Group supervision and Japanese students' successful completion of undergraduate theses

Kiyomi Yamada[†]
University of New England

This paper explores, from a sociocultural perspective, the nature and functions of *zemi* or seminars in which Japanese undergraduate students received group supervision for research and thesis writing. The study also investigates how the *zemi* contributed to completion of their theses. It was found that the *zemi* provided contexts for teaching and learning in which, via assigned tasks, formal teaching, oral presentations and discussions, students acquired new knowledge and skills for undertaking research and completing a thesis. The solidarity, friendship and close bonds which were built among the members of the *zemi* motivated and encouraged them to achieve their goals.

Introduction

It is common, though not universal, for undergraduate students to submit an undergraduate thesis (or a graduation thesis for the Japanese "*sotsuron*") at universities in Japan (Marriott, 2001; Marriott & Miyazaki, 1999; Sprague, 1996) where all undergraduate degrees in areas like the Arts and Humanities are four years in length. It is likely to be their first engagement with research and the academic genre and thus constitutes an intellectual challenge. Despite the centrality of the thesis component to the final year of undergraduate

[†] Address for correspondence: Kiyomi Yamada, University of New England, Armidale, NSW 2351, Australia. Email: kyamada2@une.edu.au. Phone: +61 2 6773 3028

programs in Japan, hardly any attention has been focused on this genre in research to date, either in Japan or elsewhere. Thus, we know little about undergraduate theses or the process of students' undertaking a thesis at university.

Whilst being engaged with their research and thesis writing, Japanese undergraduate students typically attend *zemi* to receive group supervision from their supervisors who have expertise in relevant fields. The term *zemi* is short for the Japanese "*zeminaaru*", which originates from "seminar" in German, and refers to both face-to-face group supervisory classes and to a study group consisting of the students and supervisors involved. Undergraduate students in the Arts/Humanities have fewer individual meetings with supervisors but participate more frequently in the *zemi* (Sprague, 1996). The *zemi,* therefore, plays a pivotal role in Arts/Humanities students' progress.

A number of previous studies, many of which took an educational perspective, have focused exclusively on Masters and PhD programs, and have demonstrated the important role of supervision. In fact, it has been frequently argued that the success of students in research is positively related to the quality of the supervision they receive (Powles, 1992). Therefore, supervisory interactions are especially crucial for research students in that teaching and learning occur in these situations (Lybeck & Carlsson, 1986). More specifically, such interactions enable supervisors to help their students to become independent learners by guiding and empowering them and to move them on (Wisker, 2005).

In light of the shortcomings in previous studies and the importance of supervisory guidance and interactions for student success in university research settings, this paper,

which is based on a larger ethnographic study (see Yamada, 2009, 2010), explores what actually occurs during the period of the student's engagement in the research project and graduation thesis writing. The study is meaningful as the number of studies of socialisation into academic discourses in both L1 (first or native language) and L2 (second or non-native language) using an ethnographic approach has not yet been sufficient (Duff, 2010). Specifically, the paper focuses on the *zemi*, and addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the nature and functions of the *zemi?*
2. How does the *zemi* contribute to Japanese students' successful completion of their undergraduate theses?

Review of the relevant literature

Some researchers have investigated supervision in order to examine the nature of interaction between supervisors and students in university research settings and their expectations towards supervision. In their longitudinal case study, Lybeck and Carlsson (1986) explored the nature of supervision of a physiology PhD student at a university in Sweden and suggested the importance of both supervisors and doctoral students being informed about the nature of supervision for them to have realistic expectations about supervision. This echoes Walford's (1981) claim that students' dissatisfaction can be caused by different expectations towards supervision between supervisors and students.

It was argued by Elton and Pope (1992) that supervisors and their students who have successful relationships share a collegial relationship (i.e., a feeling of equality and mutual responsibility), which contrasts with a hierarchical

relationship. Whittle (1992), on the other hand, reported that mentorship was the key element for satisfactory supervision for science students at an Australian university. In particular, students need appropriate guidance from their supervisors, as well as "inspiration, support, encouragement and professional nurturing" (Whittle, 1992: 96). It was also important for such students to construct strong bonds and collegiality with their peers and supervisors by having daily contact with them and working with them in a large research group.

In a case study that focussed on L2 writing, Belcher (1994) examined three non-native English-speaking graduate students from different disciplines who were enrolled in her L2 dissertation writing class at an American university. Her aim was to explore the types of student-advisor relationships that contribute to the student's successful enculturation into a new discourse community, and the successful completion of their dissertations. Belcher reported that the one student who had successfully grown as a writer of the genre in her academic area had had a more collaborative relationship with her supervisor. The two other students, neither of whom were socialised into their new discourse communities, experienced hierarchical relationships with their supervisors, whose expectations were that their students replicate exactly what they themselves practised in their disciplines. Belcher concluded that the differences in mentoring styles might have affected the outcomes of the three students.

Some previous studies explored the processes of L2 acquisition in university contexts. For example, Shaw (1991) gathered interview data and explored the process of writing dissertations by international students enrolled in PhD and Master's programs in Engineering, Science, Social Science and Agriculture at a British university. He investigated

interactions between his informant students and members of the discourse communities to which they belonged, and found that they had interactions not only with their supervisors but also with peers and lecturers within and beyond their own disciplines and universities. The international students in Shaw's study also obtained ideas regarding rules for writing theses from the sample theses of other students which were recommended by their supervisors, rather than directly from their teachers.

Morita (2004, 2009) investigated the processes of L2 academic discourse socialisation of first-year Japanese postgraduate students at Canadian universities in her two ethnographic studies. In her first study, she explored how six female Japanese students enrolled in three different Master's courses were socialised into open-ended whole-class and small-group discussions in graduate seminars. It was found that the students remained silent during the classroom discussions for reasons such as their limited language ability, different cultural background and self-image as less knowledgeable members of the academic community (Morita, 2004). In the other study, Morita (2009) also examined the academic socialisation experiences and perspectives of a Japanese male doctoral student in Education. The student reported that due to his limited language proficiency and cultural knowledge, he faced various issues such as difficulty socialising with his peers in social events and understanding reading materials and class discussions, and remaining aloof during the class discussions (Morita, 2009).

Theoretical framework

Sociocultural theories of learning

With emphasis on the social and cognitive aspects of learning, Vygotsky (1978) introduced the notion of "the zone of proximal development" (ZPD) to explain the processes of children's learning and their cognitive development, including the acquisition of language. The ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). This notion has influenced scholars of sociocultural theories of learning, and provides a framework for us to examine the processes of students' acquisition of academic genres practised at university settings.

Lave and Wenger (1991) applied the ZPD to learning which occurs in the everyday, lived-in world. Their theory of "situated learning" emphasises the idea of participation, "legitimate peripheral participation" (LPP), to describe the process of enculturation of an apprentice into a new community of practice, in contrast to learning through pedagogical activities in which knowledge is transmitted through instructions. This theory highlights learning through direct participation in social practice in daily life or naturalistic settings with changing intensity over time. It also claims that the apprentice's identity develops as his/her understanding, knowledge and skills develop.

The way in which Rogoff (1990) construed Vygotsky's ZPD is referred to as "guided participation" or "scaffolding", which conceptualises children's cognitive development in sociocultural contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1990). This concept

suggests that children's learning is enhanced by both guidance and participation; in other words, by both observation of, and participation in, the activities together with their companions and more skilled community members (Rogoff, 1990). Guided participation also enables children to learn new skills and knowledge by extension of their current capacities, thus allowing them to develop greater skill as their responsibilities develop.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of LLP and Rogoff's (1990) concept of guided participation overlap in terms of learning involving apprenticeship into the real world, with participation gradually becoming more intensive. However, the former, which mainly focuses on apprenticeship into professional practices, does not always involve explicit guidance from more experienced community members, while the latter implies that such guidance is a necessary condition for children's apprenticeship in thinking. Accordingly, Rogoff's (1990) concept will be adopted in the current study to investigate the process of novice students' acquisition of an academic genre in a new discourse community as it is just as relevant to adult learning as to child learning.

In light of the concept of guided participation, this paper assumes that student learning in university settings should also occur through increased participation in the production of academic genres, with guidance from, and interactions with peers, supervisors and other more experienced members of the discourse community who share the same goals. In order to achieve this, university teachers scaffold student learning using appropriate activities, tasks, and assistance (Freedman, 1997). Consequently, novice learners acquire new skills and knowledge through observation and participation in a complex process of cultural practices (Brown et al., 1989) and

by building on prior knowledge, which eventually enables them to participate effectively in the discourse community.

Methodology

Participants

As shown in Table 1 below, this study involved 13 participants: eight students (seven males and one female) enrolled in the fourth year of their Bachelor's programs; and their five male supervisors in the Humanities at two universities, M University (MU) and K University (KU), in Japan. In order to protect the privacy of the participants, students will be referred to by pseudonyms and their teacher will be mentioned with their titles and the initials of their family names in the sections below. The small size of the sample and use of non-probability techniques may decrease external validity. However, the primary purpose of the research was to explore phenomena relating to thesis writing in Bachelor degree programs in Japan, not to generalise the results from the sample to a larger population.

The Japanese students in the study were enrolled in disciplines within only the Faculties of Humanities (*Jinbungaku-bu)* at MU and KU, which had the effect of reducing variation across disciplines and thereby enhancing internal reliability. The students at both MU and KU studied subjects in general education or the liberal arts during their first year, and major units in the following years. All were required to submit their graduation theses on topics of interest to them in their final year.

Data collection and procedure

An ethnographic approach was used to record data in naturalistic settings and processes in which the Japanese

Table 1. *Participants*

Student	University	Sex	Age	Year level	Areas of students' thesis topics	Supervisor
Satoshi	MU	M	23	4th	Social Psychology	Assoc. Prof. T
Iyo	MU	F	22	4th	Social Psychology	Assoc. Prof. T
Taro	MU	M	22	4th	Japanese History	Assoc. Prof. H
Naoki	KU	M	23	4th	Cognitive Psychology	Assoc. Prof. S
Kazuya	KU	M	22	4th	Cognitive Psychology	Assoc. Prof. S
Ryuji	KU	M	22	4th	English Applied Linguistics	Prof. Z
Yukio	KU	M	22	4th	English Literature	Prof. K
Miyoki	KU	F	22	4th	English Literature	Prof. K

Key: MU = M University, KU = K University,
M = Male, F = Female,
Assoc.= Associate, Prof .= Professor

students were engaged with their research and graduation theses. This approach stresses "context and thick descriptions" as reported in Freebody (2003: 76), and enables the researcher's exploration of the cultural practices and patterns of daily life of a group from insiders' points of view (Green et al., 2003). Also, information gained by employing an ethnographic approach can be the basis for the investigation of other phases of the culture or phenomenon (Green et al., 2003).

Data collection was undertaken using multiple methods in order to achieve what Miller and Salkind (2002) describe as development of a portrait and establishment of cultural rules of the culture-sharing group. Methods included interviews, diary study, questionnaires, participant observation, tape-recording, and collection of written and electronic documents. Triangulation and cross-checking could, therefore, address any shortcomings of individual methodological procedures and improve "scope, density and clarity of constructs' gained through one way or another" (Sarantakos, 1998: 199), leading to enhancement of validity and reliability.

Semi-structured interviews were administered twice with the students, and once with their supervisors over a three and a half month period in order to collect data on the participants' past experiences. All initial interviews with both students and supervisors, and second interviews with the KU students were conducted face-to-face. The first interviews occurred approximately three to four weeks prior to the students' thesis submission dates, while the second interviews with the KU students were held a few days after the students had submitted their theses. The second interviews with the MU students were conducted over the telephone immediately after their submission. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

The language of communication was Japanese in order to make the process of examination meaningful, and make the interviews comfortable for the participants (cf. Riazi, 1997).

This study also employed participant observation of four *zemi,* which were held by three supervisors at KU (Associate Professor S, Professor Z and Professor K) and one supervisor at MU (Associate Professor T) approximately one month before the thesis submission dates. The main purpose of employment of this method was to record the process of the ongoing events (Preissle & Grant 2002). During the observations, the researcher took notes on the events with the permission of all the participants.

Diary entries are claimed to be one of the most effective introspective methods to allow diarists to report their activities and behaviour during a past event (Miyazaki 1999, 2002). The students in this study were asked to keep a record of the *zemi* in which they participated, and of study activities related to their research and theses for two periods -the first for a week prior to the first interview and the second for the week before submission of their thesis. The self-reporting nature of diary studies was supplemented by subsequent follow-up interviews that were held within a few days after completion of the weekly diary.

Questionnaires were also emailed to both students and supervisors to collect data related to assessment events connected with graduation theses (e.g. oral examinations, poster presentations), but which were not covered in the interviews. Documents such as copies of syllabuses of the relevant Bachelor's programs, class timetables, study materials related to thesis writing, other printed and electronic

materials used as means of communication were also collected.

Data analysis

First, all the interview transcripts, the notes from the participant observation, diary entries, email questionnaires and the written and electronic materials were carefully examined and organised (cf. Marshall & Rossman 1989). This phase was followed by extraction of information necessary for describing each stage of the socialisation in line with the themes of the current study, which also enables reduction of a large volume of raw data to manageable clusters as claimed by Marshall and Rossman (1989). The extracted data was then interpreted and summarised in order to investigate the research questions. With respect to the excerpts of my field notes from the participant observation and the interview transcripts presented in this paper, I translated them from the original texts in Japanese to English.

Findings

Zemi

At the end of the second year of study, each student in this study was required to nominate a lecturer who specialised in a relevant study area as his/her graduation thesis supervisor. The student was then admitted to *zemi* led by that supervisor. This involved attendance at 90-minute face-to-face classes, held either weekly or fortnightly, throughout the student's final two years of university study.

The class size of the *zemi* varied from five to 18. Three KU students (Ryuji, Yukio and Miyoki) attended the *zemi* in both their third and fourth years as it was a compulsory unit in the

curriculum of their undergraduate programs. Attendance at the *zemi* was also compulsory for all the MU students and two KU students (Kazuya and Naoki) during their third year; however, it was optional during their final year. Taro's supervisor always combined his third- and fourth-year students and supervised them together. He also invited his Masters students to the weekly *zemi* as an interactive audience. Naoki and Kazuya's supervisor combined his third- and fourth-year students in the same *zemi* only when the two students were in their final year.

The ways of running the *zemi* depended on the supervisors and thus varied. Each *zemi* class typically consisted of the supervisor's housekeeping announcement, 10-15 minute oral presentations (OPs) or *happyoo* delivered by four or five students and discussions during which feedback on the delivered presentations was given by the supervisors and the audience. Professor K in American and English Literature, however, taught lectures on the areas of his speciality when Miyoki and Yukio were third-year students, and thus the students did not give OPs in that year.

Tasks and projects assigned by the supervisors

The students did not start to write their graduation theses immediately after joining the *zemi* groups. When the students were in their third year, their supervisors allocated them assignments or projects which later became part of their graduation theses. Taro's supervisor directed his students to write a 6,000-character report based on broad topics of interest to them during Semester 1, and then to write a 18,000-character review of the literature on their more specific topics during Semester 2. Miyoki and Yukio's supervisor required his students to write a review of the literature on their thesis topics during the last four months of the third year, while

Ryuji and his peers undertook a literature review of the textbook on second language acquisition provided by his supervisor to prepare for writing his graduation thesis. Through being engaged with these tasks and projects, the students in the disciplines other than psychology learned mainly "subject-matter knowledge" or knowledge of content of a particular field (Tardy, 2009). The students submitted their written reports to their supervisors and/or made OPs on their reports and projects during the *zemi* in the third- and fourth-years, and received written or oral feedback from their supervisors.

In the case of the four psychology students, the tasks required by their supervisors during their third year were more extensive. Naoki and Kazuya were instructed by their supervisor to specify their thesis topics at the beginning of the second semester in their third year, to collect and read the related references and to conduct a pilot study. Iyo and Satoshi independently conducted research and wrote preliminary graduation theses, a shorter version of a graduation thesis. During the first two years of their studies, the students were formally taught methodology/practicum units using textbooks that detailed the rules for writing experimental reports, which are similar to, but shorter in length than graduation theses. They also practised conducting research and report writing. Therefore, by the time they started to attend the *zemi*, they were, to some extent, already familiar with undertaking research and thesis writing.

Oral presentations

The contents of OPs delivered during the *zemi* varied among the groups and between the different year levels (third or fourth year) and semesters (first or second semester). During the four *zemi* that the researcher observed, the students who

delivered OPs reported on their graduation thesis drafts and received feedback from their supervisors, and peers.

The OPs and discussions that followed provided important teaching and learning contexts for the students. The students acquired subject-matter knowledge through undertaking literature reviews and listening to their peers' OPs during the *zemi*. Although the topic of each presentation differed from those of the other *zemi* members, all of the students shared the same study field of their supervisor's specialty. Thus, according to the comments of seven students (Taro, Iyo, Satoshi, Naoki, Kazuya, Miyoki and Satoshi) and three supervisors (Professor K, Professor Z, Associate Professor H), listening to others' presentations was meaningful and interesting for almost all the students within the same *zemi* as commented. For example, Miyoki in English Literature and Naoki in Psychology at KU commented as follows:

> …By listening to the other peers' presentations, I can learn new things. I can notice something which I cannot notice by myself. (Miyoki)

> I enjoy my peers' oral presentations during the *zemi*. I can discover something new. Of course, I think my research is the most interesting, but, in the past, I enjoyed oral presentations of research on topics such as an amusement park, a married couple, and driving a car because I'm also interested in those topics. (Naoki)

The discussions after oral presentations were also important teaching-learning contexts for the Japanese students, as Iyo who was majoring in Psychology at MU stated in an interview:

> During the discussion following my oral presentation, I can get opinions and ideas from my peers and supervisor who see things from different points of view. So their feedback is very valuable for me. (Iyo)

By listening to feedback from their supervisors during the discussions, the students acquired research process knowledge (e.g., how to undertake literature reviews, and data collection and analysis) and knowledge about thesis writing (e.g., how to effectively present the processed data and discuss it in their theses, style rules, the typical macro-structure, lexico-grammar and structural moves). The excerpt from my field notes below is part of the discussion between Kazuya, a KU psychology student, and his supervisor (Associate Professor S) following the student's oral presentation of his thesis draft. During the presentation, the supervisor read a copy of the thesis draft which was delivered at the beginning of the *zemi* and read it through during the presentation, jotting down his comments on the draft with a red pen. (This draft was returned to Kazuya later.) After the presentation, he started to comment on Kazuya's thesis draft, reading his notes. In this excerpt, Associate Professor S makes a suggestion about how Kazuya can present his data more effectively and advises him to correct an error in his reference:

> Supervisor: As I said, you had better add an example in this part… This part gets clearer if you add an example. You must think how much you can embody the data. The way of your writing needs to be improved. And you had better present an analysis of the contents of the wrong and correct answers. The way you wrote this

reference isn't right. Haven't you read the new style guide?

Kazuya: No, I haven't.

Supervisor: Have a look at it. You wrote the page numbers for O'Brien as "44-61", but it doesn't have a period at the end. Your reference list needs to be improved. As a whole, you need to write your thesis with more concrete expressions.

Another example is this excerpt from the dialogue between Miyoki, majoring in English Literature at KU, and her supervisor (Professor K) which occurred after her oral presentation during the *zemi*. This supervisor also took notes while listening to Miyoki's presentation and started to comment on it, looking at the notes. In this excerpt, Professor K identifies a problem about spacing and the content and makes suggestions accordingly:

Supervisor: The sample English text should be indented.

Miyoki: How much should I indent it?

Supervisor: Space for two characters. And, you need to type page numbers. This rule is introduced in the guidebook, isn't it? You have already learned it, haven't you? Also, I don't understand the content very well. The relations of the characters…You had better explain them in detail.

Three students (Taro, Iyo and Miyoki) and two supervisors (Professor K and Professor Z), however, commented in the

interviews that the majority of the students remained completely silent, like the Japanese students reported in Morita (2004, 2009). During the researcher's observation of the four *zemi*, there were one or two students who actually asked questions or commented on the delivered presentations in three *zemi* (Professor Z, Associate Professor T and Associate Professor S), while there were no volunteers for the discussion at Professor K's *zemi*. The supervisors, therefore, dominantly took the floor and provided feedback to the presenters. Nevertheless, these discussions were particularly important in that they were the only occasions during the *zemi* for presenters to receive specific oral feedback from supervisors particularly on their thesis drafts.

Learning how to write graduation theses

The students in the current study also learned how to write graduation theses in various modes. Yukio and Miyoki's supervisor formally taught his students the rules of writing a graduation thesis by using a commercially available textbook during the *zemi* for one semester in their third year. Ryuji's supervisor, Professor Z, occasionally explained rules for thesis writing in his *zemi* as mentioned by him in the interview:

> …Well, because students eventually have to write their theses in formal academic Japanese, for example, I show them actual texts written in both colloquial Japanese and academic Japanese and compare them pointing out the differences. I also show them sample reference lists. And, just reading books isn't enough for them to understand how academic texts are written, so they need to read academic journal articles as well. In the past, not

> many times but three or four times, I have advised
> the fourth–year students in my *zemi* to read sample
> journal articles which I had photocopied for them,
> and told them to write their theses like the samples.
> That's what I have done so far. (Professor Z)

As advised by their supervisors, Taro, Kazuya and Naoki also
referred to published academic journal articles in their study
areas. Just as the international students in Shaw's (1991)
study did, Taro also referred to sample theses written by
seniors who had already graduated. In addition to receiving
Professor Z's guidance during the *zemi*, Ryuji also referred to
his supervisor's handouts as described in Professor Z's
interview comments above. The four psychology students (Iyo,
Satoshi, Naoki and Kazuya) consulted the manuals which
contained detailed style rules specifically for thesis writing in
their study area.

The zemi as the context for interactions with other members

The *zemi* also provided the students contexts for socialising
with other members of the discourse communities outside the
classrooms. Social gatherings such as sharing dinners and
drinks at restaurants, pubs or their supervisors' homes were
organised by the supervisors or the students for their *zemi*
groups. Some students also participated in short trips (called
gasshuku) specially planned for the members of the *zemi*
groups, with students and their supervisors staying in the
same accommodation for one or two nights, eating meals
together and engaging in study and recreational activities and
social drinks. The study activities planned for the *gasshuku*
trips included giving OPs (Ryuji, Naoki, Kazuya and Taro),
working in groups on given tasks (Satoshi and Iyo) and

exploring historic sites (Taro), while a popular recreational activity was playing sport.

Some of this social activity was also recorded in bulletins. Associate Professor H, for example, was also the editor of a bulletin, *'Doosoo-kai hoo'* (*Alumni Bulletin*), issued at the end of every academic year, in which he and his former and existing *zemi* students (undergraduate and postgraduate) exchanged news and communicated with each other.

Another example of such communications were web sites operated by Associate Professor S and Professor Z at KU for online communication with students in their *zemi* groups. Both supervisors posted administrative notices and information on how to write a graduation thesis on their websites, which functioned as a context for communication and student learning. Professor Z frequently posted common errors and tips for effective thesis writing in Applied Linguistics towards the thesis submission date. The following excerpt is a message posted by Professor Z which shows a tip for how to write a good Discussion section:

> When you present results from questionnaires, you must write what you can say from the results, or if your hypothesis has been proved. If you cannot prove it, you should discuss in the "Results and Discussion" section what were problematic, or if there are any other reasons for it. It doesn't mean anything if you just present only results. Please be aware that all you have to do is to prove your arguments.
>
> If you ask why-questions to yourself, your thesis becomes more profound. You shouldn't just present

results in Discussion. All the best. (Posted by Professor Z on 11th December 2005)

The students' postings were all written in a friendly jocular manner and included reports on the progress of their theses, expressions of feelings towards thesis writing, encouragement with peers, banter and chit-chat. Professor Z also replied to such students' postings in a jocular manner, encouraging and praising comments, suggestions and banter. These postings revealed the very close relationship between the supervisor and his students.

Social relationships were also reinforced by students' daily meetings with their peers in the same and other *zemi* groups in study rooms provided by the universities. The students not only wrote their theses in these rooms but also interacted socially, eating lunch and snacks, and chatting. Through participation in both study and non-study activities of the *zemi*, the students in this study developed social networks, solidarity, friendship and strong bonds with the other members including their supervisors, which echoes the findings reported by Whittle (1992).

The *zemi* provided the students with a context in which they frequently interacted with other members and facilitated their socialisation into the thesis genre. In the interviews, the participants commented on advantages of the group supervision provided by the *zemi*, which can be summarised as follows:

- The *zemi* enable the students to have close relations with their peers and supervisors (stated by Naoki, Ryuji, Associate Professor T and Associate Professor S);

- It is easy to seek help from the supervisor and peers of the same *zemi* (stated by Miyoki, Ryuji and Yukio); and
- Participating in the *zemi* keeps the students encouraged, stimulated and motivated and thus facilitates their successful completion of their theses (stated by Naoki, Kazuya, Ryuji, Miyoki, Iyo, Satoshi, Taro, Associate Professor H, Professor K and Professor Z).

These comments indicate that the students and the supervisors were well aware of the benefits of working together with others in the *zemi* groups who shared the same goal, developing close relationships among themselves and assuring easy access to assistance and guidance, all of which empowered the students to keep moving on as Wisher (2005) claims.

All of the students in this study completed and submitted their graduation theses by the submission dates. Six of the eight students (excluding Naoki and Kazuya) were then required to undertake oral examinations based on their theses, and all five KU students delivered poster presentations. The two MU students (Satoshi and Iyo) made OPs on their theses in addition to the oral examinations. Seven students (Iyo, Taro, Naoki, Kazuya, Ryuji, Yukio and Miyoki) obtained the highest grade, that is, an "A" (80-100%) for their theses, and one student (Satoshi) received a "B" (70-79%), which indicates their successful completion of the theses. The students fulfilled all the requirements for their Bachelor's programs and were awarded the degrees as scheduled.

Discussion

Using an ethnographic approach, this paper explored from a sociocultural perspective the nature and functions of *zemi* with Japanese students for their undergraduate thesis writing, and how group supervision helped their completion of their theses. Although the students' experiences with the *zemi* during their third and fourth years varied, the group supervision facilitated their successful socialisation into their graduation theses. The findings of the current study revealed that the *zemi* played dual roles: one role is to provide the context in which teaching and learning occur, and the other role is to provide students with psychological support to achieve their common goal.

The *zemi*'s teaching-learning contexts are complex and extensive and offered various modes of teaching and learning. The students' learning occurred rather gradually by being engaged with appropriate tasks and projects assigned by their supervisors and involved in actual thesis writing, by delivering their own OPs, by receiving feedback from their supervisors and peers, by listening to their peers' OPs and the discussions that followed, and by being explicitly taught in lectures. As Wisker (2005) points out regarding the nature of supervision of undergraduate students, the students in this study appeared to receive explicit guidance and directions from their supervisors. Through these experiences, the students successfully acquired and consolidated subject-matter knowledge and knowledge for undertaking research and graduation theses as practised in their study areas.

It was also found that the students were inspired and encouraged by participating in the study and recreational activities and interacting with the other members of the *zemi* in and outside the classrooms and that they established social networks, friendships, solidarity and strong bonds. This

assured them easy access to assistance and guidance whenever they needed it and helped them to remain highly motivated. Furthermore, such an environment enabled the students and supervisors to preclude hierarchical relationships that frequently have a negative impact on students' outcomes and student-supervisor relationships as reported by Belcher (1994) and Elton and Pope (1992). The psychological support provided by the *zemi,* therefore, appeared to have greatly contributed to the students' successful completion of their theses.

The Japanese students' socialisation processes via the *zemi* mostly agreed with Rogoff's (1990) notion of guided participation with one difference. The students' learning occurred not only through observation and participation in the cultural practices of the discourse communities, as suggested by the notion of guided participation, that suggests that learning should occur in these ways, but also through explicit guidance and instructions provided by their supervisors in the *zemi*, which seemed to be equally effective.

The findings of this study may have pedagogical implications for supervisors of Japanese postgraduate students enrolled in universities outside Japan, as well as for supervisors of other undergraduate students who are required to complete theses. First, although Japanese students may be reluctant to participate in classroom discussions, they may still benefit from group supervision and interactions with other peers. In addition, Japanese students may expect their supervisor to provide explicit guidance and directions, which is similar to the sort of guidance they typically receive from their Japanese supervisors. Finally, to my knowledge, group supervision is commonly practiced in some areas of science in Australia, for example. The findings of this paper may suggest that

undergraduate students who are required to complete theses in other disciplines such as Arts and Humanities may also benefit from group supervision like the *zemi*.

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