

# Writing Groups as Dialogic Spaces: Negotiating Multiple Normative Perspectives

Kathrin Kaufhold  
*Stockholm University, Sweden*

Daniel Egil Yencken  
*Stockholm University, Sweden*

## Abstract

Facilitating sustained dialogic engagement in writing groups to support postgraduates' research-based writing can be challenging. So far there is little research on dialogic strategies in such groups. Studies of tutor-student talk around texts highlight how different dialogic strategies can invite or exclude contributions. This article investigates how writing group participants negotiate different perspectives on academic writing practices in a multidisciplinary writing group. The study analyses six video-recorded meetings of multilingual master's students writing in English at a Swedish university. It identifies dialogue patterns with diverging or converging perspectives. Hedging and suggesting potential norms creates spaces for sharing diverging perspectives while reflecting on ones' own writing. Insisting on universal norms and applying them to others' texts can close down dialogue. The results suggest that an awareness of dialogic strategies can aid facilitators when moderating writing groups.

## 1. Introduction

In light of the massification and diversification of postgraduate education, the need for supporting research-based writing has gained urgency. Writing groups have been suggested to be one of the responses to this need. In contrast to writing classes with specific assignments, writing groups facilitate sustained work on individual research projects with peer support (Chihota & Thesen, 2014; Haas, 2011; Kumar & Aitchison, 2018; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). At master's level, this need seems to be particularly pressing as the thesis is often the students' first major research-based piece of writing (Badenhorst et al., 2015). Advancing from a highly structured schedule with classes and short essay assignments to being responsible for a longer piece of research-based writing can be daunting for students, and some decide to discontinue their studies (Dysthe et al., 2006).

Facilitated writing groups aim to address these issues by providing a forum for peer discussions of ongoing work without the pressure of the supervisor's assessment. This horizontal-power arrangement is said to afford a space for multiple voices (Dysthe et al., 2006; Wilmot, 2018). In addition, writing groups are considered to provide safe spaces for socializing students into academic writing, especially postgraduate students who use English as an additional academic language (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011). Most importantly, writing groups are a response to students' desire for more dialogue around their writing (Lillis, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Yet, researchers and practitioners also report challenges in facilitating meaningful and sustained student participation. Most studies are based on students' or facilitators' observations, and there are few studies that examine how participants negotiate different voices in writing group interaction. From research that examines tutor-student dialogic interaction, we know that it is not only important to see *what* is talked about but also *how* it is talked about and

whether this manner invites or excludes contributions (e.g. Lillis, 2006; Wingate, 2019). Such insights can inform pedagogic development.

Therefore, our study analyses recorded writing group sessions and examines the dialogic strategies of writing group participants when engaging with their own and their peers' writing. More specifically, we ask:

- What are students' dialogic strategies in writing group interaction?
- What is the role of facilitators in this interaction?

## **2. Writing groups as dialogic spaces**

So far, most studies on writing groups have focused on doctoral level writing (e.g. Allen, 2019; Aitchison, 2009; Ferguson, 2009; Wegener et al., 2016; Wilmot, 2018). Yet, master's students face similar challenges of feeling isolated in their writing and seeking orientation beyond their supervisors' advice (Dysthe et al., 2006; Hass, 2011). In addition, a master's thesis often constitutes the first experience of research-based writing and requires the students to develop an understanding of writing in their discipline (Badenhorst et al., 2015; Johns & Swales, 2002).

Benefits of writing groups include cognitive, affective and social gains. In terms of the cognitive dimension, writing groups have been found to support the development of writing skills and increase productivity (Cuthbert et al., 2009). Connecting writing and reading by responding to peers' texts seems to inspire 'reflexive practice' (Aitchison, 2009, p. 207). In terms of the affective dimension, these groups are said to provide emotional support and safe spaces (Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2020) where frustrations can be aired and ideas can be tested (Dysthe et al., 2006). According to Cafarella and Barnett (2000), such spaces also serve as learning grounds for receiving critique and building confidence.

In terms of the social dimension, research suggests that the peer-learning set-up with a horizontal power relation and without supervisor assessment provides an environment conducive to learning (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). While minimizing structural power differentials is part of the ethos of writing groups, the extent to which this can be achieved might also depend on whether the groups are facilitated by the group members, trained doctoral students or learning developers. At master's level there is a tendency to involve the latter, as is the case in the present study.

Central to writing group pedagogy is the focus on discussion and dialogue, and on privileging process over product (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). In contrast to writing courses or supervision, the aim is not to teach how to write but to encourage discussions around the students' texts and the writing process (Chihota & Thesen, 2014) within a horizontal power arrangement. Essentially, writing groups aim to foster dialogic engagement (Aitchison, 2009).

However, research has also identified challenges to facilitating dialogue. These include the possible overreliance on the facilitators as feedback givers (Wilmot, 2018), and perceived limitations to the relevance of peer feedback in multidisciplinary groups (Cuthbert et al., 2009). Assigning expert authority to one participant (the facilitator) and withholding it from others jeopardizes dialogic engagement. But how do participants establish or impede such a 'dialogic space' (Wegerif, 2013, p. 4), i.e. a space in which the group is free to challenge and explore issues around writing? While there are various descriptions of techniques based on tutor observations and student feedback (e.g. Haas et al., 2020; Wilmot, 2018), there is little research on how postgraduate students and writing group facilitators activate dialogic strategies in actual interactions.

Burbules and Bruce (2001, p. 1112) comprehensively define dialogic learning and teaching as 'a pedagogical relation characterized by an ongoing discursive involvement of participants, constituted in a relation of reciprocity and reflexivity'. This is relevant for our context of writing groups as it comprises not only the cognitive co-construction of meaning but also an interpersonal dimension. It highlights the participants' ongoing engagement and their active 'interpretation, questioning, and rethinking the issue[s] or problem[s] at hand' (Burbules &

Bruce, 2001, p. 1113) open to the contribution of other participants on equal terms. The engagement relates both to the participants' capacity for reflection on writing processes and discursive choices, and to their dialogic engagement in the group itself. The multitude of voices can also cause tensions, misunderstandings and disagreements (Burbules & Bruce, 2001)

Dialogic interaction around writing has been investigated in tutor-student interactions. It has been shown to nurture reflexivity (Merkel, 2018; Brodersen et al., 2016) and develop a voice (Lillis, 2006). Drawing on Bakhtin, Lillis (2003) adds a normative dimension and suggests that dialogue entails a negotiation of norms (centripetal forces) and the possibility that various interpretations exist simultaneously (centrifugal forces). While the former aims for one perspective, one voice and one truth, the latter engages with possibilities for several truths, voices and perspectives.

Bakhtin (1981) relates these contrasting forces to externally authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses. Externally authoritative discourses are monologic as they impose specific interpretations. These meanings are presented as given or legitimated by reference to an authority. An example is talk that stipulates writing rules. Internally persuasive discourses stand in dialogic relation to other internal discourses. In its interaction with new contexts 'this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). Dialogue that facilitates internally persuasive discourses often stands in contrast to normative monologic teaching traditions in higher education.

The relation between multi-voiced dialogic and monologic teaching modes can be seen as a continuum. Lillis (2006) suggest that tutors and students engage in different types of dialogue ranging from instruction question-answer sequences, which guide the student towards a normative way of writing, to identifying different intentions and voices in a student's text. This study investigates how dialogic forms across this continuum are negotiated in a writing group among peers and with facilitators, in order to ascertain obstacles and opportunities for writing group pedagogies.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 The writing group**

The writing group was set up as one of the first for master's students hosted at the writing centre of our university to provide continued support beyond the limited number of one-to-one consultations. In line with writing group pedagogies, the aim was to discuss the students' writing processes and to avoid an exclusive focus on text-level issues (Chihota & Thesen, 2014). In studies on group work (e.g. Yu & Hu, 2017), the latter has been observed to be detrimental. Wilmot (2018, p. 262) warns that such a focus bears 'the risk of a grammar-based (deficit) approach' and quenches an active engagement with multiple perspectives on writing practices.

Our group had two facilitators (the authors) whose institutional position as teachers inevitably invoked a hierarchical structure. To flatten this hierarchy and follow the dialogic principle of establishing a 'reciprocal relation' (Burbules & Bruce, 2001, p. 1113), the students decided which topics to discuss. In addition, participation was voluntary and the students and facilitators were introduced as co-participants with the students being experts in their research fields and the facilitators being experienced in teaching academic communication (cf. Merkel, 2018).

The student participants were four female and two male students from European and Asian countries. They came from humanities, social sciences and natural sciences departments and used English as an additional language. All of them prepared for or were in the process of writing their master's thesis in English. The aims identified by the students in the first meeting were to receive support with: text-level issues, such as lexico-grammatical issues, academic style and referencing; higher-level issues, such as combining different chapters; and issues around the writing process ranging from managing literature to dealing with anxiety. The writing group ran over the final eight weeks of the term, a relatively short but intensive writing period for the students. Due to the voluntary nature of the activity, attendance varied. Before each

session, the participants submitted an excerpt of their current drafts, which they wanted to discuss. We met for two hours on a Monday morning to discuss each other's writing.

### 3.2 Data collection, methods of analysis and ethical considerations

To gain insights into the interactional negotiations, six meetings were video recorded, totalling 570 minutes. We collected the students' text samples and, if possible, the written peer-feedback that students exchanged during the sessions, to aid our understanding of the interaction. Finally, we conducted follow-up interviews with four of the students who were available after completion to complement the interaction analysis with the students' perspectives. The interaction was transcribed verbatim. We returned to the video recording for closer analysis of selected sequences.

To identify the students' dialogic strategies and the role of the facilitators in this interaction, we first identified dialogue patterns across the transcripts and then analysed the interactional construction of norms within these patterns (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

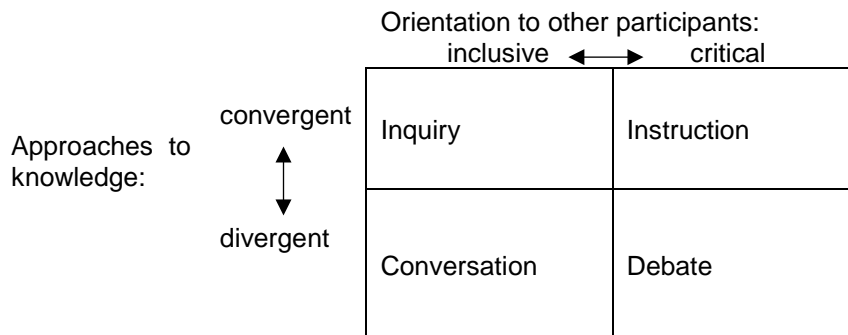
*Overview of analytic tools*

Analytic tools:	Burbules' types of dialogue patterns	Descriptive patterns	Normative dimension	Stance
Orientation towards others:	Inquiry Instruction Conversation Debate	Initiator	Reference to authorities	-
Approaches to knowledge:		Types of writing issues	Presentation of single norm or multiple perspectives	Elements of stance taking in norm construction

In terms of the overall dialogue patterns, we noticed that some sequences led to agreement while others remained open-ended. Burbules' (1993) typology of convergent and divergent dialogue patterns was therefore chosen as a heuristic for the initial analysis. Burbules (1993) suggests four types of dialogue along two spectrums, namely, the orientation towards other participants and to knowledge (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Burbules' (1993) four types of dialogue*



The orientation towards other participants in an interaction is either inclusive or critical; the approaches to knowledge range from agreement seeking (convergent) to encouraging various perspectives (divergent). The four resulting dialogue types are: 1) inquiry (inclusive-convergent) often based on solving a problem; 2) instruction (critical-convergent) involving a guided

interchange that leads to the understanding of an issue; 3) conversation (inclusive-divergent) in the form of open-ended discussions; and 4) debate (critical-divergent) which tests different positions without coming to an agreement. These distinctions are obviously not so clear in authentic interaction (cf. Burbules & Bruce, 2001). For instance, in the analysis we noticed that a few sequences began with a question that aimed for a converging epistemic endpoint, i.e. a conclusive answer, but triggered the presentation of several diverging perspectives, or vice versa. We coded these instances based on the subsequent contributions since we are interested in the negotiation process. We also found instances that were overall convergent but where some students also included alternative points. If such alternatives were not taken up by the group, we coded the entire sequence as convergent (see 4.2). Because of our interest in group interaction, we focused on dialogic sequences with more than two interlocutors.

To investigate the dialogic strategies within these dialogue types and to pay attention to the normative dimension of dialogic interaction, we complemented the study as follows: In terms of the orientation to other participants and to understand the role of the facilitators in the interactions, we noted whether a sequence was initiated by a student-participant as author or as peer, or by a facilitator. In terms of the approaches to knowledge, we coded what types of writing issues were discussed in each sequence, namely, higher-level issues, text-level issues or writing process. To analyse the normative dimension of dialogic interaction, we drew on Bakhtin's distinction between externally authoritative and internally persuasive discourses (see Section 2). We noted explicit references to authorities (e.g. supervisors) or presentations as facts on the one side, and the explicit recognition of alternative perspectives on the other side. To trace these discourses, we analysed how the participants took a stance towards their own and others' writing. Drawing on the tools of stance analysis (Thompson & Hunston, 2000, p. 19), we logged the use of lexical items that denote certainty, doubt or affect, as well as hedges (e.g. 'kind of'), emphatics (e.g. 'just', 'really') and modal verbs of possibility, necessity, and prediction (e.g. 'could', 'should', 'would').

The students were informed about the research aim and procedure before they joined the writing group. They provided informed consent to participate in the study prior to any recording. The first session was not recorded to provide room for questions, get to know each other and to share aims for participating in the group. Students were reminded that they could withdraw any contribution at any time. To ensure anonymity, participants are identified by number (student-participants: P1 to P6; facilitators: F1 and F2).

## **4. Results**

Section 4.1 provides an overview of the dialogue patterns. Sections 4.2 to 4.4 discuss the participants' dialogic strategies and how they orient to other participants and to knowledge within the inquiry, conversation and debate patterns. The excerpts have been selected because they illustrate the possibilities and obstacles for dialogue most comprehensively. The appendix lists the transcription conventions.

### **4.1 Patterns of dialogic interaction**

We identified 39 sequences that discuss the students' texts or writing processes with more than two interlocutors. Table 2 summarizes the dialogue patterns based on Burbules' (1993) typology, the type of issue discussed and the initiator. These numbers provide an overview of what occurred in this specific writing group over a short period of time.

**Table 2.**

*Dialogue patterns across meetings*

Interaction pattern	Total (N=39)	Content			Initiator		
		Text-level	Higher-level	Process	Author	Peer	Facilitator
Inquiry (inclusive-convergent)	12	10	2	0	4	4	4
Instruction (critical-convergent)	12	5	7	0	0	4	8
Conversation (inclusive-divergent)	9	0	2	7	2	1	6
Debate (critical-divergent)	6	3	3	0	1	3	2

The *instruction pattern* (critical-convergent), defined as guided interchange with the goal of understanding an issue, resembles the dialogue type that Lillis (2006) relates to normative monologic teaching traditions. In its classic form, this pattern is initiated by a facilitator who elicits ideas about the current text structure to guide towards improvements. In contrast to one-to-one tutoring, other group participants added agreement or clarification questions. However, there are also instances where peers took on a tutoring role and initiated an instruction pattern.

Especially when dealing with text-level issues, the question-answer structure turned into more explicit guidance. For instance, when invited by F1 to express thoughts on a text under discussion, P2 initiated an instruction pattern and started to advise, 'I think try to putting not too much information in one sentence'. After some more explanation, P6 added, 'and another way you can shorten it, is to try to avoid repeating the same words'. Such sequences also included comparisons to one's own writing or some probing to understand the intention behind discursive choices. The author might agree or add an explanation. These sequences usually occurred at the beginning or end of a discussion of a participant's text and were more peripheral to the discussion. We therefore focus on the other patterns in the remainder of this section.

*Inquiries* (inclusive-convergent) dealt with jointly solving a problem, in contrast to the instruction pattern that guided towards an alternative discursive choice. The problem could be posed by the author (see Section 4.2) or by any of the other participants. Often these sequences dealt with text-level issues. *Conversations* (inclusive-divergent) were generally, but not exclusively, initiated by the facilitators who posed open questions in a moderating role. Participants contributed their views without aiming for an agreement. Seven of the nine conversations related to experiences of the writing process, e.g. dealing with supervisor feedback.

*Debates* (critical-divergent) were frequently in the form of requests for, or a suggestion of, a solution to a problem. In contrast to the inquiry pattern, they resulted in diverging positions without agreement. In this pattern, the facilitators often switched from acting as co-participants to acting as moderators. As co-participants, they contributed to the debate by presenting additional perspectives referring to different types of expertise, e.g. dictionary definitions. As moderators, they moved the discussion beyond the disagreement among the participants by asking broader questions (see Section 4.4).

Overall, the participants engaged in all four types of dialogue patterns and the facilitators played an important role in initiating interaction. Facilitators and students can take on guiding roles in instruction sequences or initiate conversations, which are arguably most open to accommodate multiple voices. In line with the aims the students had formulated in the first meeting, text-level, higher-level and writing process issues were discussed. Surprisingly, students *and* facilitators initiated dialogue around each of these issues and took on guiding or eliciting roles.

#### 4.2 Inquiry: inclusive-convergent interaction

The inquiry sequence analysed in this section demonstrates how the students negotiate different authoritative discourses to find a solution to a writing problem. P2 initiates this sequence by asking for advice on a higher-level issue, namely how to make sense of the nature and role of objectives and aims in her master's thesis introduction:

- 
- 1 P2: there's one more question I came up with this week  
it's about my aims and objectives [...]
- 3 P2: according to my supervisor they are too similar, so I tried to make them more  
broad ((laugh)) but then [...((explains))]  
how do you feel about the aims and objectives what do you see as an objective
- 4 P5: [...]  
that's a good question even for me ((laugh)) because I also [...]
- 

P2 formulates her question in order to elicit views rather than facts ('feel', 'see'), and she refers to the authority of her supervisor who identified this as a problem in her text. P5 validates this question as being relevant and supports this statement by drawing on her own subjective experience. She thus foregrounds the inclusive, relational aspect and creates mutuality (cf. Wegener et al., 2016).

P6 takes a different approach and provides a normative definition followed by an example:

- 
- 15 P6: the aim is what you would like to like what you would like to understand more
- 16 P2: mm
- 17 P6: it's more of a theoretical more of an abstract thing ((P2 begins to take notes)) and  
the objectives are the exact steps that you are willing to take to get that to achieve  
those aims.
- 18 P2: yeah
- 19 P6: so you want to develop theory or you want to create new theory that could be your  
aim
- 

Providing definitions ('the aim is', 'the objectives are'), P6 presents facts. He adds an example which applies the definitions and indicates possible solutions. In addition to her positive backchannelling P2 starts writing during P6's explanation, which indicates that she is attentive to this answer.

Indeed, she develops P6's response further and connects it to a third component of her thesis, namely research questions:

- 
- 22 P2: and then my research questions need to focus on like some particular parts of my  
objectives (.) like my research questions are kind of then more focused on-
- 23 P6: I think they should be should be connected somehow
- 24 P2: yeah yeah (.) ((starts writing))
- 25 P1: but the research question is the question you want to get an answer within the  
whole
- 26 P2: yeah (.) I know yeah ((stops writing and looks up))
- 

P2 continues to make sense of her problem and presents her solution as necessity ('need to') with some hedging ('like', 'kind of'). In contrast to his initial factual definition, P6 responds with less certainty and repeated mitigation ('think', 'should', 'somehow'). P2's confirmation and her note taking indicate that she has found a solution to her problem informed by P6's contribution. While P6's definition constitutes an externally authoritative discourse orienting to 'centripetal-monologism' (Lillis, 2003, p. 198), P2 engages in internally persuasive discourses. In the interaction, she applies the normative information to her thesis and seems to develop her understanding of the technical terms under discussion.

P1 challenges the understanding of research questions as relating to specific objectives and introduces a counter definition. The different ontologies might be due to the different disciplinary affiliation of the students with P1 studying a humanities subject and P2 and P4 studying social

science subjects. The alternative definition is acknowledged as valid ('I know') but not further discussed as part of the meaning making process. P2 as initiator of the inquiry around her text selects what information is relevant for her solution.

### 4.3 Conversation: inclusive-divergent interaction

The conversation sequence discussed in this section follows on from talk about the higher-level issue of setting research results in relation to theories and previous literature. It is initiated by F1, who invites the participants to extend the conversation around the use of theories in their writing: 'how do other people feel about this thing of incorporating theory into [...] writing where you're discussing the findings'. The participants contribute different perspectives of what they generally do, what they should do and what they consider doing in the specific case of their thesis. By moving between these perspectives, they negotiate various normative frames.

P2 responds first:

- 
- 5 P2: I usually work from theory kind of only ((laugh)) but now with doing my own research I'm planning to just write the findings chapter only based on my findings in my interviews to kind of keep it a bit separate and then discussion section uhm combine the two but keep it like kind of strict because- so then for the reader it's clear what is my own research and what is coming from other [um
- 6 P1: [m
- 7 P2: research but I don't know if that is the correct way of doing it but I thought that in the (.) kind of the finding section you only need to focus on your finding and describe- for me I need to describe what my interviewees said and then in the discussion I kind of kept my res- literature back and
- 8 P5: yeah
- 9 P2: combine them
- 

She describes her use of theory in her thesis within a common Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion (IMRD) structure with a clear separation between results and discussion sections. In turn 5, the application of this structure is hedged ('kind of') but justified by drawing on the authority of an expected reader. After the positive backchannelling from P1, P2 expresses some doubt as to whether her practice complies with a normative 'correct way' but continues by reinforcing the validity of the IMRD structure. By using generic 'you' and presenting it as obligation ('need'), she constructs IMRD as a commonly accepted and generally applicable norm. She further justifies her choice by demonstrating the appropriateness of the structure for her thesis. Without naming it, the IMRD structure provides the strong externally authoritative discourse, which is acknowledged by P1 and P5.

After some further discussion, P1 introduces an alternative perspective and legitimates it by presenting it as custom and necessity in her department: 'we have like an introduction which is quite a huge um part [...] where you need to introduce all the theories [...] the analysis part should be like discussing with that [literature]'. In light of her further explanation and her text samples, P1 seems to introduce a topic-based structure (Paltridge, 2002) where each chapter discusses an aspect of her topic. Turns 22-26 exemplify how the two normative structures (IMRD and topic-based) are negotiated in relation to P1's text.

- 
- 22 P2: but are the findings- are they saying the same things as the theory that you [used
- 23 P1: [no I  
don't have any theory ((laugh)) [for all the parts of my thesis cause my thesis
- 24 P2: [ah ok
- 25 P1: is not like focusing on only one thing and then it's like um analysis of findings and [discussion I have now- I don't know if it's a good thing or not
- 26 P2: [yeah
- 

In turn 22, P2 asks for clarification and refers back to her perspective on the discussion section where she connects results and literature. P1 clarifies the nature of her thesis to legitimate her choice of excluding theories in some parts of her discussion. At this point, P1 draws on her authority as author of the text, and P2 accepts this possibility (line 24). Similar to P2 in turn 7,



P1 mitigates her strong stance by expressing doubt and suggesting that an alternative standard might exist.

The excerpts demonstrate how the students explain their choices by drawing on contrasting externally authoritative discourses. They create a dialogic space that allows for multiple perspectives by justifying and mitigating their normative stances. In contrast to the facilitator who explicitly invites various perspectives, the students suggest the existence of alternative norms, which serves as a mitigation and provides an opportunity for sharing diverging perspectives without losing face.

#### **4.4 Debate: critical-divergent interaction**

The topic of P1's thesis structure reoccurs in a subsequent meeting and provides an example of a debate. In contrast to sharing perspectives as in the conversation above, the participants critically assess one participant's text. In contrast to inquiries, they do not arrive at a solution. In the selected sequence, the participants discuss P1's text sample, which has the subheading 'Conclusion' and starts: 'In this chapter my aim was to answer to my second research question group: [set of questions repeated]'.  
P6 initiates the sequence by commenting on the word choice for the subheading:

P6 initiates the sequence by commenting on the word choice for the subheading:

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | P6: uhm (.) I think it could be uh beneficial to avoid using the word conclusion for these uh subchapters because uh conclusion should be just one at the end of the paper (.) there is this kind of structure in some papers but then you could use uh name them (.) maybe findings or results<br>[...] |
| 5 | P6: but maybe not uh conclusion because (.) uhm that's usually not how research papers are structured  |
- 

P6 formulates his challenge with some hedging but is clear in his rejection of the word choice for the sub-heading and presents it as an obligation ('should'). He reinforces his point in turn 5 by suggesting a common standard for structuring research papers.

P1 responds by justifying the relevance of her word choice. In turn 13 she engages with the alternative P6 has suggested, expresses her doubts about it and explains why she rejects it. P6 continues his critique and provides a further alternative word choice which P4 supports and develops. P4 enforces P6's initial point on the place of the conclusion and frames this as a general rule by using the inclusive 'we'. In the advice that follows, she seems to refer to the IMRD structure.

- 
- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 7  | P1: because I explained in the in the introduction that I will have like in the thesis outline that there will be   |
| 8  | F1: m   |
| 9  | P1: a short conclusion and then there will be a final conclusion in the end   |
| 10 | F1: m   |
| 11 | P1: so it's kind of explained there how it's it's going [to be structured   |
| 12 | P6: [m  |
| 13 | P1: but I I don't know if I would say findings cause I'm explaining them already in the analysis part (.) °then it would be more°-  |
| 14 | P6: or discussion   |
| 15 | P1: yeah  |
| 16 | P4: yes discussion (.) yeah but I also agree with you I think uh we keep the conclusion at the end of the thesis or chapter and if you have any results or your finding so you can dis- in discussion you can discuss |
| 17 | P1: mhm yeah I'll think °think about that°  |
- 

In contrast to the conversation pattern where several normative frames seemed to be accepted for different texts, in this example of the debate pattern one text is evaluated based on what is perceived to be a universal norm (IMRD) as well as a text-internal logic. While P6 mentions the potential existence of other solutions, he immediately dismisses these as exceptions from the

rule and insists on a different wording. P1, on the other hand, presents an argument that draws on her specific text and her authority as author of the text. In response to P4's advice, she diplomatically closes down the debate and suggests that she will consider the points later.

In this sequence, there is little room for internally persuasive discourses, apart from P1's interrupted consideration of an alternative sub-heading. Diverging views have been presented based on parallel normative frames. Following the excerpt, P4 and P6 continue to make suggestions based on an IMRD norm joining into 'centripetal-monologism' (Lillis, 2003, p. 198). At this point F1 takes on the role of a moderator and asks: 'what do you think about the difference between writing theses in social sciences and humanities'. The question moves the debate away from the focus on P1's text to an abstract level that opens up possibilities for different normative frames.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

The article investigated the dialogic strategies of writing group participants when they discussed their own and their peers' writing. The participants came with individual writing histories and were in a specific phase of their studies. They had individual ways of engaging with each other's texts. Our aim is therefore not to extract generalizable dialogue patterns but rather to identify possibilities and obstacles for mutual engagement.

In terms of the participants' dialogic strategies, the analysis shows that all levels of writing issues were discussed in this group. In contrast to Haas's (2011) participants, the students in this study initiated issues on all levels. The closer analysis of the examples for different dialogue types reveals different ways of creating spaces for the co-construction of meaning, a feature of dialogic learning (Lefstein, 2010). Students were selective in the knowledge they appropriated to serve their needs, as depicted in the inquiry sequence.

In the conversation sequence, students engaged in parallel negotiations of perceived norms in relation to their own hypothetical writing practice. While conversations come closest to the ideal of dialogue as 'grounded in ideas of situatedness, multiplicity, and difference' (Burbules & Bruce, 2001, p. 1117), each perspective was legitimated by reference to a range of externally authoritative discourses. Considering their own practices, students negotiated these norms and engaged in parallel internally persuasive discourses. Expressing diverging perspectives was helped by hedging comments on applying different norms to thesis structures, and by suggesting the possibility of alternative generic norms.

In contrast, insisting on applying a seemingly universal norm to a peer's text in the debate sequence contributed to the closing down of the dialogue, despite the fact that some hedging was expressed. In fact, the challenges often attributed to multidisciplinary writing groups (Cuthbert et al., 2009) might be connected to perspectives on academic writing as consisting of universal norms. The frequent occurrence of such monologic normative advice, also in instruction and inquiry sequences, might indicate expectations of feedback that traditionally focuses on evaluating students' texts as products with a specific form rather than as a process with 'a range of potential meanings' (Lillis, 2003, p. 204).

Analysing the interaction made the participants' reflexive practices observable as a negotiation between externally authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses (cf. Bakhtin, 1981). Having to formulate questions, and clarify and justify discursive choices makes language (Lillis, 2006) as well as the writing process visible and is a precondition for reflection. Instead of a tutor guiding a student, the students had to negotiate perceived norms with their own text requirements and respond to critique.

Considering the role of the facilitators, we see that they are the organizers and initiators of the writing group. At the same time, students take on facilitator roles in inquiries, steering the conversation and guiding towards a solution. Facilitated writing groups thus provide a context for purposeful, dialogic interaction with joint meaning making and mutual engagement, where

students are encouraged to take the initiative in contrast to more hierarchical arrangements (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014).

At the same time, while the writing group ethos entails avoiding monologic guidance and encouraging discussion (Chihota & Thesen, 2014), we see many instances of such guidance by both students and facilitators in our data. While there is a power differential between the facilitators, who are seen as more experienced writers (explicitly in the student feedback, also see Wilmot, 2018), students take up expert roles. They do so either by referring to an authority, such as the supervisor, or presenting their points as facts. Drawing on such externally authoritative discourses can nevertheless lead to internally persuasive discourses (see Section 4.1). Thus a monologic form might allow a dialogic stance (cf. Boyd & Markarian, 2015).

In the debates, the engagement of participants was not always entirely mutual (see Section 4.4). Participants had to deal with disagreement and tensions (cf. Burbules & Bruce, 2001) and provide, receive or resist critique (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000). In contrast to writing studies that solely focus on the participant roles, our analysis demonstrates the importance of the facilitators' careful moderating to keep the interaction open or move it on.

Based on our results, we can formulate some implications for facilitating writing groups. Insights into dialogue patterns and the importance of varying orientations to other participants and to knowledge can provide strategies for moderating writing groups. More specifically, these insights encourage discussion of not only the participants' initial aims but also how they might achieve them. They indicate benefits of a meta-discussion on constructive strategies for engagement and the relevance of disciplinary differences. These discussions could reduce reported problems with writing groups such as not meeting the participants' expectations (McMurray, 2017). Overall, insights into dialogue patterns can provide a basis for facilitators' decisions on when to step back during the discussion and when to step in as moderator.

The dialogic strategies that draw on a range of normative frames highlight the need for participants to be able to argue for their choices, which can in turn support engagement. However, the study also indicates that this might require time and practice, especially for participants with less experience of peer reviewing processes (cf. McMurray, 2017). The introduction of some metalanguage, such as IMRD and topic-based structure, might help to expose perceived norms as context-dependent conventions. Fostering such 'critical competence' (Badenhorst et al., 2015, p. 10) in a writing group context might help to transform thinking from universal rules to practical possibilities (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018).

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## **Appendix: Transcription conventions and notes**

Note: The transcriptions are rendered verbatim and punctuation is included for ease of reading.

(.)	pause
[	overlapping speech
(( ))	transcriber comment
word-	break off
°word°	distinctly quieter than surrounding speech by same speaker
[...]	omission of speech to limit the length of the excerpt