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An online community of international scholars: Enabling spaces for reciprocal academic and psychological support

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 and its imposed social confinement entailed a radical shift in research, supervision and learning in doctoral education. Heightened flexibility in delivery, sensitivity and compassion and greater reliance on technology sought to address not merely scholars' pedagogical but holistic needs, which became more prominent during the pandemic. Face-to-face doctoral supervision and academic events were conducted online to overcome hurdles presented by 'social distancing'. We examine how the dynamics of our group supervision for international doctoral scholars changed after shifting to online mode. We employed an autoethnographic approach to highlight evolving rewards and challenges in conducting online meetings with a group of international scholars. Focusing on this group is timely since the 'working-from-home' mode contributed to doctoral scholars' isolation and stress that they experienced. This paper: a) exemplifies the psychological benefits fostered by online meetings; and b) highlights creative virtual pedagogies and practices worth adopting even after the pandemic is over.

Introduction

Advanced technology usage has been part and parcel of higher education practice in the last few decades (e.g. Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). Within doctoral education, the transformative impact of technology-assisted practice has made a qualitative difference in enhancing both crucial and mundane day-to-day activities – from searching resources via online multi-databases to preparing sophisticated doctoral theses, e.g. 3D digital models, animated sequences, video clips or immersive technology.

While technology's indispensability has always been acknowledged, our paper focuses on a specific time when advanced technology was not merely crucial but became the sole option for higher education. In the UK and elsewhere in early 2020, the arrival of the COVID-19 virus posed an unprecedented challenge that necessitated a technology-orientated solution for universities to continue delivering teaching, learning and assessment (Ratcliff et al., 2021). This paper focuses on when the pandemic challenge led to the unique mandatory shift to remote online learning. Technology was not merely a replacement for traditional learning modes or driven by personal initiatives; instead,

the 'emergency remote teaching' (ERT) was imposed (Shin & Hickey, 2020, p. 2). With no vaccine available, the circumstances were coloured by fear of the unknown and this fatal virus.

On the one hand, doctoral scholars and supervisors are at an advantage compared to undergraduate and Master's students. Firstly, they are likely to have acquired skills and competence from involvement with online provision and adeptness in using technologies leading to a smoother online transition. Secondly, organising doctoral supervisory meetings tends to be easier than coordinating large undergraduate or Master's classes. On the other hand, ERT may arguably have contributed to extra stress associated with an already-isolated and challenging doctoral journey (Mantai, 2017) resulting from the accompanying social confinement through mandated 'social distancing' measures (Shin & Hickey, 2020).

Doctoral communities before and during the pandemic

It is universally acknowledged that expected outcomes from a research doctorate comprise independence and capability to produce 'an original contribution to knowledge' (Baptista et al., 2015; Belavy et al., 2020, p. 1). Whereas doctoral education can be exciting and passion-driven, its overall nature and accompanying 'untold stories' tend to be characterised by stress, anxiety and poor wellbeing, too (Acker & Haque, 2015; Beasy et al., 2020; Byrom et al., 2020). For the international group, those doctoral scholars who are studying abroad, embedded challenges of an academic and non-academic nature can bring forth added loneliness, linguistic demands or confusion with differing academic norms, often exacerbated by physical distance from key social support (Cai et al., 2019). Such challenges may intensify doctoral stress (Elliot & Kobayashi, 2019).

Notably, writing is regarded as central to the doctoral process – the primary means for doctoral scholars to communicate research soundness, knowledge claims, their theoretical position, and in seeking validation from other scholars as they forge a scholarly identity (Mantai, 2017; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). Yet, writing can be a double-edged sword. While the learning process per se is intended to strengthen scholars' writing competence, it also exposes one's vulnerabilities to other scholars' critiques, becoming a 'high-risk activity carrying significant fears of being found wanting' (Thomson & Kamler, 2010, p. 151). This may explain examples of stress stemming from writing, e.g. writer's block, concern over supervisor feedback on coherence and clarity, Imposter Syndrome (see Deconinck, 2015). It is suggested that a way of reducing doctoral-related stress and fostering wellbeing is via writing groups (Beasy et al., 2020; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). Although primarily writing-focused, benefits from these interactions may include social and practical support, reduced sense of isolation, and greater writing accountability assisting scholars to manage doctoral demands (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). While writing groups might constitute most doctoral communities, others focus on social activities or reading groups. Joining these groups potentially enriches doctoral research culture, scaffolds and reinforces scholars' knowledge, identity and research competencies and sustains wellbeing (Beasy et al., 2020; Belavy et al., 2020). Yet, as Beasy et al. (2020) argue, 'few studies have investigated the attributes of writing [and/or other] groups that enable positive wellbeing to occur' (p. 1093) – arguably of more importance during a pandemic.

Online communities for international doctoral scholars

The pandemic put international doctoral scholars in a peculiar position. The 'social distancing' measures, aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19, had the unintended consequence of contributing to further social isolation and loneliness (Shin & Hickey, 2020). In addition to undertaking a PhD, these scholars may already experience some loneliness being in a different country and away from families; social confinement means further isolation from friends and colleagues in the host country who may offer social support. Despite technology facilitating online communication, these platforms unsurprisingly entail restrictions, . Whereas custom backgrounds may show outdoor scenes or give the impression that participants are all together, it does not alter the reality that they are within the separate confines of their respective workspaces. Smiles, stories and laughter may be shared online, but the impossibility of any physical contact (e.g. handshake, hug) to convey encouragement and support remains. nder normal circumstances, opportunities for learning, growth and development are much broader, coming in all shapes and sizes, and are situated within and outside academia (Elliot et al., 2016, 2020).

Given the challenges caused by COVID-19 and the situation it created, and more so for international scholars, this paper aims to offer holistic and pedagogically useful insights into the dynamics of an online community of international scholars. Our study was guided by two research questions:

(1) How does forced transitioning to an online mode affect the dynamics of an international doctoral scholars' community?
(2) What examples of virtual pedagogies and practices during 'emergency remote teaching' are regarded as creative pathways for supporting communities of international doctoral scholars?

The study

This research springs from the two authors' ongoing joint initiative at one Scottish University since October 2016, involving a community of ten to twelve international doctoral scholars under our supervision who came from various geographical regions (e.g. Central Asia, Middle East, North America, East Asia, Southeast Asia) and were living and studying in the UK. Pre-COVID-19, our group met regularly for two hours every month as an avenue for reinforcing learning via informal academic activities. As doctoral supervisors, our commitment to this initiative (in addition to standard supervisory meetings) arose from our conviction about a scholarly community's inherent value – intellectually, socially and psychologically. Each session, underpinned by dialogic learning principles, is deemed a powerful means for 'authentic' learning, fostering peer support, and creating a community while supporting scholars' wellbeing (Beasy et al., 2020; Wegerif, 2018). These sessions facilitate meaningful conversations, where 'real dialogues happen' as people listen to and learn from each other making the dialogue enjoyable and productive (Wegerif, 2018, p. 90). Citing Aitchison (2009), these sessions are 'inspiring and creative places where people talk, write and learn together because they are being nurtured, empowered and stimulated' (Wilmot & McKenna, 2018, p. 4). In our group, flexible, informal, relaxed and supportive environments are crucial as we

accommodate scholars' needs at various stages (e.g. fieldwork preparation, viva). Before and after the arrival of COVID-19, we engaged in academic writing activities, critiquing half-written manuscripts, co-writing academic papers, and reviewing journal manuscripts. Members were encouraged to share insights, research techniques, or practical strategies they found effective or challenging. Over the past four years, our group celebrated successes, including paper publications, awards and nominations, successful vivas, PhD completions, promotion, successful job applications and new family members. Starting March 2020, however, our meetings, with parallel activities suddenly shifted to an online mode (Ratcliff et al., 2021).

A collaborative autoethnographic method

Ethnography refers to 'the study of a group or culture and is concerned with the ordinary, i.e. people's daily routines' (Harding, 2019, p. 35). A number of principles guiding ethnography draw from the qualitative approach, e.g. recognising multiplicity of perspectives, observation in a natural setting and prolonged period for collecting data, at times, living with those being studied (Méndez, 2013). The distinctiveness of autoethnography, i.e. 'self-observation', is gaining ground as it draws on personal experience to examine a social 'reality' within naturalistic settings to generate in-depth understanding (Beasy et al., 2020; Méndez, 2013, p. 285). Chang (2008, p. 28) further argues that autoethnography is beyond one's experience, and often portrays 'an extension of a community rather than ... an independent, self-sufficient being'. This is a suitable method as we focused on our interactions with international doctoral scholars, in order to capture the unique experience of being part of a face-to-face community that abruptly shifted to an online platform (Chang, 2008). Drawing upon our reflective diaries as two doctoral supervisors, we employed a collaborative autoethnography method (Méndez, 2013). In so doing, we took a 'selective approach' (Harding, 2019, p. 35) based on our collective reflection for a specific period, i.e. March to December 2020, during which lockdown of various degrees occurred in the UK. Our written reflections are in the form of electronic diary entries for ten online meetings in 2020. We were specifically guided by honest, in-depth and evaluative reflection (Méndez, 2013) during preparation, actual group interactions and outcomes from observed interactions.

By using an autoethnographic method, we both acknowledge the necessity to demonstrate greater rigour in the analysis to address potential weaknesses, e.g. emphasis on self, selected self-disclosure, sensitivity of data (Chang, 2008). Therefore, reflexivity, 'special considerations' for our and others' circumstances, self-evaluation and cross-checking of data required even greater attention (Méndez, 2013, p. 283). Ethics approval was not required for this study and this further encouraged both authors (one previously served as School Ethics Officer) to ensure what Megford (2006) refers to as 'an ethic of accountability' in which honesty and transparency are core (Méndez, 2013, p. 284). It is worth noting that writing is at the core of our group's practice; everyone is encouraged to write or co-write blog posts, papers or book chapters. Engagement in writing is staple to our discussion and during the time that this paper was written, other members recorded their audio diaries for another project. Openness and willingness to be involved in publication is not only encouraged but is generally practised. Group members have been informed of this paper and have given consent to its publication. Other sources of data, complementary to diary entries, enabled

a check of our recollection of events: a) Slack, i.e. our group's designated channel-based messaging platform for announcements, updates and resource sharing; b) the university's secure OneDrive for shared folders of activities; and c) Twitter posts from us or group members. As supervisors, our deep knowledge of each scholar in our group, first-hand involvement in their doctoral journeys, and presence in the monthly learning engagements as a community, put us in an ideal position to record such observations (Harding, 2019). Equally, neither supervisor is originally from the UK. This perhaps enables us to empathise better with doctoral scholars' experiences of being away from family and home countries. During analysis, an inductive thematic approach was employed (Braun & Clarke, Braun and Clarke, 2021), with the first author leading the identification of themes. This involved repetitive reading of the diary entries, colour-coding of diary text to assist with data categorisation and generation of a hierarchy of themes and sub-themes. Reviewing codes, reflecting on trends and patterns as well as recording memos for further reflection are all embedded in this process. This led to our collective reflection and discussion of the emergent findings, with group members' identity safeguarded by using pseudonyms. Concurring with Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke, 2021)'s assertion that researchers do not start from 'a theoretical vacuum', this analysis was likewise 'grounded in the data, rather than "pure" induction' (p. 4).

Findings

In examining the March to December 2020 diary entries, two major themes arose from the data. The first highlights multiple benefits coming even after transitioning to an imperfect online mode. The second features examples of creative doctoral online pedagogies and practices, which may remain useful post-COVID 19.

Online community – an extended platform for social and psychological support

While online platforms are a valuable alternative during the 'emergency remote teaching' period (Shin & Hickey, 2020), there exist practical constraints, particularly for those who have young families. One supervisor, who contracted COVID19, reflected on her experience in the early part of the lockdown.

> The spring months in particular were extremely challenging ... all of our meetings and teaching moved online. My daughter's nursery was cancelled so she was at home with us and having an energetic, loud, four-year-old who loves social interaction meant it was difficult to get work done.(Skye, April_2020)

There is gradual acceptance that an online platform is 'a good alternative' and can create 'more opportunity for those who found it difficult to get to campus' (Skye). The transition to online provision was not perceived to be a huge hindrance per se, but there were other challenges accompanying this move, e.g. bandwidth-related issues, difficulty with more active hands-on activities. For example, in June, 'one of our PGRs [postgraduate researcher], Aaron, had an unstable network and it kept logging him out' (Skye). Despite the accessibility of resources, inability to join the meeting could cause disappointment. Despite such failings, both diaries are filled with members' expressions of gratitude for being in a community.

> . . . everyone is just happy that we can still support each other not just academically but even in a more personal way . . . it was heartening to see how group members shared invaluable information, e.g., posters, a video link, websites, mainly on how we can keep safe at this time . . . . We again offered our personal phone numbers to enable everyone to reach out [and] shared about fifteen COVID-related pieces of information [regarding] masks and gloves, new opening hours for local stores . . . articles on how to fight against the virus (e.g., adequate sleep), videos on self-care, exercise . . .. (Autumn, March_2020)

> In late March I believe I got COVID-19. I had the common symptoms . . . I remember being very scared . . . . My colleague . . . brought me groceries, disinfecting supplies, and lots of protective gear. One of the PGRs in our group sent me groceries . . . we really are a community that takes care of one another. When you are far from family abroad, it means so much to have people who are local who are there for you acting as a family member would. The community . . . does not just benefit our PGRs . . . . We as supervisors immensely benefit, too, and I feel so thankful to be a part of this . . . small community.(Skye, March_2020)

In both accounts, there was a shared appreciation for members of our community expressing mutual concern and offering practical support, and therefore, creating a strong 'sense of belonging' – particularly important for scholars whose families are in another country (Skye). Moreover, although the community was well-established before the pandemic, it was further nurtured during these months. While Slack conversations were predominantly academic-focused, they were filled with members' interesting use of emojis including ♥(sun) ?(hug) ♥(love) ☺(smile) and ? (okay). At the end of the message, support for each other and good wishes to keep safe were typical. For example, Faith reminded others that it is bound to be very warm on a certain day suggesting opening their windows to let some fresh air in, especially if stepping outside makes them anxious (Autumn, April_2020). Being in a similar situation, everyone's mutual support via Slack was very heartening to see, particularly during challenging and uncertain times, e.g. Gabrielle warning others when an outbreak at the university occurred (Autumn, September_2020).

Whereas the original purpose for establishing this doctoral community was to reinforce pedagogical learning and support each other practically, the group served as an adaptive system for responding to our group member's needs; in turn, humanity and care were observed on numerous occasions (Waddington, 2018). Two instances where social concern and support stood out occurred at the beginning of October and December. On these occasions, major celebrations were taking place back home. Greetings were exchanged over Slack, with Erick sharing a photo of homemade curry chicken and mooncake, i.e. a delicacy associated with the Mid-Autumn Festival. We both shared a similar sentiment – combined joy and empathy for our international scholars:

> It was great to see our PGRs finding the time to celebrate in the midst of the pandemic chaos. (Autumn, October_2020)

> There is always something comforting about sharing and seeing food, even if we can't eat together.(Skye, October_2020)

While celebrating privately became the norm, sharing photos of food traditionally eaten on special occasions could help ease prevailing physical and psychological isolation. Similarly, while Christmas parties via Zoom could not replace the actual parties previously held at Skye's residence, ending 2020 with 'a virtual Christmas Party was a great way to conclude a tumultuous year with a heart-warming party' (Autumn, December_2020).

> Over the last two years, we had a Christmas party that I was happy to host in my home, where the members of our PGR group and their loved ones were invited to come over, to bring a dish to share, and to have a fun party.(Skye, December_2020)

Instead, sharing photos as children, videos of special celebrations from home, funny Christmas songs (e.g. Minions singing), enabled everyone to enjoy the virtual party. Despite its limitations, we both observed that the gathering left a meaningful impression on everyone.

> We finished by sharing the answer to the question we asked at the beginning of the party, 'Despite everything that happened in 2020, what are the three things that you are most grateful for?' It was so nice to end our party with positivity, with everything that everyone shared – from being grateful for their families, health, achievements – big and small.(Autumn, December_2020)

> . . . I find it really difficult to be positive this year [but] hearing how our doctoral researchers, who are probably in one of the most challenging times of their lives . . . studying abroad, away from family for a long time because of lockdown, and not getting in-person social support, were still able to find so much to be grateful for . . . I feel very lucky to be part of such a special group.(Skye, December_2020)

With all its imperfections, transitioning to online mode (mainly via Zoom and Slack) offered both change and continuity in facilitating community learning interactions. Even the technical and practical challenges encountered served as a catalyst to be creative and avoid further challenges. Notably, these interactions were key in mutually sustaining social and psychological support – something each member arguably needed more than ever.

Creative pedagogies and practices delivered via the online doctoral group community

Concerning the online pedagogies and practices to support doctoral scholars, these practices may be parallel to our pre-pandemic doctoral group activities; nevertheless, using a new mode of delivery posed some challenges and required a creative approach in the online space.

Viva preparation

Two mock online vivas (oral defences) were organised for Faith and Camille, in August and December 2020 respectively. These mock vivas were held using Zoom, with other doctoral scholars asking questions to assist the viva candidate. Yet, we both acknowledged the 'excellent' value of conducting this exercise for the viva candidate and for all members.

> On the day itself, every member of our team had prepared about two questions each . . .. We then took turns asking Faith our questions which Faith defended passionately . . . I was so impressed with the questions that the group prepared [and] how the whole afternoon went . . . this was an excellent example of research group support in action.(Autumn, August_2020)

> We had Camille's mock viva today. The PGRs asked excellent questions! This is supporting Camille, but also just listening to her responses and the types of questions that are asked are useful for the other PGRs as well, similar to the experience we had with Faith.(Skye, December_2020)

Building a close-knit scholarly community

What we anticipated after shifting to an online community mode materialised, i.e. the platform continued to serve various functions, observable throughout the diary extracts in this article. They are characterised by: a) friendship, camaraderie and a sense of belonging; b) a means for peer support – academic and practical; c) mutual psychological encouragement and peer-checking; d) empowering researcher identity and competence; and e) personal and professional growth. What is worth noting is that everyone, us included, recognised how the online mode enabled mutual learning, growth and continuous benefits from being part of a close-knit, supportive scholarly community.

Collaborative paper writing

During this period, the two-hour monthly discussions were split into two, i.e. general discussion and a collaborative writing activity. Being inspired by the group's first published conceptual article, i.e. Cai et al. (2019), selected members decided to embark on another empirical study. From the outset, everyone worked collaboratively – from topic selection, research question formulation, decisions on methods and approach to analysis. We considered members' distinct subject knowledge, methods expertise and a feasible timeline, which all assisted in deciding over members' project contributions.

> Each person was given a do-able task based on their current commitments – this is a principle that we applied throughout. Their PhD will always be their priority. . . . We also made it clear that PGR writing is a means for learning academic writing, which they can then apply in their own doctoral work [stressing] that getting the paper published is a bonus . . . . It's not meant to be a burden but an effective learning tool to assist their growth and development.(Autumn, March_2020)

As supervisors, we impressed clearly our stance on this extra-curricular activity and the importance of collaborative paper-writing. Commencing in March, our group produced the complete manuscript in November 2020. Viva preparation, community building, and collaborative paper writing are all staple activities that our group previously engaged in face-to-face. Continuing to undertake them during the pandemic has seemingly intensified its impact, probably because each activity became a natural extension for social connection.

Table 1. Online spaces as enablers of wellbeing spaces.

Spaces of wellbeing	Description	Virtual doctoral pedagogies
Spaces of capability	Social and physical spaces as enablers or hindrances for experiencing wellbeing through self-fulfilment	
Integrative spaces	Integration into a network with strong social association impacting on wellbeing including health	
Spaces of security	Relationship characterised by 'social, spatial and individual support' affecting wellbeing	
Therapeutic spaces	Social spaces beyond cultural, emotional and spiritual offering healing spaces	

Note. Online spaces as enablers of wellbeing spaces. Adapted from 'Wellbeing, health and geography: A critical review and research agenda', by S. Fleuret and S. Atkinson, 2007, *New Zealand Geographer, 63*(2) (doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-7939.2007.00093.x). Copyright 2007 by Wiley Online Library.

Discussion and conclusion

Not discounting the challenges linked to online provision, our study findings highlighted how the rewards outweighed the drawbacks. The sudden shift to an online mode offered both change and continuity while creating online spaces essential for addressing international doctoral scholars' holistic needs – pedagogical, social and psychological (Byrom et al., 2020). In our community, the online platform served as a crucial channel for continuously nurturing members in a reciprocal manner, particularly during this period characterised by a greater sense of isolation (Shin & Hickey, 2020).

In turn, these online spaces also inevitably served as 'spaces of wellbeing'. Fleuret and Atkinson's (2007, p. 113) 'spaces of wellbeing' framework makes both a useful and interesting comparison as it presents four components of wellbeing namely 'spaces of capability', 'integrative spaces', 'spaces of security', and 'therapeutic spaces', with each impacting the other. While the framework came from geography, these spaces are aligned with the wellbeing spaces as experienced by our international doctoral scholars. Within the context of the imposed social confinement during the pandemic, we highlight that online platforms facilitated these wellbeing spaces, as depicted in Table 1.

Our findings reinforce existing literature that wellbeing spaces can be found, nurtured and enjoyed through communities (Beasy et al., 2020; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). What our ethnographic study findings strongly highlight is that during the pandemic, these spaces were exclusively enabled by the online mode, therefore, making such online spaces essential for extending both academic and psychological support during ERT. These online spaces were not merely channels but served as enablers of wellbeing spaces.

A second but equally crucial point – against the constraints associated with the online mode, our community of scholars demonstrated that with ingenuity, a new mode of learning can overcome limitations, but more importantly, harness what these online platforms offer. Arguably, viva preparation, virtual community building activities, and collaborative paper writing are constructive and effective pedagogical pathways for supporting a community of international doctoral scholars. It is, therefore, worth stressing their potential transformative impact, if adopted either during the COVID-19 pandemic or even after its threat is finally over. Finally, we assert that positivity and healthy relationships between doctoral scholars and their supervisors nurtured in the community make a substantial difference to the overall experience and success of online learning. Practising kindness with each other is at the core of this doctoral practice. As Waddington (2018, p. 87) contends, 'care, kindness and compassion are not separate from being professional' after all.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dely Lazarte Elliot, CPsychol is a Senior Lecturer whose research focuses on the cross-cultural facets of international doctoral scholars and their impact on acculturation, academic performance and psychological wellbeing.

Kara A. Makara, CPsychol is a Lecturer whose research interests include motivation, assessment, academic and social goals, social development and peer relationships, academic help seeking, and cultural differences in these processes.

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