





‘It Is a Nice Way to End the Week’: Journal Club as an Authentic and Safe Learning Space

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The doctoral journey involves the development of significant research skills, one being the ability to critically engage with the literature in one’s field. One way that doctoral scholars can better develop this imperative skill is through participation in a Journal Club (JC)—also endorsed in Frick’s chapter as a form of environment that strongly fosters creativity development. Often informal and unofficial in nature, these can be considered ‘hidden curriculum’ within doctoral education through serving as

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authentic pedagogical spaces for learning (Elliot et al., 2020). Through collectively discussing and critiquing articles, JCs offer an interdependent space in which scholars arguably learn together about the more implicitly hidden approaches for independent critical engagement with literature that are expected of postgraduate researchers (see relevant concepts in Wisker's chapter, e.g. Fridaying.) While widely used within medical and health fields, JCs are less common and not usually part of the official curriculum within the solo pursuit of doctoral scholarship in the Social Sciences and Education. The limited empirical understanding of how JCs shape doctoral experience warrants an exploration of their potential benefits for these scholars. We, therefore, conducted an autoethnographic analysis of our participation within a JC as a multidisciplinary group of doctoral scholars in Education. Our exploration was guided by the following question: What does being part of a monthly journal club mean for developing researcher independence of a group of doctoral scholars?

RESEARCH ON JOURNAL CLUBS

One approach helping doctoral scholars reach their academic goals more effectively is Journal Clubs (JCs). JCs involve a group of scholars who meet to read and critically discuss articles from the academic literature. JCs offer flexible paths for students to take turns being the leader (i.e. the designated person who facilitates the session) while other participants contribute to the discussion (Swift, 2004). It is a form of interdependent learning whereby peers rely on and mutually benefit from their exchanges with one another. Scholars have found that employing JCs with multidisciplinary participants can lead to increased academic proficiency and prowess in learners (Honey & Baker, 2011). In the doctoral context, the potential benefits of interdependent JC participation on independent learning would be beneficial to understand, as developing critical appraisal and analysis skills are central to completing a doctorate.

While research demonstrates the various benefits of engaging with a JC, some scholars question their usefulness, arguing that JCs are less effective than self-assessment and have limited influence on critical appraisal skills (Alguire, 1998). Sidorov's (1995) survey on JCs within the medical profession across 131 residency programs in America highlighted necessary factors for their effectiveness. First, attendance rates improved for JCs when run independently of the faculty but supported by them, and second, mandatory attendance and benefits such as making food available

add to their effectiveness. How these recommendations may benefit PhD scholars' participation in JCs remains unclear.

Swift (2004) argues that the environment plays an important role—beneficial outcomes are reduced if members turn up late or do not engage with the group. Swift also argued for the importance of a responsible leader for overall effectiveness. Within higher education, JCs serve as a complementary component for a variety of purposes, such as enhancing academic writing (Good & McIntyre, 2015) or encouraging a community of practice (Newswander & Borrego, 2009). However, as published studies of JCs have mainly been carried out in clinical and medical fields (e.g. Good & McIntyre, 2015; Harris et al., 2011; Honey & Baker, 2011), the research is limited. More thorough research is warranted to understand the role of JCs for doctoral students' development as researchers.

RECIPROCAL DETERMINISM AS A LENS FOR EXPLORING DOCTORAL DEVELOPMENT

Reciprocal Determinism (RD) offers a useful framework for how JCs may support the development of researcher independence. This theory underlines that human functioning results from the mutual and continuous interaction of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors (Bandura, 2001). Personal factors entail an individual's personality traits, beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive processes; behaviour pertains to an individual's actions and learning; and environmental factors encompass the physical and social contexts that influence behaviour. RD underscores the multifaceted nature of human behaviour, which is shaped not only by personality or environment but by their continuous interaction. The theory highlights the pivotal role of personal factors, which dynamically shape individuals' behaviour, with the environment reciprocating these influences (Bandura, 1978, 2001). Comprehending the intricate interrelationships between these factors is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour.

Within the context of our own study that we carried out on JC, and drawing from this theory, behaviour can be considered as the contributions individuals make to the JC, their conduct during its proceedings, and the resultant changes in their learning. Personal factors encompass individual attributes that affect their participation and personal growth. Furthermore, the environment refers to contextual factors of the JC

setting that exert an influence. Doctoral scholars' independent learning and involvement (behaviour) may be influenced by both their attributes (personal factors) and the interdependent group dynamic (environment), and vice versa. For instance, participants reading the article beforehand (behaviour) may learn from their interactive contributions to the leader's questions, fostering a positive learning environment (environment) and motivating the individuals involved (personal). Because RD facilitates bidirectional interactions between doctoral scholars' learning experiences and their personal characteristics situated within the interdependent JC environment, it offers a framework for our exploration of JCs on developing researcher independence.

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF OUR OWN JOURNAL CLUB PARTICIPATION

We centred our exploration around our own JC, where six doctoral scholars and two academics met on the last Friday of each month to have a focused discussion on a participant's choice of article. Our JC, one of the activities within our monthly doctoral group meetings, was additional to regular individual supervision meetings (see Elliot & Makara, 2021). Taking turns to lead each discussion was key. An article was chosen by the leader and shared with the group a week before each meeting to encourage advanced reading and reflection. The discussion of each article was primarily guided by a list of questions (see Appendix). Such questions aim to cultivate good thinking and academic judgement, as explained by Peseta et al. in their chapter.

In order to understand how JC shaped developing researcher independence, we explored individual reflections that we wrote while participating in this JC. The autoethnographic approach we took authorised us to draw from our subjective and personal experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2022) and write 'in a highly personalized style', with a view to enhancing understanding of a specific phenomenon. Autoethnography emerges from ethnographic traditions, a distinct form of research that is 'concerned with the ordinary' and aims to generate an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon by seeking a group's perspective in their 'natural' settings (Harding, 2019, p. 35). Autoethnography's empowering genre is in line with the notion of personal narratives, lived experiences, or reflexive writing (Wall, 2006, pp. 146–149).

Due to the autoethnographic nature of the exploration that we undertook, it did not require ethics approval. However, we carefully considered rigour and ethics through being transparent about the research process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and taking collective responsibility for data processing and analysis. Additionally, we used pseudonyms to protect our real identities. Table 1 shows the JC participants.

Over five months of taking reflections, we generated 24 monthly written reflections from seven members. In order to make sense of the reflections, an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Braun & Clarke, 2021b) was employed using these steps:

- Preliminary analysis of a set of reflections in pairs to identify patterns grounded in the data. This involved carefully reading the reflections line by line, colour-coding the written text in pairs, and cross-checking the codes with the other paired researchers.
- Individual analysis of a set of three to four reflections each.
- A group discussion on the emergent themes through review of codes, trends, and patterns.
- Collective cross-checking of the themes to see whether the themes fall into specific categories for defining the main themes and sub-themes.

Through iterative analysis to refine these themes and ensure collective agreement, we arrived at six sub-themes, grouped into the three components of the Reciprocal Determinism model.

Table 1 Participant profile

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role</i>
Su	Female	1st year PGR
Melissa	Female	2nd year PGR
Emily	Female	2nd year PGR
Irn	Male	Final year PGR
Aibike	Female	Final year PGR
Madelyn	Female	Supervisor
Gabrielle	Female	Supervisor

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING THROUGH JOURNAL CLUB

Our exploration suggests that JC supports multiple dimensions of learning, both (1A) academic learning and (1B) personal learning. Participants in the Journal Club (JC) reported *academic learning* as one key dimension of their experience, referring to learning about different aspects of research, for example, research methods, writing empirical journal articles, and critically reviewing research. Engaging with different studies through JC helped participants gain a deeper understanding of specific methods, such as ‘using a creative research method’ (Aibike), or more general understanding of research, including ‘insights into the core values of delivering good research’ (Irn).

It allowed us to explore a new component of academic writing (journal requirements in other disciplines) and to explore a different analytical approach (content analysis). (Madelyn)

Furthermore, participants reported that the JC helped them develop academic writing skills and they were able to learn from the writing style of the articles they read. For example, Su noted, ‘I learned that clearly introducing and identifying a theory and constructs/concepts in a paper was critical’. This was echoed by the supervisors as well, with Gabrielle reflecting that the JC discussion led to a ‘greater awareness of the standards required for a published paper’.

Engagement in JC also helped participants gain new insights into themselves. *Personal learning* refers to new insights and reflections about oneself in terms of research, choices, beliefs, and attitudes. Participants wrote that the JC provided a space for self-reflection, and discussions at the JC challenged their assumptions and helped them grow as researchers. Both Emily and Irn offered examples of such gradual but explicit improvement.

I will need to be able to defend my positions, without letting the emotional connection to things which are part of a lived experience prevent me from doing this professionally and respectfully. It is a challenge, but it is a necessary one and I hope that I continue to improve in this area. (Emily)

...discussing resilience gave me the opportunity to think about my own journey as a PhD researcher who was already in a later year than my peers while also cross-benefitting the development of my ideas on another project on the [PGR] resilience. (Irn)

PERSONAL ASPECTS RELEVANT TO THE JOURNAL CLUB EXPERIENCE

Personal aspects, including (2A) evolving emotions and (2B) sparking a personal link, were also important aspects of developing researcher independence. *Evolving emotions* refers to how JC participation elicited a range of emotions, which changed throughout the process. Participants' emotions were heightened during JC, and they experienced a diverse range of emotions, from stress and worry to excitement and confusion.

Leading up to this meeting, I was actually really nervous. ... Stressed! Worried about offending anyone. ... I felt proud of myself after finishing the seminar that I didn't disregard my own beliefs to make the conversation "easier" as this would have left me feeling awful after. So although I found it a very difficult process, it was also rewarding. And being able to have these learning moments in a welcoming space with my peers was calming. (Emily)

Participants reported that they felt safe expressing their emotions in the JC as there was no fear of judgment. Instead, JC provided a supportive environment that allowed them to express both positive and negative emotions. This was articulated by Su who shared her doubts concerning participation in the journal article discussions:

Although it was sort of stressful for me to prepare for and attend an academic discussion because negative thoughts such as 'you're not good enough to do it' or 'you don't have the skills to contribute' occurred, it was beneficial to slow down and examine such thinking process while simultaneously seeking out the positive aspects—the actual situation may not be as bad as I had imagined. (Su)

Participants also highlighted that the JC *sparked a personal link*, which involved them making connections between the JC experience and their own research. Discussions within the JC felt personally relevant and they were able to apply what they learned to their own research:

Although the article is not in my research area, there are still some points to inspire me. For example, the authors used google form to recruit participants online, which gave me a new thought about the recruitment of my research. (Melissa)

Participants noted that the JC helped them meaningfully reflect upon their own doctoral research and make connections to other research areas. This can helpfully encourage their sense of developing academic identity. One of the supervisors, Gabrielle, was excited to see the doctoral scholars making these connections: ‘I was eager to see how members made the connections between the paper and their own research. It’s a useful activity for “joining the dots”.’

EXPERIENCING THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE JOURNAL CLUB

Based on our exploration, influences from the environment of the JC included a (3A) supportive pedagogical approach and (3B) positive group dynamics. Participants reported that the JC provided a *supportive pedagogical approach* that was conducive to their learning. The use of guiding questions for leading the discussion was mentioned by several as a useful instructional guide for helping to focus on what matters within the articles.

...by deeply engaging with the guiding questions and trying to find answers to them in this article, I have developed a better understanding of the structure/elements of a good academic article. (Aibike)

Participants also noted that the JC provided a welcoming pedagogical space that allowed for active interaction, perspective sharing, collective learning, and discussion. The concept of space was mentioned several times:

This isn’t something that would have necessarily been apparent to me without having the space to discuss things in this informal way. (Emily)

It’s a safe space to put forward their views, to challenge ideas and concepts from the authors whose work they read. (Gabrielle)

Positive group dynamics were also a key feature of the JC, referring to when participants found themselves in a friendly and relaxing environment

with one another that supported engagement, and, in turn, led to enjoyable and productive working. To experience positive group dynamics, a combination of several factors is seemingly essential. First, almost everyone highlighted the added value of seeing and interacting with one another in person. Second, they commented favourably on having 'a welcoming space' to assist active interaction and discussion—including topics that invite 'opposing opinions'.

Third, the regularity of the JC meetings embedded them into these scholars' routine activities. In both supervisor and doctoral scholar passages, the Friday JC meetings have become something members look forward to—'like a treat' after a long, busy week. Madelyn, a supervisor, noted: 'I like having the journal club on a Friday, because all week long at work I am dealing with a lot ... it is a nice way to end the week'. The sentiment was echoed by the doctoral scholars as well:

The seminar itself was very enjoyable. ... We even got snacks which always puts a smile on my face! I also enjoy that the sessions are on a Friday. After a long week of GTA work, intern work, meetings and writing, ending the week seeing familiar and friendly faces feels like a treat. (Emily)

JC AS AN AUTHENTIC AND SAFE LEARNING SPACE

While JCs are scholarly activities, they are neither considered as 'curriculum proper' nor something in which doctoral scholars typically engage. As in our case, JCs are often not institutionally supported and instead, are informally created leading to an incidental form of learning. Despite being confined within the hidden curriculum, they arguably channel genuine doctoral pedagogies (Elliot et al., 2020), sharing similar principles with 'constellation mentoring' where members act as mentors and mentees and mutually support each other (Li et al., 2018, p. 567). The platform offers space for socialisation—invaluable in doctoral learning—and serves as 'a source of reciprocal learning and enrichment' (Elliot, 2023, p. 114). Within this authentic learning space, not only are multiple dimensions of learning fostered, but a wide range of emotions are generated. Although members reported a wide array of heightened emotions, these were displayed in a 'safe' and 'enjoyable' context. This then enabled members to make connections between JC activities and their own research. Supportive pedagogical approaches including the guide questions and the positive group dynamics reinforced participants' learning experience.

TAKING FORWARD JCS FOR DEVELOPING RESEARCHER INDEPENDENCE

Bringing the findings from our exploration together, we offer a model (see Fig. 1), building upon the framework of Reciprocal Determinism (Bandura, 2001), to represent the mutual interactions found between our learning through the JC, personal aspects relevant to our participation, and the environment of the JC. In this way, our exploration suggests that the developing researcher independence of doctoral scholars can be thought of as interdependence through continuous and mutual interactions with one another within the environment of the JC.

The findings contribute to the literature on the benefits of JCs (Honey & Baker, 2011), expanding this to the context of doctoral study in Education, and suggesting informal JCs offer a valuable and safe interdependent learning space for doctoral scholars' independent research development. The organisation of such 'hidden' learning activities enhances scholars' comprehension of theories, methods, arguments, and academic writings. A further benefit of JCs is the potential for supervisors to encourage their supervisees to take part in scholarly debates and arguments, out-with regular supervision sessions. Supportive instructions such as guide questions can be employed to enrich the pedagogies employed. In contrast to Sidorov (1995), our findings did not suggest a hindrance from

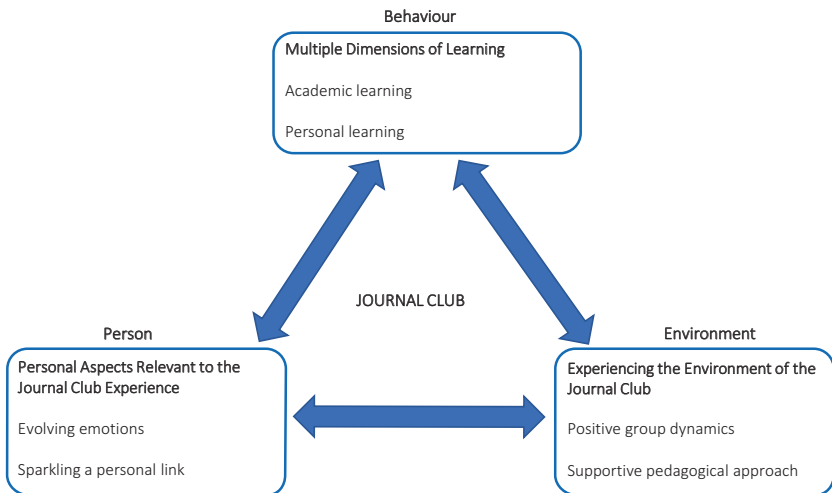


Fig. 1 An adapted model of reciprocal determinism: doctoral scholars' independent learning through interdependent participation in a Journal Club

participation alongside supervisors, yet we did find similar benefits regarding the provision of food. However, this would not preclude doctoral scholars independently designing their own JCs, perhaps where more senior members could take initiative to scaffold the activity for their peers. Finally, institutions can offer support through facilitating appropriate comfortable learning spaces and ensuring JC remains voluntary and one's contributions are not judged.

Taken together, whereas JCs are likely to exist on the periphery of doctoral education, our autoethnographic evidence contends that the doctoral experience emanating from them is instrumental in developing scholars' researcher competence and independence. As a fun and safe space, JCs can offer the opportunity for authentic collaborative learning, including but not limited to the building of doctoral scholars' understanding of how to critically engage with the research literature in one's field.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest Nothing to declare.

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APPENDIX: GUIDE QUESTIONS FOR THE GROUP DISCUSSION DURING THE JOURNAL CLUB

Guide questions for group discussion:

1. What are the key terms in this article? How did the authors define them?
2. What is the purported 'gap' in the literature that this paper tried to address?
3. What theories have been considered? What is the underpinning theory used in this article?
4. Identify one or two arguments from the authors.
5. How did they collect research data? Give an example how the authors justify a methods-related decision.
6. What did they do to convince the readers of the validity/trustworthiness/credibility of their findings?
7. How do their findings offer new insight?
8. Identify a phrase that is worth citing or quoting as it may have some relevance to your research.
9. What is the contribution of this study?
10. Identify examples of study limitations.

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