Contortion, loss and moments for joy: insights into writing groups for international doctoral students

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ABSTRACT
The idealised internationally mobile doctoral student is often presented as seamlessly transitioning across space – translating and neutralising themselves within globalised higher education. However, for those positioned as ‘international’, writing can be experienced as disconnecting. This paper considers the tensions of writing, as experienced by international doctoral students. It draws on 19 semi-structured interviews and a focus group with international doctoral students to explore their experiences of research writing within a writing group. These data revealed accounts of the contortions involved in continuous acts of translation and its resulting sense of ‘othering’ and dislocation. Alongside these revelations emerged feelings of loss in terms of perceived ‘mastery’ over language and the experience of the writing group as a space for both joy and vulnerability. Consequently, we argue for the importance of doctoral writing groups that subvert and reinvent dominant narratives of writing, writers and the ‘international’.

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Introduction: ‘Othering’ international doctoral students

The doctoral journey and attendant writing practices constitute a transitional space, full of multiple contestations. Being positioned as an ‘international’ doctoral student potentially produces additional disconnections in terms of the required identity shifts and consequent acts of translation required. A perceived loss of ‘mastery’ over language by international doctoral students can contribute to them and their writing being imagined as ‘other’. This is, in part, related to the spatial disparities in the globalised knowledge economy (Bilecen 2013) in which Western bodies, knowledges and languages dominate. These disparities are argued as having become particularly pronounced since the eras of Trump and Brexit (Bartram 2018), and the impact of international freedom of movement engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2017, i) provide the example of the USA where ‘the very ideals of democratic inclusiveness and international pluralism are under direct attack... the country with the largest
share of international students globally is increasingly becoming an unwelcoming place to study abroad. In the UK context, Bartram (2018, 1479) highlights the legitimisation of casual xenophobia and racism, exacerbated by Brexit, arguing for the need for universities in this context to offer sufficient support for students’ changing experiences and needs.

A response to this increasingly inhospitable context for international students is captured in Carter, Smith, and Harrison’s (2021) framing of a geography of ‘doctoral borderlands’ whereby doctoral education is recognised to be in a constant state of transition shaped by spatial disparities. Consequently, Zapata, Kuby, and Thiel (2018) assert the importance for research and practice to continue to rethink writing relations. This paper meets this provocation in the literature by drawing on qualitative data with international doctoral students produced alongside the facilitation of a doctoral writing group, to enhance understandings of what transition moments and writing relations are produced in the borderlands of doctoral education. We argue that the socio-political context described above orientates international doctoral students, studying in the United Kingdom, in normative ways. This has implications for how students are able to occupy academic writing spaces, including how they can engage their own expertise through writing. We theorise our approaches in leading a writing group for international doctoral students, how students experienced this, and what we learned about the act of academic writing from this process. Finally, we present possibilities for doctoral writing practices that challenge some cherished ways of doing.

Importantly, when we refer to ‘international’ students, we recognise this as a socially constructed framing in terms of being a tuition fee category, visa status and indicator of language proficiency, rather than a meaningful label representing a shared identity or experience. The category ‘international’ does not reflect the multiplicity and temporality of students’ identities, including diversity in ethnicity, language, culture and nationality. As such, for the purposes of our study, we sought participation from doctoral students who identified themselves as ‘international’, while recognising that their experiences are far from homogenous.

**Literature review: language, knowing and being/writing together**

To understand international doctoral students’ writing practices involved engaging with literature on international students’ language proficiency and the complex identity transitions experienced (and assumed) by these students. We then go on to focus on the specific role of writing groups as a pedagogic space for developing doctoral students and their writing.

**Language, knowing and being**

Although critical and multilingual perspectives on the international student experience have emerged in recent years (Fabricius and Preisler 2015; Sovic and Blythman 2013), international students remain broadly positioned as ‘other’ – to domestic students, to first-language English speakers and to ‘Western’ educational traditions (Harvey 2016, 371). While proficiency in language is only one means through which an international student may experience being ‘othered’, it is important to note the dominance of the
English language within higher education, even in non-English-speaking country contexts, and the position of English as the common international language of the scientific community (Nerad and Heggelund 2008, 51).

Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1991) discussion of ‘linguistic habitus’, Malhotra (2019) identifies the internationally perceived importance of being able to speak ‘good English’ as a marker of social standing and form of ‘linguistic capital’. Differences in terms of accent, grammar and vocabulary become indicative of the social positions of speakers and reflect the quantity of linguistic and other capitals they possess (2019, 144). Behar (2011, 54) poignantly identifies the successful cumulation of such linguistic capital:

Now I speak an English that can’t be recognised as being from anywhere specific … no one can tell by looking at me or hearing me speak that another language burns inside me, an invisible but unquenchable flame. No one can tell I came to the English language the way a woman in another era came to her husband in an arranged marriage – trying to make the best of a relationship someone else chose for her and hoping one day she’d fall in love.

Shen, Carter, and Zhang (2019) identify the unique challenges of writing a doctoral thesis in an additional language, as a process entailing major identity transformations and negotiations. Given that this process of identity transformation occurs within English-speaking institutions, in our research we are interested in how doctoral students respond to the privileging of standardised written English approaches to writing pedagogies and the extent to which students engage with the ‘multiplicity and convergence of many possibilities’ of writing (Zapata, Kuby, and Thiel 2018, 481).

Becoming a doctoral writer in any context is always already positioned in terms of ‘what it is possible to do and think’ (Barad in Zapata, Kuby, and Thiel 2018, 10–11). For example, Qi et al. (2021) recall reluctance from international students to draw on academic sources from their home context, expecting to be introduced to Western theories and methods instead. Paré (2019) also identifies the way in which doctoral students may feel compelled to draw upon particular scholarly traditions over others. Yet in contrast, Qi et al. (2021) draw on Andzaldúa’s (1987) concept of ‘borderlands consciousness’ to observe how doctoral education offers the potential for ontological and epistemological experimentation and methodological inventiveness. However, pushing beyond traditional paradigms requires appropriate supervisory and institutional support.

**Writing together**

Writing groups are as important pedagogical, social and political spaces for doctoral students to formulate their scholarly texts and identities. Aitchison and Guerin (2014) describe the multiplicity and variety of writing groups – particularly in terms of the range of pedagogic philosophies employed – from the didactic (this is how you write) to the deconstructive (how might we write and why?). Regardless of approach, Cahusac de Caux et al. (2017) conclude that doctoral writing groups have a demonstrable positive influence on doctoral students’ writing proficiency, higher-order thinking skills, motivation and confidence. They also state the specific pedagogical value of writing groups for the fostering of reflective processes on and about writing. Indeed, Maher et al.
(2008) show how students taking part in a writing group experience a shift in their thinking from seeing writing as a private and implicit process towards writing becoming a public encounter. Writing groups offer the potential to make visible and problematise the relations between ‘writer’ and ‘text’ as well as ‘testing out’ the performative aspects of writing via developing confidence in a writerly voice as something to be ‘out there’ rather than purely introspective.

As a site of and for writerly identity formation, writing groups also offer something powerful and distinct for those unequally positioned in relation to the production of, and engagement with, conventions of academic English. If such groups invoke multi-cultural and possibly multidisciplinary conversations about writing, they also potentially speak back to normative colonial discourses of certainty around what constitutes ‘good’ writing (Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2014). For example, Guerin et al. (2013) state that doctoral writing groups offer international students an inclusive and dynamic research community in which the ‘multiplicity of areas of expertise, language and cultural backgrounds’ enhanced the ‘awareness and acceptance of diverse views on our work’ (77). This demonstrates how international doctoral writing groups might be operationalised as political spaces that embrace diverse knowledges, experiences and methodologies.

Writing groups also provide intellectual sociality for navigating the aforementioned identity transformations experienced by international doctoral students (Shen, Carter, and Zhang 2019). Aitchison and Guerin (2014) position writing groups as affective sanctuary – a safe place for students to explore their emotional responses to the highly individualised and specialised doctoral process. This is likely to be intensified for international students who are spatially distant from ‘home’. For example, Elliot, Reid, and Baumfield (2016) explore the academic acculturation practices of international doctoral students in the UK – revealing the joys, excitement, puzzlement and challenges encountered as students navigate a new country alongside their postgraduate courses. Søraa et al. (2017) identify the importance of writing groups as a non-hierarchical, supportive community of peers. Whilst our doctoral writing group was facilitated by academic colleagues at various career stages, we set out to include and validate participants through enacting a ‘vulnerable’ feminist pedagogy. For us, this meant attention to unpicking the unequal power-dynamics in a pedagogic space by sharing our own struggles with writing and undertaking tasks alongside our participants; validating personal writing as an intellectual endeavour to disrupt masculinist notions of emotional separation from texts and creating space for a collective endeavour to re-think normative subjectivity of the academic expert as singular. This is exemplified further in (Danvers, Hinton-Smith, and Webb 2019) where we highlight how a key tenet of our practical pedagogic philosophy was inviting (and re-thinking) the seemingly ‘personal’ into the collective writing group and the doctoral text.

**Theoretical framing**

In this paper, we work with theoretical assumptions that destabilise taken-for-granted assumptions of the international student that position them in one way rather than another. Given our shared theoretical leanings towards post-qualitative methodologies, we are drawn to theorists who problematise conceptual certainties, including desires for discursive ‘mastery’. Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014) discuss mastery of doctoral
writing as that which is assumed to fall within a rationalist, and normative tradition of ‘command and control’ (1140). This amounts to a process that seeks to universally represent doctoral writing through a particular framing that centres on technocratic, skills-based, seemingly unproblematic instruments. We suggest that this conceptualisation is decontextualised – assuming a universal accessibility for international doctoral subjects who have written predominantly in English as a global language, and who appear, unscathed, in multiple international spaces, operating with comfort and ease. This figuration of the mobile doctoral researcher assumes that texts can be accessed, read and digested in global spaces of academic production in ways that transcend linguistic, cultural, social and embodied difference. Risk minimisation in this process is, as Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014, 1140) suggest, ‘an understandable inclination’. Dominant understandings of international students’ investment in their education are framed by discourses of marketised higher education in which risks and benefits have a simplistic and fiscal logic. Yet we see students’ intellectual journeys, and the associated risks, as being complex entanglements of emotion, sociality and materiality such that multiple and alternative logics arise that understand postgraduate studies as a transformative, ethical and intellectual endeavour.

This ideation of mastery is therefore about unequivocally ‘knowing one’s field’ (Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2014, 1140) and ‘being accountable globally for the claims it can make’ (1142). This representation of the doctoral writing process as ‘command and control’ mastery aligns to a dominant and assumed construction of the experience as one in which there is a known way to undertake writing and to do it correctly. While the term ‘mastery’ itself exceeds a neat definition, Singh (2018) regards it as having three key qualities: mastery mutilates, mastery subordinates, and mastery requires hierarchised relations. Her work probes how colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial discourses are shaped by the politics of ‘mastery’. Singh (2018) suggests a range of concepts which can serve as interventions into interpretive methods and political organising, and for the purposes of our paper, inform the practice of academic writing for international doctoral students. A form of mastery that comes under scrutiny in her work is ‘the disciplinary’. She argues that through the ways we are disciplined as thinkers and then discipline the texts we read and the students we teach, coloniality continues to shape most of what we do as academics.

Similarly to Singh (2018), Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014) suggest the need for problematising of mastery. Although they do not use the language of colonisation, anti-colonisation and decolonisation, they assert the need for a de-stabilising space of opportunity which champions an embodied approach to doctoral writing to re-think what it might mean to be ‘an authoritative writer’ (Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2014, 1141). They foreground ‘joy and risk at the heart of writing’ and invite some ‘instability and uncertainty of meaning’ into the process (1140). This has the potential to generate unexpected insights for the doctoral student that can be exciting, whilst also acknowledging that writerly anxiety can never be entirely banished. Crucially, Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014) assert that there are differences between the closed, mastered text and an ‘open invitational’ one (1144). Open texts are those that allow the reader in, including the examiner of the final thesis. In this construction, they emphasise a form of knowing that can be situated within the materiality, and spatiality and temporal specificity, of embodiment (Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2014, 1145). This means taking seriously the subjective,
temporal and spatial positioning of the international doctoral researcher, where mastery as beyond control means that ‘knowing is not treated as reducible to thought or the discursive’ (1145).

Hence, Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014) re-position the possibilities of doctoral writing as one where there is ‘mastery of mastery’ such that a text can be re-framed as authoritative and masterful by virtue of confidently pronouncing itself as ontologically ‘fragile, unstable, and ephemeral’ (1147). In this way, the masterfulness comes from the recognition of the doctoral text as always provisional and the doctoral researcher’s subjectivity open to transformation. Doctoral writing becomes connected to ontological vulnerability and precarity that can serve to produce and open up spaces to ‘write otherwise’ (Danvers, Hinton-Smith, and Webb 2019, 36). By both reading and writing with vulnerability (Butler 2016), there is the possibility for creating new ways of relating to our work and to each other, both intellectually and politically. Singh (2018) similarly envisions vulnerability as a vehicle for listening, reading, writing, and feeling which can gradually erode some of our engrained desires for mastery. This ties in with our approach to doctoral writing groups, whereby we urged students to let the process of writing surprise themselves, and to lead them in unanticipated directions that do not feel pressured to conform to the expectations of form or linguistic precision. Drawing upon Singh’s (2018) work, we asked our students to write outside of the confines of the desire to master a voice and specifically for our purposes, the desire to write in a recognisably ‘English’ voice.

**Researching and facilitating doctoral writing groups**

The data for this study comes from qualitative encounters in the form of 19 individual semi-structured interviews and one focus group with international doctoral students. Within these, we explored the impact of ‘internationalism’ on the experience of becoming doctoral writers and upon the texts produced. This involved considering what our doctoral writing group assumed, made possible and excluded.

We received a small grant from the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKISA) in 2018 to run a writing group and research the experiences of those taking part. Ethical Review for the research element of the project was applied for and given by the University of Sussex. This group ‘Writing into Meaning International (WiMi)’ emerged from prior incarnations of collective writing spaces (Danvers, Hinton-Smith, and Webb 2019), specifically developed to have a pedagogical focus on international students. WiMi took place over a single academic term with fortnightly 2-hour in-person sessions attended by 6–15 students. The group was facilitated by three of the contributing authors to this paper (with the first author attending as a participant), all of whom now work in the Department of Education at a UK research-intensive university. The group also ran as a day-long event at a similarly profiled university in a different city, attended by 10 students.

The intention of the groups was to create a space where students could re-imagine their writing, and through this, themselves as academic writers. A key pedagogic philosophy was to reject a dominant quasi-scientific enlightenment narrative of writing as an unproblematic outpouring of perfectly formulated knowledge from ‘brain’ to ‘page’ (Beach 2001). Instead, the groups explored the power of social and relational connections (Danvers, Hinton-Smith, and Webb 2019; Lillis 2001). This involved reflecting on writing
as dialogic, meaning-making in action, with the possibility of reframing writing as an entangled act of ‘becoming’ a researcher (Wegener, Meier, and Ingerslev 2016).

Those who took part in the fortnightly WiMi group were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to reflect on their experiences of developing their research writing in English. Attendees of the day-long WiMi group were invited to engage in an hour-long focus group to similarly share their experiences of being ‘international’ student writers. Participants across the interviews and focus group came from fifteen different countries, bringing experiences from diverse contexts including Egypt, France, Germany, India, Macedonia, South Africa, Taiwan and the USA. All were studying PhDs in social sciences or humanities.

The focus group and interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure names had cultural or geographic resonance to the participants. The initial analysis in 2018 constituted three of the authors (Danvers, Hinton-Smith and Webb) immersing themselves in the data and being attentive to what emerged or ‘glowed’ in the dataset, invoking meaning making as a process of wonder (MacLure 2013). We then worked collectively to discuss and generate initial themes before returning to the transcripts to ‘code’ using NVivo. With Mazanderani, we returned to the data in 2020 by ‘plugging in’ all our engagements with post-colonial provocations in the literature, alongside her specific reflections of being involved in the group as a participant. This process of analysis involved further individual immersion with the data and collective discussion on what emerged. Quotes were then selected that illustrated the theoretical claims we sought to make most powerfully.

As the three facilitators and one doctoral participant who subsequently took a faculty role in the department, we were mindful of the relation dynamics of such collective analysis. While seeking to democratise the research process through including voices of diversely positioned stakeholders as equally-valued contributors (Periera 2012; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002), we remain reflexive regarding the complexities of power imbalances as interred throughout fieldwork and analysis. We see such ontological and epistemological uncertainty around voice and representation as integral to carrying out feminist qualitative research (McKay 2002).

**Discussion: contortion, loss and moments for joy**

**Contortion and ‘othering’**

The first of three dominant themes we identified was the experience of students feeling ‘othered’ (Fabricius and Preisler 2015; Sovic and Blythman 2013). This emerged as a form of contortion, whereby some participants, in pursuing legitimacy and credibility through their academic writing, felt uncomfortable working the margins of the English language. Others recognised the inadequacy of their institutions in assuming that they should adopt a particular normative framing and expression of their work. A central concern for our additional language English-speaking participants was how they felt their use of English did not have the same level of nuance that a first language speaker would have. As expressed by Tariq:

> The English language is really strong in making analogies and making metaphors. This kind of thing is pretty cultural. Like, the codes, British codes … And it’s the same in Arabic. We use these things to kind of entertain the reader and kind of engage with them ….
Resonating with perspectives on the challenges of writing a doctoral thesis in a second language (Shen, Carter, and Zhang 2019; Xu and Hu 2020), Tariq had the competency of being able to ‘engage’ and ‘entertain’ an audience who spoke his home language of Arabic. He was not able to bring the same level of stylistic flair to his work in English and as such, the voice that he projected was not one in which he felt most confident or articulate.

The ability to write confidently in academic English was deemed so necessary to the experience of doing a PhD in the UK that one participant even suggested that ‘before international students go into a different country, they should really learn to write academic writing for that country to survive’ (Bianca). In this way, several of our participants felt the need to prove their worth and right to belong to their institutions:

I’m a foreigner, I was feeling under pressure. I should write good, I should explain it very well; otherwise, people won’t like it, my supervisors won’t like it, or they could even laugh … which is not the case, but I was putting so much pressure on myself. (Dinah)

The process of translation encompasses much more than mere words, with writing and language critically informing ‘what it is possible to do and think’ (Barad in Zapata, Kuby, and Thiel 2018, 10–11). Tamara indicated that:

As an international student I’ve spent a long time just understanding bits of the language or humour, things, and it takes a while. Because it’s so different culturally there is also I think … There is … You feel othered. So there is this very … It’s … I think it’s subtle. It’s not as inclusive. You don’t feel as included in things as you thought it would be.

Mumtaz similarly touched upon the challenge of navigating a different institutional and geographical culture when they said:

There is also … not just the language but the culture of it which I don’t think my supervisor can understand. She can’t understand it independently of me, so I feel that’s a huge problem.

Given the significance of the supervisor/supervisee relationship in shaping the experiences of doctoral students, several of our participants spoke about how the practice of writing was geared towards the gaze of their supervisor. Qi et al. (2021) identify the responsibility of supervisors to acknowledge the silent relevance of colonial histories to the unbalanced supervision relationship and how this informs knowledge legitimacy, including who is permitted to share personal experience as part of developing doctoral understanding. Our participants reported being engaged in continuous acts of translation – from explaining their country context to ‘expert’ supervisors who had never ‘been there’, to rewriting their ideas in a foreign language, all of which contributed to their positioning as deficit.

Resonating with existing insights (Zapata, Kuby, and Thiel 2018; Paré 2019), Roberto explained how, as a PhD student at a UK institution, he felt compelled to draw upon Western canons which were the established discourses against which all knowledge was legitimised:

Most of the time I feel frustration or anger because I don’t want to give them the dominant stance. I think that it is violent for me to take this approach … . A dominant view. I feel that this literature, those works, that way of thinking doesn’t understand what is going on in South America. (Roberto)
Roberto experienced a contortion of his research data in that it had to be expressed for a non-Spanish-speaking audience (including his supervisor) and in writing up his data, he was expected to draw upon ‘dominant’ theories to understand the experiences of his research participants in the Global South. He experienced this as embodying the position of ‘misfit’ in that:

> When I am in Chile, or Uruguay or Argentina, I think that the way that here people are thinking, I don’t fit there. So, it is quite confusing to be an international student.

Often students such as Roberto have already developed their own voice as professional/academic writers in their first language (Hirvela and Belcher 2001). The development of epistemology and changing conceptions of voice can be a site of struggle when students feel compelled to draw upon particular scholarly traditions over others (Paré 2019).

One of the key challenges, as expressed by Thandeka, was the pressure of having to ‘converge so many cultures’ and to present these in an ‘academic way’. Drawing upon Singh (2018), we consider this expectation to conform to particular standards to reflect the manner by which the legacy of colonialism continues to shape academic work (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018). Some of our participants felt pressure to master the English language and to write in an ‘academic way’, which in some cases required using theories rooted in Western academia. This reflects Singh’s (2018) recognition of how coloniality continues to shape academia, through the ways in which we are disciplined as thinkers, the texts we regard as authoritative and our approaches to teaching.

Some interviewees, however, challenged the construction of Otherness as difficult and awkward, whilst also acknowledging its conceptual construction as one of contortion: ‘international has the potential to create Otherness, doesn’t it, in a problematic way?’ suggested one Focus Group attendee, before going on to highlight its advantages, as they saw it, in providing ‘a space of mobility’. Similarly, some research respondents described having been placed in a position of elite acquisition within a global Higher Education market, as a consequence of acquiring the knowledge of its universal academic vernacular which gives them ‘a particular kudos’. Zainab captured this through their assertion of:

> One of the reasons I decided to do my Master’s and my PhD in English is just because I think that, nowadays, one of the things that is more important about research is reach, trying to reach people through journals or however to get citations and everything. And I think if you’re doing that in English, you have more of a chance. Then again, you also have more competition …

Another Focus Group attendee alluded to the possibilities for international doctoral researcher agency to re-shape and re-define some of the contorting parameters of what goes on: ‘We can make a space to shift the boundaries that are there’.

Other interviewees built on their awareness of global market positioning by also recognising the need to be able to draw on something distinctive and versatile with regard to their Otherness. Emilia identified themselves as: ‘Working in different languages [which] offers me the opportunity to play around with words.’ This was picked up by Mario who located their opportunities as beyond language and related to culture:

> I think that one great benefit is actually as a trans-cultural student being able to access different worlds, and different cultural systems.
This participant went on to speak about the access to different epistemologies and ontologies afforded by their mobile positioning and international academic dexterity:

I think that in many ways it [being an International doctoral researcher] broadens my research because I have access to texts and material and data in other languages, and it also gives you access to different academia or academics that belongs to like different kind of communities. (Mario)

**Ventriloquism as loss**

The second theme we identified was the notion of risk and loss. Participants spoke of experiencing expectations of unfamiliar ways of writing that felt disconnected from what had been previously understood:

You know like it’s a different way of writing ... In India we’ll be expected to expand on people’s theories. Here we are expected to have a perspective about it and justify why we need that theory at all. (Mumtaz)

Doctoral students convey receiving clear messages around writing convention, such that ‘you’ve just got to accept it and learn how to do it the UK way’ (Bianca), and that the supervisors’ way is the right way: ‘my supervisors keep telling me that I’m barking up the wrong tree’ (Maria). Academic ‘mastery’ can be perceived as only legitimised through learning to write in the voice of the supervisor, what we have conceptualised as a kind of ventriloquism. What often seemed to be lacking from the wider doctoral experiences of participants, but appreciated in the writing workshops, was a space legitimating the right to write in ways that validated the existence and meaning of personal reflections, whereby international doctoral students could explore ways of ‘knowing’ differently. Many students described the challenges of doctoral writing in a foreign language:

If I start to think of something in a language, it’s not always easy to switch over because then you lose terms that are commonly used in the field and stuff like that. (Zainab)

The affective impact of managing this process is identified by Carter, Smith, and Harrison (2021, 284) whereby ‘candidates manage a fractured multiply-layered reality that includes panic and despair that are masked when they step into their professional persona’. The idea that something is *lost* in the process of meeting the demands to write in particular ways came through strongly:

I understand a lot of English while I’m reading it, but I have the feeling starting writing, that my words are quite limited or that I often start sentences so similarly. (Abdullah)

This resonates with Behar’s (2011, 55) observation about ‘the frustration of knowing an idea you wish to express to a teacher but not knowing how to say it in English’. This dislocation or loss extended beyond anxieties around technicalities of language to impacting the authenticity and integrity of writing’s meaning:

The flavour doesn’t come out the way you want it to come out you know. So, maybe the other reader who maybe be reading it English might not see that flavour in it, which maybe if it was written in local language, then the meaning becomes so rich. So, it loses its meaning in the process of translation. (Pertunia)
Participants writing across languages conveyed feeling disconnected, caught between spaces:

For me it is confusing to be an international student working across languages and cultures, because I don’t know where my location is. The first problem that appears to me and has affected me in my writing, is that I am in the middle of these two worlds, and in my head, they are super different. (Roberto)

What emerged was a trade off in an exchange (Bakhtin 1981) where personal narratives and languages must be sacrificially given up in order to secure something in return (Thesen and Cooper 2013):

My supervisor and most of the professors, they speak just English. And that is why I am doing the translation. In my point of view, the ideal situation would be that they be able to read in Spanish also, if they are working with Spanish speakers. Otherwise it’s impossible to convey what I am trying to do in my interview, or my fieldwork notes, or the conference that I went to and took notes; they are all affected adversely also. It is lost, sometimes. (Roberto)

Bilecen (2013) conceptualises this transaction in terms of a trade-off through which international doctoral students will return home after their doctorate with something, having an influence on the reputation of the university and, later, of the country. There is the assumption here that the mobile doctoral researcher will master texts that can be accessed, read and understood across global spaces of academic production in ways that transcend linguistic, cultural, social and embodied differences. Yet as exemplified in the quote above, Roberto demonstrates the impossibility of mastering the fullness of his research in this way.

Moments of joy: what did a writing group offer?

As the previous two sections described, international doctoral students’ writing across language and cultures was predominantly experienced in terms of disconnect, loss, translation and contortion. Our doctoral writing group then, became a space to bring in and explore these tensions by giving specific permission for, and valuing of, affect. Using Singh (2018) and Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014), we recognised how the normative expectation to produce ‘mastered’ texts silences diverse and multiple ways of knowing and of representing knowledge. Our writing groups sought to acknowledge doctoral writing as ontologically ‘fragile, unstable, and ephemeral’ (Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2014, 1147).

Writing was positioned as an embodied encounter such that feelings about writing as an international doctoral student were not just invited into the group but legitimised. For example, we asked participants to freewrite their feelings in relation to their emerging academic voice and facilitated a process of feedback on drafts in which recognition was given to the affective dimension of this dynamic. It was also central to our feminist ethic as practitioners to invoke a discourse of vulnerability through locating ourselves clearly within the writing process. This evokes Singh (2018) who explores how ‘mastery’ discourses rely on hierarchised relations. To disrupt this as facilitators we sought to foreground and normalise our struggles as writers at different career stages. For example, one facilitator shared their perception of their own academic writing as improving, both in terms of the writing produced and their pleasure in the process, when they began to contextualise personal experience within their work.
Many of our participants described experiencing the group as a joyful and freeing space. In particular, there was relief in understanding how personal struggles were not individual but shared:

The first thing, I guess, would be the realisation that I’m not alone, to feel lost in this maze of writing a PhD thesis, you know; so knowing everybody felt almost the same as what I’m feeling, that is really reassuring. So you don’t feel like you’re a freak, so it felt really nice to be amongst a group of people who understand how you feel. (May)

Even though it may be commonly known, it does help to have other people very clearly saying, I’m struggling with this too. (Leila)

In these quotes, the notion that others were similarly lost brought a sense of relief at discovering a shared orientation, and a normalising of such uncertainty within doctoral writing. While it is understandable to feel buoyed at not feeling your feelings alone, there is something more than this in the collective discovery of writing as meaning-making. This is eloquently stated by Zainab who says: ‘I cannot, for the life of me, explain something until I started writing it’. Recognising the difficulties of producing texts and the entanglement of researcher and research within this, speaks back to instrumental discourses of research and writing as seamlessly transferred from idea to page. As explored by Barnacle and Dall’Alba (2014, 1145) mastery as beyond control means that ‘knowing is not treated as reducible to thought or the discursive’ but is an embodied act of meaning-making.

In contrast to the often lonely, insecure endeavour of academic writing, this group collectively asserted academic writing as – ultimately – pleasurable. As facilitators of the group invoking a feminist pedagogy, we deliberately moved away from the ‘boot camp’ or ‘shut up and write’ that operates as a dominant discourse of university writing support (Rowtho, Gopee, and Hingun 2020). The use of freewriting and creative prompts such as drawing and poetry invoked the space as ‘safe’ to be and to share together differently, as fellow writers:

It was more relaxing ourselves and free writing … In that sense, it was really useful, and I didn’t feel an outsider. I think in that environment there were many students who were international. I was not afraid of being criticised or judged by other people. I remember a nice feeling, to be honest. (Dinah)

A space to be comfortable around the difficulties of writing is particularly important for international doctoral students who may already feel outside or othered by the academy’s writing practices. While it feels good as facilitators to know we sparked joy, there is more to this than the warmth of pedagogic evaluation. Our doctoral writing group offered affective possibility (e.g. that it was okay to struggle) and epistemological freeing (e.g. that knowing is a situated and contested practice). This produced something very deliberate for one participant:

We did an exercise about our writing process … we visualised it in form of a river. And this was really helpful for me to see the different steps. How studying in different cultural and language contexts affected my writing and also my pleasure for writing. (Emilia)

The ‘river of life’ activity asked students to consider what and who influenced their journey towards their texts. This participant felt this invited her to consider the role of
culture and language in shaping and enriching her writing. This was valuable to her as an international student to not side-line her international-ness but invite it in. Relating to the theme of dislocation, this activity emphasised how doctoral writing emerged with, and was an inseparable part of, students’ histories and identities. Given the aforementioned feelings of disorientation and dislocation, we recognise the value of writing groups whereby writing is located within the writers themselves, rather than belonging to a specific space or time. As such, we argue for doctoral writing groups which recognise the entanglements of texts with the different cultural identities of the students themselves.

**Conclusion and pedagogic recommendations**

Our data indicates the ways in which some international doctoral students felt othered and excluded when having to navigate different institutional and geographical spaces. Participants expressed being engaged in continuous acts of translation – from explaining their country contexts to supervisors who had never ‘been there’, to altering their ideas in a foreign language. Although the pressure to present research academically is not unique to international doctoral students, we are concerned by the received normative expectation that international doctoral students need to ‘learn how to do it the UK way’.

Writing groups do not provide a panacea to the tensions of increasingly unwelcoming spaces of higher education which privilege certain ways of being and knowing over others, but our research indicates that they have the potential to create environments which speak back to singular paradigms. This is particularly important given the spatial disparities in the globalised knowledge economy whereby Western bodies, knowledges and languages dominate and whereby, in the case of our findings, international doctoral students feel compelled to draw upon dominant theories in order to meet the expectation of their supervisors and institutions. This requirement to write with a perceived level of authority (Barnacle and Dall’Alba 2014) has implications for how students are able to occupy and decolonise academic writing spaces, including how they can engage their own expertise through writing.

While some of our participants demonstrated feelings of dissonance in relation to academic writing, others saw their position as ‘international’ providing a ‘space of mobility’. In this construction, the act of writing is a means to ‘shift the boundaries’ and a space through which to navigate and articulate ‘different worlds, and different cultural systems’. As such, we argue for the creation of writing groups which allow doctoral students to ‘play around with words’. This recognises the entanglements of academic writing with the languages and cultures that writers represent and celebrating this as a means for generating richer and closer academic texts.

A limitation to this article is the framing of ‘international’ doctoral students in broad terms, which does not account for diversity among the students themselves. As indicated at the start of this paper, our focus was to consider the experiences of students who self-identified as ‘international’ within the context of UK higher education. By exploring how our participants felt ‘othered’ through the process of research writing, we hope not to have characterised these students as ‘the other’ in a binary opposition to local students. Instead, by attempting to convey the range of different responses, both negative and positive, towards the process of academic writing, we hope to have represented our research
participants as agents who not only reproduce their own multiple subjectivities but also question the discursive positionings assigned to them by others (Koehne 2006). That said, we feel that further research on the role of doctoral writing groups needs to consider the tensions of academic writing as experienced by students deemed both ‘local’ and ‘international’, given that feelings of disconnection with the process of academic writing are felt more widely across bodies of both students and staff (Murray and Moore 2006, 28). In turn, while our writing group encouraged students to write themselves into their accounts, future iterations of such groups should provide more opportunities for doctoral writers to freewrite in a range of different languages and to more explicitly address the possibilities and impossibilities afforded through translating their ideas and texts.

The construction and evolution of students’ voices in thesis writing is a process of interactions with others (e.g. supervisors and research participants among others) and the contexts within which it is produced (Xu and Zhang 2019, 3). Given this, we consider writing groups which invoke feminist pedagogies as providing meaningful additional spaces to free up the thinking processes of the writer. We do not feel these spaces are sufficient in and of themselves. Our research indicates the need for supervisors and institutions to engage more with the processes of ontological and practical uncertainty and vulnerability produced through the writing of a thesis. As the data to inform this paper was collected prior to start of the COVID-19 pandemic and its corresponding emergence of online modalities, we have not addressed how online writing groups might provide alternative spaces for students to re-think their relationship with writing. This is a pertinent area for future study, given the possibilities of international students being able to write in a virtual collective that reflects multiple points of origin and experience.

While students will require a range of support in the writing of the thesis, this paper demonstrates that procedural, technical and productive writing support should be accompanied with reflective and potentially joyful spaces to free up the practice of writing. This should foreground writing as an affective practice, which may be helpful in making space for and legitimatising the intensities experienced by international doctoral students constituted as ‘other’.

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