

Article

# Inked: Graduate Writing Groups as Writing Centre Pedagogy

Michael Cournoyea  
University of Toronto

Boba Samuels  
University of Toronto

David Calloway  
University of Toronto

Nearly ten years ago, Aitchison and Guerin's (2014) edited collection on doctoral writing groups outlined the various challenges motivating pedagogical reform for graduate learning: overloaded supervisors, interdisciplinarity, multi-method research, growing graduate enrolments, and greater cultural and linguistic diversity among students and supervisors. These challenges remain a decade later, magnified by the increasingly competitive academic job market, attempts to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread social isolation, and most recently, text-generating large language models. While these obstacles problematize traditional approaches to graduate education, they also inspire pedagogical innovation. The last few years have reminded students, faculty, and staff at Canadian universities that providing diverse supports can accommodate both the perceived and hidden needs of our students. In the same collection, Doreen Starke-Meyerring (2014) critically outlined the "inherited institutional environments" whereby "doctoral writing groups have emerged out of the need to 'squeeze out' writing" (p. 65). The writing group that we detail herein, *Inked: the Health Sciences Writing Collective*, aims to avoid becoming what Starke-Meyerring called an "ad hoc, add-on" initiative that perpetuates "rhetorical deficit views of doctoral writing" (p. 79). In what follows, we argue that *Inked* exemplifies a model of graduate support inspired by writing centre pedagogies that build self-efficacy, community, and trust. We outline how this model bridges one-on-one support with collaborative co-working, an approach that addresses current gaps in Canadian graduate education.

Writing centres – and the Centres for Teaching and Learning in which they are often housed – may be the most prominent (or only) spaces devoted to cross-disciplinary graduate writing instruction at Canadian universities. This instruction focuses on rhetorical awareness, language/grammar development, personalised skill-building, dialogic learning, informal feedback, and non-hierarchical consultations. These pedagogical approaches hold particular relevance for graduate writing groups. Most centres focus their graduate support on one-on-one consultations and workshops that address disciplinary writing, targeted writing tasks (e.g., literature reviews), and just-in-time document preparation (e.g., grant proposals). Use of these supports is voluntary, opt-in, and/or incentivised, and graduate students are relied upon to self-select support based on their perceived needs.

In addition to providing writing support, writing centres can also provide much needed social opportunities and strengthen graduate culture (Handford et al., 2021). As Brooks-Gillies et al. (2020) document about graduate writing groups facilitated through the Michigan State University's Writing Center, writing centres (and the groups that they facilitate) can create a “more flexible and fluid” *space* to contrast the “more fixed and stable” *place* of disciplinary expectations (p. 193). Similarly, Clark-Oates and Cahill (2013) contrast the perception of writing centres as “*places* that students are sent for remediation” with the view that writing centres can be *spaces* that provide and enact “practices that construct literacy events in particular ways” (p. 111, *our emphasis*). With experience creating such spaces, writing centre faculty and staff are well-positioned to foster the accountability and multidisciplinary communities that emerge in graduate writing groups.

The diverse characteristics of graduate writing groups have been most clearly outlined by Sarah Haas (2014), whose typology of writers' groups is based on extensive international data collection from structured writing groups. Her codification includes eleven dimensions (e.g., membership, leadership, in-meeting activities) and sixty-nine variables and sub-variables to differentiate the characteristics of these dimensions (e.g., number of participants, peer-led leadership, goal setting). According to this typology, for example, *Inked* is a general purpose, multidisciplinary, expert-led group with informal in-meeting activities.

While Haas' (2014) “Pick-n-Mix typology” may be a “beneficial tool in setting up student-led writers' groups” (pp. 43–44), it is not strictly a typology that *categorises* writing groups. Instead, it provides detailed characteristics to *describe* these groups without clustering them into kinds. We envision a typology of graduate writing groups that emerges from clusters of Haas' characteristics: (1) high-commitment co-working groups (as described by Aitchison, 2009; Brooks-Gillies et al., 2020; Ferguson, 2009; Lassig et al., 2012, Maher et al., 2008); (2) low-commitment accountability

groups (such as Mewburn et al.'s [2014] description of *Shut Up and Write!*); and (3) short-term retreats (e.g., Smith et al., 2018; Tremblay-Wragg, 2021). High-commitment co-working groups are likely to have expert-led leadership, with precisely outlined in-meeting activities and peer-review responsibilities between-meetings. Low-commitment accountability groups are likely to be peer-led and informal in purpose, membership, and leadership; they are also likely to have minimal in- and between-meeting activities. We suspect that accountability groups are underreported, since they may often be student-led, short-term, and exclusive. We do not address writing retreats further because, in our view, their intensive, time-constrained formats resemble workshops more than typical continuous writing groups.

Categorizing groups in this way also elucidates how students *perceive* and *choose* available groups rather than how organisers *describe* or *explain* such groups. A student may, for instance, choose a low-commitment group early in their writing process, then transition to a high-commitment group as they progress in their writing and want the structure of mandatory peer-review or instruction. Groups that clearly articulate their goals and expectations enable participants to self-select groups that align with such goals (McMurray, 2019). When students have the benefit of multiple accessible groups, they likely compare and select groups based on these clusters. Or, as is more likely when students join a group, such clusters may motivate students to remain in or leave that group.

Writing groups can reduce feelings of isolation, create informal structures for accountability, and build disciplinary confidence in multidisciplinary settings (Brooks-Gillies et al., 2020). They also increase writing productivity (e.g., Cui et al., 2022; Mewburn et al., 2014) and develop research-writer identity (e.g., Cannell et al., 2023). The diversity of groups and their goals, however, makes it challenging to identify which group characteristics lead to specific benefits. Some characteristics may even present challenges. High-commitment co-working groups, for instance, may burden participants with peer-reviews when they already feel overburdened by their own work. Groups that require peer-review may also assume a superficial “arhetorical” approach to doctoral writing that is “essentialized and homogenized,” where “anybody can be expected to give useful feedback on anything” (Starke-Meyerring, 2014, p. 77). In student-led groups, organisers and participants may find it onerous to create and maintain the group while also participating; such groups may undergo frequent turnover as organisers focus on their own work, take leaves of absence, or graduate. Turnover and organisational instability may undermine community-building in accountability groups, so students work in the same *place* but without a co-created *space* (Brooks-Gillies et al.,

2020). Institutional inattention and the marginalisation of writing also mean that such groups are sometimes unrecognised and poorly supported by the university (Starke-Meyerring, 2014).

Despite these challenges, writing groups offer an effective pedagogical alternative to one-on-one instruction and workshops at Canadian writing centres. At the University of Toronto's *Health Sciences Writing Centre* (HSWC), we have been experimenting with a model of group instruction that bridges high- and low-commitment graduate writing groups in the wake of pandemic-induced changes to graduate communities, instruction, and remote accessibility. Rather than one-on-one instruction (as is typical in writing centres) or course-based approaches (typical of academic departments), *Inked* occupies a distinctive *space* where the focus is on community, accountability, and indirect support, with opportunities for individualised writing instruction.

## ***Inked* in Practice**

*Inked* began in the fall of 2022 to offer a writing space for graduate students in the health sciences at the University of Toronto's downtown campus. The group was organised and facilitated through the HSWC, with two of this paper's co-authors, David and Michael, hosting twice-weekly sessions. The HSWC offers one-on-one writing instruction, and *Inked* was its first facilitated writing group. The interdisciplinary group is open to doctoral students in Nursing, Public Health, Pharmacy, Social Work, and Kinesiology and Physical Education. Doctoral students from other disciplines have occasionally attended in search of a community and space. Between 3–8 students typically attend each session, with approximately twice as many doctoral students as master's students. *Inked* has attracted a dedicated and consistent group who aim to attend most sessions.

*Inked* is structured in 3-hour blocks with hour-long working sprints separated by scheduled breaks. Sessions are lightly catered with coffee and snacks. The sessions are also hybrid to accommodate students conducting fieldwork abroad and those living inaccessibly far from campus. Students often work on writing projects with tight deadlines, or use the sessions to work on presentations, slide decks, and/or teaching tasks. During the 2023 Summer term when Michael was unable to host sessions, regular attendees continued to meet each week in the same space and have subsequently formed a community of writing practice. Anonymous feedback collected from students at the end of each term has been overwhelmingly positive, indicating that students: (1) join *Inked* to work with others in a structured writing space; (2) make consistent progress and accomplish goals; and (3) appreciate that one-on-one support and facilitation was conducive to their productivity.

*Inked* was inspired by the success of *Just Write*—a graduate writing group at one of the University of Toronto’s suburban campuses. Hosted by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), *Just Write* was reinstated after a two-year hiatus (caused by COVID-19) to assess if there was pent-up demand for face-to-face networking and group writing. Previously a loose series of workshops, *Just Write* evolved into a weekly, year-round series of writing-intensive sessions that allow graduate students, post-docs, and affiliates to devote time toward current projects. *Just Write* sessions run for a full day in a convenient meeting space, with an hour-long break for lunch and ten-minute breaks every 1.5 hours, with lunch and coffee provided. Students especially appreciate full-day writing sessions during the summer term when they are less occupied by teaching, departmental colloquia, and lab meetings. All sessions are facilitated by CTL’s graduate writing instructor (previously Michael), who provides some one-on-one writing support (e.g., meeting with students, reviewing drafts, discussing time management strategies). The sessions have also included a goal-setting meeting with each student at the start of each term, and informal social events (e.g., picnics, yoga, drinks). Like *Inked*, *Just Write* attracts a dedicated and motivated group with approximately 10–15 students at each session. Some attendees commute an hour just to attend the group. The success of both *Inked* and *Just Write* illustrates a desire for facilitated, flexible, and interdisciplinary graduate writing groups across diverse contexts. Below, we motivate why we believe this model should be adopted by writing centres across Canada.

## ***Inked* as a Middle Space**

The University of Toronto hosts nearly a dozen formal and informal graduate writing groups across its three campuses (two suburban and one urban), with a variety of modalities, disciplinary restrictions, and facilitation styles. These groups are supplemented by department-specific groups which are either staff- or student-organised. If graduate writing groups are envisioned along a spectrum, *Inked* aims to offer a middle space by bridging the gap between high-commitment co-working groups and low-commitment accountability groups. The initiative thus offers a communal space for focused writing while incorporating facilitated, informal, unstructured time for students to reflect on their progress, discuss professional uncertainties, and share productivity strategies. *Inked* is also in the middle of the interdisciplinary spectrum since it draws students from diverse fields but remains restricted to the health sciences. This interdisciplinarity allows members to relate more easily to each other’s rhetorical and methodological challenges during informal discussions. Ultimately, *Inked* aims to foster both self-efficacy and community in a dedicated, supportive space.

## Self-efficacy

*Inked* sessions typically begin with a discussion identifying members' personal goals for the day and term. Support is offered through reflections on goal setting and how to set achievable short- and long-term goals; however, success is solely determined by members. Indirect instruction occurs in casual discussions of student progress and suggestions for how to approach a particular section or challenge. This soft facilitation contrasts with that of some faculty-led writing groups where students may feel pressured by externally imposed requirements. This indirect approach offers members a "safe haven" — a space where students feel accountable to themselves "rather than to an external authority" (Fajt et al., 2013, p. 168). Informal discussion in writing groups also helps graduate students accomplish the most difficult aspect of their current project – to become a colleague in one's field and a part of the discourse community (Gradin et al., 2006). *Inked* offers participants informal time to practice this transition with their peers, and the interdisciplinary nature of the group seems especially conducive to recognizing members' disciplinary and academic exigencies so they can be critically examined. *Inked* therefore operates as an accountability group with soft, expert facilitation. Members can attend for instruction or feedback, or for the consistent time and space to write, peer discussion, or whatever they themselves deem to be advantageous.

## Community

Since *Inked* meets weekly, members tend to form a sense of community that is built around the shared experience of graduate scholarship. *Inked* has developed what Smith et al. (2018) found to be important aspects of group writing: consistency within the group, mutual support of and respect for group members, and space for networking. *Inked* offers 'low stakes' accountability that is borne out of the consistency of meetings, goal setting, and intermittent reflection and conversation. Students appreciate this structure even when they join remotely. Some have shared that the relaxed approach is what brings them back.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of *Inked* is that students have become more willing to share work and discuss challenges over time. Both casual conversation during breaks and a non-judgmental approach to writing progress have helped to build trust that encourages collaboration. Some students join *Inked* on the recommendation of a friend or attend their first session with a friend to test the waters. The facilitator's focus on relationship-building and consistency opens a space for support through scheduling soft deadlines, talking through roadblocks, and sharing experiences. This

support is especially important since graduate students can so easily feel isolated, or struggle with imposter syndrome and negative self-perception throughout the writing process (see Amell, 2022; Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2023; Eaton & Dombroski, 2022). Both the regularity and informality of *Inked* have encouraged trust-building and honest conversations about writing and research challenges. Addressing these challenges means the facilitators have met with students to discuss a variety of textual and genre-specific topics (e.g., metadiscourse and cohesion; the organisation of literature reviews; and focus and drift in paragraphing). Such discussions demonstrate the tangible benefits of having writing experts facilitate the group. However, most consultations have remained informal, providing space to discuss supervisory feedback, frustrations with time management, assumptions about the scientific process, and burnout. Even in these discussions, however, facilitators who have themselves completed their own doctoral studies foster empathy and authentic understanding.

Despite its successes, we must also acknowledge the challenges that we've faced with *Inked*. Most notably, attendance is widely variable across the year, from periods that are sustained by a core group of committed members to weeks when few students attend. This variability seems inevitable in an informal model that loosely attracts multidisciplinary members without high-commitment obligations. Funding for *Inked* is also a concern since it currently draws on the HSWC's restricted budget. Justifying the budget is especially fraught given conventional administrative demands for evidence of success that focus primarily on number of participants rather than the quality of their experiences. The long-term commitment required to establish and maintain groups like *Inked* has also required significant adaptability from its facilitators, as well as support from administration. *Inked* is still very much a work-in-progress, building community and *space* with each passing term.

## Graduate Writing Groups in the Writing Centre

*Inked* demonstrates a model of group instruction that may supplement one-on-one approaches to Canadian graduate student programming. Much graduate programming is focused on individual development and professionalisation. The implicit, if not explicit, articulation of graduate school's benefits to students is primarily individualistic – that they can focus on their own specific interests as they develop disciplinary expertise and receive personal mentoring from expert advisors or supervisors. Communal experiences are acknowledged in fleeting events (e.g., orientations) or offered as part of the academic program (e.g., graduate seminars, research labs), but despite these

opportunities, students especially at the doctoral level have long commented on the isolation and loneliness they feel (Ray et al., 2019; Tremblay-Wragg, 2021).

Writing centres have often demonstrated a similar approach. While our attention is directed to developing students' writing skills, ideas, and voice, these pedagogies are primarily individualistic, emphasising one-on-one feedback and instruction. At the graduate level especially, this focus putatively responds to the specialised nature of each student's work and interests. The pedagogical methods in writing centres therefore often reinforce the perception of academic work and writing as solitary. In contrast, *Inked* provides a model of community-focused teaching that integrates communal, social activities with dedicated, solitary writing to encourage pedagogies that operate between one-on-one tutoring and group instruction. *Inked* demonstrates that providing an expert-facilitated space for graduate students to write should include pedagogical strategies for writing as well as social and academic supports.

What makes such community-focused teaching effective? Research on writing groups indicates that peer support and facilitator engagement encourage students to reflect on writing skills, reframe obstacles, build solidarity, improve self-efficacy, and maintain motivation in diverse writing projects (e.g., McMurray, 2019; Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2023). As described by Aitchison and Guerin (2014), writing groups embody writing pedagogies that are "socially situated and practice-oriented" (p.11). At the program level, however, writing in community presents the possibility for broader change in graduate education. In a writing group like *Inked*, students are neither regimented into a pre-existing process, nor are they left alone. Instead, they work in proximity to similar others and adjust themselves to the group norms and behaviours that emerge, creating a responsive learning community. While it is too early to suggest that community-building instruction in groups such as *Inked* will have broader group effects, it is an approach that has the potential to address long-identified weaknesses in graduate education that are not addressed by current individualistic approaches. We would encourage future empirical work that investigates the impact of groups like *Inked* and whether its model can be translated to other diverse contexts.

As a promising initiative that has seen substantial student interest, *Inked* has been positioned by the HSWC as a key offering in its graduate writing supports. For instance, we have introduced *Inked* as an ongoing group following a doctoral writing retreat in Nursing, encouraging students to maintain effective writing habits and community following this one-off event. Intended as a robust and sustainable writing program, *Inked* addresses some of the key elements identified for successful programming; it engages interdisciplinary stakeholders, establishes a long-term timeframe for

growth, and embraces distributed leadership to inspire transformation (Cox et al., 2018). This move to group-centred, indirect instruction presents an exciting direction for writing centre pedagogies in Canada.

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