Article

Doctoral Students’ Experiences, Self-Efficacy, and Sense of Belonging Related to Academic Writing in an Online Program

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Abstract: Considering the expansion of online graduate education, higher education practitioners must support student belonging and academic writing in this growing context. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to use social cognitive theory to explore how students in an online Doctor of Education program experience becoming academic writers and to examine trends in students’ belonging and writing self-efficacy. This explanatory sequential design study included quantitative data collection via an electronic survey followed by individual and focus group interviews with participants. Seventy-four students completed the survey (29% response rate) and eleven students participated in interviews. Survey results revealed that students had a moderate to high sense of belonging related to the writing process and a significant negative correlation between writing self-efficacy and belonging uncertainty. Qualitative analysis of the interviews resulted in five themes: (1) writing is experienced as a journey, (2) unclear expectations are painful, (3) English is viewed as a privilege, (4) peer support is needed, and cannot be forced, and (5) developing writers view writing as a craft and identified writing tools. This study provides supporting evidence that belonging is possible in online doctoral education. Recommendations for practice include the strategic engagement of peers and clear, timely notes from instructors.

Keywords: online graduate education; belonging; writing self-efficacy; social cognitive theory; peer engagement; mixed methods

1. Introduction

To succeed in their programs of study, graduate students need to develop advanced academic skills, including the production of original work and the ability to defend a stance [1,2]. Academic writing is central to the development of both skills and can be a barrier to graduate student degree completion [3]. As independent thesis work can be isolating [4,5], a sense of belonging and connectedness rooted in peer and faculty relationships serves as a support for graduate student success [6]. Writing self-efficacy is also positively associated with graduate students’ grades on writing projects [7,8], highlighting the importance of these two concepts: belonging and self-efficacy, in supporting developing writers.

With increasing enrollments in online graduate education programs [9], educators must support student writing development in virtual communities of learners [10]. However, little guidance exists for educators on how to develop academic writers in online communities. Therefore, this paper provides an analysis of students’ experiences of becoming academic writers in an online doctoral program, including a quantitative analysis of two key psychosocial factors in the writing process: sense of belonging and writing self-efficacy.
1.1. Belonging in the Online Learning Environment

Academic success and well-being are associated with tertiary students’ sense of belonging, writing self-efficacy, and a relatively low sense of writing anxiety [11]. Doctoral education can be an isolating experience, with certain student groups facing more marginalization than others [12]. Since student sense of belonging and writing self-efficacy are important for academic success, scholarship on these concepts guides this research. Learners feel a sense of belonging when they are “(a) secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group, (b) connected with or integral to the group, and (c) that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group” [13] (p. 104). Creating belonging in online academic programs may require different strategies from in-person education, requiring attention to equity among student groups. Age, academic preparedness, familiarity with college structure and processes, perceived social identities, social hierarchies, culture [14], and linguistic insecurities [15] contribute to students’ feelings of belonging in university programs. Feelings of belonging may be altered in online programs [10,16], potentially impacting academic success, warranting the need for specific strategies to support students in online Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) programs, which is the focus of this study.

Rost and Krahenbuhl [10] offer strategies for increasing socialization in online Ed.D. programs; however, there is a lack of empirical research specifically measuring student belongingness in online doctoral programs. For graduate students, socialization, sense of belonging, and academic outcomes are linked concepts [6], and graduate students must integrate their schooling experiences with their out-of-school responsibilities [17]. The writing process has the potential to alter students’ sense of belonging, as peer writing groups and shared experiences can all promote belonging [18]. Writing can be a common interest, drawing doctoral students to convene, learn [19,20], establish a scholarly identity [21], and socialize in the academic setting [18]. For students who identify as English learners, informal peer interactions facilitate the writing process through scaffolding student understanding of the composition process [22]. Social cognitive theory (SCT) highlights the importance of learning from others [23], and the relationship between writing and SCT is further explored below.

1.2. Writing Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is closely related to student performance in higher education [11]: it describes one’s ability to execute a specific behavior to perform a task successfully. Self-efficacy develops over time and is influenced by mastery experiences, vicarious learning, a reduction in stress and negative emotions, and social persuasion [24]. Writing self-efficacy and student academic success are generally linked [25,26]. Writing promotes student engagement by activating self-efficacy [27,28] and helping students develop a scholarly identity [1,21]. Sources of writing self-efficacy include student- and program-level factors [29,30] and institutional and familial support [25]. Ultimately, the development of writing self-efficacy can alleviate writing anxiety and increase confidence in the writing process [25]. The benefits of promoting writing self-efficacy and a sense of belonging include improved writing performance and achievement [7], student engagement [28], and course grades [31]. Schmidt and Alexander [11] coined the term writerly self-efficacy, referring to “student-writers’ beliefs about what and how they can perform as writers” (p. 1). Writerly self-efficacy can be fostered through self-assessment, coaching, and repeated practice, which are often provided through writing support centers [11], and is further explored in this study using the following framework.

1.3. Theoretical Framework: Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory [23] highlights that individuals function in systems where there is reciprocal causation between personal determinants, actions, and environmental factors. While personal (cognitive) factors, behavior, and environment are all determinants of one another, this reciprocity is not symmetrical. Rather, the relative strength is determined
by context and the individuals in that context. For example, a learner enrolled in an online EdD program (environment) who does not feel a sense of self-efficacy related to research methods (cognitive factor) may not reach out to faculty or peers in the program for additional support due to fears of a lack of belonging (behavior). The learner has thus changed their environment by limiting their support network and feelings of a lack of belonging can be worsened, highlighting that individuals are both products of and producers of an environment [23,32].

Recent studies of writing development among doctoral students draw on concepts from SCT to understand student writing development [5,7], as self-efficacy mediates effort, persistence, and perseverance. Low self-efficacy leads to the belief that tasks are more difficult than they are, increasing stress levels, and decreasing problem solving, whereas high self-efficacy allows students to calmly approach difficult tasks [32]. Therefore, efficacy beliefs can be strong determinants of writing accomplishment. Doctoral students who have negative beliefs about their writing capabilities may alter their effort, perseverance, and resilience. However, the interplay between the self-system and the environment is also key [23]. Vincent and colleagues [5] highlight that academic writing is influenced by a combination of internal factors, such as self-efficacy and self-regulation, and external factors, such as urgency and opportunity to write. The results of Vincent and colleagues’ [5] mixed-methods study with doctoral candidates revealed that writing retreats developed students’ self-efficacy and self-regulation and provided students with the opportunity to write, reinforcing that students can change their environment (using writing retreats and groups) and their behavior (writing outcomes).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This mixed-methods explanatory sequential study included quantitative data collection (via an electronic survey; see Appendix A), followed by individual and focus group interviews. The researchers adopted a constructivist paradigm, accepting the ontological stance that there are multiple constructed realities, and the epistemological approach that knowledge is a human construction [33]. Interviews included emotion photograph prompts (for example, one of the prompts included a picture of a student sitting alone, in front of a laptop and appearing frustrated) and reflective questions (Appendix B). Ethical approval was obtained from the Johns Hopkins Institutional Review Board (IRB protocol #00006680).

2.2. Research Questions

1. How do students enrolled in an online EdD program experience becoming scholarly writers?
2. What is the relationship between writing self-efficacy and students’ sense of belonging to doctoral writing?

2.3. Population and Context

The study population included 3 cohorts of students in a U.S-based online EdD program with 252 students enrolled. The sampling strategy was one of convenience. All students enrolled in the EdD program at the time of the study were eligible to participate and received recruitment materials from program staff. Students ranged in age from 30 to 55 years old, 75% identified as women, 24% as men, and 1% did not select a gender; 47% of students identified as non-Hispanic White, 20% as non-Hispanic Black, 10% as non-Hispanic Asian, 10% as Hispanic, and 7% as non-U.S. At the time of this study, the program’s requirements included a five-chapter dissertation written in an academic style. Courses included scaffolded writing instruction, critical reading skills, literature synthesis, and research method writing activities. In addition, a program-wide writing clinic provided monthly skills workshops, one-on-one appointments, organized peer writing accountability groups, and a summer virtual writing retreat with faculty and student discussion panels.
Program supports aligned with Sword’s [34] academic writing framework focused on behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional (BASE) writing skills.

2.4. Instrumentation and Survey Design

The survey, which focused on key constructs connected in academic literature to the academic writing process—writing self-efficacy and belonging—included three scales: the Writerly Self-Efficacy Scale for Writing Centers [11], the Belonging Uncertainty Scale [35], and a modified version of the Sense of Social and Academic Fit [36]. The Writerly Self-Efficacy Scale for Writing Centers includes 20 items rated on a 7-point scale, designed for university writing centers. The scale measures perceived competence and writerly beliefs and includes items such as “I can articulate my strengths and challenges as a writer”. The Writerly Self-Efficacy Scale has a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.93 and split reliability of 0.86, with high internal consistency and reliability across items [11].

The Sense of Social and Academic Fit Scale [35] is a 10-item scale that includes items such as “I belong in the dissertation writing process at [school name]”. The Belonging Uncertainty Scale [35] includes three items, where respondents rate how they feel about themselves at different times, either strongly agreeing or strongly disagreeing with a statement such as “When something good happens, I feel that I really belong at [school name]”. Both surveys have been validated [35].

The survey was administered to two educators to test the face validity and establish whether the items were clear, relevant, and unambiguous. One educator was enrolled in an Ed.D. program. Unclear items were revised. Researchers established content validity by aligning questions with the constructs under study (writing self-efficacy, belonging, and academic fit). Four items from the Sense of Social and Academic Fit Scale [35] were discarded due to repetition with the other scales. The final survey (see Appendix A) included 30 questions about the specific constructs under study and 7 demographic questions. Demographic data were collected at the end of the survey to minimize the effects of stereotype threat.

2.5. Focus Group Interview Protocol

The interview protocol included elements of the BASE writing framework [34] in the development of open-ended questions. The first two authors, educators at institutions of higher education, developed the interview protocol (see Appendix B) in consultation with the third author, a master’s student at the time of the study (Y.S.). The protocol explores cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors aligned with triadic reciprocal determinism [23], the process of becoming a scholarly writer, and antecedents to writing self-efficacy. Researchers conducted online focus group discussions (FGDs) via Zoom, as participants were located throughout the U.S and internationally. While FGDs were preferred to allow for social cohesion, where participants share perceptions and opinions and feel comfort and reassurance [37], one-on-one interviews were held if only one participant arrived for a scheduled FGD. Each FGD or one-on-one interview did not last more than one hour.

2.6. Data Analysis

Survey data were imported to SPSS (2021) [38], and this software was used to complete descriptive statistics and non-parametric statistical analysis. Focus group interview data were transcribed using otter.ai software (2023), de-identified, and checked for accuracy. Researchers used NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (2020) [39] and inductive coding (no pre-existing coding frame existed) to code across the dataset [40]. The first and second authors independently coded the same transcript and then met to decide on one set of shared codes. The researchers agreed that the coding process would allow for emergent coding. The researchers then coded three more transcripts independently and agreed upon a second set of shared codes. During this second coding meeting, the researchers reviewed the transcripts together and discussed the emergence of new codes, which included “group stress”, “collaborative effort”, “out-of-sequence”, “lacking tolerance for ambiguity”, and
“imposter syndrome”. The researchers discussed common codes and emerging themes, added new codes to the codebook, and coded the remaining transcript independently before a third coding meeting. At the final coding meeting, the researchers identified groups of codes that formed themes, expressed below. Finally, the researchers re-read the transcripts to check the validity of the draft themes and adjusted the theme statements for accuracy. The codes and themes developed are shared in Appendix C.

2.7. Trustworthiness

The researchers leveraged data and researcher triangulation, as well as thick descriptions, to increase the confirmability. Data triangulation included the use of quantitative and qualitative data and researchers’ field notes. Two researchers with experience in qualitative research (the first and second authors) coded independently but met multiple times to agree on codes. They also ensured that the findings represented the dataset by selecting quotes from participants across interviews to enhance the credibility.

2.8. Positionality Statement

The research team included three women scholars who identify as White (1) and Asian (2). During the study, one researcher was a faculty member with a professional role to support a writing clinic for students in the program under study. FGDs were facilitated by the first author, a program graduate who had supported the writing clinic during her term of study, and literature analysis was supported by the third author, a student in a different academic program. Although each team member has a different area of expertise, we shared a focus on excellence and equity in education and a collective interest in student writing success. This interest framed our approach of examining student experiences to identify trends and helpful practices.

3. Results

A total of 93 students began the survey, and 74 submitted completed surveys, composing 29% of the total student population. The sample included students from three cohorts who entered the program between 2018 and 2020 (see Table 1). Respondents ranged in age between 28 and 59 years (mean age 41.38). The average respondent gender-identified as female (74.3%), White (66.2%), was not an international student (89.2%), and spoke English as a first language (77%). Other first languages spoken by respondents included Hokien (2.7%), Vietnamese (2.7%), as well as Urdu, Russian, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Chinese.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
<th>Mean (Range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>41.38 (28-59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14 (18.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55 (74.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender male</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender female</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-conforming</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>1 (1.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer not to respond</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>4 (5.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian; Asian American; Pacific Islander</td>
<td>10 (13.5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black; African American</td>
<td>4 (5.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>49 (66.2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial or Biracial</td>
<td>4 (5.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>3 (4.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>4 (5.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1. Student Experiences Becoming Academic Writers

Survey and interview data spoke to the experience of becoming scholarly writers. Overall, quantitative data indicated that respondents experienced a moderate sense of belonging as they engaged in scholarly writing. In addition, themes from qualitative data indicated that participants experienced writing as a journey, found unclear expectations to be painful, and believed that their English proficiency was a privilege or led to challenges in learning content. Participants valued peer support, although this support could not be forced, and they viewed writing as a craft.

3.2. Quantitative Measures of Belonging

The Sense of Social and Academic Fit Scale [35] provided data to respond to the first research question. Since the researchers only included 6 of the 10 items from the Sense of Social and Academic Fit Scale, responses to individual items are provided as opposed to a composite scale score (see Table 2). Respondents, on average, moderately agreed that they belonged in the dissertation writing process and fit in well in the program. Respondents disagreed, on average, that they felt alienated from the dissertation writing process or that the dissertation process was a mystery to them. Respondents moderately disagreed that others understood more than them about what was going on in the dissertation writing process but were neutral when asked whether they thought the same way as people who do well in the dissertation process.

Table 2. Social and Academic Fit Scale—Individual Items.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Range of Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I belong in the dissertation writing process in the [name of institution] program</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>5.51 (1.90)</td>
<td>1–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people understand more than I do about what is going on in the dissertation writing process in the [institution] program</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.78 (1.91)</td>
<td>1–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think in the same way as people who do well in the dissertation writing process at [name of institution]</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>4.92 (1.36)</td>
<td>1–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a mystery to me how the dissertation writing process in the [name of institution] program works</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2.57 (1.65)</td>
<td>1–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel alienated from the dissertation writing process in the [name of institution] program</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2.65 (1.67)</td>
<td>1–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I fit in well in the dissertation writing process in the [name of institution] program</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>5.16 (1.47)</td>
<td>1–7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Likert scale: 7—strongly agree, 6—agree, 5—moderately agree, 4—neutral, 3—moderately disagree, 2—disagree, 1—strongly disagree.

3.3. Qualitative Findings

Over six months (October 2021–March 2022), the researchers conducted five interviews, which included between one and six participants. Eleven students participated in the
interviews. Thematic qualitative analysis yielded five themes: (1) writing is experienced as a journey, (2) unclear expectations are painful, (3) while English was viewed as a privilege, some participants with different home languages experienced challenges learning content, (4) peer support is needed and cannot be forced, and (5) developing writers view writing as a craft and identified writing tools.

3.3.1. Qualitative Theme 1: Writing Is Experienced as a Journey

Overall, participants described vacillating feelings and needs regarding their writing experience. Many participants identified with the photo of a person on a path (see Appendix B). Writing was a journey that was at times "daunting", a “roller coaster”, or "overwhelming". This journey also included the need for support, affirmation, and cheerleaders; dedication of time, and for some, the feeling of being "behind". Participants noted that feedback was mostly frontloaded, offered at the beginning of the program, and some recalled memorable positive feedback. Overall, the journey included the experience of improvement, and joining a new academic community through the act of writing.

One participant highlighted the intensity of this experience, specific to dissertation writing, noting, "when there are multiple iterations of the dissertation, that's what I'm relating to. That can be the daunting part of the process and feeling like this never-ending writing trail" (Participant 1, 25 October 2021). Participants also described experiencing positive sentiments during this journey, including joy and the experience of improvement. One participant explained, “It’s sort of jumping up as I proceed with perhaps excitement. That is how I feel after I've completed a substantial part of my dissertation” (Participant 1, 25 October 2021).

Part of the journey experienced by some participants was imposter syndrome. Two of the eleven interviewees named this experience, saying, for example:

I definitely came in not being an academic writer. I had made it through my master’s program, and could write, but not in the sense of taking myself out of the writing. So, it took me a little while. My first semester was a little rougher with that. All the way through it, I probably fought imposter syndrome just a little bit where, I would get something back and go, I'm just not sure that measures up to where somebody else is. But at the same time, I found myself becoming a better writer. And now I hate to say it, but I miss that kind of intensive writing.

(Participant 2, 11 January 2022)

An important contributor to feelings such as imposter syndrome or belonging to the program and dissertation writing process was the expectations that participants held of themselves and believed that others held of them, explored in the next theme.

3.3.2. Qualitative Theme 2: Unclear Expectations Are Painful

Most participants reported entering the program with high expectations of themselves. One commented, “You just have this feeling of I have to grow into this giant tree, I have to fit in with all these other papers. But I’m this little seedling, right? And so, I don’t know how that’s going to happen” (Participant 2, 25 October 2021). Reflecting on the faculty and advisors in the program who would be reviewing their work, another participant remarked, “I do know that the people who work with me have seen greatness and I want to be able to deliver that” (Participant 5, 25 October 2021).

Some participants were more comfortable than others with writing mechanics but expected to grow during their time in the program. A student who worked as an English teacher explained:

There are elements of academic writing in a doctorate program that are totally different from what I would expect for my students like literary analysis... But I think the thing that has helped me the most is recognizing that I don't know everything, relying on the things that I do know and that I know I do well, but also recognizing... I’m here to learn.

(Participant 1, 7 March 2022)
To develop as researchers and writers, participants reported needing clear feedback from faculty, teaching assistants (TAs), and peers. Faculty judgments about writing quality felt subjective, but feedback helped developing writers determine whether they were on the right track. Participants valued and respected professors’ opinions. They appreciated affirming feedback from faculty, which helped to bolster confidence. However, even positive feedback needed to be specific so that participants could understand what was good about their writing and should be replicated. One participant remarked, “I don’t know what I did that was any different than anyone else. And I mean this in the humblest way possible. I truly and authentically don’t think I’m a great writer” (Participant 6, 25 October 2021).

While participants appreciated positive feedback, they also appreciated honest and candid feedback about how their writing could improve. Constructive, timely feedback from faculty and peers helped to guide their progress. Delayed feedback from faculty was frustrating when writing assignments were due in quick succession. Additionally, there were challenges when faculty feedback was conflicting. One participant describes, “I really struggle when [my advisors] disagree. Because I feel like the kid between mom and dad going [hands-up and shrugging gesture], ‘Who do I listen to?’” (Participant 6, 25 October 2021). Another participant elaborated on how conflicting feedback impacted their writing self-efficacy:

I don’t think that my advisor and some of the professors agree on the nomenclature of writing, because some of the things that I was submitting to both people were getting opposite spectrums of feedback. I’m already insecure in my own knowledge. . . Maybe as long as I progress further in the program and further in my writing, I’ll have a little bit more of a stronger foundation where I know where my own insecurities lie.

(Participant 1, 10 January 2022)

Writing is an iterative process, which some participants described as “never-ending” or a “moving target”, which caused frustration. One participant discussed how time was a challenge in multiple ways:

Time is the enemy in two ways. One, if you are not writing and you have a deadline coming, you don’t write well. You can’t do it at the last minute. But too much time to ponder something, too much time to play in it, is also the enemy.

(Participant 1, 11 January 2022)

This participant shared an anecdote about the importance of writing a bad first draft saying, “It was so freeing to be able to say, I’m just going to write the first draft. It may not be great but get words out on the paper” (Participant 1, 11 January 2022). Ultimately, participants acknowledged the need to let go of high expectations and find sustainable strategies:

We have to be patient with ourselves and know that every expert had a beginning and so I’m not there yet. But knowing that we have resources of people that we can come online and have feedback sessions with them.

(Participant 2, 25 October 2021)

3.3.3. Qualitative Theme 3: English Was Viewed as a Privilege

Since language is a factor in access to academic settings, we asked participants about how they viewed their home language as influencing their academic writing development. Most respondents to the survey (77%) identified their first language as English, and 10 interview participants described their home language as academic English. These participants described their use of English at home as a privilege and indicated confidence and belonging as part of this privilege. One participant said “I think that my language is still fairly academic. It’s not unusual for me to have conversations with my daughters about critical race theory, what they see going on in the public eye, so it’s still an academic
conversation, even though we’re at home” (Participant 1, 27 October 2021). Similarly, another participant called their home an “evidence-based home” (Participant 1, 11 January 2022). One participant who had another first language still identified English as their home language, saying:

I would say my day-to-day home language is English—my first and primary language. I am fluent in another language that does take up much of my day, a lot of time off and on throughout my material. It’s just my upbringing. But that does not hinder my English at all, if anything, my English was that other language... My emails and text messages even tend to have full sentences, they are grammatically correct. They may be passive and not APA compliant, but they are grammatically correct.

(Participant 1, 10 January 2022)

One participant whose home language was Chinese discussed challenges with writing and learning content, sharing:

I always tell my students that everybody writes differently, and the Chinese way is to say it and then finally you tell the topic sentence. I recently realized that my advisor, he wants me to spit it [out] and then say it... But it’s the content that I’m struggling with, as an English language learner. So, I wish I would have that help. Now that I’m in chapter three, and four has a follow, I don’t even know what to do.

(Participant 2, 25 October 2021)

3.3.4. Qualitative Theme 4: Peer Support Is Needed and Cannot Be Forced

Participants valued peer support to successfully navigate the academic journey, as few people in their lives understood the unique pressures of a doctoral program. Peer support came in many forms: social groups, writing groups, peer writing partners, as well as comprehensive examination preparation groups. Online discussion boards allowed participants to hone their academic writing skills in a low-stakes context. Peer feedback was especially valuable since faculty feedback tapered after the first year of the program. Peer support, when it was ongoing, helped participants hold each other accountable:

I have wonderful peers. One thing that [the program] did was they accepted some pretty amazing people. And a few classmates of mine saw how stressed out I was with my writing and they were very comfortable in their own writing and they stepped in and really offered to help me. Things like, wording things better, making things not passive. I mean, I am still like how am I making things passive? It’s like that guy that’s in the picture going, what am I doing wrong? ...they have really stepped in, they really helped and given me that extra encouragement and push to say you have all the right tools.

(Participant 1, 10 January 2022)

Participants indicated that peer support needed to develop organically and was less helpful when forced (such as required peer feedback on writing tasks). Participants preferred when they could seek out like-minded peers and valued when their peer support partner was in a similar time zone to them. Time was in short supply, and they needed to find peers who were easy to connect with, trustworthy, and with whom the relationship could be mutually beneficial. One participant explained:

The people you loved might not have been writing at the same level that you were writing at. So, you had to navigate that someone who’s a really good study buddy, or a really good encourager, might not be a really good peer editor for you.

(Participant 1, 11 January 2022)
Once in the dissertation writing phase, however, it was less feasible to receive peer feedback. Participants worried about being burdensome to others, as everyone already had so much to do. Participants also needed to prioritize their needs. A participant explained, “I think there was a point in time where I felt like too many people were relying on me and I couldn’t get my own stuff done” (Participant 1, 11 January 2022). Occasionally, peer interactions were negative, as the collective group stress of the cohort reached a peak. Then, participants relied on a smaller group of peers for support. Another negative aspect was social comparison. Participants described needing to recognize that each person would progress through the program at their own pace.

3.3.5. Qualitative Theme 5: Developing Writers View Writing as a Craft, and Identified Writing Tools

Another element of participants’ experience of becoming academic writers involved understanding writing as a craft, and the continual identification of tools to use in this craft. Many were cognitive tools: writing strategies, strategic interaction with peers and program mentors, and mentally balancing aspects of life in which a student experienced high self-efficacy, such as their full-time job, with the experience of being a novice in the craft of academic writing. One participant stated, “I’m thinking specifically of the dissertation, it’s so long, you know, sometimes you’ve got to break it down into chunks” (Participant 3, 25 October 2021). Another participant indicated the use of multiple cognitive tools when discussing how to use feedback:

Being able to process [TA] feedback and apply it and using the [Mind Brain Teaching] strategies of identifying your errors, looking to correct them, doing authentic practice all those pieces, not always relying on my manual, but doing something, seeing how close it measured when I did self-checking, and then getting the feedback afterwards.

(Participant 1, 11 January 2022)

Tools included specific people or resources, such as the program writing clinic, class discussion boards, peers, professors, and in one case, a participant’s child, who served as an “in-house editor” (Participant 1, 11 January 2022). Reading a field’s literature was another tool participants mentioned, “As you keep reading everything, filling your mind and the [comprehensive exams] and preparing all the different parts, there was a switch, I could see it in my writing, and the way I speak and also at work” (Participant 5, 15 October 2021).

When asked what advice they would give to students in the program, participants emphasized the use of multiple tools, from grammar-based tools to outlining. Applying feedback to a graded paper was an example of dedication to the craft with the goal of mastery:

The first piece is to learn to separate the mechanical from the content. Mechanize your APA, love your Grammarly; play that game, you can’t avoid it. Don’t wait, do it now. And the second piece would be: develop a process where you outline, write, and reverse outline, so that you know that what you’re going to say, you say it really well, and back it up with evidence. And then you check to make sure you actually did it because when you’re tired and it’s due, it’s easy to hit send. And the third thing, which all of my peers have laughed at, but I have told them as I really did go back and apply all the things to a graded paper.

(Participant 1, 11 January 2022)

3.4. Relationship between Writing Self-Efficacy and Students’ Sense of Belonging to Doctoral Writing

To understand the relationship between writing self-efficacy and belonging, we analyzed the correlation between the Belonging Uncertainty Scale and the Writerly Self-Efficacy Scale scores. We hypothesized a significant, negative correlation between the two
scale scores. To assess normality, we assessed for skewness, kurtosis, and conducted the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests. The analysis revealed that the data were not normally distributed, necessitating a non-parametric test, the Spearman rho. Results revealed a significant negative correlation between the two scale scores. For this student population, as student belonging uncertainty decreased, writing self-efficacy increased (see Table 3). We repeated the analysis using a parametric test and found that the results were the same.

Table 3. Relationship between the Belonging Uncertainty Scale and the Writing Self-Efficacy Scale scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Belonging Uncertainty (N = 74) (Mean Scale Score (SD))</th>
<th>Writing Self-Efficacy (N = 70) (Mean Scale Score (SD))</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Scale Score (SD)</td>
<td>13.43 (3.39)</td>
<td>115.90 (15.50)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skewness</td>
<td>−0.33</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurtosis</td>
<td>−0.67</td>
<td>−0.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kolmogorov–Smirnov</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapiro–Wilk</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spearman’s rho</td>
<td>−0.35</td>
<td>0.003 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>−0.34</td>
<td>0.004 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * \(p < 0.05\).

4. Discussion

We investigated how students in an online EdD program experience becoming scholarly writers and the relationship between writing self-efficacy and students’ sense of belonging to doctoral writing. This research was framed by the SCT [23] to capture the complex relationship between students’ personal factors, their behavior, and the environment of an online doctoral program. The findings confirm the relationships between writing self-efficacy and sense of belonging in an online environment and add to the literature regarding how to cultivate both attitudes in an online educational context.

4.1. Process of Becoming Academic Writers

Respondents, on average, felt that they belonged to the writing process and fit in well in the doctoral program. Although the measures are different, these results indicate that an online program may in fact have a higher sense of student belonging than an in-person Chemistry PhD program at the University of California, Berkeley [41]. Autoethnographic inquiry from in-person doctoral students in Australia suggests that sense of belonging may be supported “through self-reflection and the sharing of experiences in a safe space, which builds perceived self-efficacy and self-awareness” [42].

Nascent research on distance doctoral students’ conception of belonging confirms this statement: a qualitative study of the experiences of one online student who lived in Iraq and was attending a PhD program indicated she felt a sense of belonging “to some extent” [43] (p. 5) due to connections with supervisors and peers through WhatsApp, Twitter, and/or other virtual platforms [43]. Other studies of online doctoral programs point to program elements, such as a cohort model and informal online spaces, which promote belonging [44]. Our study provides quantitative evidence that a moderate sense of belonging is possible in online doctoral education. As described, sense of belonging contributes to how students interact with and in their learning environment, highlighting the importance of this construct.

4.2. Writing as a Journey with Unclear Expectations

This research also focused on learner self-efficacy, which is closely related to academic performance, as it mediates effort, persistence, and perseverance, and can develop over
Thematic analysis of interview data revealed the participants’ perception of the doctoral process as daunting, with a rollercoaster of emotions. Similar to research on in-person and online doctoral education [41,45], some learners described being plagued by imposter syndrome, especially at the beginning of the program, making them question whether they belonged. However, the program offered opportunities for mastery, as participants leveraged multiple opportunities to hone their writing skills, which some participants described experiencing with joy. Sources of vicarious learning included feedback from faculty, TAs, and/or peers. Feedback plays a powerful role in helping students become effective writers and can serve as an important source of self-confidence [46]. Consistent with this research, participants valued clear, constructive, and timely feedback from faculty and TAs.

Feedback from supervisors tends to change over time [47], which is consistent with what we found, as the participants noted a tapering of feedback as they progressed through the program. In a study of doctoral students who dropped out of their programs, Leijen et al. [4] found that former doctoral students were most challenged as they transitioned from the didactic portion of the curriculum to the more independent stage of their doctoral journey. While all our study participants were on track for degree completion at the time of the study, they too experienced challenges as they transitioned away from coursework toward the dissertation (independent writing) stage of the program. Another study of doctoral students at this independent stage indicates that students who developed self-directed learning strategies expressed “a positive assessment of the professional demands placed on them at this stage and confidence in their ability to persist through the individual challenges” [45] (p. 467). For students enrolled in in-person doctoral programs, this independent stage can bring difficulties as the students move away from a personal support network for doctoral students [45]. The students in this study, as part of an online program, did not need to move away from personal support networks.

The journey described by many participants aligns with research on doctoral students’ experiences, indicating that this process includes learning writing and research skills as well as professional identity development [48]. The production and dissemination of knowledge, often conducted through writing, are key features of doctoral work. Participants in this study noted that the iterative nature of this work was a source of both frustration and accomplishment on the doctoral writing journey.

4.3. English as a Privilege

Among the students who discussed home language in the focus groups, eleven out of twelve described their fluency in academic English as a privilege that facilitated their writing development. One participant indicated that their use of English as an additional language was a privilege, and one participant indicated that their English proficiency level did pose some challenges in accessing content. Participants’ perceptions of English align with Park’s narratives of East Asian women English teachers, who described English as a dual symbol of privilege and marginalization [49]. Higher education researchers are only beginning to theorize how doctoral students’ multilingualism can contribute to advances in research, thinking, and learning; for example, using multiple languages to understand the findings of research studies and broaden the meaning of terms in one language [50,51]. No evidence indicates that these ideas about the expansive possibilities of multilingualism were put into practice for participants in this context. For students who experience a language barrier in accessing academic content, approaches to help students access content through learning critical reading skills may be helpful [52].

4.4. Importance of Peers in Doctoral Writing

Self-efficacy development is influenced by vicarious learning, social persuasion, and a reduction in stress and negative emotions [24]. In this study, peers served as an important source of vicarious learning and positive discourse. Effective management of stress and negative emotions is a powerful antecedent to self-efficacy, as participants must continue
to believe that they will be successful in order to persist. There is a negative and significant relationship between self-efficacy with academic burnout, emotional exhaustion, academic disinterest, and academic inefficacy [53]. However, the participants described that they needed to be strategic about which peers formed their close network of support. Similar to Brodie and Osowksa [16], we found that participants sought peers who resided in the same time zone to avoid additional barriers to connection.

When treated as a social practice, writing can serve as a common interest that draws doctoral students to convene and develop in their learning. Bergen et al. [19] highlight that when delivered successfully, student writing groups have the potential to strengthen students’ writing skills and outputs, which was a consistent finding in our study. Participants relied on peers as writing partners either in pairs or groups and felt the absence when this support tapered during the more independent portion of the program.

4.5. Writing as a Craft

Research on writing with professional academic writers suggests that the view of writing as a craft is a belief held by many successful academic writers [34,54]. In addition, this approach is suggested in curricula targeted to doctoral students [55]. A view of writing as a craft indicates that a craftsperson continually develops their skill with tools to create a product [34].

Students’ descriptions of tools they used in their academic writing journey highlight the potential connection between student behaviors, in this case the use of writing tools, and student attitudes of writerly self-efficacy, aligning with Bandura’s [24] social learning theory. Similar to Schmidt and Alexander’s [11] research on writing clinics, there is some evidence in this study that the writing clinic supported writerly self-efficacy, as it was one of the tools mentioned by participants. Institutional and familial support [25] were also evident in students’ mentioning of reaching out to peers, mentors, and family members as a strategy to support their writing development. Participants also mentioned behaviors such as submersion in the field’s literature [48] as part of becoming fluent in academic English.

4.6. Writerly Self-Efficacy and Student Belonging

When we analyzed the relationship between writerly self-efficacy and belonging uncertainty, we found a significant negative correlation between the two scales. This relationship between belonging and self-efficacy is consistent with existing research findings that sense of belonging and self-efficacy are joined, and that increases in belonging and self-efficacy are associated with increases in academic performance [56]. Exclusion impairs cognition [57], decreases self-esteem, and increases stress, anxiety, and depression [58]. In contrast, when there is a sense of belonging in a learning environment, learners exhibit increased engagement, improved academic performance, decreased stress and anxiety, and increased retention [13,58]. What is not known from our study is whether belonging is an antecedent to writing self-efficacy, or vice versa.

Learners develop belonging when provided with strategies to deal with social adversity [36], reflect on experience, and create social spaces and relationships with peers [13,58]. A sense of belonging can also be activated by personal networks, programs, and mentors. Holloway-Friesen [59] found that mentored Hispanic graduate students reported a higher sense of belonging and self-efficacy when compared with unmentored students. Participants in this study spoke of the importance of both faculty and peer mentors in their doctoral journey.

Sources of writing self-efficacy include student- and program-level factors [29,30], as well as institutional and familial support [25]. The benefits of promoting writing self-efficacy and sense of belonging include increasing writing performance and achievement [7], higher course grades [31,58], and increasing student engagement [27]. Ultimately, the development of writing self-efficacy can alleviate writing anxiety and increase confidence [7]. The need for academic programs to address both students’ sense of belonging and self-efficacy is clear.
4.7. Limitations

The limitations of this study relate to the timing, design, and process. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a unique context for studying belonging and a potentially confounding factor, considering the many ways that pandemic-related life shifts impacted belonging [60]. This may have increased students’ sense of belonging to the program, which remained a constant factor in students’ otherwise disrupted lives. Future research on this topic might elucidate students’ sense of belonging when they have fewer life disruptions.

Multiple design elements may have also impacted the findings. Having a former student interview current students may have impacted participant responses, with a potential bias of downplaying program challenges. However, it may also have encouraged students to reflect honestly on their experiences with a peer. In addition, working with a small group of participants from one program at one institution, with a response rate of 29% for the survey and 4% for interviews, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research might focus on participants from across several institutions to provide an understanding of typical student experiences. Similarly, the small numbers of ethnically minoritized students in the quantitative sample did not allow for group comparisons to understand if programming changes are needed to provide a more equitable experience for students across social groups.

Due to the timing of the thematic analysis, the researchers did not conduct member checks with participants in focus groups, which would improve the validity of the qualitative findings. Additionally, because of the sample size, we did not focus on the student program stage. Being at the beginning versus the end of the program may have implications for student sense of belonging, writing self-efficacy, and experience of becoming an academic writer.

5. Conclusions

Findings from this study indicate that online doctoral programs can support at least a moderate sense of student belonging, and that a sense of belonging has a positive relationship with writing self-efficacy in the online doctoral program context. These findings, as well as the qualitative descriptions of the process of becoming an academic writer, allow for some recommendations for practice. These recommendations center around the healthy use of stress, strategic engagement of peers, and clear, timely feedback.

Many participants experienced the journey of writing as stressful at times. As unclear expectations are common across career stages and certainly exist in academic life, practitioners may want to consider how to cultivate a sense of adventure versus a sense of stress on the writing journey. Practitioners should highlight how academics move successfully across languages and provide a variety of samples of academic writing that represent diverse voices. It may also be helpful to point out how second-language learners may have both advantages and disadvantages regarding academic language, to counteract stigmatization of differences.

Guidelines for strategic engagement of peers can support the student writing journey. Multiple students discussed the need to engage with peers for different reasons, and that the peers who might help with their writing would be different than the peers they might rely on for social support. Program leaders may want to guide students to make a peer map, similar to the National Center for Faculty Diversity and Development’s mentor map [61], identifying peers they can rely on for encouragement, technical support, or as a critical reader. Providing students with specific tasks they can ask peers to do may also be helpful; for example, asking a peer to provide a reverse outline of their work or to double-check the writing structure.

Finally, providing students with clear, timely feedback appears to support students’ writing attitudes. Indicating to the learner what they did well is just as important or even more important as constructive feedback on what to improve. In addition, specific positive reinforcement allows students to serve as effective peer mentors. This process may involve
some clarity on the faculty feedback process—there are some writing choices that are stylistic or individual, and some that are dictated by conventions or professional guidelines. Practitioners may wish to clarify these distinctions for students.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, K.N., L.Q. and Y.S.; methodology, K.N. and L.Q.; formal analysis, K.N. and L.Q.; investigation, K.N. and L.Q.; resources, L.Q.; data curation, K.N. and L.Q.; writing—original draft preparation, K.N., L.Q. and Y.S.; writing—review and editing, K.N. and Y.S.; project administration, L.Q. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical approval was obtained from the Johns Hopkins Institution’s Review Board (IRB protocol #00006680).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data unavailable due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Appendix A**

Survey

Likert scale: 7—strongly agree, 6—agree, 5—moderately agree, 4—neutral, 3—moderately disagree, 2—disagree, 1—strongly disagree.

The following questions are about your experience with dissertation writing in the [name of institution] program:

1. I belong in the dissertation writing process in the [name] program.
2. Other people understand more than I do about what is going on in the dissertation writing process in the [name] program.
3. I think in the same way as people who do well in the dissertation writing process at [name].
4. It is a mystery to me how the dissertation writing process in the [name] Ed.D program works.
5. I feel alienated from the dissertation writing process in the [name] Ed.D program.
7. Compared with other students in the [name] Ed.D program, I am similar to the kind of people who succeed in the dissertation writing process.
8. Sometimes I feel that I belong in the [name] program, and sometimes I feel that I don’t belong in the [name] Ed.D program.
9. When something good happens, I feel that I really belong in the [name] Ed.D program.
10. When something bad happens, I feel that maybe I don’t belong in the [name] Ed.D program.

The next section is about your writing skills:

11. I can identify incomplete or fragment sentences.
12. I can invest a great deal of effort and time in writing a paper when I know the paper will earn a grade.
13. I can articulate my strengths and challenges as a writer.
14. I can find and incorporate appropriate evidence to support important points in my papers.
15. I can be recognized by others as a strong writer.
16. When I read a rough draft, I can identify gaps when they are present in the paper.
17. I can maintain a sense of who my audience is as I am writing a paper.
18. I can write a paper without feeling physical discomfort (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, back-aches, insomnia, muscle tension, nausea, and/or crying).
19. When I read drafts by classmates, I can provide them with valuable feedback.
20. When I work with a writing tutor, I can learn new strategies that promote my development and success as a writer.
21. When I have a pressing deadline for a paper, I can manage my time efficiently.
22. I can attribute my success on writing projects to my writing abilities more than to luck or external forces.
23. When a student who is similar to me receives praise and/or a good grade on a paper, I know I can write a paper worthy of praise and/or a good grade.
24. Once I have completed a draft, I can eliminate both small and large sections that are no longer necessary.
25. I can write a paper without experiencing overwhelming feelings of fear or distress.
26. When writing papers for different courses, I can adjust my writing to meet the expectations of each discipline.
27. I can map out the structure and main sections of an essay before writing the first draft.
28. I can find ways to concentrate when I am writing, even when there are many distractions around me.
29. I can find and correct my grammatical errors.
30. I can invest a great deal of effort and time in writing a paper when I know the paper will not be graded.

Demographic questions:
31. How do you gender-identify?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Transgender male
   d. Transgender female
   e. Non-conforming
   f. Not listed
   g. I prefer not to respond
32. Are you an international student? Y/N
33. What is your first language?
34. Do you consider yourself a native English speaker? Y/N
35. What is your age?
36. Please identify your race/ethnicity. Select all that apply:
   a. Asian; Asian American; Pacific Islander
   b. Black; African American
   c. Hispanic; Latino; Chicano
   d. Native American; American Indian; Alaskan Native
   e. White; Caucasian (non-Hispanic)
   f. Multiracial or Biracial
   g. Prefer not to say
37. Please indicate your cohort year:
   a. 2018
   b. 2019
   c. 2020

Appendix B
Instructions for the Facilitator: How to use the focus group guide.
1. There are two levels of questions:
   Primary discussion questions appear in bold text and represent all the topics you will need to cover by the end of the interview. The questions are written to ensure some consistency across focus groups, but you are not required to read them verbatim. You may adapt the questions and/or ask them in a different order, depending on how the discussion develops.
Probing topics are indicated with a bullet. If you find that the participants provide little information in response to the primary question, these probing topics may be used to encourage further discussion. You are not required to cover every topic listed.

Before starting the FGD, ensure that all participants have provided written informed consent.

A. Introduction
Facilitator should explain the following points (do not read verbatim):

- The purpose of this focus group is to understand students' experiences of becoming academic writers.
- Affirm to the participants that they are the experts and that all answers are valid: no right and wrong.
- Invite differing opinions.
- Remind participants that the discussion is confidential, so personal information will not be shared outside of the study.
- Tell participants to use pseudonyms for themselves and anyone else they mention so as to preserve confidentiality.
- Participants should identify themselves with their pseudonym each time prior to raising a point and speak one at a time so that the audio recorder can capture everything.
- Remind participants to keep cellphones silent throughout the discussion to avoid disruption of the audio recording.

B. Focus group questions
1. What picture best represents your experience as an academic writer? How so? (Facilitator should show the images of the emotion prompts on the screen.)
2. Can you tell me about your experience becoming a better writer during your time in the Ed.D. program?
   a. How has faculty feedback affected your growth as a writer?
      i. Can you tell me about a time it was helpful?
      ii. Harmful?
   b. How has peer feedback during coursework affected your growth as a writer?
      i. Can you tell me about a time it was helpful?
      ii. Harmful?
   c. How often do you receive peer and faculty feedback?
      i. Do you think feedback from faculty and your peers is timely?
      ii. Do you hope for more or less feedback in the future?
3. Do you have peers who share your experiences with writing?
   a. How do you know that they share your experiences with writing?
   b. Do you communicate with peers about writing, such as writing better and more effectively?
   c. Do you have a writing partner?
   d. Have you ever had an experience where others praised your writing, or your writing was an example to others? How did this experience affect you?
4. Do you have mentors who share your experiences with writing?
   a. How do you know that they share your experiences with writing?
   b. How often do you communicate with your mentors?
   c. Do your mentors provide feedback on your writing?
      i. How has your mentor’s feedback affected you?
5. How would you describe your home language?
   a. How has your home language (whether a variety of English or another language) helped you become an academic writer?
   b. How does your home language relate to your sense of writing self-efficacy?
c. How does your home language relate to your sense of belonging in this program?

6. What advice would you give a new student in terms of learning academic writing in this program?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience becoming a better academic writer?

8. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C

Table of themes, codes, and excerpts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Codes</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing is experienced as a journey</td>
<td>Academic writing as a new community</td>
<td>So, I think for me, now, versus the beginning of all of this. So, the beginning would definitely be the gentleman struggling in front of the computer, or the little girl with her face, you know. And that was definitely kind of my first, I guess, semester, especially. But going through the program, honestly, that group in the top where it has the three girls kind of collaborating together. (Participant quote, 11 January 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imposter syndrome</td>
<td></td>
<td>I always considered myself a strong student, in general. So it didn’t really occur to me that I was not a strong writer until I was around some very strong writers. And then I had a huge imposter syndrome. (Participant quote, 10 January 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear expectations are painful</td>
<td>Expectations of self</td>
<td>I’m at the point where I’m with the guy with his hand on his head and the little girl with her hands on her cheek, pull your face down, because I do have high expectations. And just, I mean, I think that’s true of all of us. But I feel like it’s just never going to be good enough. And I remember my advisor warning me of that when she said when she wrote hers, she said she felt like she was never going to finish editing. And, you know, she said, you just keep going until you finally just say, you know what, we’re just going to stop here. And I keep trying to tell myself that yeah, I just want something that’s authentic. I really want to push myself to do something that’s authentic and also high quality. So, I don’t think those are bad things. It’s just sometimes it does get a little overwhelming. (Participant quote, 25 October 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations from others</td>
<td></td>
<td>My writing has a lot of improvement to go, and I worry that I’m still going to make so many mistakes, that it’s going to upset my advisor, and he’ll just not want to be my advisor anymore. (Participant quote, 10 January 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Sample Codes</td>
<td>Excerpt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing quality is subjective</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes I submit things in courses, comes back minimal edits. Looks good, right? It looks like I’m on the right track. It goes to my advisor. And it’s almost like you have to rewrite that section. So there’s such disparity in the feedback that you get, depending on who is delivering the feedback. That for me, that’s also part of that, you know, holding my head thinking, Okay, now what? (Participant quote, 27 October 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language is viewed as privilege</td>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td>I’m a doctoral student at [school name], that in and of itself is a pretty privileged position that I don’t think I would have access to or be as successful at doing without that background and academic language. And so it’s powerful. It’s opened doors for me. It’s like a position of privilege that like not everybody has or has had access to. (Participant quote, 7 March 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language influencing writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>I am fluent in another language that does take up much of my day, a lot of time off and on throughout my material. It’s just my upbringing. But that does that does not hinder my English at all, if anything, my English was that other language. And from a writing perspective, and just in general, I have never been one that was really into writing in extreme colloquial slang. My emails and text messages even, you know, they tend to have full sentences, they are grammatically correct. (Participant quote, 10 January 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support is needed, and cannot be forced</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>I didn’t like not to trust other people, but I think that we get a tight-knit group. And once I had that, and there were clear parameters, and I knew that, you know, I had valuable ideas, they had valuable ideas, a couple of people that I worked with, I couldn’t bounce things off of, and I knew that it wasn’t going to be like an academic risk, where my stuff was going to show up in their paper. (Participant quote, 11 January 2022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking out frequent peer feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td>And learning that there’s always something you can improve. And I think one of the ways that we do that is by learning that from other people who have gone through similar experiences. And so that would be my biggest thing is find people who are willing to talk to you about writing. (Participant quote, 11 January 2022)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing writers view writing as a craft, and identified writing tools

Intensive writing community

When we would work together on our discussion board posts, we would draft together, we would work together. I think that was much more helpful than if I wrote something and got feedback from a peer. Just sit and construct a piece with three other people. You know, we’re all messing around in the same doc and editing each other’s work and seeing how that process plays out. And we’re sort of iteratively going through.

( Participant quote, 7 March 2022)

Applying feedback

I relied on all my resources and the expertise from TAs. And then just trying to practice continuous improvement, so I kept a running list of the things that were my common errors so that I can start to overcome them.

( Participant quote, 11 January 2022)

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