Connecting and interconnecting:

Encouraging communities of practice among doctoral scholars

University of Stirling Faculty of Social Sciences Doctoral Conference 2022

Keynote Address

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OVERVIEW

Why doctoral scholars' social connections matter and what is meant by "communities of practice" for doctoral scholars

Supporting communities of practice among doctoral scholars before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and in today's new hybrid model

How to engage in meaningful connections and interconnections with others to support your own academic development

THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

- A complex, exciting, challenging journey (Elliot, 2021); and in some disciplines, independent and unstructured

- Doctoral learning does not have a clear beginning and an end, it cannot be easily separated from other activities, and it is not only the result of explicit teaching

- Learning is **social** and develops from our experience of participating in activities with others (Lave & Wenger, 2004; Rogoff et al., 1995)

DIFFERENT FORMS OF DOCTORAL SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

- Formal, semi-formal, and informal (e.g., Mantai, 2017)
- Home, work, and "third space"
- Structured and unstructured
- Personal and academic
- Within, between, and outwith HEIs

WHY ARE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS IMPORTANT FOR DOCTORAL SCHOLARS?

- Academic development and the production of new knowledge and ways of thinking
- Personal development and psychological wellbeing
- Academic socialisation
- Social capital
- Sense of belonging and identity
- But also…
  - Require time and energy to maintain
  - Can sometimes lead to group conformity
  - Not meant to replace mental health services
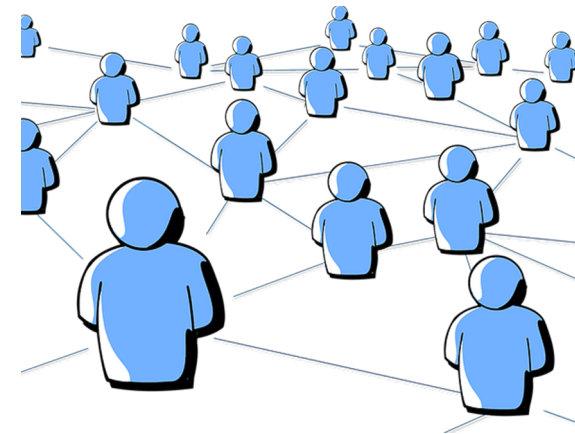
E.g., Cai et al., 2019; Elliot et al., 2022; Hopwood, 2010); Janta et al., 2014; Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018; Lahenius, 2012; McApline et al., 2014; Sverdlik et al., 2018

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

- Communities of practice (CoPs) are 'Groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (Wenger, 2000, p. 139)

- Social learning systems whose purpose is to develop members' skills and help members build and exchange knowledge as they interact regularly

- CoPs have explicit or implicit boundaries that bring people together – *a personal example*

WHAT MAKES A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE UNIQUE?

- Not all communities are CoPs
  - Networks with only a goal to transfer knowledge
  - Groups/teams who accomplish a specific task
  - Being formally nested within a group does not guarantee one is in a CoP

- Members of CoPs have a shared enterprise, understand what matters to that CoP, actively choose to participate and have mutual engagement, and have a shared repertoire of language, norms, and artefacts accumulated over time

Wenger, 2000; Wenger, 2010

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: MOVING FROM CONNECTION TO INTERCONNECTION

- Beyond one-to-one connections with others, members of CoPs are interconnected: "to be meaningfully or complexly related or joined'

- What might be the benefits for doctoral scholars of being interconnected within an academic community of scholars?

Some of these individuals are connected; others are disconnected
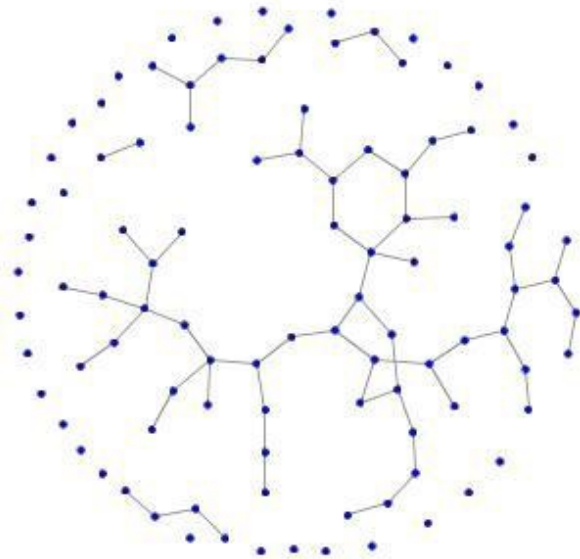
Most of these individuals are interconnected
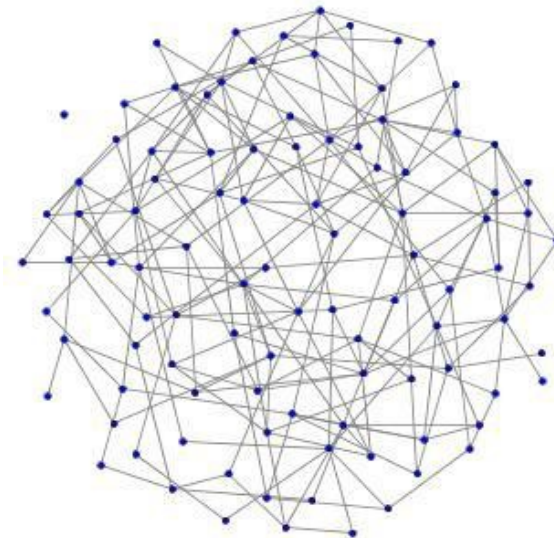
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE?

- CoPs lead to acquiring new skills and understandings, greater performance, ability to tackle unstructured problems, and reduce problems of traditional hierarchies where learning belongs only to individuals (Lave & Wenger, 2004)

- Also involves 'becoming a certain person—a knower in a context where what it means to know is negotiated.' (Wenger, 2010, p 2)

What identities do you have? Do you identify as a doctoral scholar? As a member of a particular research group, your School, your University? As a researcher within your discipline?

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITIES FOR DOCTORAL SCHOLARS

- In a collaborative study with our own doctoral scholars, we conducted a review of research literature to address the following exploratory questions focusing on CoPs for *international* doctoral students:

  - RQ1. What are the different forms of communities available to international doctoral researchers?

  - RQ2. How do these communities affect international doctoral researchers (e.g., academically, professionally, psychologically)?

Cai, L., Dangeni, D., Elliot, D. L. , He, R., Liu, J., Makara, K. A. , Pacheco, E.-M. , Shih, H.-Y., Wang, W. and Zhang, J. (2019) A conceptual enquiry into communities of practice as praxis in international doctoral education. Journal of Praxis in Higher Education, 1(1), pp. 11-36. (doi: 10.47989/kpdc74)

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITIES FOR DOCTORAL SCHOLARS

| Institutional research communities	Disciplinary communities	Cultural communities	Communities of common interests & needs
• Scholarly growth and supporting scholarship • Stronger relationships with staff and doctoral community • Confidence building • Sense of academic membership and identity as a researcher	• Enhanced knowledge via interaction with scholars & experts • Personal and professional growth • Research dissemination and communication • Academic identity development	• Affiliation and comfort zone within familiar practices • Emotional, social and academic support • For international students, a supportive way of understanding a new culture	• Sense of belonging • Physical & psychological wellbeing • Stress alleviation • Self-esteem • Socialisation opportunities

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HOW DID WE DEVELOP A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC?

Some of our doctoral scholars at a meeting of our PGR peer group
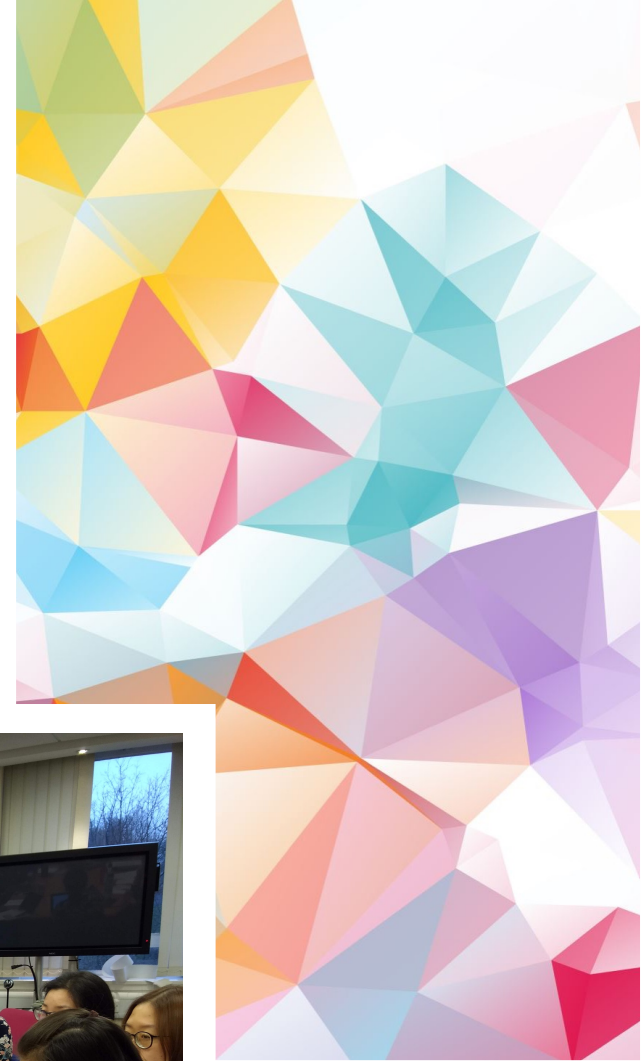
HOW DID WE DEVELOP A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC?

- Regular monthly meetings with the supervisory team

- Shared office spaces to work with other doctoral scholars

- University opportunities which vary across institutions; e.g., doctoral seminars, social events, workshops and training

- Connections within, across, and outwith the University

- Professional academic networks

- Online communities, e.g., ResearchGate, Twitter (#PhDChat)

- In some disciplines, the lab group, or self-made groups…

HOW DID WE DEVELOP A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC?

- Since 2016, my colleague and I have met monthly with a small community of 8-12 doctoral scholars under our supervision

  - Apply dialogic learning principles and engage in meaningful discussion

  - Academic writing activities, critique drafts of writing, discuss relevant strategies used in research, co-write academic papers, and members share research techniques used in their research

- Also meet as a group socially outside of these meetings

HOW DID WE DEVELOP A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC?

- To foster an understanding of academic writing conventions, we included our PGRs in an authentic collaborative writing experience for a peer-reviewed publication (Cai et al., 2019)

- Benefits
  - More profound understanding of what academic writing entails
  - Insights transferable to their doctoral research
  - New appreciation of the required standards & procedures for publishing
  - Facing the challenges of academic writing in a supportive environment
  - The collaborative aspect reduced the burden on any one scholar
  - Fun, and helps their CVs!

Elliot, D., & Makara, K. (2019). Advancing an authentic writing experience among international PGRs.
http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/authentic-writing-experience-international-pgrs-390.aspx

Elliot, D., & Makara, K. (2020). The many benefits of co-writing with doctoral researchers.
https://drhiddencurriculum.wordpress.com/2020/05/28/the-many-benefits-of-co-writing-with-doctoral-researchers/

HOW DID WE SUSTAIN A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY DURING THE PANDEMIC?

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- Beginning in March 2020 and the shift to 'emergency remote teaching' across UK universities, doctoral students who benefit from social support were suddenly forced into social isolation (Elliot et al., 2022)

- Our group's meetings shifted to a synchronous online mode

- We carried out an autoethnography during this time(Elliot & Makara, 2021)

  - RQ1: How does forced transitioning to an online mode affect the dynamics of an international doctoral scholars' community?

  - RQ2: What examples of virtual pedagogies and practices during 'emergency remote teaching' are regarded as creative pathways for supporting communities of international doctoral scholars?

HOW DID WE SUSTAIN A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY DURING THE PANDEMIC?

- Online community as an extended platform for social & psychological support

…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, protocols when entering, leaving home and when living with someone who is at risk … articles on how to fight against the virus (e.g. adequate sleep), videos on self-care, exercise…. (Autumn, March_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)

HOW DID WE SUSTAIN A DOCTORAL COMMUNITY DURING THE PANDEMIC?

- Creative pedagogies and practices delivered via the online doctoral group community: viva preparation (mock vivas held via Zoom), building a close-knit scholarly community, and collaborative paper writing

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)

Elliot, D. L. and Makara, K. A. (2021) An online community of international scholars: enabling spaces for reciprocal academic and psychological support. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 58*(6), pp. 693-703. (doi: 10.1080/14703297.2021.1991424)

HOW ARE DOCTORAL SCHOLARS RECONNECTING IN THE 'NEW NORMAL'?

These are some of our doctoral scholars at a social outing at a park in Glasgow, Scotland

WHAT IS THE 'NEW NORMAL' FOR ACADEMIC SOCIAL CONNECTION?

- Flexible working models mean you may meet with supervisors online more than in the past

- More challenging to travel internationally

- Some trainings and workshops offered online

- Mix of in-person and online meetings

- Hybrid meetings and conferences

- Hybrid teaching

- HyFlex (hybrid flexible) teaching - offered in-person, synchronously online, and asynchronously online

HOW ARE DOCTORAL SCHOLARS RECONNECTING IN THE 'NEW NORMAL'?

- Hybrid approaches to foster social connection

  - E.g., within the UofG School of Education, the 2021-22 academic year contained both virtual opportunities (Write On; PGR Chatter; PhD-led Research Sharing) and in-person opportunities (Walk & Talk; tea & coffee; writing retreat) for doctoral scholars

- The return to F2F conferences with virtual options

- A time of uncertainty, but also an opportunity to shape new ways of working and connecting

BENEFITS OF THE NEW HYBRID MODEL

- Builds upon hybrid ways we already worked before the pandemic (using learning management systems, communication platforms, distance learning practices)

- Less costs for travel and more accessibility

- Greater flexibility leading to more inclusivity

- In person we tend to develop 'strong social ties', whereas online ways of working can help us access 'weak ties'; both important for different aspects of development

CHALLENGES OF THE NEW HYBRID MODEL

- New expectations that *everything* has a virtual element

- Hybrid models can create a two tier system – how to help those who are not physically present to still feel connected/avoid FOMO

- How to support those who benefit from more structure and social accountability

- Travel issues, esp. for international doctoral scholars

- COVID still remains a risk esp. for those who are vulnerable

HOW TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS

- May need to be more proactive than in the past in planning formal & informal get togethers

- Reach out to the range of in-person and online sources of help (Makara & Karabenick, 2013)

- Be self-aware of your own wellbeing needs and optimal working patterns (Elliot et al., 2022)

- Call out social and systemic barriers that may limit your or others' ability to socially connect

This is a photo of me at my first conference presentation as a doctoral scholar (AERA 2008)

HOW TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS

- Look outwith your University for discipline-specific knowledge or skills

- Attend conferences (Kuzhabekova & Temerbayeva, 2018) and professional org. events for doctoral scholars

- Form both "strong ties" with close academic friends (Jairam & Kahl, 2012) & "weak ties" more broadly

HOW TO INTERCONNECT IN MEANINGFUL WAYS

- Actively engage in communities whilst being aware of the benefits and challenges of different types of communities (Cai et al., 2019)

- Purposeful peer mentoring & peer learning (Dangeni et al., 2021; Lahenius, 2012)

- Do not underestimate the power of different forms of social spaces to harness the "hidden curriculum" (Elliot et al., 2016)

- Appreciate that learning does not end when you close your book or laptop – reflect upon the learning gained through activity, listening, talking, and thinking with others

CONCLUSIONS

- Communities of practice are valuable social systems marked by meaningful interconnections with others and can support doctoral scholars' learning

- Doctoral scholars' social connections have evolved before, during, and after the pandemic

- There are diverse ways to develop the meaningful complex relationships needed to support your academic and personal development

FOR DISCUSSION

- Did any parts of the talk resonate with your personal experiences?

- What are some creative ways you have connected or interconnected with others for academic purposes?

- What are some of the challenges you have faced in connecting with others? How can you overcome (or be supported to overcome) those challenges?

University of Glasgow

THANK YOU

Many thanks to the FoSS Doctoral Organising Committee, to my colleague Dr Dely Elliot, and to the PGRs I have had the pleasure of supervising and learning from over the years

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