

## Deeply Digital in Shallow Times: Writing Communities in the Shadow of the Pandemic

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**Abstract:** Recent studies have confirmed profound mental health concerns within PhD student cohorts. Phrases like ‘imposter syndrome’ pepper student narratives of their candidature. This article explores one intervention in this tale of mental health concerns, attrition and disappointment. Exploring a born-digital writing community termed the Write Bunch, we investigate how communities can be formed that enable support and success, compassion and excellence. This study is particularly noteworthy because the interruptions of COVID-19 were managed through already existing support structures.

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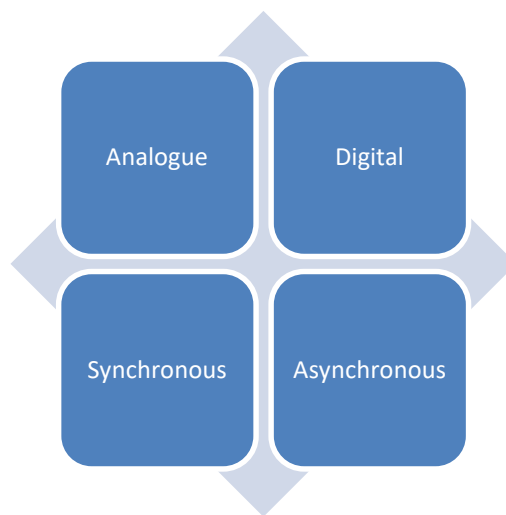
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### **1. Start the Call (Tara's Introduction)**

It was April 2016. I had just commenced as Dean of Graduate Research at Flinders University. I realized how higher degree programmes were clouded with clichés and nostalgia. The assumptions about higher degrees were completely disconnected from the reality of the contemporary student cohort. Neoliberal 'research training' duelled with homological assumptions about students serving the national research imperatives and needs of their supervisors. The first week I started work, I attended a meeting where higher degree students were described as "slaves." Even more horrifically, the participants in this meeting laughed at this description.

As I researched the backgrounds of our students, I saw that Flinders University had an unusual higher degree cohort. Women dominated the student numbers. The institution also offered another countervailing data set from the presumptions of doctoral education. When entering Google images and entering the phrase "PhD students" into the search engine, young white men – frequently in lab coats - dominated the returns. Our students were different, dominated by women, they were older and of diverse races and nationalities, and commenced their degrees in their mid to late thirties. A large minority were part time. A large minority lived outside of the capital city of Adelaide, and – indeed – the state of South Australia. Our students were regional and international.

Therefore, when I reviewed the provision of 'research training' for higher degree students before I commenced my post, I realized that the way that higher degrees had been supported maintained the assumptions of an earlier time, targeted at young men, straight from an honours programme and enrolled in the experimental sciences. Yet to make changes, the transformation had to be evidentially-driven. After reviewing the literature of online learning, I implemented some radical changes, clustered around the phrase the "digital doctorate."



After developing these four media sectors, I could track their best use for diverse students. Analogue synchronous platforms include lectures, tutorials and training delivered in a classroom. Analogue asynchronous is demonstrated through reading library books or reading chapter drafts on paper. Digital asynchronous platforms incorporate email. Digital synchronous platforms encompass Zoom, Collaborate or Microsoft Teams meetings. Each of these sectors, and the media they contain, dialogue and spark innovative interfaces and options for higher degree students. The goal of this matrix was and is to build community, communication and collaboration.

While many options and platforms are available, learning and technology are not synonyms. They must be aligned with intent. Simply because a technology is used, does not mean that learning takes place. An unwatched online lecture is pointless, as is an unheard podcast. Recognizing the necessity to connect learning and technology with care and respect for our students, many innovations burst from these quadrants. A weekly vlog series, where I produced a short film each week on topics requested from students, became the best known of these trajectories, with millions of views (OGR Channel, 2021). This platform was created specifically for regional and part time students, so that they would feel part of a community. This was a digital, asynchronous innovation, slotting into the work and caring responsibilities of students. Training for supervisors was delivered in person, but also via podcast, and via flipped instruction, where a short video provided the introduction to the group discussion. This flexibility ensures that academic staff – wherever they were positioned in their career – could customize a package to suit their needs.

From this beginning of my term as dean, I wanted to deploy synchronous interfaces – either by analogue and digital means – with precision and care. Through my career, I have critiqued the recording of analogue lectures, assuming that content can digitally migrate without researching the relationship between form, content and audience (Brabazon, 2002). If digital materials are to be created, then they are best summoned with planning and intent, rather than as an accidental product of an analogue experience. I needed to know our students, and how they valued time and content. With so many students in full time work and with caring responsibilities, time was precious and important. With our students in many different time zones, synchronous communication and connections needed to be considered with care. Students would be excluded through location. Therefore, I had to manage synchronous and asynchronous media decisions with a recognition of the opportunity cost in building a communication system. Therefore, reading groups were held synchronously and then the recording disseminated via podcasts and video. Reading groups have a long history in leisure-based practices (Osborne 2002). I was concerned about the isolation of students, and with the research pointing to the value of writing groups such as Shut up and Write, I thought this may be an option.

There is an evocative – if small – literature on doctoral writing groups (Acker & Haque, 2015; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Cahusac et al., 2011; Cooper, 1986; Ferguson, 2009; Hunter and Devine, 2016; Kozar and Lum, 2015). These sessions are confirmed as providing emotional support during an isolating candidature. Vacek et al. (2021) have summoned the “collaborative autoethnography” and “personal writing ecologies” of these writing groups. These communities were recognized as being of profound benefit to those in paid employment and with family and caring responsibilities, “improving work-life

balance” (2021, p. 105) and returning balance to a research career. The imperative for this support was recognized as creating a community of “persistence” (2021, p. 106).

Having researched the cohort of students and the strategies to build communities for reading and writing, I commenced my new job. From the second week of my term as dean – after publicizing a new writing group in the previous week’s email/newsletter – five students logged into Skype at 10am. None of them knew each other, or me. We introduced each other, wrote silently for 30 minutes and then opened our microphones to talk about what we have written. We were on our way. Sue was one of these participants. Unmute Sue.

## **2. Inclusive Regionality through Weekly Writings (Sue Charlton)**

An addiction? A habit? Call it what you will, but Friday morning is earmarked for the Write Bunch. It is not difficult to outline the benefits and research growth engendered by this group. What is more difficult is sharing the personal change this group has been responsible for in supporting me to the completion of my PhD. Commencing as a regional part-time PhD, whilst maintaining a physiotherapy practice in a multidisciplinary pediatric practice, it was easy to feel at a great distance from the University campus. My supervisors urged me to immerse myself in campus activities, a campus with which I was not familiar and which was a great distance from home and work.

An invitation to join the Write Bunch introduced me to a wonderful and changing world wide group of Flinders University students at various stages of their PhD studies. The continuous exhortation and encouragement to write regularly, "to put the problem into the writing," as Tara Brabazon used to say, slowly grew my ability to write and to share what I was writing.

The Write Bunch is an international group, coming together to share our research and writing experiences. All are higher degree students of Flinders University. All are studying in different faculties and all are learning from each other. We share not only writing experiences, but also supervision challenges, publishing opportunities and collaborative possibilities. Time zones may be different, but we all come together at the same South Australian time.

My week revolves around Friday mornings. Truly, our family's and friends' weeks revolve around Friday mornings. It is essential to be on my computer, with good Internet availability and the ability to be actively involved in conversation as we share a week in writing, Covid, lockdown, supervision and family. Then - heads down - we write for 30 minutes, with a discussion afterwards. Our trips around Australia have been structured around where we can connect for one hour on Friday morning. From far North Queensland outback station country, to the southernmost coastal areas of South Australia, in parks, cafés, halls and libraries, I have called in hoping the connection will last, the place will not be too noisy and the others will enjoy their coffee during this enforced rest time in their travels.

This group has spurred me to write on a variety of issues, some related to my research studies, others about diverse local issues. Although my research degree is now completed, I still look forward to Write Bunch mornings with the same enthusiasm anxious to know if others have submitted or gained results. There is joy in following the continued writing and research of others in the group, those in the early stages of their research and others who have also completed their major study.

### **3. PhD ↔ Writing (Tara)**

Sue Charlton – Dr Sue Charlton – was in our first cohort, from the first week. A remarkable woman, a regional Australian woman, she ran her physiotherapy private practice in Mount Gambier in South Australia. Her supervisory experience was variable, and the support structures were not welcoming or enabling. I learned from Sue about the weaknesses of doctoral education from a regional perspective, and what we can do to rectify these challenges. She was the first participant and our agent for the changes made to the programme (Brabazon & Charlton, 2019). As always with teachers, our students taught me what I needed to learn. I was the dean who learned how we needed to supervise for new times. The Write Bunch allowed me as a dean to listen to our students, and learn how to improve.

What became clear is that the connection between PhD students and their writing lives is troubled. Yet, it matters. As Montserrat Castello, Anna Sala-Bubare and Marta Pardo stated, “research writing is a mediator of knowledge creation and epistemic discussion, as well as of research development” (2021, 480). Often writing is considered a tool of knowledge. But it is a tool that is challenging for so many students to use. Flinders University was unusual in terms of international doctoral programmes. Young people on scholarship were a small minority of our students. The programme was dominated by women, and a sizeable minority held a declared disability. But also, most of the students were a great distance from the suburban campus. Yet students – overscheduled with family and work commitments – were a crucial and important group. Jessica has described her ‘life raft’ writing group.

### **4. The Write Bunch Life Raft (Jessica Thomas)**

As Sartre argues, existence precedes essence. We become our choices. Doing a PhD during a pandemic is like learning how to swim while being swept up into stormy seas. I accept that I chose to swim, however I did not foresee the pandemic which thrust uncertainty onto an already difficult journey. I like the unknown. I consider myself an adventurer and that is what attracts me to research. The discovery. The chance to develop new knowledge. However, doing a PhD during a pandemic was like learning to swim in the research sea when a global storm blew in with waves of uncertainty to the height of which none of us had ever seen before.

Completing a PhD underpinned by existential philosophy makes me acutely aware of the choices I make. My choices have provided me with a full life with emotional, physical, and intellectual challenges. I am a mother to young twins, a wife, an academic, an ultra-marathon runner, and a concurrent PhD and an MD student. Each challenge I take on requires a support team. A group of beautiful humans who ‘get it’. This is true of running, of mothering, of teaching, and of research. I have learnt, the bigger the challenge, the stronger the support network needed. Undertaking a concurrent PhD and MD is challenging, however, the Write Bunch are an elite bunch of supporters.

Essence, Sartre argues, is the principal purpose, the defining characteristics (1960, 28). The essence of the Write Bunch is of a life raft, a protective space. The writing group provides a weekly structured timeslot in my hectic life. A space to think, to create and to feel safe. A life raft is always there, often collecting dust in the good times. We get on with our lives, not thinking about it during calm seas. Life rafts do not ask much from us, no real maintenance required, but it is something we can depend upon when the

inevitable research storms blow in. The Write Bunch is like this, a low-pressure peer group, ready to pop into action when needed.

Finishing a PhD, we are told, is often about persistence, the ability to endure, to outlast the ongoing abrasiveness of setbacks. The Write Bunch has heard my tales of woe, they listen as I describe how I have fallen and watch as I get back up again. They see me when I am exasperated at supervisory situations, after I receive a rejection from a journal. However, they also see the highs when I win scholarships, receive paper acceptances, the triumph when the research knits together and the analysis works. They witness the moments of mundane grinding in between. It is the mundane moments when I need them less. But like a life raft they sit quietly and wait for when protection is needed.

I have been involved with the Write Bunch for close to four years. During this time, some of the members of the group have remained but several have come and gone, and new faces have become familiar. What remains constant is a group where members lift each other up. A protective space which keeps us afloat. We come from different disciplines and many of the group undertake research in areas with which I am completely unfamiliar. However, what we do have in common is the writing journey. We have a passion for research, to discover and to understand. The shared journey is what unites us. There is no judgement in this group, things are as they are, we laugh together, share our expertise and knowledge. The life raft provides a safe space to process our experiences of the doctoral journey, to feel validated and less alone. It is this feeling of psychological safety, of connection to something larger and stronger that has helped to keep me afloat.

## **5. Writing in ISO (Tara)**

Monty Python, the great comedic scholars of the absurd, once shrieked in a skit, “no one expects the Spanish Inquisition.” Similarly, when I commenced my term as Dean, I never predicted a pandemic. What was rarely discussed during this dreadful time was the pressure on higher degree programmes. If we closed the labs, offices and libraries, then projects and candidatures would die as rapidly as unfed rats in a rat lab. If we kept the university infrastructure open, then we were threatening the health of our students. It was a tough paradox of leadership. There was no right answer, no solution without consequences. I note that institutions, such as Auckland University of Technology, experimented with the creation of online communities for coursework postgraduate students during the lockdown in Aotearoa / New Zealand (Rangiwai, 2021).

At Flinders University, we were more prepared than most universities because we had been working on the digital doctoral project for two years, ensuring that an array of digitized support structures and co-curricular opportunities were available for our regional, international and part-time students. Therefore, with social distancing in place and agile response times, the Office of Graduate Research remained physically open each day, and the online suite of asynchronous and synchronous media and platforms increased in number and customization. In many ways, the digital doctorate rendered our PhD programme pandemic-ready. The Write Bunch had always met online – via Skype. Nothing changed. And everything changed. Most precisely, a large group of our student-writers each week were in lockdown. Some were in isolation. Therefore, the company was even more important. This was a productive internationalization.



### **7. International Community (Julie Brose)**

The PhD journey is not one of isolation; rather, the experience is shaped by the people you are surrounded by. I chose Flinders University to pursue a PhD under Dr Deirdre Morgan, a highly respected researcher in the field of palliative care and occupational therapy. As a distance student living on another continent, remaining attentive to the task of writing required intentionality and initiative. The Write Bunch provided a weekly timeslot to connect with other PhD students outside of Adelaide. This community was more than 30 minutes of writing; it became a space for PhD students to share ideas, discuss concerns, and develop strategies. PhDs were written, and life was shared. It was a place to grow and learn from one another, celebrate the birth of babies and papers published, grieve deaths, process other losses, and, most importantly, to encourage one another in completing our PhDs. When life is busy and time is short, we set aside slots of time for the things that are important to us. One of the important commitments woven into my weekly routine over the course of my PhD was the Write Bunch. Although the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of community for many, the value of groups such as the Write Bunch has been evident throughout the course of my degree. In the weeks following my submission, I remain thankful for the opportunity to conduct my research through Flinders University, not only due to the high quality of mentorship provided but also for the Write Bunch community.

### **8. Sharing Time, Not Space (Tara)**

Julie's presence in the Write Bunch was a constant reminder that internationalization is the privilege and gift of doctoral education. The gift of synchronous digital communication – if the timing is chosen well – is that students from many nations can share time, if not space. That is why the Write Bunch was effective in building a community in a way that a writing retreat would not be (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). This was not a community of practice, but it was situated learning. All academic research takes place in a context. What the Write Bunch confirmed was that academic writing in a community allows diverse individuals and cultures to align, albeit temporarily (Olmos-Lopez & Tusting, 2020). This complexity is enhanced when students move their enrolment, research and lives through the candidature. As employment, underemployment and unemployment increase through and after the pandemic, our universities must manage this transformation.

### **9. Managing Change (Susan Witt)**

What does it mean to be a member of the Write Bunch – or the Right Bunch as we often nickname ourselves!? Completing a PhD can be a lonely journey. And it is hard. Hard to motivate yourself. Hard to know what the next steps are. Hard to work through a process you've never done before. And it doesn't matter what you read or who you talk to before you begin on this journey, it is different for everyone. And it is not until you are walking down the road yourself that things come together, and you really understand what it is all about.

For me, I am working remotely. Initially, I was in Darwin and my supervisors in Adelaide. Now I live in Germany and have a mixed team of supervisors here and in Adelaide. With so much change and turmoil in my life, the Write Bunch has remained a constant, positive, supportive force to motivate me to keep on writing. Yes, membership comes and goes but the positivity and encouragement remain strong week after

week. It doesn't matter that the time difference often precludes me from participating in person as the social chat continues outside the designated meeting time and is equally heartening. I concur with the thoughts of Julien and Beres (2019) who write that they did not identify social support as a key goal for writing but it emerged as a very important outcome. It is difficult to quantify the value of such a group but for me, it has certainly helped my journey.

#### **10. Remembering the Students (Tara)**

Our universities must remain student-focused organizations. Too often issues that matter very little – involving brittle leadership, empty Key Performance Indicators, or limited configurations of ‘industry partnerships’ – gain undue emphasis. As Ralf St. Clair has confirmed, “administrators do not add anything to the institution unless they enhance and support that creation of value” (2020, p. 4). While our understandings of ‘value’ remains variable and contested, there must remain a recognition of how students define this term, and how it marinades their enrolment.

The Australian Research Training Program is the legislation that confirms the funding arrangements for the completion of higher degrees. Introduced in 2017, no funding was offered for student load or student progress. This process resulted in an institutional emphasis on completions, without attention to how these completions take place. Therefore, initiatives such as the Write Bunch receive no funding, no prioritization and little publicity. They create completions – but they are not completions. However, for a group that reveals heightened attrition rates in doctoral programmes – women, students with impairments and disabilities, regional, rural and remote students – the Write Bunch is a key initiative to support, care for, and render visible this important group.

This community was important, meaningful, and created deep relationships when the mental wellbeing of students was – and is – of international concern (Beasy et al., 2021). What became clear is that the Write Bunch was a game of two halves. Thirty minutes of writing together – in silence – was followed by thirty minutes of conversation as each participant discussed what they had completed, and the progression of their thesis, and their lives. Stories of writing became slotted into the narratives of a life in and through a doctorate (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Rebecca's capacity to align the narratives of research and the researcher rendered her the muse of the group.

#### **11. The Mew Unmutes (Rebecca Mew)**

I am a full-time student who lives a mere twelve minutes away from the Bedford campus, the main location of Flinders University. I have a shared office space in the Humanities building. In the early days of my PhD journey, I felt by joining the Write Bunch I was taking up the community writing space dedicated for remote learners that I understood at the time as rural, interstate and international higher degree students. This was not the case at all. Tara was so welcoming and encouraging regardless of whether I was a corridor, a building, a state, or a country away. As my first weeks progressed, and I made a compulsory dork of myself in the upper righthand box of Skype, I felt more comfortable with taking up a seat at the academic digital table and unmuting my microphone.

At times, when thesis writing for thirty minutes was a struggle, the suggestion of applying ourselves to low hanging fruit proved valuable. This meant different things for different people: engaging in reference



checks, formatting, ORCID or LinkedIn updates, industry placement employment searches, mapping out abstracts, a reflection, topic sentence construction, rejigging section headings or timeline overviews. It was general thesis busy-ness. But no matter how small or seemingly pithy, these tasks achieved something and still provided an opportunity to sit in the Write Bunch space with others, listen to their wins and misses from the week and hear Tara's advice (pen at the ready!). When invited to say my bit during these times, I could still comment on an element that drove my project forward and did not feel like an imposter or time-waster. I was accountable for that section of time.

Sometimes I was bursting with questions, wanted to share a break-through or an amazing novel. Sometimes half an hour felt like five minutes. Sometimes I just wanted to say something silly and make others laugh. Other times reading glasses, excessive mascara or Skype's blurred background effects did nothing to mask tears or the overwhelming nature of the project. Tara could always sense these things. It was a strange occurrence that the mood of the collective whole generally undulated in sync without prior discussions or contact.

It has been an absolute inspiration to hear stories and see the mosaic PhD journey each student, each person, each friend undertakes whether at the beginning or celebrating its completion. In this community we have been seen and heard, no matter the discipline, no matter the age. One hour on a Friday morning has meant so much.

## **12. Understanding Doctoral Diversity (Tara Brabazon)**

Rebecca captured the two parts of the Write Bunch: the quiet writing component, and the shared experiences of that writing. Solitude and community. Quietude and sound. The shared silence was rare, and special because education is noisy. Lectures and tutorials and seminars involving talking with others. Yet reading and writing are quiet. Rarely is silence studied in educational settings. Silence can be a confirmation of power or summon seething resistance. Yet rarely are opportunities created for shared silence. The Write Bunch created a "state of soundlessness" (Alerby, 2020) to build a community. But as with all silences, it is not absolute. The Write Bunch was punctuated by the clicking of keys by participants. This soundscape created predictability and community, a shared slice of quietness, broken at the end of thirty minutes by a shared discussion about writing. It also enabled a reflection on the nature of research, learning and writing. As Maive recognized, the joining of the shared silences and experiences was so important.

## **13. Joining (Maive Jackson Collett)**

I joined the Write Bunch on 5.9.2019. I was baby to doctoral education in every way. This was a pre-Covid moment in an internet world. I first learned there was a human called Tara Brabazon when I was writing a theoretical scoping paper for a master's degree. I found an amazing article on 'How not to write a PhD thesis' (Brabazon 2010). Clarity. I thought okay follow that advice for this paper. I did. This resulted in my highest grade at post-graduate level.

I saw Tara's name on Facebook and sent a friend request. It was too good to be true but when not home alone, introverted, I am bold and outgoing. She added me. This moment and everything that followed catapulted me into a strange new world. I had been previously ill, knowing there was no PhD for me. As

I started to recover, I saw a Facebook post. Anyone wanting to do a PhD could participate in a #DocFest #Flinders online day. I asked to attend. I was sent a link and had never experienced Zoom before. Remember pre-Covid 19?

In a space between discussions, I was invited to pitch my idea. I did. Could I send an email with that? I could. I did. Boldly again I asked could I participate in the Write Bunch the next day? I had no idea what it was, but it sounded like hot butter on toast. I have mega dietary requirements so that is a metaphor of delight. Yes. I could. I'm in. Wonderful Write Bunchers. You know who you are.

Two years later. In the Write Bunch, I reflected weekly on my PhD. I did it instinctively as a hangover from an education bachelor where I studied Stephen Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (1995, p.115). I modified that to five relevant questions, the main one being what surprised me this week? I also looked for universal moments, big changes and themes for later writing. I also noticed what I called tacit learning. When Tara and peers with much more experience than me dropped pearls of wisdom, I knew I did not need them now but they were going into the seed bank of my mind. I wrote them down every week.

This silent online writing group was discussed by Tara Brabazon and Sue Charlton in their article on regional education (2019, p. 15). This group still holds me when I am low. I have a secretive nature, rarely revealing my issues. Yet it still holds without the reveal and celebrates my achievement and plans on other occasions.

The result is our comrades in silent writing complete their PhDs. Tara sometimes finds it hard to receive praise. She has a rare deep listening capacity and humility in one so successful. I wish her 'every best wish' which is her own signature. My little life is inspired by her example and stellar leadership. There are vlogs, the Write Bunch, and I have had the incredible privilege of calling her, my supervisor. The Write Bunch for me was also a catch-up with my supervisor. In the conclusion to *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau says, "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live and could not spare any more time for that one" (1854, 1995). As Tara Brabazon moves on, rest wholly assured my life is changed forever.

#### **14. Domestic Platforms for Scholarly Purposes (Tara)**

Maive remains the heart of the Write Bunch. However, she has also recognized the importance of the interface selected for the community that also gave the group its name. Skype was a clear choice for this writing group. There were options: Zoom, Collaborate and Teams are well known, and gained greater visibility during the pandemic. But because I wanted the participants to feel no pressure to join, the call could ring each week and it was answered or refused, like a landline telephone call. There was no Zoom waiting room, or the necessity to be operating from the proprietary university email address and system. I also hoped that once students submitted their theses that some may remain in the group. It was an opportunity for students to build a community and share knowledge to and for completion of their theses, but I wanted to make sure that the students – post submission – were supported through the next stage of their lives. There is a ruthlessness to the completion process. Skype offered the opportunity for a domestic and known interface – with an ease of use – but the rigour and demands of joining at a particular time. This combination proved useful for Nicky.

### **15. Accountability (Nicky Baker)**

I came into the Write Bunch half-way through my PhD studies specifically as a pragmatic way to safeguard writing time. Meet once a week, write for half an hour, let the others know what you were writing. Easy! I attend other online writing groups. We write silently in companionship with other PhD students who are doing exactly the same. But the Write Bunch is different. There is the accountability aspect. Yes, I'm accountable to me, but also to the other Write Bunch members and our dean. That doesn't happen with the other groups - no one cares. In the Write Bunch there is listening each week - what people are doing, where they are up to, what they are struggling with, what they are celebrating. There's none of that elsewhere, no celebrating the wonderful mess of humanity. We learn each week - epistemology, ontology, theories, approaches, considerations. None of that in the other groups. And Skype! Skype is how families and friends connect - my brother in the USA, my buddies back in the UK. I love that it's not a preferred University medium, that it normalises remote access. I love that I can't access Skype on the desktop, but need the laptop. Skype means I can't hear the conversation if I have two screens. One small screen, one job, one focus. I missed TWB for five months while I was in the field on Fridays for data collection. I missed the sharp wit, humility, humour, glamour and sage advice. I'm back now and continue writing, listening and learning with my peers - certainly will until submission, hopefully will after that.

### **16. Whole of Candidature Support (Tara)**

The Write Bunch was a way to create a support structure for an entire candidature, including the post-submission process. The format of Skype suited the community, with each participant occupying a square of the screen, like the Brady Bunch. We could wave and support and watch, without the pressure of Zoom focusing only on the speaker.

This support was – and is – important. The ruthlessness of doctoral degrees, particularly for university academics without a PhD, is clear. The pressure to gain a PhD is intense, and without the qualification, an academic career is limited. Anne was such an academic, located in regional Australia in a teacher education programme. The doctorate was the ticket to career promotion and mobility.

### **17. Collective Writing (Anne McLeod)**

Whoever said writing was easy, lied.

Whoever said writing by yourself and ensuring you had the internal focus to do so also lied.

As a PhD graduate of Flinders University, the Write Bunch provided me a safe space to not only be myself and express the challenges of completing a PhD whilst doing life. It also provided me with the internal reassurance that what I was doing was not only important to the profession but to me as an individual. Moreover, it provided me with the motivation and internal voice of perseverance and when needed the gentle reprimand to just 'get on with it'.

As a 50-year-old woman from Dubbo, New South Wales, who inhabits Wiradjuri land, it has been a struggle to write consistently over the past six years. I have not come from academia, rather I have come

from the profession of teaching and have moved into university lecturing and the imparting of knowledge to those wanting to enter the teaching profession.

The introduction of the Write Bunch became a way for me to quarantine or dare I say isolate time every Friday to engage in writing and reflection. Often the writing that was done was an outpouring of my reflections of the past week and the capacity to articulate the direction my research had taken. Be that down the Derrida's (2016) deconstruction path or perhaps just realising that as a woman who has been engaged in teacher education both in the city and regions of New South Wales, we are the precariat (Standing, 2012, 2014) and as such the challenges that we face are real and often all encompassing.

To fully understand the impact of writing with a diverse range of people is to understand the impact that the Write Bunch has on one's self esteem and also capacity to write even when life throws you curve balls. The conversations of life and the impact the lives of others have on the journey of you as a writer is something that I will never forget.

### **18. Worldviews (Tara)**

Anne joined the group from Dubbo, a regional Australian city. One of the unusual – and unpredicted – sociological surprises of the Write Bunch was that it was dominated by women and particularly women from regional Australia. These small cities and towns are invisible in urban, corporatized higher education. They are locations for education or health 'placements.' They are researched, rather than the home of researchers. The Write Bunch offered a new lens for research. The marginal and the marginalized became visible. Worldviews aligned. Specifically, John Valk argued that, "worldviews are not ... exclusively or even ultimately about views – about beliefs or belief systems of one kind or another. They are also about the kinds of actions or behaviours that relate to those beliefs or beliefs systems, for beliefs are intimately related to behaviours" (2021, 10). One of the reasons that the Write Bunch revealed such loyalty from its participants was because the imperative to share and support was directly confirmed through the behaviour to join each week, and to support the members of this community. This was authentically digitally, but also revealed what can emerge when all universities take regionality – and regional students – seriously. The challenge in building such a community is how insiders and outsiders – new comers and the long-timers – remain comfortable and create bonds. Jane reveals how those first few weeks were managed and how affinities were created.

### **19. Valuing the Process (Jane Phillips)**

When I joined the Write Bunch, there were so many people nearly finished, who knew their topic well, engaged in discussion about the finer points of writing, that I felt insignificant among many of great academic intellectual clout. My topic is so niche that even those working in this field could think "So what?" It took me a while to 'warm' to this group, joining as I did at an early stage of my thesis. I was feeling my way through a lit review and had yet to traverse data collection. My very quantitative study seemed light years away from the theory-based discussions each Friday. I touched base occasionally. But once into the hard yards of statistical analysis, following data collection, my writing was being challenged and I began to be a regular each week, appreciating the comments and thoughts of others on the writing process and the highs and lows of feedback or publications. Others at similar stages have buoyed me up,

providing experiences that informed the process I was in at the time. Over time, as I turned up and quietly sat, I learnt from the diverse characters and topics discussed after our writing, woven together by Tara, a mentor who always has a pertinent comment for your writing, no matter how esoteric the topic. It grew from being a helpful support when bemused by a tricky question, into a community who celebrated the highs and lows of the journey together. It has been said how lonely it can be doing a PhD, amplified so many times over when remote from your university. Knowing that there is someone there to chat to who will know something about your query is a huge reassurance, particularly when there is no one else around who understands quite what a PhD is all about or how arduous the journey.

The home straight has never seemed so long. But each week we are drawn together to share writing time. More than that: we share each other's triumphs and trials, acknowledging that whatever the topic, the process of producing a PhD, or any large body of writing, is a process through which a cheer team is important. Pertinently, Tara spoke recently on how who we are shapes and influences the research we do. The Write Bunch distils this, displaying the very human nature of each person living their research journey: the practical aspects of life impacting on writing (Covid-19, the kids being sick, having a sore back...), and the very real challenges of balancing work with research. Beyond these human challenges are the questions we are tackling. When wrestling with a problem, someone else is bound to have had some experience to share or challenging thought to stretch the boundaries. I have come to realise writing does not come easily, but to have been able to ask and answer some questions, through a PhD, has been special. To have had the support of a group like the Write Bunch has been a privilege.

## **20. The Difficulty of Writing (Tara)**

Jane captures so evocatively the profound difficulties in inserting a PhD into an already full life. Writing is an art and a craft. It maintains the rules of spelling and grammar, but academic writing makes heightened demands on higher degree students in particular. It requires more than the formal presentation of ideas. These terms, concepts and arguments must be supported in the literature. Abstractions are grounded through examples. Methodologies must align with epistemology and ontology. The complexities of research are rarely verified or enabled through research training in undergraduate degrees, with a focus on employability and skills, rather than education and excellence. But also, through the proliferation of dissemination options, the diversity of academic modes of writing must be taught and discussed overtly and clearly. This expertise in form is beyond disciplinary expertise, requiring a movement between analytical, descriptive, critical and persuasive writing (Selinger, 2018). Most importantly, the lessons rarely taught about academic writing involve an understanding of the audience for our work. While the attention – rightly – is on peer review and the resultant quality assurance, the two or three reviewers for a journal are not the audience for our research. Instead, scholars must work – hard – to move beyond the clichés of stakeholders. The gift of the Write Bunch is that ideas received immediate feedback and support structures. Indeed, and resonating with Sharon's creative slice, it provided a moment of convergence, conversation and community.

## **21. Convergence (Sharon Ganzer)**

Each Friday at Ten

Intellectuals Converge

The Timer is Set

Fervour and Flurry

A Bunch - Collective

Together They Type

Confidence Boosted

Success and Challenges Shared

Reflective Insights

'Friends Academic'

A Writing Community

Meaningful Exchange

Heartfelt Love and Loss

Dean of Graduate Research

Thank Goodness for Skype

## **22. (Writing) Presence (Tara)**

The capacity to claim credibility as an academic writer is tenuous. All sorts of phrases – like Imposter Syndrome – serve to capture and configure the flawed socialization of academic life. Academic modes of communication are diverse, and must recognize the increasing complexity in shaping ideas for diverse audiences. Each student – with a life, academic background and personal experience – has strengths and weaknesses that resonate with academic skillsets. How curiosity and motivation align is crucial, as a doctorate is a major investment of time, expertise and scholarship. Paul Silvia captured this reality with a powerful phrase: “graduate students write in loud, vocal desperation” (2007, loc 32). Writing is a skill, not a gift or an art. It is an act of discipline that flays out to stress and guilt and uncertainty.

What the odd structure of the Write Bunch confirmed is the behaviour that is required to write. Writing is not a gift. It is about behaviour, schedules, goals and good habits. The Write Bunch opened a screen to the writing behaviours of others, revealing and modelling writing discipline. The Write Bunch displaced the assumptions that ‘we’ know how to write, or that students learn how to write – osmotically – from academic teachers and supervisors. The Write Bunch offered peer support to teach writing. Writing became a visualized behaviour. It is scheduled. If we wait for inspiration before writing, then it will never happen. It is, as Libby Hammond confirms, about “Turning up.”



### **23. Turning Up (Libby Hammond)**

I research and work within the discipline of social work. After graduating in 2004, I was employed in child protection briefly until I became a mother myself in 2006. When our second child began school in 2014, I went from being a stay-at-home mum to a full-time doctoral student. My doctoral journey was accentuated with numerous ups and downs, some that I controlled, and others that I did not. One aspect of my journey that I did have control over was turning up to write with a community of supportive doctoral students and our dean. I joined the Write Bunch writing group in 2016.

Writing in this capacity with the Dean of Graduate Research on a weekly basis required me to ‘show up’ and not just in an unprepared way. I had to show up on the days that I did not want to be accountable to the Dean for my limited progress or my lack of writing, when life had thrown numerous unexpected circumstances. That accountability motivated me to find time to read, write, and research in the oddest places. Waiting for appointments with my elderly in-laws, sitting by my son’s hospital bed, as well as in the day-to-day life of being a mother and a casual academic, juggling teaching and marking, writing, and researching. I made the Write Bunch a priority, ensuring that this time of writing and meeting with my fellow doctoral students for inspiration—and at times commiserations—was paramount. My journey through the doctoral process was isolating, so having other like-minded people to write with was important.

The debriefing sessions following each writing session gave me insight into my own research. One example was after I had literally spent months trying to grapple with my methodological framework for my research, see-sawing between different ideas, lenses and theories. Speaking at a Write Bunch debrief, I was able to see more clearly a path forward and resolve an issue that I don’t think I would have resolved without a group discussion. Sharing advice, woes during the journey, and having a community of like-minded scholars from different disciplines enhanced my doctoral journey.

Having a supportive writing community that went beyond the weekly online sessions and into our day-to-day life has been invaluable, whether it was navigating family crisis, impacts of bushfires, or COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines. We were there for each other. One example of this was writing with a Write Bunch member on the other side of the world. We wrote in different time zones and connected often outside of the weekly Write Bunch to write and support each other. As humans, we are social beings; sharing the load at times when the doctoral tunnel had no light at the end of it enabled me to complete my PhD.

There were times when I wanted to avoid the Write Bunch in some of those dark days of my PhD journey, when I was making little or no progress. Showing up to write when I felt like an imposter, or less intelligent than my fellow write bunchers was tough. There were times too when I knew I needed to be accountable and sit at my computer with the bunch so I could see there was light at the end of the tunnel because there were many times, I couldn’t see it for myself. It was pretty intense at times, to think I had to sit with my dean and be accountable.

It took a lot of courage to continue when I was making slow progress and was wondering if I would ever finish. But I always felt inspired, and I loved the humour. Sometimes the Write Bunch was the only time

that I would really laugh all week. Sharing the load made the doctoral load and life's loads lighter to bear. I felt very supported.

Sharing in navigating the doctoral journey on a weekly basis has meant that we also shared in each other's successes. Having articles published, children graduating, and we have become role models and inspirations to each other. I have made lifelong friends who have done the doctoral journey with me. There is no doubt that I would not have completed this PhD without the Write Bunch.

#### **24. All Writing Is Rewriting (Tara)**

Research is important. It is not opinion. It emerges from the collection, shaping and verification of evidence. Personal identity and experience are not the foundation of research; it may lead to an interest in a topic. But the experience of an event or topic is not sufficient to enable the repeatability and accountability required from research. We action, activate and respect the words of others for new research questions in new times. Our references reveal the tissues of connectiveness to other texts and scholars (Harris, 2017). We as scholars are built through our context and through the respect and interpretation of the work of others. Therefore, academic writing becomes a process and practice. We share its process and its development.

#### **25. The Value and Power of the Collective (Amanda Cooper)**

"Get a good job in the bank", I was told in 1977. I was horrified. That comment was the catalyst for university, a Bachelor of Education, and everything that followed. I was determined and had to prove them wrong. I was not a reader or writer at school but was always involved in art and sport. I had a strong work ethic from a socialist family upbringing, and the movement of its time and Gough Whitlam's made university education accessible. After this point, I encouraged every female student I taught to go to university.

Fast forward, three children, a career in education, the death of my first husband, and a sudden realisation that I was the sole breadwinner was the next catalyst for undertaking a Master of Education (M. Ed) to ensure my future employability. I enrolled at Flinders University, in South Australia, for the M.Ed. It was fascinating, and the engagement with international educational literature, the International Baccalaureate (IB), and interdisciplinarity (ID) opened a new world of learning again.

The M. Ed program opened doors. Jobs in Taipei then Tokyo offered new cultural experiences and career expansion. This move into international education and my passion for interdisciplinary teaching and learning flourished and connected me with my M. Ed supervisor extraordinaire, Shani Sniedze-Gregory (2016), and now my adjunct supervisor for doctoral studies. Shani had mentioned a group called the Write Bunch and the value of writing in a group with reflective discussion. She encouraged me to attend the Write Bunch but working full time, I could never get to the online sessions, and I also considered myself "not academic enough". I completed the M. Ed, had a Travel Man mini-break from studying, but something was missing. The engagement with global literature and a nagging feeling told me an M. Ed was not enough.

The early part of the doctoral candidacy was a struggle for many reasons. However, I would listen to the latest Tara Brabazon vlog every Saturday morning in Tokyo before reading and writing for the weekend. Tara's vlogs were a godsend, and I felt like I was involved in the university. Tara spoke so personally that I thought she was speaking to me. "SOCK"; "Epistemology"; "Ontology"; "The characteristics of the best PhD students" which was not about me but directed at me; "Excuses", she might be talking about me, so I better improve (Brabazon, 2021). The connection from listening to someone talking about academic endeavours, tips, and problems helped me clarify so many issues.

COVID19. It hit Japan quickly. We moved back to Australia under advice from the consulate, and I took a six-month study sabbatical. During a university professional development session, I met the wonderful Julie Brose, who mentioned the Write Bunch and encouraged me to join, and I finally did. This chance meeting helped connect me with a group of wonderful people.

Sue loved headings, and so did I. Bec talked about fashion which is my passion. Jess had the voice of reason, the scientific brain I always wanted. Cheryl is wise, and Julie is always calm, and Tara provides direction and so many moments of insight. We all laugh a lot. The Write Bunch is full of courageous people who are compassionate and kind, authentic and encouraging. Empathy carries across the airwaves. The value of these attributes can never be measured. They are not tangible, but they surround you, and you carry them with you.

The strength of the collective. The power of community ideas and how they can change the world. The Write Bunch is like a microcosm of the IB philosophy. Reflective thinkers, principled learners, and inquirers who are open-minded and have a genuine commitment to communicating and sharing knowledge and care about one another.

I am incredibly humbled and feel privileged to be a part of this group. I will finish this never-ending PhD because I could never let down the Write Bunch and with the belief that we all can change the world.

## **26. Writing Ecologies (Tara)**

Amanda confirms the gift of changing the world through research. This change has many portals and platforms, but writing remains the carrier for this movement and moment. But writing is intricate, requiring naming and the summoning of argument (Atwood, 2002). Writing requires solitude and communication, with the page, with knowledge and with disciplines. Individuals write from their personal and professional histories, but in the emerging context of transforming knowledge. There is, as Blewett, Donahue and Monroe have described, "the expanding universe of writing studies" (2021). Research requires writing, and there is writing in research. The way in which research integrates with digital life (Duin & Pedersen, 2021) transforms professional practices. The future of writing is collaborative, situated in an educational ecology (Snepvangers, Thomson, & Harris, 2018). The pandemic however accelerated the experiences of teaching and learning (Cone, 2021). As Samantha confirms, communities and friendships were summoned at speed.

### **27. A Launchpad for Your PhD (Samantha Batchelor)**

I joined the Write Bunch for the first time about six weeks into my PhD. A fellow student suggested it was a great way to connect with other students and to have a dedicated 30 minutes of writing each week. Well, she was not wrong. What an inspiring group to be a part of... and it's not just about the writing....

Being a distance student, I have looked forward to this group every week, for some connection, advice, and expertise. What an eyeopener: the extent of experience, skill and inspiration just on the end of a skype call each week was phenomenal. Hearing about other PhDs has been amazing and I found it so interesting that even though there is huge diversity in fields of study and different levels that are common threads that weave together. One of the most fantastic parts of this though is seeing students at different parts of the PhD journey and knowing that one day you will be where they are now – reviewing all your chapters and readying your thesis for final examination – and during this process I've been keeping notes of helpful tips to support me on my own PhD journey.

Tara as the lead is amazing – between this and her Vlogs how could you not feel inspired, motivated, and ready to just get the job done? That one hour a week has been so beneficial to me in so many ways and sets me on the path where I think, 'yes, I can do this to... and this group will help me get there.' I also managed to complete writing too and managed to publish a paper within the first nine months.

### **28. Leadership (Tara)**

Leadership remains challenging to locate, inside and outside our universities. Indeed, as Anders Ortenblad confirms, "bad leadership" (2021) has many causes and consequences. Leadership maintains a social role, rather than individual behaviour. Leadership in graduate education is unusual. Students are well educated professionals, many coming from great success in their careers. Stewardship – enabling the next generation of researchers – is a key trope and imperative. It is clear that much is going wrong with doctoral education. The "wellbeing" of higher degree students has been studied (Velardo & Elliott, 2021), with "research culture" being a barrier to success" (2021, 1536). Yet, not only are our universities in crisis, but our lived realities as citizens – as humans – intervenes in our writing lives. Cheryl's story remains resonate and powerful.

### **29. Triumph and Tragedy. Life and Writing (Cheryl Hayden)**

I finished my PhD in 2019 and really didn't want to lose contact with the Write Bunch, especially when I still had so much more work to do. But I almost didn't make it to the composition of this shared paper. Sitting at my desk, reading the draft, I found myself wishing I'd had the time and headspace to contribute. Life had intervened. I was moving house and coping with the heart-stopping news that after several years of strange symptoms, my brother had been diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. In fact, I received this news while waiting for my house to be emptied of potential buyers at a twilight 'open house'. It was all a bit much.

My PhD experience at Flinders had been brilliant. Great supervisors, a research project that kept on giving, and an A and a B from my markers. Throughout, the Write Bunch had been a not-to-be-missed Friday morning session. I didn't need help with writing. For me, writing has always been an utter joy, and I had

a career in journalism, communication and media management that absorbed me. My PhD took that to a new level of immersion. But when all this happened, for the first time in my life I couldn't think beyond what lay deep within my heart and the certainty of my brother's slow and agonising demise. I turned back to our childhood and began writing memoir snippets.

This sort of melt-down is one of the very times when groups like Write Bunch is invaluable. Nothing is more valuable than an empathetic group of intellectual soulmates. Even when you simply can't write. Because, during that half hour, in the company of other people who ARE writing, you just might find the strength to re-start.

### **30. Power through Tragedy (Tara)**

As highlighted so evocatively by Cheryl, the Write Bunch has undergirded and supported members through profound personal tragedies. I led the Write Bunch the day after the death of my husband Professor Steve Redhead, knowing that members of the community had also lost their supervisor. But it was a powerful moment, to not hide from the horror and the grief, but to be present and to sit in survival.

There is much commentary about the critical intellectual and the public intellectual. Most of us never reach these heights. We are sweaty scholars trying to survive in an under-resourced, ruthless university system. But in such a context, the greatest resistance is to occupy the present with intelligence and feeling. We as academic writers are only useless if we choose to be. The Write Bunch made a different decision. Therefore, as Elisa Armstrong confirms, it is necessary to move beyond inspiration and motivation, to discipline and rigour.

### **31. Beyond Inspiration (Elisa Armstrong)**

I have only one regret for my PhD experience and that is waiting so long to join the Write Bunch. I can say honestly that I appreciate the rest of my (many) mistakes for what I have learned and how I have grown (which sounds trite, but it is true). The support, community, and knowledge I have gained from only the few months of meetings I have attended have been a paradigm shift. The group was so welcoming, friendly, and honest. Stories of success despite or through challenges were shared openly and it shattered my idea that everyone else was somehow doing what I could not.

I have long subscribed to the culturally pervasive imagery of writing being born from a moment of inspiration – like a lightning strike. Not something to practice or grind away at until proficient but a gift or moment to be seized. I blamed this lack of “aha!” moment for regularly occurring writer's block and used it as an excuse to do easier work. My inability to move thoughts from brain to text was seen not a lack of skill, but further proof of being a fake academic – an imposter. Real academics can write. Real academics are inspiration and passion-driven geniuses like you see on television, always scribbling on paper or chalkboard. I had to hide my writing struggles for fear of being recognised as an imposter. I was not just scared to identify the problem, but I could not see that there was something to be helped with beyond a deep flaw with myself.

Through participating in the Write Bunch, my approach to writing (and academia) has been fundamentally altered. A significant part of this paradigm shift arose from a feeling that the Write Bunch was dissolving

the divide between frontstage and backstage (as described by Goffman, 1959). Zoom meetings (or other online platforms) have become a vehicle for frontstage practices such as meetings, workshops, presentations, and conferences. The view through the webcam lens has become substitute for a physical presence around a table or a seat in the audience. Through Zoom, we were literally getting a view into each other's homes due to the pandemic's lockdowns and shift towards working from home. The Zoom camera peeks into "previously personal, domestic spaces" (Cesare Schotzko, 2020, p. 271). During the Write Bunch meetings, there were often partners wandering around in the background (or delivering tea), pets making an appearance, and personal objects in the camera view. If backstage is where the frontstage performance is prepared for, then for academics and writers this is the time spent testing ideas, writing drafts, editing, and deleting work. This is often a solitary or private endeavour, with this process going unobserved or hidden until a draft is deemed ready for sharing and thus transitions to some state of frontstage. For my frontstage appearance as an academic, I alter my posture, speech, and dress-style from my everyday approach. I sit properly without slouching over my keyboard, try to avoid swearing and heavy use of colloquialisms, and I wear a smart blouse rather than a sweatshirt or t-shirt. I perform the academic version of myself. Masi de Casanova et al. (2020) describe how humans are incentivised for having "multiple, divergent performances of distinct selves" to avoid potential embarrassment. I perform my academic-self to avoid the embarrassment that I feel would result from being my everyday-self failing to meet expectations and social norms present in academic settings. To attend my first Write-Bunch meeting, I wore a nice shirt and prepared to perform; for all subsequent meetings I attended as my casual-work-from-home-self. I remained backstage-me, in my backstage-environment, whilst participating in a typically frontstage-activity (a Zoom meeting with other academics).

The Write-Bunch drags the backstage activity of writing at your desk into the bright lighting of the frontstage for others to witness. For thirty minutes a week I can watch other academics sitting, writing, thinking, sighing, and typing away like some strange piece of performance art. And they can see me doing the same. I would find myself nodding along to music or chewing my lip in thought, and then realise that there were more than thirty other people witnessing my behind-the-scenes process of writing. They might never even read what I am writing, so they do not see the frontstage result but only a glimpse into the backstage processes.

Our digital backdrops can be a revealing insight into our home or offices, as viewers or fellow participants get a view that they would not normally be privilege to. Zoom meetings can be held anywhere in the home, and often the background is carefully selected to be appropriate. Being in the bath whilst attending a Zoom meeting sends a very different message to sitting at a desk in a tidy office. Webcam backgrounds for Zoom meetings are similar to Twitch livestreams where "spaces are deliberately constructed" (Ruberg & Lark, 2021, p. 692). Twitch streamers often display items that represent themselves and their interests behind them or share "backdrops of a seemingly unorchestrated daily life" to bring viewers into intimate family spaces (Ruberg & Lark, 2021, p. 692). I try to keep the clutter in my study to spots in the room that are not visible on camera because I do not want to be judged for my home environment. Some choose to use Zoom backgrounds which obscure their background and replace it with different images, like a beach or the Death Star. Tran (2021, p. 357) describes their use of background as waving "a magic wand over the backstage of PhD stipend-funded space and unwashed clothes." I keep the background unfiltered but as neutral as much as possible to control the messages that I share.



There is a strange intermingling of personal and professional activities that occur at my desk. It is where I eat breakfast, play video games, play D&D online with friends, shop, and watch television shows. However, it is also where I work from home – my thesis is written at this desk, I have presented at conferences sat here, attended seminars, and even completed a PhD milestone over Zoom. So many aspects of my life and the varied identities I embody collide when I sit at my desk and it can be difficult to switch between. Levy (2021, p.1) explores the experience of attending their grandfather’s funeral over Zoom – “I looked into a Zoom screen with nobody but my cat nearby, sitting at the desk where I take my medical exams. I cried as I listened.” the Write Bunch straddles these intersections, blending my identities and challenging me to interact not from a position of performance but rather honesty. Cesare Schotzko (2020, p. 282) describes the opportunity for “living dangerously” that is presented by Zoom as we may “invite people into our lives more deeply, into our messes, and stresses, and vulnerabilities.” I have listened to Write Bunch members explain their research, describe a new article, and discuss new opportunities they have found. However, I have also seen hair styling tools waved around (and discussed), had my dog wave to everyone, and listened to discussions about life problems. The Write Bunch members invited me into their homes each week, into their work process, to bear witness to their writing, and to share their problems. Together, the group worked to solve each other’s problems and offer advice. There is a holistic openness to the Write Bunch that blurs the normal frontstage and backstage behaviours and topics.

Through the Write Bunch, you get to see how the sausage is made – the ugly and unappetising process that results in something consumable. That is the power of the Write Bunch. Unflinchingly honest sharing throws back the velvet curtain to reveal the oft hidden ugly reality of research and writing. This is how we must tackle imposter syndrome, rubbish PhD supervision, and so much of the toxicity and gatekeeping inherent in academia. Normalise mistakes and confusion, share supervisor horror stories, and shatter the misconception that if everything is not sunshine and rainbows it must be solely the fault of the individual and thus solved in isolation.

### **32. Call Ended by Tara Brabazon**

Encircling the pandemic were an array of ‘commentators’ questioning the purpose of doctoral education. Sharon Sharminin and Rachel Spronken-Smith asked if the PhD was “out of alignment” or “fit for purpose” (2020, 821). Actually, the diversity of students means there is a diversity of purposes. There is no singular reason to complete a PhD. Many of our students commence the degree in full-time work and are using the qualification to enhance the promotion in their already existing occupation. Therefore, it is arrogant of institutions to assume that they can offer career advice to successful professionals.

Globalisation has been corrupted through the lens of neoliberalism (Scribano, 2021). Yet the emotional landscapes of globalization were rendered toxic and real through COVID-19. Mobility was not benevolent, but carcinogenic. New realities reset everyday life, as masked, socially distanced and quarantined parameters framed higher education and higher degrees (Zhao, 2021). Social bodies aligned to create a community sharing time, managing anxiety and detachment. This was a place for writing, and writing practice. The Write Bunch was a geographical and andragogical world. It was a portal that opened once a week, and a community was formed. It was authentically digital. The learner was a writer and the maker of meaning. The material interface for communication (the form) enabled a diversity of writing (the content).

Now, the Write Bunch in its first generation has concluded. I complete my term as Dean in December 2021. New strategies, personnel and platforms will offer innovative modes and nodes of connection for the next generation of scholars. But for this period of higher education history – with waves of redundancies and restructures, dysfunctional university leadership and a pandemic (quite the trilogy) – the Write Bunch constructed a disintermediated, deterritorialized time and place for kindness, support, sharing and connection. Such opportunities are shrinking as the neoliberal university crushes the teaching and learning opportunities that do not cleanly align with KPIs.

The pandemic transformed our understandings of disappointment. Loneliness, despair and confusion altered our understanding of productivity. But in a time of loss, a community with a routine of predictable companionship made a difference. From the font of a shared despair, confusion and disappointment, something powerful was summoned. Success against the odds was only one outcome. Friendship and mentorship were others. It is clear though that with planning, consistency and compassion, an authentically digital future for doctoral education can emerge.

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