

How to write a PhD with peer support

Follow this model, and the introduction to your
article-based dissertation will (almost) write itself

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Abstract

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The article was originally written in Finnish for the Finnish context, where article-based PhDs are increasingly common. This is also why much of the referenced literature is Finnish. The article was published in 2018, so practices may have changed, but we believe that the core ideas about peer support remain valid. Our sincere thanks to Janna Tuominen for translating the original text into English.

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TAGS: article dissertation, working method, university, dissertation, peer support, interaction, cooperative learning

IN THIS article, we launch a method which we have developed for writing the summary/introduction section of an article-based dissertation. The article presents a concrete model, which includes instructions for fourteen peer meetings. The model is based on our own experiences writing the summaries of our article-based dissertations. We emphasize the benefits of peer support for the writing process, and the article seeks to inspire collaboration in the process of writing a paper. The article is aimed at doctoral researchers, supervisors and persons interested in the development of university education.

Introduction

ALTHOUGH ARTICLE-BASED dissertations have become more common in recent years, this form of dissertation is still relatively new, especially in the study of pedagogy, social sciences and humanities (Valo 2013).

Article-based PhDs, also known as manuscript-, paper-based or cumulative PhDs, are increasingly popular in Finland. They typically present 3–5 published, submitted or to be submitted peer-reviewed academic articles/papers.

In addition to the articles/papers, the dissertation also contains a summary/introductory section, that can range anywhere between 50–100 pages (and the length depends on the field and university). Many different terms are used to refer to this summary/introductory section but in this article, we mainly use the term ‘summary section’, which typically includes an introduction, a theoretical section, data and methods / methodology, and overall conclusions on the entire research. Faculties often have their own very general guidelines for article-based dissertations, but there is still little guidance for students and supervisors on the formal requirements or concrete practicalities of this type of dissertations (Isohanni 2000; Nikander & Piattoeva 2014).

Although there are good guides available for writing a dissertation, as well as for academic writing in general (see e.g., Kiriakos & Svinhufvud 2015), it is difficult to find more detailed information on the structure of the summary/introduction section of an article-based dissertation (see, however, Belt, Möttönen & Härkönen 2010, 17–19). Therefore, it can be challenging for an author to know how to summarize an article-based dissertation. In this article, we aim to provide some answers to this question.

It can be challenging to summarize an article-based dissertation.

We will not aim to dictate how the summary of an article-based dissertation “should” be written. We are going to share our own experiences and the methods we have found helpful, and which doctoral researchers and supervisors may apply as they wish. We emphasize collaboration and peer support as an aid to the writing process (see e.g., Belcher 2009; Jokinen & Juhila 2002; Kaittila, Hakovirta, Isoniemi, Rantalaiho & Salin 2011). Our own doctoral studies are empirical and pertain to the field of criminology/legal sociology: one of us wrote a dissertation for the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Helsinki (Saarikkomäki 2017) and the other for the Faculty of Law of the University of Turku (Ollus 2016).

In this article, we launch the ‘PhD with peer -support’ working model that we have developed for creating the summary section of an article-based dissertation. The method is based on peer support (see e.g., Repo-Kaarento 2004; Repo 2010; Topping 1996, 2005), the concept of which we shall briefly introduce at the beginning. We emphasize the benefits of peer support for the writing process, which is why this article can also give ideas for how to use collaboration and peer support in the writing process of any form of academic paper. The article presents concrete weekly steps – 14 peer meetings – based on how we worked during the time we finalized our doctoral dissertations.

These steps can be used either in independent work or in a peer group. The method is practical and includes tips and homework.

This article is primarily aimed at dissertation authors, but it is also intended as a tool for supervisors, dissertation seminar leaders as well as other persons interested in the development of university education.

The importance of peer support

Peer support has been highlighted as an important form of learning. Peer learning can be defined as the development of knowledge and competence between peers, i.e., it is based on students' mutual learning and support (Repo-Kaarento 2004; Repo 2010; Topping 1996, 2005).

THE ADVANTAGE of peer support is, for example, that it increases students' commitment and motivation, and can reduce study-related stress (Repo 2010). With peers, students have the opportunity to solve problems together and also to realize that the challenges they face are experienced by their peers as well (Multisilta 2011). Although collaborative learning has been increased at universities, it is still used relatively little (e.g. Multisilta 2011; Repo-Kaarento 2004; Repo 2010).

Our 'PhD with peer support' model is based on peer support between two dissertation authors. At the center of our method is collaboration between two peers who are in the same situation of their PhD process. However, peer support can also be used in a small group, or in such a way that one person acts as a tutor for a group.

The competitive and individualistic ways of working, that is typical to universities, can make collaborative learning challenging to implement, especially if it is not encouraged by supervisors (Repo-Kaarento 2004). The peer-supported model is based on positive and constructive encouragement. Mutual trust and keeping promises are also important. Mutual rules, goals and schedules are central to this model.

Description of the 'PhD with peer support' model

As inspiration for developing the model, we used Wendy Belcher's (2009) book 'Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success'.

THE BOOK helped us outline the different stages of the writing process, the structuring of a text and the different aspects of writing. Concrete tips for peer support models and writing can also be found in other works (e.g., Kaittila et al. 2011; Kiriakos & Svinhufvud 2015).

Right at the beginning, we set ourselves a deadline by which we should submit our dissertations for preliminary examination. This encouraged us to stay on schedule. The process of writing, from the initial planning phase of the summary section to finally submitting the dissertation for preliminary examination, took us a total of about eight months, of which a few months were dedicated to full-time writing. Both of us were also working professionally (in research) besides writing our dissertations, and therefore we could not spend more time on full-time writing.

It is not necessary to proceed exactly according to the schedule presented below, but the idea is to agree on a common schedule and tasks and to proceed accordingly.

We met about every two weeks. In each meeting, we agreed on what we would write for the following meeting and for the other to comment upon. We read each other's texts before each meeting and prepared to comment on them. At the end of each meeting, we would plan what to write for the following meeting. In each meeting, we agreed on the time of the next meeting and assigned ourselves homework. Next, we present the schedule of fourteen peer meetings, share our experiences of the writing process, and a table that summarizes the model with concrete steps.

Timeline of the 'PhD with peer support' model

1st peer meeting: initial preparations

FIRST, WE collected information from other article-based dissertations. We asked those who had already completed their dissertations how they had written their summaries. We collected about ten article-based dissertations from our discipline or related relevant fields, and we examined their structures. In particular, we looked at the tables of contents, examined the number of pages, titles and tables of the different parts of the articles and sought to understand what the summary of a dissertation should include.

2nd peer meeting: outline of the table of contents

WE STARTED by preparing preliminary tables of contents for our dissertations based on the examples we collected. Although the structure changed during the process, writing was facilitated by knowing that the table of contents has a limited number of parts. Writing a table of contents helped us to understand the total length of the summary/introductory section, and how many pages would be available for each part of the text.

3rd peer meeting: full summary abstract

AT THIS stage, it was still difficult for us to pin down the central messages of our dissertations, and therefore we started from the most essential results of our articles. Next, we wrote a preliminary abstract of the entire PhD study. The idea seemed strange at first, but we followed Belcher's (2009, 54–58) idea that it is worth preparing an abstract of the entire work first. Our abstracts mainly consisted of summarizing the results of our articles on one page. Writing an abstract helped to visualize the entirety of the research and encouraged to think about the broader results and theoretical approach(es) of the research. We rewrote the abstracts at the end of the writing process when the summary was almost ready.

4th peer meeting: summary of articles

THE SUMMARY of an article-based dissertation is built around the results of the articles. In our case, our dissertations consisted of four peer-reviewed academic articles that had already been published or were in the final stages of approval for publication. We wrote about two-page summaries of each article. In our own dissertations, this section remained almost unchanged in the final dissertations. A summary of the results forms the part of the dissertation which presents the actual results of the research that was carried out in each article, and in our summaries, we highlighted our most important results and discussions.

5th peer review: summary table of articles and methods

WE EACH made a table in which we listed the name of each article, the main research question, the data and the research method (see Ollus 2016, 62; Saarikkomäki 2017, 46). Making the table helped clarify the central research question of the dissertation.

6th peer meeting: research questions

IN A dissertation summary, it is possible to have a broader discussion than just presenting the results of the articles. The summary can thus be thought of as forming its own research. We started with the research questions of the articles and based on them, we each came up with one central, unifying research question. At first, this top-level question was general, but in the end, a broader research question was developed for the summary, which combined the articles into a larger discussion.

7th peer meeting: key concepts

NEXT, WE considered the essential concepts of our research. At the same time, we reflected on which theoretical discussions our research was based on and which literature we engage with in our research. We considered which concepts were the same as in the articles and which were new. We sought to outline which concepts to use in our summaries. Working on the concepts continued throughout the writing of our summaries.

8th–11th peer meeting: theory, i.e., everything that comes before the method section

WRITING THE theory chapter took the most time and was the most challenging part. What helped us was the idea that theory is a way of thinking – a frame of reference – through which research results are outlined and the topic defined. In an article, theory often cannot be explained in detail due to lack of space, but the summary provides an opportunity to write more broadly. In the summary, there will inevitably be repetition in relation to the articles. In the summary, theories can be explained in more detail – even as thoroughly and in a way that resembles an MA thesis. We had a total of four peer meetings related to the theory section. You may have more or less than four meetings dedicated to theory, depending on how your work progresses.

AT THIS point, we benefited from having the opportunity to delve deeper into reading and writing. We read new theoretical literature and reviewed what we had already read, but we also soon realized that we didn't have time to read everything we might have wanted to read. Based on a peer's comments, we realized that writing a dissertation requires less material than we had originally thought. Having the opportunity to give unfinished text to someone else to read at a low threshold was very useful. At this point, an agreed schedule helped us move forward: compulsion is often the best motivator!

12th peer meeting: material, method and methodology

OUR EMPIRICAL method chapters were largely based on the articles, but crucial difference was that we expanded them. We wrote our method chapters as we would write a thesis, i.e., we thoroughly explained the research questions, data and methods used, as well as ethical aspects and limitations of the research.

13th peer meeting: dissertation arguments

IN A dissertation, one must argue something, i.e., one needs a central argument/arguments (see Belcher 2009, 67–98). In this peer meeting, we first wrote on post-it notes the three main points of our research, i.e., the main arguments of our dissertations, which at the same time were the key results of our research. At first, it was difficult to summarize one's own research, but the conversation with a peer helped to narrow down the central message of the research. We sought to connect the research questions, the theory, the results, and the arguments based on them: these form the common thread of a dissertation summary.

14th peer meeting: conclusions

WE WROTE the conclusions of our summaries only at the very end, when we had had the opportunity to grasp the bigger picture. It took about 2–3 weeks to write our conclusions, and we rewrote them several times. At this point, we also read through the entire summary sections of each other. Finally, we checked our own bibliographies, which took a surprising amount of time!

TABLE 1.

Summary of the 'PhD with peer support' model

HOMEWORK: Find 5–10 article dissertations and examine their tables of contents and structure. Decide on a preliminary schedule for submitting your dissertation to preliminary examination.

1ST MEETING: Initial preparations, examine different tables of contents and compare the length of different parts of the articles. Share insights of writers who have already completed an article-based dissertation.

HOMEWORK: Sketch your own table of contents.

2ND MEETING: draft table of contents. Comment on each other's tables of contents.

HOMEWORK: Write an approximately one-page long abstract of the entire dissertation. You may use as reference the dissertations that you have previously collected.

3RD MEETING: an abstract of the entire summary. Is the abstract comprehensive and clear? What emerges as the central message of the dissertation?

HOMEWORK: Read the articles forming your dissertation and write a summary of about 1–2 pages of each of them.

4TH MEETING: Are the results presented in a comprehensive and compact manner? Are the main findings of each article clearly presented?

HOMEWORK: If you find it useful, create a table summarizing your articles, their central research questions, data, methods and methodology.

5TH MEETING: summary table of articles and methods. Does the table clearly express the central research question of each article? Is it clear to the reader what data has been used and how it has been analyzed?

HOMEWORK: Make a preliminary draft of the research question(s) of the summary

6TH MEETING: research questions. Discuss the research questions of your dissertations and of your entire research.

HOMEWORK: Write down all the concepts that you have used and make a brief description of them. Make a list of the theoretical framework(s) to which your research is connected.

7TH MEETING: Central concepts. Are your concepts clear? Which of them should you use, and which should you leave out?

HOMEWORK: Write the theoretical chapter piece by piece. Agree on the number of pages with your peer: for example, you can write three pages of text or one subsection.

8TH–11TH MEETINGS: theory. Present to each other which theory/theories you are planning to use and how they are connected to your central concepts and existing literature. What is the relationship between previous literature, concepts, and theory, and in which order should chapters be placed in the table of contents? Is your message clear to the reader, and why is the theory you have chosen relevant to the summary?

HOMEWORK: Write the chapter on materials and methods. You can reflect on your choice of material, the outline of your research and ethical questions.

12TH MEETING: materials and methods. Are your materials, methods and methodology clearly described in a way that your reader can understand your choices?

13TH MEETING: arguments of the dissertation. Write down the central arguments on i.e., post-its. Are your arguments clear? Do the arguments, theory and research questions support each other?

HOMEWORK: Start writing conclusions

14TH: CONCLUSIONS. Do your conclusions match the research questions? Does the theory support your conclusions? Do the conclusions bring out the central argument of your dissertation?

Summarizing the 'PhD with peer support' model

During the writing of our dissertation summaries, we had many eureka moments. First, a summary should be relatively concise, coherent and have a clear common thread.

THE DIFFERENT parts of the whole depend on each other: research questions, key concepts, theory, and (empirical) results make up the whole. It is good to think about the reader and make the text a coherent narrative. Even though it is a thesis, the summary of the dissertation is, at its best, an interesting and even captivating piece of writing. If a peer doesn't understand what you're trying to say, try to clarify your text.

It is easy to get so wrapped up in one's own topic that it can be difficult to notice that things are not as obvious to others.

Second, an article-based dissertation is formed by the articles. The articles are the core of the dissertation, and the summary synthesizes them. The summary may therefore contain repetition in relation to the articles, especially regarding methods, theory and literature. It can also be useful to see the articles as targeted to a more specialized audience, whereas the summary is written for a more general readership.

Third, remember to keep a low threshold. Start writing with a low threshold – sit down and write, no matter how hard it seems. If writing is difficult or you avoid it, look for inspiration in writing guides (see e.g., Belcher 2009; Kiriakos and Svinhufvud 2015). Also remember to give your texts to a peer to read at an early stage. Taking breaks from writing may backfire and it can be difficult to return to the text. It is therefore worth writing regularly (see e.g., Belcher 2009; Kaittila et al. 2011). Writing can also be enjoyable and expressing the thoughts and opinions that have arisen during the writing of the dissertation can feel meaningful.

Final thoughts: about the importance of peer support

In this paper, we have presented a model that teachers, supervisors and doctoral researchers can use to increase peer support in university education. In addition to the peer meetings presented here, central to the 'PhD with peer support' model is the constant encouraging, constructive and positive feedback from peer to peer.

THE TASK of a peer is to encourage and to give faith that you can finish your dissertation even when your own faith is tested. Share your concerns and successes and cheer each other on!

The peer does not have to be an expert in the same subject or field, as synergies can also arise between different disciplines. The greatest benefit of peer support arises from working side by side and also from the positive pressure created by mutually agreed schedules.

The collaborative learning model presented here can, at its best, increase the motivation of doctoral researchers, reduce the workload, and speed up the process. With the help of the peer support model, you can both share the challenges you face and find solutions together (Repo 2010; Topping 1996). In addition, the model challenges universities to move away from the often individualistic way of working of dissertation projects (Repo-Kaarento 2004).

We encourage students, researchers, supervisors, and those responsible for the development of university education to expand and develop peer support methods.

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