



‘It gives you that motivation to keep pushing on’: the role of dialogic workshops on postgraduate researchers’ academic preparedness and ‘belonging’

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Abstract

Completing a doctorate is reputed to be uniquely academically challenging and isolating. To challenge this, doctoral supervisors, academic developers, and peers can play a significant role in academic preparedness and enhancing feelings of ‘belonging’ on a doctoral programme. During the 2023-2024 academic year, a new provision for doctoral academic skills enhancement was piloted at a large university in southern England, with ten workshops aimed to develop academic writing, research integrity, presentation skills, and criticality. The workshops were designed to align with Alexander’s (2004) model for dialogic teaching and adapted Lee and Murray’s (2015) supervision framework to provide facilitated spaces for postgraduate researchers (PGRs) to cultivate curiosity, confidence, and collaboration. In reflecting on the first year of this provision, three focus groups were conducted with ten PGRs to explore their engagement with and evaluation of the workshops’ format relating to their experiences of ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’ in doctoral study. The focus groups highlighted various challenges in transitioning to doctoral study and anxieties about academic preparedness. However, engaging with dialogic workshops alleviated some anxieties, enhanced academic preparedness, and ‘normalised’ challenges experienced by PGRs. On this basis, there is potential for dialogic PGR initiatives to heighten feelings of academically ‘belonging’ on doctoral programmes.

Keywords: postgraduate researchers; academic skills; belonging; dialogic pedagogy.

Introduction

Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) occupy an 'in-between' space within Higher Education Institutions (Carvalho et al., 2018). No longer considered students in the same sense as taught undergraduates or postgraduates, but also not research staff, PGRs inhabit a complex space of 'becoming' scholars (Barnacle and Mewburn, 2010). The demands on PGRs to independently and successfully navigate opportunities that develop high-level academic research skills contribute to an enduring notion that completing a doctorate is uniquely isolating and challenging (Emmioğlu, McAlpine and Amundsen, 2017; Carvalho et al., 2018). To counter these difficulties, professional development workshops for PGRs can enhance skills through delivered content, peer reflection, and problem-solving, enhancing feelings of 'belonging' on a doctoral programme (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Foot et al., 2014). Whilst existing research on initiatives for developing PGRs' academic skills, such as writing and critical thinking (Badenhorst and Guerin, 2016; Cisco, 2020a; 2020b; Woodhouse and Wood, 2022), shows a positive role on feelings of academic preparedness and belonging, the role of dialogic workshops in particular is under-explored.

The dialogic workshops of focus in this case study form part of a recently expanded PGR professional development provision at a large university in southern England. Specifically, the ten academic skills workshops cover academic writing, academic presentations, research integrity, and criticality. Delivered in person, the workshops have been designed to balance information and advice from an academic developer, group discussions, and activities/feedback. This case study uses focus groups with PGRs to reflect on the role of the workshops, posing the question: can dialogic workshops aimed at developing PGRs' academic preparedness enhance feelings of 'belonging' on a doctoral programme?

Academic preparedness: becoming and belonging as a PGR

Acclimatisation to a doctoral programme is more individualised as a process in comparison with taught programmes, due to expectations of independence and the specificity of the research topic (Gardner, 2008). On that basis, emphasis has been on the role of doctoral supervisors in preparing PGRs for the academic demands of a doctorate (Lee, 2010; Bastalich, 2017). Lee and Murray (2015) propose a framework for supervisors to enhance PGRs' self-efficacy and sense of 'belonging' in academic communities. Areas for action

include enculturation (encouragement to become members of academic communities), critical thinking (encouragement to scrutinise their work), emancipation (encouragement to reflect and develop themselves), and developing quality relationships (PGRs feel enthused and well-supported) (Lee and Murray, 2015). Extending this framework into the remit of academic developers – and involving PGR peers – can provide scaffolding to further cultivate and embed these four areas. In light of this, designing and implementing dialogic workshops was felt to have the potential to enhance both PGRs' academic preparedness and belonging, whereas other teaching formats (i.e., instructor-centred) may be overly restrictive and directive.

Dialogic workshops in higher education teaching and learning

Dialogue in learning environments – both peer-to-peer and between the instructor and students – 'has the power to shape knowledge through participant engagement with a range of processes' (Barnes, 2010, p.7). Alexander's (2004) model of dialogic teaching determines that a learning environment should be collective, reciprocal, cumulative, supportive, and purposeful. Existing studies have focused on dialogic talk in the context of the doctoral student-supervisor relationship (Moriarty, Danaher and Danaher, 2008; Benade, 2015; Hamilton and Carson, 2015), and there are recent works focused on the benefits of dialogic approaches in doctoral writing initiatives. For example, Álvarez and Colombo (2023) found that participants considered peer work – in this case, peer feedback on written drafts – helpful as a vehicle for gathering different perspectives on their writing and as a form of support. Similarly, Woodhouse and Wood (2022) propose more opportunities for dialogic initiatives after finding that PGRs who engaged in sustained peer work found it beneficial to enhance their ability to write critically and felt more comfortable in academia.

Drawing on the above, my approach to designing and delivering dialogic workshops has been premised on a combination of Lee and Murray's (2015) academic supervision framework and Alexander's (2004) model for dialogic teaching. Regarding the latter, I build multiple content-relevant prompts for discussion into each session to encourage dialogue between participants, which becomes part of a broader group discussion. Approximately 50% of each session comprises dialogue and activities, with the other 50% dedicated to delivered information. The workshops take place in seminar-style rooms on the main

university campus. The provision is open to all PGRs from disciplines across the university. As such, significant preparation went into ensuring the content of each session could be broadly applied across disciplines. To provide some context as to the structure of a typical session, Table 1 offers an outline with example dialogue prompts.

Table 1. Typical structure, content and timings of a dialogic workshop.

Structure	Content	Timing
Introduction	Introduction to focus of session and overview of learning outcomes.	5 minutes
Discussion prompts followed by whole-group discussion	Small group/paired discussion relevant to the content of the session, for example, 'what do you find most rewarding about [x]?', 'what do you find most challenging about [x]?').	20 minutes
Information delivery	Information and guidance about workshop topic with regular pauses for questions and further discussion.	20 minutes
Discussion prompts followed by whole-group discussion	Collective sharing/problem-solving: 'do you have any current strategies for [x]?', 'what do you feel are your current strengths/things to improve regarding [x]?'.	20 minutes
Information delivery	As above.	20 minutes
Activity and feedback	Short activity to put academic skill into practice within facilitated environment.	20 minutes
Conclusion	Summary of the session, signposting to additional resources and time for questions.	10 minutes

Ultimately, the goal of the dialogic workshops is to enhance PGRs' academic preparedness in a supportive environment that cultivates curiosity, confidence, and collaboration. It was on this basis that I sought to reflect on the impact of the workshops for PGRs during the pilot year of implementation.

Methodology

Focus groups were selected as the data collection method, approved by the university's Faculty Ethics Committee (ID: 93182). Focus groups encourage a relaxed environment where self-disclosure amongst participants could lead to honest recollection of experiences, reflection, and evaluation (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Participants were recruited for the study through direct communication and promotion via a regular PGR email newsletter. The only condition for participation was that PGRs had attended at least two academic skills workshops to allow for in-depth discussion of their dialogic features. Ten participants were recruited for the study and split into three focus groups. Eight of the participants were women, and two were men. Six of the participants were international students, and four were UK-domiciled. At least one PGR from each of the university's five faculties was represented in the sample.

Whilst the sample was small, the data held high information power as the study's evaluative aim was specific, and the quality of dialogue was good (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). The questions covered various elements of becoming, being, and belonging as a PGR in the context of academic preparedness and the impact of the workshops (see Appendix A for a complete focus group question guide). The focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and took place on Microsoft Teams. Conducting the focus groups online posed benefits for the research in enhancing access to participants where they were geographically dispersed (de Villiers, Farooq and Molinari, 2022). I moderated the focus groups, which had both advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, I already had an established rapport with the PGRs from their attendance at the sessions, which meant a degree of comfort in conversing freely. On the other hand, this familiarity may have resulted in less honesty regarding their evaluation of the sessions. From the outset of the focus groups, I emphasised that critiques of the workshops were welcome in order to enhance them in the future. However, I recognise that my presence as

the moderator may still have swayed participants' discussion. The transcripts were transcribed verbatim and analysed in NVivo 14, using the six-step process for reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). I undertook the analysis inductively (grounded in the data) as this study was exploratory, and the process for coding was open and organic, as opposed to following a specific coding framework (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Results

In the discussions about belonging as a PGR, a prominent theme was 'uncertainty' regarding academic preparedness. However, participants also expressed 'becoming comfortable' after attending the dialogic workshops. This section will be divided into two parts: first, I will briefly explore participants' recollections of their academic preparedness as they transitioned into being a PGR before attending the workshops. Secondly, I will discuss their experiences and the impacts of attending the workshops.

'That level of uncertainty is something I was completely unprepared for': becoming a PGR and academic preparedness

One frequently discussed aspect of becoming a PGR was feeling a lack of (academic) preparedness for doctoral study, whether because expectations did not match the reality, or due to lack of awareness of what to expect. The lack of preparedness for some was consolidated by feeling that there was not an expected level of support built into the transition to doctoral study: 'I had high expectations that I will get the support from day one and it didn't quite happen how I expected. And so, I did really struggle when I started' (L, Focus Group 1).

Lack of support, and subsequent struggles, was disconcerting given that becoming a PGR was predicated on previous successful acclimatisation and achievement within an academic environment: '[Even] though we all come into PhDs because we were used to academically excelling, and we are comfortable in an academic environment, that level of uncertainty is something I was completely unprepared for' (D, Focus Group 1).

Feelings of 'uncertainty' dominated discussions about PGR experiences of entering their doctoral programmes, and their initial day-to-day research. Participants also referred to difficulties in finding information, undertaking administrative aspects of the doctorate, time and project management, and how to approach necessary assessment tasks like annual progression reviews. Uncertainties and confusion sometimes gave way to feelings of 'failure': 'I'm by no means an unconfident person, but that level of uncertainty – like I had no idea it was normal and thought I had just miserably failed at this' (M, Focus Group 1).

For others, uncertainties and difficulties adjusting to what were perceived as opaque processes and procedures for doctoral progression assessments culminated in unexpected stress and anxiety: 'I understand the assessment is a bit different. You're meant to be doing something a bit novel or contributing. I get that, but in essence, a PhD shouldn't be providing this amount of stress and I just don't get it' (N, Focus Group 2).

Academic preparedness was one of a number of aspects that resulted in pervasive discomfort with how to approach doctoral research. Whilst some participants noted that their supervisors were effective in providing clarity around areas of confusion, others said that there was little guidance. There was also a sense from some of not wanting to come across as academically underprepared and/or too 'needy' to their supervisors by asking too many questions.

Where these feelings dominated prior to attending workshops, attention will now be turned to the impact of the pilot year of dialogic workshops for PGRs, and how these were perceived in relation to academic preparedness and belonging.

'It gives you that motivation to keep pushing on': dialogic workshops and academic 'belonging'

Overall, the dialogic workshops were positively received. The mixture of delivered content, facilitated discussion, and experiential dialogues had various impacts, from enhancing skills, demystifying processes, and normalising academic challenges. Some cited the usefulness in hearing about others' challenges as clarifying their own issues and to begin 'resolving' difficulties: 'Being able to listen in on how other people are reflecting on the things that are challenging them have sometimes helped me understand things that are

challenging me. So that that's been really useful' (M, Focus Group 1); '[You] get to talk to other students and they can share experiences, and sometimes you don't have any immediate solution, but you can at least get an idea of how they resolve that issue' (S, Focus Group 3).

For others, discussion of challenges had the effect of lessening their own anxieties around academic preparedness:

[With] the writing sessions, everybody comes in like, 'oh, I struggle with this. I struggle with that'. So that's like, 'OK, [K], you're not on your own. This is not a unique problem to you, so don't worry about it. You know, you got to work on it'. So that's how it has helped me (K, Focus Group 2).

In addition, and not something that was anticipated, it was noted by some participants that they found hearing anecdotes from myself as the instructor useful during these sessions. The approach that I have taken is to be transparent about my own challenges as a PGR, where there may not be those types of admissions from other academic staff, like the supervisory team:

[Giving] examples of bringing in your personal experience, it makes things more relatable for the PGR, 'Oh, OK then Becki standing in front of us and says this kind of thing. It's not only us who's going through it'. So yeah, I think those are good (T, Focus Group 3).

Importantly, there was a sense that dialogic workshops normalised challenges and presented practical ways forward for participants with respect to their academic skills:

These workshops are all around a particular theme, and you come and you say 'look, I've been struggling with this', and everybody else will go, 'yeah, me too', even though we're all at different stages of our PhD, and that feels really validating, because sometimes when you're getting in the weeds of your work, you can't see past the issue and you start to spiral and the fact that everybody's having those issues as well and you know, finding these practical tools to overcome them both helps practically, but also helps

emotionally in the sense that you feel like it's OK. This is part of the process.
It is a bit of a struggle, but I will find my way out (D, Focus Group 1).

The purpose of designing workshops to be dialogic was not only to provide practical advice and guidance to PGRs pertaining to specific academic skills, but also to cultivate an environment where discussion about challenges could be verbalised in a safe, supportive space. As above, this had academic, social and emotional benefits to participants.

There were, however, some criticisms of the format. Not all the participants valued the length of time allocated to some of the dialogic aspects, preferring instead for weighting to be given to delivered content from the instructor:

I don't necessarily see a need to have longer periods where we discuss [concerns], but because I'm in an office space, we have a group that's dedicated to PGR. So we have like around five or six. But, I know not all PGRs have that, they are very isolated, you know, so therefore, when they come to these sessions, being able to discuss concerns and problems and all of these things, it's helpful for them (N, Focus Group 1).

Despite this critique, there was recognition of the value in the differential experiences of PGRs, tempering what the participant considered overly-protracted discussion periods.

Ultimately, the sessions had the effect of providing a space for practical delivered content, but also a supportive environment for PGRs to talk about academic struggles, and collectively problem-solve. Having transparency about challenges and working collectively on solutions was felt to alleviate some of the anxieties that PGRs felt regarding their academic preparedness. This provided a sense of 'becoming comfortable' within academia.

Discussion and conclusion

It was clear from the focus groups that the transition to doctoral study was often fraught with a stressful level of uncertainty, seeding feelings of self-doubt and failure. Participants

felt there was opacity in doctoral processes and inconsistencies in the support provided by supervisory teams. These struggles are congruent with other research on doctoral experiences (Emmioğlu, McAlpine and Amundsen, 2017; Carvalho et al., 2018). From what was articulated by the participants, it could be posed that there were some missing steps as per Lee and Murray's (2015) supervision framework for doctoral development, specifically regarding enculturation, emancipation, and developing quality relationships. The dialogic workshops aimed to address these elements of Lee and Murray's (2015) framework, and the combination of delivered learning content with opportunities for discussion, activities, and feedback during sessions impacted positively in the following ways:

- Peer-to-peer conversations around content-relevant prompts and activities could alleviate anxieties associated with academic preparedness.
- Similarly, inclusion of anecdotes from the instructor on their own academic experiences provided transparency about difficulties experienced by those who have completed doctorates, making the content relatable.
- The workshops served to 'normalise' the challenges associated with doctoral-level academic skills, and provided practical, social, and emotional support for 'moving onwards'.

Linking these findings with the framework set out by Lee and Murray (2015), it can be argued that dialogic workshops designed as spaces that are collective, reciprocal, cumulative, supportive, and purposeful (Alexander, 2004) contribute positively to enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation, and development of quality relationships. Such engagement can enhance academic preparedness (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Foot et al., 2014; Cisco, 2020a). This benefit may, in part, be due to the emphasis on the 'hidden curriculum' as a pedagogically beneficial part of doctoral education, whereby peer interactions, personal anecdotes, and 'informal' dialogic features can support and empower PGRs (Elliot, Bengtsen and Guccione, 2023). Furthermore, the 'third space' positioning of academic developers can play a valuable role in facilitating 'safe' spaces for PGRs to articulate challenges outside of formal academic or professional services spaces (Webster, 2022).

Relating to the instructor's openness about their own doctoral experiences, Cisco (2020b)

notes that contributions from doctoral advisors can potentially help lessen impostor phenomenon in PGRs. In the context of this project, anecdotes were found to be a source of reassurance, eradicating secrecy around challenges experienced by those in post-doctoral positions. Though understandable that doctoral supervisors may not feel comfortable with expressing vulnerabilities within a professional capacity, relational pedagogies can have an emancipatory impact on the learning environment (Gravett, 2022), fostering camaraderie and care and lessening 'hierarchies' in favour of commonalities (Huzar, 2025). Furthermore, to echo Álvarez and Colombo's (2023, p.2131) advice for future PGR pedagogical initiatives, emphasising the 'normality' of uncertainty and unease in doctoral study at the same time as working collectively to overcome challenges is a valuable foundation from which to refine dialogic workshop provision continually.

There are, however, limitations to this reflection. The focus group sample does not allow for generalisations, and participants were self-selecting. Further research could randomly sample workshop participants to obtain a broader view of the impact of dialogic workshops. Furthermore, academic skills comprise only one part of the doctoral experience and this case study by no means suggests that the workshops can resolve all issues that PGRs confront. Lastly, this case study focused solely on in-person provision. It has proved harder to replicate a genuinely dialogic environment in online training. Although the prompts and activities remain the same, facilitated digitally through collaborative platforms like Padlet, participants are more hesitant to engage by unmuting to contribute or taking part in breakout rooms. Further research could focus on how to more successfully implement dialogic pedagogies in online settings, particularly where the number of workshop attendees is larger.

In conclusion, this case study has emphasised the usefulness of dialogic workshops specifically for PGR academic preparedness, contributing to broader literature on the benefits of PGR professional development provision for enhancing the doctoral experience. Through focusing on dialogic workshop provision, the combination of delivered content alongside peer-to-peer engagement has dual advantages for enhancing academic skills and providing social and emotional support through the normalisation of difficulties. A key recommendation from this case study is for staff involved in PGR professional development to foster learning environments that promote opportunities for verbal

reflection, curiosity, and openness regarding academic challenges *alongside* practical information and advice. In an environment that has pervasively been characterised as uniquely isolating and challenging (Emmioğlu, McAlpine and Amundsen, 2017), I lastly echo Woodhouse and Wood (2022) that bringing dialogic pedagogies into PGR professional development can help foster PGR peer-to-peer engagement and alleviate anxieties and concerns that may not otherwise be articulated.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to focus group participants for volunteering their time to participate in this research. Thanks also to the reviewers for their helpful comments on this article.

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Appendix A: focus group question guide

Introductions:

- Can you each tell us a bit about yourself: year of study, faculty, research topic?

Becoming a PGR:

- In the early stages of becoming a PGR, would you say you knew what to anticipate regarding academic expectations?
 - o Was there anything that you didn't expect?
 - o How did you address this/these?
- In becoming a PGR, what did you find to be the biggest challenges regarding academic skills?
 - o Did this/these get easier over time?
 - o How did you address this/these challenge(s)

Being a PGR:

- Can you tell me a little bit about your everyday experiences of undertaking your research?
 - o What are the best parts?
 - o What are the most challenging parts?
 - o Do you feel supported by others in addressing challenges?

Academic skills training and 'belonging':

- How did you determine what academic skills training you may need?
- What were your expectations of the workshops?
- Did the workshops meet these expectations?
 - o If so, how?
 - o If not, why not?
- How would you describe your experiences of interacting with other PGRs during these sessions?
 - o Positive?
 - o Negative?
- Were you surprised by any of the conversations you had with other PGRs during the workshops?
- How did you feel after the workshop(s) ended?

Looking forward:

- If you had to use one word, how do you currently feel about your own academic competencies?
- Is there anything that you feel can be done more effectively to support PGRs with their academic skills?