010; Phothongsunan, 2016), this study is hoped to provide more nuanced information regarding Indonesian EAL master's students' endeavour of demystifying the publication process and to contribute to the growing literature on this very topic. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the suitable writing group model for Indonesian master's students of the English Education Department?
2. What (if any) notable transition do the Indonesian master's students perceive related to their development into scholarly writers?

2. Literature review

2.1. Community of practice (COP)

The term "community of practice" (COP) refers to a learning paradigm that promotes the development of informal groups with the goal of initiating exploration into a social discipline of learning involving the exchange of exercises (Hoadley, 2012). This concept can be traced back to earlier attempts to establish theories of the social aspect of human learning, which were influenced by social theory (e.g. Lave, 1988; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of a COP lays an emphasis on socially and cognitively engaged learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Social learning theorists claim that communities provide a framework for collaborative learning whereby thought that people may develop themselves by paying attention to, and taking cues from, the behaviours of those around them (Li *et al.*, 2009).

Three fundamental qualities distinguish communities of practice from other types of communities: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). "Mutual engagement" refers to the relationships that exist between individuals. As a result of their participation in the community, individuals are able to build standards and cultivate collaborative ties, resulting in the formation of a single social entity. Consequently, "joint enterprise" is a component of a COP that guarantees everyone is held accountable for achieving a common goal. It is the member's awareness of the community's core characteristics that bind them together and gives them a sense of ownership over the location. The joint venture should not be mandated from the outside but rather should be negotiated among COP members in order to produce a cohesive response to a given scenario. The final element of a COP is the "shared repertory," which includes routines, words, tools, techniques of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, acts, or concepts that the group has generated or absorbed throughout the course of its life and incorporated into its practice. In other words, repertory refers to the resources used to create value by members.

2.2. Writing groups as a COP

There are various types of COP communities, including micro-communities, small groups, and a larger collective of teachers. In addition, there is a wide variety of COP for professionals to join such as conferences, webinars, research communities, discussion forums, and special interest groups like writing groups (Reilly *et al.*, 2012). Due to the productive nature of the group in terms of academic writing, the writing group can be viewed as a practical manifestation of the community of practice. A community of writing practice refers to a group of individuals who share their writing interests and passions and regularly collaborate to develop their writing performance. The primary objective of the program is to assist participants in developing productive writing habits, including writing regularly, preferably daily, separating idea generation from critical (self) reviews, receiving and providing feedback in early drafts, and encouraging emotions, thoughts, and actions associated with academic writing and publishing success (Hartley, 2008; Hartley & Branthwaite, 1989; Weaver, Robbie, & Radloff, 2014). A writing community is ideal for enhancing scholarly writing because people are more likely to learn about writing conventions and challenges when they write as part of a community (Moore, 2003). Empirical evidence shows that a writing group can assist its members to improve not just their scholarly writing knowledge and skills, but also their self-confidence and writing output (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Ciampa & Wolfe, 2020; Kent *et al.*, 2017).

3. Method

A qualitative descriptive case study approach (Yin, 2014) was utilized to capture and investigate the scholarly writing experiences of Indonesian master's students of English education in a community of practice. Participating in the writing group

voluntarily were fifteen students (11 females and 4 males) from two academic years. Two methods, a questionnaire, and an in-depth interview, were used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire with open-ended questions was administered to explore the participants' perspectives on scholarly publication prior to and during their participation in the writing group. Prior to its utilization, the questionnaire was piloted to 30 master's students at the same institution who were not involved as the study participants to ensure that the items appropriately addressed the research questions. The interviews were conducted to garner additional information and/or to clarify what the respondents had mentioned on the questionnaire. Between forty and sixty minutes were allocated for each interview. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Thematic Content Analysis was employed to analyze the collected data. The responses of the participants to the questionnaire and interview questions were assessed contextually by reading each response in its entirety and underlining words, phrases, and concepts that were deemed pertinent to the phenomenon under investigation for further categorization. Using the Structural Coding approach, the data were coded in three stages: pre-coding, first coding, and final coding (Saldana, 2016). The emerging themes were compared to the literature review by describing their similarities and differences. This is in accordance with Yin's (2014) theoretical proposition strategy stating that the case objectives and design are based on a scheme that generates research questions and connects them to a literature review, resulting in a new discussion or recommended solution. Finally, generalization is applied to the research questions and phenomenon in a framework containing tables and/or diagrams, a comparison to the basic design from the literature review, and a case conclusion.

4. Findings

4.1. The study group model

The first research question relates to the writing group's implemented model. This study's writing group has three primary components: group sessions, individual writing, and a seminar (Figure 1). All three complementary components of this writing group played an important role in fostering the development of its members' scholarly writing skills and were designed to overcome the multiple challenges in their respective contexts (in this case, master's students in the English Education department). Central to this writing group is the group sessions, which were conducted six times during this study (over a period of three months). The 15 members of the writing group met fortnightly (usually on weekends), beginning in July 2022 and concluding in September 2022 (look at Figure 2 for details). However, due to the different time flexibility of master's students in the group, the members were not always available to attend every group session.



Figure 1. The writing group’s three complementary components

The group sessions comprise three core activities, namely: dialogic presentation, instruction and practice of writing skills and strategies, and sharing and discussing writing progress. The dialogic presentation, directly led by the principal researcher covers a variety of topics pertaining to scholarly writing, such as navigating credible sources, the publication process, and journal article elements. The writing progress sharing and discussion, which focuses on collaborative work among members, gives each member the opportunity to share their manuscript drafts and receive feedback from others. However, due to time constraints during group sessions, it was not possible to offer everyone's work particular attention.

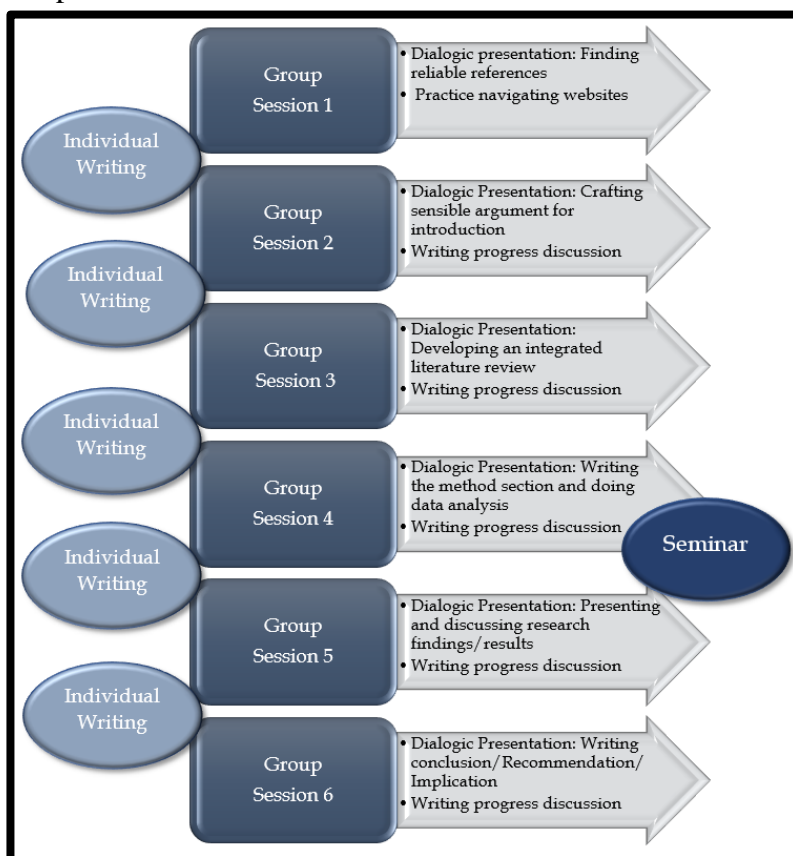


Figure 2. The research group model

In consideration of the time constraints in group sessions, individual writing components were included to maximize time efficiency. Individual writing gives

participants the opportunity to apply what they've learned in group sessions to their personal work. In addition to using the writing skills and methods taught in the group session to the creation of new writing, the individual writing component was utilized to rewrite and edit prior drafts that received comments during the group session. As depicted in Figure 2, the participants completed their writing independently in the period between two group sessions. Any progress made during the period of individual writing would be shared with the group at the subsequent session. Lastly, the seminar component provides individuals with the opportunity to engage in a live discussion with an expert in scholarly writing for publication in an effort to boost their writing motivation and increase their knowledge of best practices. The seminar session was held one time only, between group sessions 4 and 5.

4.2. Perceived transition of development into scholarly writers

Anchored on Wenger's (1998) theory of the Community of Practice (COP), writing groups as a collaborative learning platform provides some benefits, including defining someone's identity, establishing collaboration, acquiring new competencies, and improving community members' performance. The participants in this study also self-reported gaining similar benefits after their participation as a COP member. In general, the benefits perceived by the participants led to their professional identity reconstruction as scholarly writers.

4.2.1. Awareness of the values of scholarly publication

One of the merits of engaging in something regularly, such as joining a writing group whose primary focus is how to develop the members' ability as scientific writers, is a heightened awareness of the significance of scientific publications for individual and professional lives. The same benefit was also noted by the participants in this study, who believed that after joining this COP-based writing group, they have become increasingly aware of the value of publishing for themselves, particularly in terms of future career advancement. This can be seen in the excerpt below:

Before I joined this community of writers, I previously only wrote a scholarly article to accomplish the assignments my teacher gave me. I didn't realize that scholarly publications could help me in my future career." (Excerpt 1, Interview, Participant 2)

As illustrated in Excerpt 1, Participant 2 admitted that she initially drafted a scholarly manuscript as a necessity of finishing a project assigned to her as a post-graduate student without recognizing that the writing would have an impact to her future career. However, as she became a member of the writing group, she realized how important it was to write and publish scientific articles that would be useful in the future.

A slightly different opinion related to the significance of scholarly publication for a professional trajectory is mentioned by participant 10, who revealed that his continues

engagement with other members of the writing group broadens his perspectives towards the value of scholarly publication not only for his future career but also for his current one. He believes that he could establish his name in the world of publication by publishing his written works in nationally-accredited and internationally indexed journals to advance his current career and enable promotion to higher structural positions in the future, as can be seen in Excerpt 2.

This writing group somehow makes me feel familiar with scholarly writing. I want to build and raise a reputation for myself in this field of work by publishing several articles in accredited journals to support my current career and to achieve a high structural position in my future career. (Excerpt 2, Interview, Participant 5)

In conclusion, participants recognize that writing a scholarly manuscript is more than just a college assignment; they are aware that having scholarly publications might positively affect their current professions and future careers.

4.3. Construction of scholarly writer identity

Identity construction in the concept of community of practice (COP) illustrates how a professional identity can be constructed by participating in a community of practice. Clearly, the participants in this study believed that they constructed their identities as scholarly writers through their engagement in the writing group. Particularly, they could identify themselves as scholarly writers-in-the-making who are still developing their writing skills. As seen in Excerpt 3, this is taken from the interview data with Participant 1 who admitted that she could see herself as a scholarly writer, in addition to her identity as a teacher and a post-graduate student.

At first, I thought that writing for scholarly publications wasn't my main job because I'm a headmaster who is also a teacher. So, I think my main job is to teach. However, after joining this writing community on campus, I realized that even though writing publications is a college assignment, it could be relevant to my job as a teacher because it helps me start improving my professional development (Excerpt 3, Interview, Participant 1)

The statement in Excerpt 3 reveals that Participant 1's identity construction as a writer of scholarly publications had been much impacted by her participation in the writing group. As a student teacher who also takes a role as a headmaster, she initially believed that authoring scholarly publications was not her primary responsibility. Even after becoming a postgraduate student, she still considered teaching her primary obligation. However, after she became a part of the writing community, she realized that writing would continue to be relevant to her career. Previously, she believed writing a scholarly publication was only for completing her college assignments. However, she eventually realized that writing is one of the professional development activities that can be maintained in her career. This indicates that participant 1 has constructed a writer

identity for producing a scholarly publication for her career journey, as her perspective on writing has shifted from "college projects" to "professional development."

Similar to participant 1's experience, other participants also support the conception that involvement in the writing community helps them construct writer identities, as evidenced in Excerpt 4.

Beginning as a university project, writing articles has now become a part of me, and I aspire to publish my scholarly writing in international journals as part of my career. (Excerpt 4, Questionnaire, Participant 12)

The data in Excerpt 4 demonstrates that the student's perspective on producing scientific papers has shifted since joining the community and that what he formerly considered a part of his educational path is now a part of himself. In this case, participant 12 argued that his professional identity began to take shape from what he previously thought was only a "student" who wrote scholarly writing as an assignment and has now transitioned to become a "scholarly writer" when he stated that he would continue writing until it could be published in international journals concurrently with his career. In this instance, it is evident that students' professional identities began to emerge from their surroundings.

4.4. Demystification of the publication endeavour

A writing group as a manifestation of a community of practice can be viewed as a platform to boost students' expertise as academic writing practitioners because this community aims to raise students' identity and productivity concerning academic writing. Community members engage in this activity by helping one another and exchanging information regarding the various practices connected to it. Learning to write a manuscript worth publication to practice how to submit and respond during the publication process are some activities done by the members of this writing group with one purpose to demystify the publication endeavour. These activities involve pertinent theoretical literature, navigating the target journal, creating a manuscript that utilizes the rhetorical framework accepted by the targeted discourse community, and improving language capacity.

In this case, the writing group members get some efficiency in the publication process due to their involvement. Knowing how to find literature pertinent to the discussion of scholarly publications during manuscript writing is one of the conveniences that the participants in the publishing process can perceive. The following excerpt confirms this point:

At first, I was really confused about how to find literature that helps deepen my understanding and suits the topic of my discussion to be used in the manuscript I was writing, but it is no longer an issue because I already know the "keywords" to use while searching for literature on both national and international publishers for my scholarly article. (Excerpt 5, Interview, participant 7)

The statement made by participant 7 in excerpt 5 indicates her confusion in navigating current literature related to the topic of her writing. She found it challenging for her to write a scholarly article when she did not even know where to start to find the sources that help her broaden her knowledge of the topic of discussion. However, after joining the writing community, she got a new insight into how to find relevant literature by navigating diverse websites of national and international publishers, which eventually helps advance her knowledge on the topic and enrich the content of her manuscript.

Another aspect that helps further demystifies the publication process that the participants' experience is navigating the target journal. Participants in the publication process in this community were able to successfully navigate the target journal, which is significant because successfully navigating the target journal is one of the steps that must be taken in order to complete the publication process. By becoming community members, participants will not only be aware of how to retrieve pertinent literature, but they will also be aware of how to navigate the appropriate journal in terms of the scope of discussion, templates, and other provisions following the expertise of participants. Thus, participants also will be aware of how to navigate the journal in terms of whether or not paid author fees are required. As a consequence, the scientific articles that the participants generate will have a better chance of getting published in the journal, provided that they are suitable for the requirements. This is demonstrated in excerpt 6.

First, I assumed the lecturer’s writing format could be used for any journal, but after joining the workshop, I know that every journal has various requirements, from the writing format to the charge. By navigating the journal, we can measure our capacities and make it easier to submit papers since we’ve followed the guidelines. (Excerpt 6, Interview, Participant 5)

The data in excerpt 6 shows the misconception that participant 5 had before she joined the writing group. She formerly believed that the writing template given by her lecturer could be applied to all journals in general. This implies that her knowledge of writing format that meets the requirement of the target journal is quite limited; nevertheless, her understanding of preparing manuscripts a journal submission grows by joining the writing group. This is evident from her statements, which specifies that a number of specifications must be adhered to, such as the writing format and the author fee. In addition, the participant is aware that they must adhere to the style of each target journal when writing the manuscript.

5. Discussion

This study demonstrates that the writing group model is effective in reconstructing while enacting the participating students’ perceived identities as scholarly writers. This perceived transition includes scholarly publication knowledge and practice highlighting development to being scholarly writers while joining the community of practice (COP). COP refers to the congregation of individuals with similar goals and interests (Wenger, 188 | **Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities** | Vol.10, No.2, May 2023

1998), in this case, the members congregate to discuss scholarly article writing and publication, Because the value of scholarly publication reflects developmental progress for a student's academic career (Belcher, 2007), the transition that students in this study go through results in positive outcomes, such as students beginning to recognize the value of scholarly publications. This positive outcome will have an impact on students' current careers as well as their careers in the future, particularly in the academic field. The significance of writing with the goal of publishing has had a significant impact on academic communities worldwide, not only affecting the faculty member and researchers but also trickling down to students in advanced education (McDougall & Stoilescu, 2010). In addition, it has been discovered that one of the criteria utilized for yearly performance reviews and salary modifications for university professors or researchers is the number of publications they have (Stockwell, 2016). This finding is also in line with that of Al-kadi and Madini's (2019) study noting the significance of highlighting the learners' self-awareness in writing to make them more productive.

Students taking part in the writing group for this research can experience another aspect of their perceived transition regarding scholarly publication, namely the construction of scholarly identity. When the participants in this study joined the COP, they became conscious of the fact that they were currently in the process of refining their writing talents and were aware that they are scholarly writers in the making. Their attitude on writing has evolved from "college projects" to "professional growth". This finding supports Wenger's (2010) argument stating that COP is a way into people's professional development. This finding is also consistent with other previous studies revealing the role of a COP in which language is being learned that can affect the constructions of identities that language learners make of themselves (Lee, 2014; Teng & Bui, 2020).

In addition, a community of practice may be seen as a platform that helps students improve their expertise as scholarly writing practitioners. This is because this community aims to strengthen students' identities as well as their productivity concerning academic writing (Kent *et al.*, 2017). Community members participate in this activity by lending a helping hand to one another and exchanging information about the many activities associated with it. The publication procedure will be demystified as one of the benefits for the students. It means that students get a better understanding of how to get their work published, which includes seeking pertinent theoretical literature, navigating the target journal, creating a manuscript utilising the DC rhetorical framework, and improving language capacity. This finding is also relevant to the findings of several other empirical studies showing how COP helps promote the individual, team, and organisational benefits such as learning and development; colleague recognition; the establishment of relationships and networks among co-workers; improvement in work quality; work satisfaction; quick access to information; innovation; problem-solving skills; improved process efficiency; work coordination and integration; and a number of other advantages (e.g. Fontaine & Millen, 2004; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Zboralski & Gemuenden, 2006).

6. Conclusion

For graduate students currently enrolled in master's programs, where students are often compelled to publish their research findings in accredited peer-reviewed journals upon graduation, the value of publishing scholarly work has become increasingly apparent. This study was conducted to support graduate students in their publication quest and facilitate their maturation into scholarly writers by offering training through a COP-based writing group. This study proposes a writing group model, which might be utilized to facilitate the development of scholarly articles among master's students while simultaneously promoting their sense of scholarly identity. Participation in the writing group becomes an opportunity for its members' both personal and professional growth. The writing group served to demystify the publication process, considerably enhancing students' feeling of scholarly identity and raising their awareness of academic writing's significance in the development of scholarly knowledge.

To preserve the momentum provided by the COP approach, the writing group must be a regular routine that provides a forum for critical conversations about writing, publishing, and academic identities throughout the course of their academic year. The members of the writing group should also gain practical experience by attending seminars and conferences. In addition, faculty members must participate in their students' publishing endeavours through mentoring, feedback, and facilitation on an individual or group level. Due to the limited participant size (15 students), it is important to highlight that the diversity of backgrounds and academic preparation will continue to pose a pedagogical difficulty when adopted in other master's or doctorate programs. Further research, thus is required to ensure that this writing group model is adaptable enough to accommodate both beginner and advanced students.

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