

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Issue 25 Fall 2018

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Recommended Citation

Hytten, Karen; Schröer-Merker, Eva; Denfeld, Sofia; Dhoomun, Lovisha; and Villacís Lozada, Sylvia "Promoting Student Partnership in a Postgraduate Environmental Management Programme Through Thesis Research and Writing Workshops," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 25 (2018), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss25/3>

PROMOTING STUDENT PARTNERSHIP IN A POSTGRADUATE ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME THROUGH THESIS RESEARCH AND WRITING WORKSHOPS

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Introduction

The Master of Environmental Management programme at Massey University attracts students from a wide range of academic and professional backgrounds, including a high proportion of international students. It is an 18-month programme and students undertake a combination of coursework and either a dissertation over one semester or a thesis over two semesters. While some students have undertaken independent research as part of their undergraduate degrees, many have had little or no research experience. As a result, quite a few students struggle with the transition from completing their coursework to starting their dissertation or thesis. In this essay, we reflect upon a series of workshops which we developed and implemented to help students overcome some of the challenges associated with postgraduate study. Initially these workshops were designed to focus on specific thesis research and writing skills and strategies. However, we found that they also provided a valuable platform for promoting ongoing multilateral and mutually beneficial partnerships between students, their supervisors, and other academic and support staff.

Challenges facing our postgraduate students

Thesis writing is widely recognised as a particularly challenging aspect of postgraduate study (Ferguson, 2009; Guerin et al., 2013; Stevens et al., 2016; Strauss, 2012). Many of our students find the process difficult, stressful, frustrating, and isolating. Challenges can include identifying a suitable topic, mastering new analytical and writing techniques, managing supervisory relationships, and in some cases juggling study with family and work commitments, and coping with financial difficulties, stress, anxiety, or depression (Bazrafkan et al., 2016). For international students these challenges can be further exacerbated by studying far from established support networks, and in some cases writing in a second (or third) language (Guerin et al., 2013). International students can also face challenges associated with working within a new academic environment where expectations and conventions are often different from those in their previous educational institutions (Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011; Strauss, 2012). The literature tends to focus on doctoral students who have three to four years to grapple with these challenges. For students undertaking masters programmes, including the Master of Environmental Management at Massey University, these challenges may be compounded by the limited time frame in which they are required to complete their theses, often without previous experience of undertaking independent research.

Effective supervision is crucial in helping students address these challenges. However, Green (2005) argues that the practice of research supervision needs to be reconsidered, and that the traditional “isolated dyadic relationship” (p. 153) between student and supervisor is not necessarily the best way to promote student success. Lee and Green (2009) argue that despite the growing recognition that supervision should be “a shared responsibility among many participants, there is a persistent administrative and conceptual defaulting to the one-to-one relationship” (p. 616). As such, there is a need to proactively develop a strong support

network for students undertaking postgraduate research. Such a network can include not only supervisors, but also other academic and professional staff, including learning advisors and subject librarians, as well as other students (Carter, 2011; Li & Vandermensbrughe, 2011; Strauss, 2012).

At our university, there is a wide range of support services for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. These include online materials and livestreamed workshops on a wide range of topics, and the opportunity for one-to-one sessions with learning advisors from the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Subject librarians also offer invaluable support for students through library workshops and one-to-one consultations. However, it is up to students to find and make use of these services, and while many students benefit from them, others do not. To try to ensure that all environmental management students are supported in developing thesis research and writing skills, we initiated a collaboration with several students, a postgraduate learning advisor, and a subject librarian to develop and implement a series of thesis research and writing workshops specifically for environmental management students.

The thesis research and writing workshops

“Within higher education, students’ voices are frequently overlooked in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula” (Bovill et al., 2011, p. 134). As such, our first step in planning the workshops involved consulting with students who had almost completed their research. Through several relaxed and informal conversations, these students shared what they had found most difficult and what they would have liked to have known before they started their theses. These invaluable insights provided the basis for a list of topics to address in the workshops. Next, a series of meetings was held with a postgraduate learning advisor from the Centre for Teaching and Learning who agreed to co-facilitate the workshops. Having run many workshops and provided extensive one-to-one support for postgraduate students, the learning advisor provided a wealth of knowledge about key issues students find challenging, and strategies to help address these challenges. Together we went through several iterations of the workshop schedule, finally settling on a series of five workshops covering eight main topics including:

1. Developing your research topic
2. Designing and managing your research project
3. Finding and processing literature effectively
4. Managing your information
5. Writing your literature review
6. Planning the structure of your thesis
7. Creating a coherent argument, and
8. Developing an academic writing style

A folder of resources was also compiled for each student, including a copy of the workshop schedule, a series of short readings and worksheets corresponding with each workshop topic, and an exercise book which students were encouraged to use to start a research journal.

The workshops were scheduled during the first five weeks of semester two. Although designed primarily for students who were just beginning their theses, other students expressed interest in attending. Therefore, students in earlier stages of their coursework and

others already halfway through their theses were invited to participate. In total, twenty students participated. We tried to make the workshops as informal, collaborative, and interactive as possible. In each workshop a combination of activities for individual students, small groups, and the whole class was used to break down key topics and model possible strategies to address different stages of the thesis research and writing process. For some activities students were asked to bring specific materials relating to their thesis topic, and all the activities were designed to be directly applied to students' own research.

The value of peer learning and its capacity to help develop students' skills, build their confidence and motivation, and make the thesis writing process less lonely is widely recognised (e.g. Ferguson, 2009; Guerin et al., 2013; Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011; Stevens, 2016). We found these workshops provided the opportunity for students to collaborate, share different ideas and perspectives, and work through activities together. Another important component of one of the workshops was contributed by four students who were close to submitting their theses. They each gave a short, three-minute presentation of their research and then participated in a panel about their experiences researching and writing their theses.

Student reflections on the workshops

Feedback from students was extremely positive. Students commented that they felt the workshops provided a range of useful tools and strategies:

I found the workshops fun and interactive... They were imparted at the precise time to alert us, the students, into paying attention to critical aspects of the thesis planning, executing and writing processes. The workshops provided tools to organise our ideas and to concretise plans and realistic time frames to finish our theses... In general, the workshops were a benefit for us as students. They gave us the instruments we needed to write a good thesis (First Year Masters Student).

The opportunity to work together in small groups was identified as a particular strength of the workshops:

The workshops were divided into different segments, each providing an overview about a key element of the thesis writing process. I found the workshops particularly enriching mainly because we were asked to discuss in groups for some of the activities. This allowed us to share opinions and ideas, which was something we rarely had the opportunity to do concerning our research (First Year Masters Student).

Some students identified specific activities and ideas that they found particularly helpful:

Helpful elements of the workshops included detailed information about how to find information. Before the workshop, many of us were unaware of the 'tricks' students may use to quicken and sharpen their search for scientific papers in the different databases provided by the university. They also clarified the use of a convenient citation programme (EndNote), which may

make a significant difference in terms of time-efficiency and practicality for the organisation of documents (First Year Masters Student).

Among other themes, the workshops included activities focused on using scientific language and good academic writing. These activities were of great help not only for our master theses, but also for our assignments and future writing tasks (First Year Masters Student).

We were also advised to include some leeway into our research timelines for any unexpected situations. This proved particularly useful when I was conducting fieldwork and had difficulties contacting and scheduling interviews with important research participants (First Year Masters Student).

At the time the workshops were held, I was struggling with completing the introduction chapter of my thesis. During the workshops, I learnt that the introduction chapter can be written when other chapters, such as the literature review, are already well developed. Subsequently, I re-organised my whole research plan and became more efficient as I realised I did not have to complete one chapter before starting the next one. The different stages of a thesis are interdependent (First Year Masters Student).

Some students suggested that in future such workshops could possibly be made compulsory for all students to attend:

From my perspective, they should have been compulsory. Then all students would enhance their efficiency during their thesis-writing period. Additionally, the load on thesis supervisors, who may encounter too many errors due to a lack of planning, research and writing skills, would be reduced (First Year Masters Student).

Students particularly appreciated the presentations and Q&A panel by students who were almost finished their research:

Students who were almost finishing their dissertations presented their research. We were introduced to the diverse range of topics they had worked on and the various methods they had employed. This helped me clarify my ideas about how to later conduct my own fieldwork. They also shared their experience of the process during the Q&A panel that followed. From their presentations, I also obtained the reassurance that, although writing a dissertation may feel like a daunting task in the beginning, a clearer image emerges as we proceed (First Year Masters Student).

The workshops included visits of more advanced students, who were almost finished with their theses. They shared with us their experiences and gave us advice on typical challenges. After hearing about their experiences, we tried to avoid committing the same mistakes (First Year Masters Student).

The students who presented their research and contributed to the Q&A panel also described the experience as a positive one, supporting the Stevens et al. (2016) argument that “learning

from peers not only benefits those who are learning but also those who are teaching – reaffirming knowledge and building confidence” (p. 4):

This was my first formal presentation in English and a major challenge for me. When I was presenting, the audience asked me different questions about my research which helped me to rethink and clarify some ideas about my work. After the presentation, I felt in a better position to improve my research ideas and think about better ways to explain my topic to different audiences (Second Year Masters Student).

We found that the workshops fostered a sense of community among the students who participated, reducing the sense of isolation that can sometimes accompany thesis research and writing. Students also became more aware of the wide range of academic support services available through the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Massey University Library.

Moving towards a partnership approach

Bovill et al. (2011) argue that working collaboratively in partnership with students can increase the engagement, motivation, and enthusiasm of both students and academic staff. They encourage academic staff to start with small scale co-creative innovations to “try to create liminal spaces outside of typical structures and relationships where students understand they are taken seriously” (p. 140). In this context, we believe these workshops represented a small scale co-creative innovation in the liminal space between academic supervision and academic support. While our workshops were initially focused primarily on specific thesis research and writing skills and strategies, we found that they evolved to also provide a valuable platform for promoting partnerships between students, their supervisors, and other academic and support staff. We argue that this could constitute an alternative to the traditional one-to-one model of research supervision.

While the traditional thesis research model fosters a strong relationship between the student and their supervisor(s), the question of whether students develop relationships with other students and other academic and support staff depends on the initiative of individual students (as indicated by the dotted arrows in Figure 1). Some students form strong relationships with many staff and students and make good use of the wide variety of services provided by the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Massey University Library. However, some less confident or less proactive students do not form these relationships. With a strong supervisory relationship these students can still thrive, but some students become isolated and disconnected.

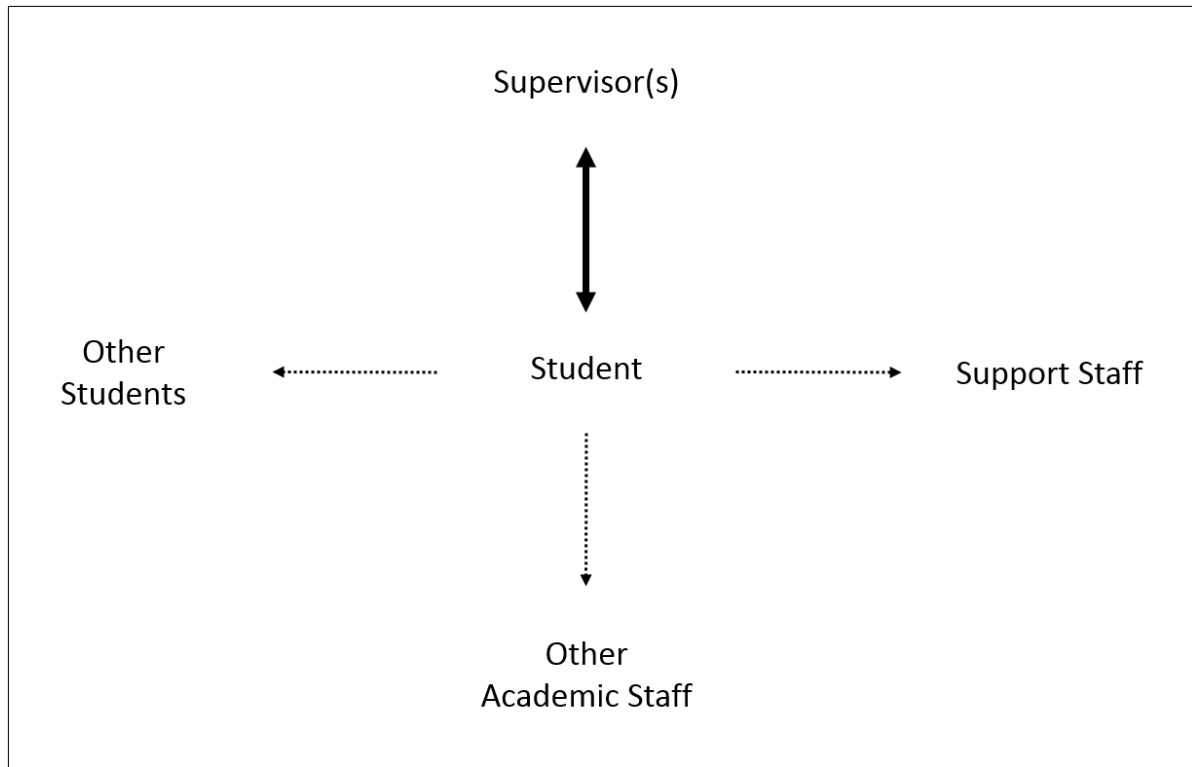


Figure 1. The traditional thesis research model, dominated by the relationship between students and their supervisor with other bilateral relationships initiated and facilitated by students.

In contrast, the thesis research and writing workshops provided the opportunity to initiate and promote multiple, multilateral relationships between students, their peers, and other academic and support staff, to complement the student-supervisor relationship, as illustrated in Figure 2. By meeting for two hours each week for five weeks, and spending time working collaboratively in small groups and as a whole group, all participants had the opportunity to make connections with other participants. Like Stevens et al. (2016) we found that the process “produced a strong cohort and made students feel comfortable about asking each other and academic and support staff for help and advice, providing a network of support” (p. 4). In this case, only one academic supervisor was involved in the workshops. However, encouraging more supervisors to be involved in the future could contribute to ‘closing the loop’ illustrated in Figure 2, further enriching the sense of community and continuity fostered by the workshops.

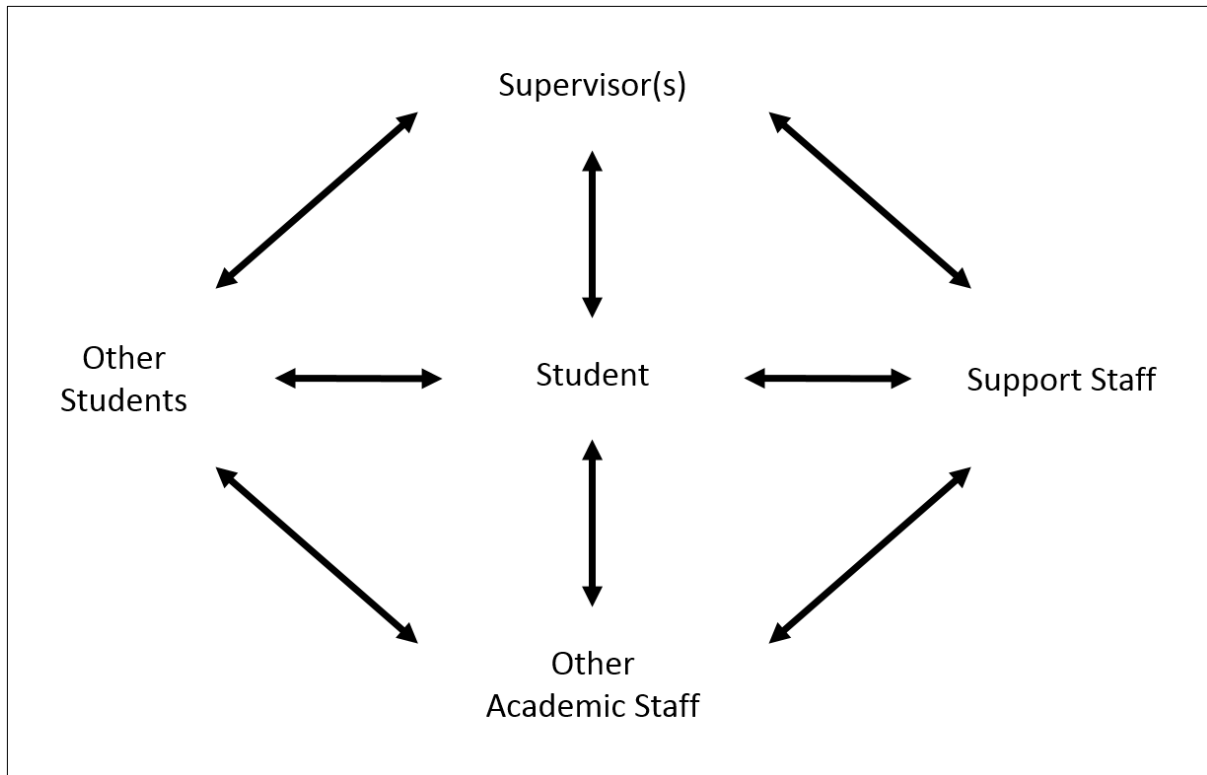


Figure 2. An alternative thesis research model in which multilateral partnerships are co-facilitated by staff and students.

Clearly, the role of supervisors in providing detailed disciplinary and methodological guidance and feedback will always remain crucial. However, thesis research and writing encompasses a range of generic skills and strategies which can potentially be better learnt in a group setting (Carter, 2011). For us, one benefit of providing workshops within the environmental management programme (in addition to the university-wide workshops provided by the Centre for Teaching and Learning) was that we could explore the intersection between these generic skills and strategies and the more specific expectations for a dissertation or thesis within environmental management. The workshops also offered an alternative forum in which students could raise and discuss questions or concerns they might not feel comfortable asking their supervisors about. By providing both practical guidance and emotional support for students the workshops have the potential to reduce the burden on individual supervisors who have many competing demands upon their time.

Some possible next steps

So far these workshops have only been run once, so they are still partnership *work in progress*. However, we have several ideas about how they could be improved and built upon in the future, such as reducing the content within each session and having more student-led sessions. In future, perhaps one more session could be scheduled, or alternatively some topics pared back to provide more time for group activities. Many students did not have time to complete the readings before the relevant workshop. Providing the workshop materials a few weeks in advance would allow more students to do the readings and be better prepared to participate in (and benefit from) the activities. One of the challenges we faced was the fact that students were at different stages of their thesis. This made some of the activities less

relevant for some students. If the workshops were to become a regular event, then each new cohort could be encouraged to participate at the optimal time in their research project. However, there were benefits associated with having all our students working together and getting to know each other. As such, perhaps additional events could be organised to provide more opportunities for all students to meet, discuss their research, and share experiences. Such events should be developed using a partnership approach to ensure that they are responsive to students' needs.

Finally, organising ongoing thesis writing groups could provide a valuable mechanism to extend the partnerships and peer-learning initiated in the workshops. At the end of the workshops, students could be invited to join one of two or three thesis writing groups. There are many benefits associated with thesis writing groups. For example, Ferguson (2009) argues that thesis writing groups “provide many unique advantages including support, collaboration, networking, and the development of a variety of communication skills” (p. 291). They have the potential to help students develop their thesis writing skills, and can also contribute to increasing their confidence and motivation (Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011). It is common for students to feel insecure about the quality of their work and their ability to complete their research. Thesis writing groups can help students overcome bouts of insecurity and self-doubt, and build an inclusive and dynamic research community (Guerin et al., 2013, p. 74). We believe that the thesis research and writing workshops, together with ongoing thesis writing groups, could contribute to developing meaningful partnerships between students, supervisors, and other academic and support staff, building a stronger research community, and ultimately enhancing students' personal well-being and academic success.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Catherine Stevens, Barbara Rainier, Lesley van Essen, Marion MacKay, Dianne Hytten, and all the students who participated in the workshops.

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