



# Blogging: Connecting Research Communities Online

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Claire Aitchison, Susan Carter, and Cally Guerin

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## Abstract

The demand for higher degree research qualifications is growing in response to the requirements of the knowledge economy, greater international competition for and mobility of students, and increased demand for research and researchers. As institutions struggle to keep up with the changing forms and requirements of doctoral education, students and supervisors appear to be turning to alternative spaces for learning and networking, notably in the sphere of social media.

This chapter reports on the establishment of an academic blog on doctoral writing, *DoctoralWritingSIG*. We draw on notions of connectivism (Downes, Connectivism and connective knowledge: Essays on meaning and learning

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C. Aitchison (✉)  
University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA, Australia  
e-mail: [claire.aitchison@unisa.edu.au](mailto:claire.aitchison@unisa.edu.au)

S. Carter  
University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand  
e-mail: [s.carter@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:s.carter@auckland.ac.nz)

C. Guerin  
University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia  
e-mail: [cally.guerin@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:cally.guerin@adelaide.edu.au)

networks. Stephen Downes Web. Available at [http://www.downes.ca/files/Connective\\_Knowledge-19May2012.pdf](http://www.downes.ca/files/Connective_Knowledge-19May2012.pdf). 2012; Siemens and Mattheos, *Education* 16(1):3–18, 2010) to describe how the blog developed its own community networked across countries and disciplines bringing doctoral students into fruitful exchange with a wide set of doctoral educators.

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**Keywords**

Graduate student writing · Online learning communities · Social media

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## Introduction

A unique confluence of pressures and changes in higher education – and particularly in research education – has propagated an extraordinary assortment of responses that harness the affordances of technology. Social media, especially, has empowered entrepreneurial individuals to create vibrant communities, often independent from their institutional homes, for the purposes of collegial support and for the co-construction and exchange of knowledge and practices.

Much literature suggests that the doctoral student experience has historically been characterized by a lack of community, leaving students feeling isolated and unsupported (Pyhältö et al. 2009). Metaphors of solitary endurance abound (Aitchison and Mowbray 2013; McCulloch 2013). The intensely personal pedagogical space of doctoral supervision (Grant 2010) and the accelerated, competitive, and audited state of contemporary academic life (Billot 2010) may well also be contributing to feelings of isolation and alienation within the tenured and “precarariat” academic workforce (Carrigan 2015). In addition, it has long been recognized that doctoral writing is a difficult, and often lonely, task (Lee and Williams 1999) for which appropriate help is not always available (Kamler and Thomson 2014). Even diligent supervisors may find it hard to give good advice on how to develop doctoral writing (Carter and Kumar 2016; Paré 2011).

Seemingly at odds with these circumstances, there has recently been a remarkable explosion of communities of researchers networking online. Every day, individuals interact through blogging, Facebook, and Tweeting, and these activities are increasingly incorporated into researcher behaviors as natural and routine forums for social and professional exchange. Global communities of student researchers use social media as platforms for communicating research: for disseminating work, for asking questions and receiving advice, for profile building, for learning skills, and for reflection throughout the processes of doctoral candidature (Carrigan 2016).

Less well recognized is the relatively slower, but nevertheless important, uptake of social media by more established academics. Early studies of such activities show that academics value the collegiality arising from participating in online communities or “virtual staff rooms” (Mewburn and Thomson 2013). As well, academics reap the benefits of professional exchange and information dissemination (Carrigan 2016).

In this chapter, we outline how the *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog developed as a networked community across countries and disciplines to connect students with a

wide variety of doctoral educators. We use the conceptual frames of connectivism (Downes 2012; Siemens and Mattheos 2010) and community of practice (Wenger 1998) to explore the unexpected popularity of the blog among research students and how traditional pedagogical spaces of student and supervisor are expanded and hybridized in this environment. We use these two theoretical frames as we reflect on the still evolving practices that bind us as a community of bloggers, followers, and readers.

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## Research Supervision: Opening the Closed Space to Community

It is clear that the rapidly changing doctoral education environment is spawning a plethora of national, institutional, and individual responses in the provisioning of higher degree programs and researcher development. Within the pedagogical space of doctoral education, technology and community are centrally implicated.

At the coalface, learning how to *do* research and *be* a researcher is no longer exclusively the terrain of the student–supervisor dyad. Alongside massive and global shifts in the way that research education is perceived, funded, and stimulated by high levels of student mobility and diversity within a hugely competitive global “knowledge economy,” this previously confined pedagogical space has opened out (Fourie-Malherbe et al. 2016; Nerad and Evans 2014). Ownership of and responsibility for learning is more dissipated and dispersed. Research degree study now involves a variety of learning sites including voluntary and compulsory coursework, departmental programs, and student and supervisor development opportunities provided by central units such as graduate schools, learning centers, and academic development units. And, aided by the online environment, these expanded pedagogical spaces include globally networked online forums ranging from sanctioned fee-paying programs to independent, free, community-oriented doctoral education goods and services (Aitchison and Mowbray 2015).

This busy, conflicted, and changing environment harbors tensions between older entrenched practices and the energetic embrace of the new. The clash is most acute in the pedagogical spaces of supervision. On one hand, digital innovation abounds, and on the other, some research reports that doctoral students and their supervisors are relatively slow to take these innovations into their workspaces (Dowling and Wilson 2015; Sim 2015). This reluctance may arise from an understandable hesitation to take risks in a context of accelerated pressures for performance and output (Aitchison et al. 2015). Doctoral supervision and doctoral scholarship operate at the pinnacle of academic endeavor, and yet, until recently, there has been limited research and scholarship in the field, perhaps prolonging the resistance to new pedagogical approaches in some quarters. Nevertheless, while relatively few technology-enhanced modes are being embraced by institutions, a huge revolution is occurring outside their direct purview.

Online digital technologies are essential to contemporary research scholarship. These technologies have not only transformed the way that we do research (consider, e.g., big data repositories and algorithms) but also how we write about (e.g., online

immediate translation, grammar and editing, and automated writing technologies) and disseminate research (epublishing, blogging, and digital databases). There has never been so much academic output so widely available both through traditional channels and via alternative modes. Increasingly we see social media operating, in tandem or independently, to promote, recirculate, critique, and appropriate this information and these forms of information (Carrigan 2016). For example, academic blogs and blogging are increasingly part of the doctoral student experience. Blogs such as the *ThesisWhisperer* (52,000 followers) and *PhD2Published* (3.2K likes) have an extraordinary global reach (Retrieved from *ThesisWhisperer* website 16 May 2016 and from *PhD2Published* website 16 May 2016).

The proliferation of technologies and software such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Tumblr, YouTube, Google+, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Pinterest, Flickr, and Instagram expands opportunities for connecting scholars into dynamic communities centered around disciplinary homes, personal, or research interests. Such “open participatory practices” are enabled by “global and continual connectivity” (Siemens and Mattheos 2010).

“Connectivism” is a theory of learning that takes account of how both information and people are connected, with a particular focus on digital networks (Downes 2012; Siemens and Mattheos 2010). This perspective understands knowledge as “distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks” (Downes 2012: 9). Going further, Downes explains:

Knowledge is literally the set of connections between entities [. . .] Learning is the creation and removal of connections between the entities, or the adjustment of the strengths of those connections. A learning theory is, literally, a theory describing how these connections are created or adjusted.

Connectivism is intimately linked with the rise of “social and participative web [Web 2.0]” technologies which have afforded “new modes of creating, validating, disseminating, and reusing information” (Siemens and Mattheos 2010). In this digital environment, individuals become creators of knowledge as they participate in the sharing of ideas and opinions, often via social media.

Successful doctoral writing requires high levels of dexterity to identify and manage multiple knowledge domains and social networks. Learning for doctoral candidates means that they are identifying connections between pieces of knowledge and sometimes creating radically new connections between existing ideas. The learning undertaken during a PhD requires the independent navigation of the vast networks of information that already constitute a chosen field. Students must demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of how scholars have made connections between items of knowledge, as well as an appreciation of the nuances of the strength or weakness of various connections. For example, writing a literature review requires categorizing (i.e., grouping some pieces of information in the ways that they are connected to each other and delineating the separations or disconnections between those bundles) and articulating a hierarchy of knowledge

in the given field (i.e., making connections between those categories). In turn, those new connections are critiqued by other scholars linking into the networks of scholarship.

The connections afforded by social media, and especially academic blogs, are representative of an expanded scholarship and of new and democratized ways of undertaking scholarship. Blogs have the potential to alter not only the distribution but also the production of knowledge. As Bouwma-Gearhart and Bess (2012: 250) argue:

The use of the blog for communication of in-process research and ideas may constitute not only an improvement in academic productivity but a significant transformation of the very culture of academic research.

Blogs can engage authors, collaborators, discussants, and reviewers in the production of knowledge simultaneously at the points of construction and dissemination. These kinds of knowledge communities are no longer bounded by time and space, nor even disciplinary and institutional norms. Arguably, there is a radical shift occurring between cognition, expression, and identity construction (Carter et al. 2014). Blogs create a space for new constructs to emerge.

Blogs and blogging communities range from individual, highly personal sites to professional, collaborative, steered topic-specific blogs. “Boundary communities of bloggers” are likely to be smaller communities with heightened levels of trust by virtue of the limited numbers of identified users and restricted participation (Katz 2001). Other blogs are fully open to readers but may have restrictions around authoring rights and content, with centrally monitored participation. Some blogs bring communities of writers together to coauthor in real time.

Garrison and Anderson (2003) argue that blogs establish community by *social* and *cognitive* presence particularly because the nature of blogging is to foreground reflection. Blog posts are more likely to be understood by both the author and the reader as thought-in-process than other forms of academic work. In this way, the blog operates as a third space, an “invisible college” for academic discourse “to move thought into the social realm, by presenting facts, ideas, and requests for assistance – and ultimately build knowledge” (Halavais 2006: 120) – and intellectual and social connections beyond corridor conversations.

The growing popularity of blogs is evidence of interest in this more open, democratized way of operating. For researchers, especially those in isolated communities, who are doing independent research or with unsatisfying supervision, the community and the learning opportunities offered by blogging are a welcome and powerful addition to doctoral scholarship. In addition, doctoral researchers look to these digital platforms as places where informal learning occurs: here they can connect with others who share their research interests, develop fruitful exchanges with peers (instead of with established “authorities”), and actively participate in creating knowledge by collectively thinking online.

Connectivism describes knowledge in terms of networks created from “nodes” and the connections between those nodes. These metaphorical “nodes” can be bodies

of knowledge or information, or people who hold that knowledge, or resources (such as blogs, websites, and traditional publications). Learning occurs at points of connection between people, ideas, and artifacts. The *DoctoralWritingSIG* website can thus be understood as a node or “hub” that creates a social network, bringing people together online to share their ideas as readers, writers, and commenters. In turn, this node then ripples out in multiple directions continually (re)connecting ideas across the web.

*DoctoralWritingSIG* blogs on issues concerning doctoral writing in its broadest interpretation. The blog style includes personal reflective posts as well as extensive information about writing pedagogies and practices. Posts that share personal experiences and that deal with practical applications of writing pedagogies seem to attract doctoral students. We suspect that this is partly because it allows novice scholars to seek specific information at the moment it is relevant for them. A blog can facilitate knowledge production at several levels: it is possible to read posts entirely anonymously, to comment on ideas presented, or to contribute a blog on a topic of interest. *DoctoralWritingSIG* authors include both doctoral students and credentialed academics, writing teachers, and other doctoral education practitioners. Thus, in our experience, the blog seems to have facilitated movement into a community of practice through degrees of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). Our community of readers and contributors learn by watching and through participation.

Next we document more extensively our experiences of how connectivism and community operate in the *DoctoralWritingSIG* as we review its origins and operations.

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## The Origins and Purposes of the *DoctoralWritingSIG*

The *DoctoralWritingSIG* is edited by three academics from different institutions located in different towns and countries. This cross-border collaboration emerged from recognition at the 2012 Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference of a shared interest in the complex practices of doctoral writing. We wanted to investigate and address the challenges of doctoral writing, “the problems of knowledge production, text production and self-formation [that] are complexly intertwined at the point of articulation” (Aitchison and Lee 2006: 268). Because doctoral writing entails a transition of academic identity within the social context of gaining acceptance into a discourse community, learning how to make these multi-purposed maneuvers frequently puts emotional stress on students and supervisors. Often, too, students and supervisors have different expectations of how to manage the feedback, response, and feedforward cycle (Carter and Kumar 2016). Our aim was to create a forum for those involved with doctoral writing by building a networked community of academic developers, academic language and literacy specialists, and supervisors – and, we thought, perhaps some doctoral students may be interested too. More needed to be said, we felt, about the intriguing, perplexing, and often vexatious practices of doctoral writing and its support.

The 2012 Quality in Postgraduate Research (QPR) Conference established a Special Interest Group (SIG), which we, the authors here, offered to facilitate. Initially, we proposed a listserv for sharing ideas and resources. However, encouraged by Inger Mewburn, well-known for her blog the *Thesis Whisperer*, we experimented with an expanded, open forum and eventually established the blog.

We manage the blog by taking turns in 4-weekly blocks to author posts and maintain the site: answering emails and accepting comments, retweeting, and occasionally reblogging the posts of other bloggers. Each post is usually reviewed by all three editors so that we perform the process of giving and responding to feedback even as we write. We have written elsewhere about the way that the blog community sustains us individually and benefits our work within our institutions (Guerin et al. 2015).

Although we produce traditional, scholarly publications about doctoral writing (e.g., Aitchison and Lee 2006; Badenhorst and Guerin 2016; Carter 2012), the blog allows us a vibrant space for reflective writing. The blog site lets us experiment with ideas that emerge from teaching within our institutions, which in turn may develop into research articles and always feed back into our teaching practices. There is a mutuality of transaction: often posts emerge from bits of our own research or from teaching material that we use in classrooms or as supervisors. An organic cycle of ideas, thinking, and recognition of the problematics we see in doctoral writing practice smoothes the fragmentation that results from the pressurized neoliberal environment.

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## The Communities and Practices of *DoctoralWritingSIG*

From our beginnings in 2012, we noticed a growing readership, including, to our initial surprise, a large following of doctoral scholars who significantly expanded our community beyond our initial target of other academics and supporters of doctoral writing. There is satisfaction in the fact that this extended community more accurately reflects the fluidity of doctoral education, revealing the shifting identities of doctoral and supervision scholarship and a more distributed learning space. Our blog incorporates those who make up the social biosphere of doctoral writing with its various layers of pleasures, conflicts, and challenges.

Our blog posts cover many interrelated aspects of doctoral writing that emerge from working within this community. As we analyze 4 years of weekly posts, a number of recurring themes are evident: feedback on writing; close-up, sentence level concerns; digital technologies for writing support; researcher identities and experiences as writers; and how doctoral writers negotiate research cultures.

Working across these categories, we note the individual embodied student and supervisor experience and the emotions and identities of those who sit around the writing table. Responses to blog posts confirm that heightened emotions seem endemic in the exchanges around doctoral writing and erupting from the pressures of writing time management (Carter and Laurs 2018; Morrison-Saunders et al. 2010). The post that has attracted the most comments is on mother guilt and the doctorate. It



addresses the dual identities and roles that doctoral student mothers need to mesh together, admitting to the guilt that is often felt about neglecting children in favor of doctoral study. Exchanges continue years on with commenters building community by encouraging and supporting each other.

The human dimensions of those significant networks of support beyond supervision are important (Aitchison and Guerin 2014). The post with the most views is on writing the thesis acknowledgement page and observing the etiquette of thanking appropriately. We think it attracts interest because there is little advice on how to appropriately execute this important social and academic etiquette. People matter in the identity transition of doctoral candidates. Connectivism's emphasis on the links between people, ideas, and artifacts is demonstrated in the reader engagement with the blog posts.

Then there are textual negotiations. The doctorate is defined by its *written* demonstration of conceptual expertise. Sometimes blog posts unpick the generic expectations of the doctorate or the mechanics of language. Increasingly, software applications support doctoral writing and supervision exchanges, so one series was given to the various tools that academics and students use. In this series, guest authors shared their experiences about what worked nicely and what was problematic: the series enabled communal exploration of that developing practice where reluctance to take up digital affordance signals a need for practical advice.

Our guest authors contribute substantially, building this knowledge community as a human network of support and collegiality. *DoctoralWritingSIG* guest authors include doctoral students as well as other doctoral education workers. Guest bloggers may email us with a proposal for a post, and at other times, we identify them – perhaps following a published paper or conference presentation or through local exchanges about practice. Guest authors submit posts that we subject to the same editing that we give our own.

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## **Possible Futures and Implications for Distributed Pedagogical Practices: New Communities for Learning and Belonging**

Our experience of creating a community of practice (Wenger 1998) engaged in “networked participatory scholarship” (Veletsianos and Kimmons 2012) occurred at the intersection of an apparent lack of helpful spaces for genuine conversations about good practice, combined with the ready ubiquity of social media as a vehicle for our objectives. We set out rather naively to work in a medium about which we knew very little, and over time we discovered new ways of working and building knowledge and community. But, what of the future? Is this kind of activity a legitimate and sustainable academic endeavor? What is the future for self-starters like us operating outside formal institutional structures? Is this a model that could be taken up by institutions? And if so, what might be the ramifications, benefits, and cautions?

Blogs have many different styles and models of ownership, formulation, and management. Recognizing the power of social media, few universities these days would not have a host of social media platforms closely integrated into advertising



and image management strategies. Increasingly in education we see examples of social media being taken into the mainstream. Social media – especially blogs – are now commonly integrated into learning environments. Institutions are also seeing the benefit of institutional blog spaces that are semi-independent of specific courses, disciplines, and faculties. Sierra Williams argues that university-managed blogs offer a more realistic space for the exchange of ideas than the “outdatedly atomized” institutional disciplinary structures (2016). The London School of Economics is one example where an institution’s profile has benefited significantly through the *Impact of Social Sciences* blog: “considering investment and running costs, university blogs certainly punch above their weight” (Williams 2016).

*The Conversation* is an example of formal academic “blogging” funded by universities for a broad reading audience. This online “newspaper” now has editorial operations in Africa, the UK, the USA, and France, as well as in Australia where it originated. *The Conversation* is funded by contributing universities and has a considerable reputation.

There are simultaneously a growing number of independent academic bloggers and blog sites, about which there is little research. They vary in quality and longevity, and (in keeping with the nature of blogging) many seem to evolve and change over time. It sometimes appears these forms are uncertain of their purpose and audience. They are mostly seen as adjunct activities conducted outside the main work of academic scholarship. The fluctuation and fragility of blogs calls for research into why some blogs founder where others increase in profile. We suspect that in part ours has thrived to date because the three of us work supportively together and benefit substantially from this connection in our lives. The blog also creates a space for the kind of reflection on practice that has very few alternative outlets in doctoral education particularly.

When we established the *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog, our endeavor from the outset was educational and collegial. This mandate raises particular issues: How is legitimacy determined? Who are the “imagined” colleagues? In our case, our association with a major international conference (QPR), our public persona as published academics, and our individual connections to institutions provide a certain degree of “legitimacy” and authority. However, the blog is not formally associated in the sense that these connections provide funding or oversight, nor are we restricted through formal obligations. We (so far) have operated freely in terms of our content and practices. On the other hand, we recognize that the “good reputation” of the blog is something that needs to be carefully maintained, and we feel a high degree of responsibility as its custodians to ensure high standards, accuracy, reliability, and value. This involves a high degree of self-awareness and common perspectives about quality, value, and usefulness between the three editors. We recognize that we are in a pretty special place. There are benefits and risks.

Our privileged situation brings responsibilities and vulnerabilities. We are only as good as the blogs we post and the community that supports us. We recognize that we need to work actively to stay in touch with our community and nurture the relationships that infuse doctoral education. The kinds of activities that build community and reciprocity, such as constant networking through social media, communicating

through conferences, and being proactive in seeking out new voices, contributors, and ideas, all take time. And, because for most of our community, this blog work isn't formally recognized by our institutions as a workload activity, time is a significant inhibitor given the already accelerating pressures on us as academics. But operating outside the purview of an institution also brings benefits and protections: our community operates outside the political conflicts and tensions that characterize academia and inhibit so much real scholarship, debate, and thinking.

To return to our starting comment, we initially imagined the *DoctoralWritingSIG* community would consist largely of people who support doctoral students: supervisors, academics, and language developers. This community now includes doctoral writers alongside professors, librarians, and literacy advisers who write with and for us and construct a community that builds knowledge and shares practices around writing. The entry of doctoral writers into this community is likely to counter the isolation PhD students may otherwise experience. It would seem that these candidates are facilitating their own learning in informal forums that operate outside the traditional institutional hierarchies, embracing the values of open digital scholarship. The blog, as an online network, expedites the principles of sharing and collegiality.

In our experience, blogging has truly been inspirational. We have cemented otherwise fairly casual relationships with a host of other practitioners working across a wide range of institutions and countries and from quite different disciplinary and methodological orientations. Many are now valued colleagues in this new community of practice. It has been a stimulating journey. While we operate, successfully so far, outside the formal learning spaces of the academy, we are part of what appears to be the growing system of "shadow education," providing both academics and their doctoral candidates with what they aren't getting from formal arrangements. On one hand, this could be seen as a potential problem for the academy; on the other, some would argue that the valuable exchanges, knowledge construction, and shared practices occur largely because of the absence of institutional oversight, control, and interference.

Social media is still new and evolving. It is a place of fluidity where personal professional and institutional boundaries collapse; the locus of control is uncertain, perhaps unattainable. Institutions are envious that these platforms are the places where real debate and exchange so often occurs. We are lucky to be part of this; we hope that research students will also continue to connect with this community.

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