

The Online Doctoral Community of Practice

Sustaining the doctoral experience in the 21st century

Introduction

The contemporary doctorate in any discipline requires significant scholarly research and intense dedication and time commitment. Developing mutual understanding between supervisor and student is critical to navigate the journey to dissertation defence (Reis & Grady, 2020). In today's learning environment, fostering peer or student-student learning may be more critical to successful completion of a doctoral programme than we previously understood. Yet specifics on these types of relationships and structures are lacking in the literature (Berry, 2017).

Doctoral students must acquire high levels of knowledge, critically reflect on information, and engage others in discussion, including experts from across the discipline and indeed the world (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011). Thus, participation in a community of practice (CoP) can play a crucial role in providing a more holistic and significant doctoral experience (Cai et al., 2019).

Literature

Doctoral education varies significantly across disciplines, institutions, and countries (Reis & Grady, 2020; Wisker et al., 2021). Nonetheless, every doctoral learning process demands that the student transform from a learner of knowledge to a leader in learning and research. Doctoral students must achieve synergy between high levels of research competence, deep discipline knowledge, and competence in presenting their argument to demonstrate 'doctorateness' and achieve the PhD (Trafford & Leshem, 2009, p.305).

Extant literature identifies many factors influencing and contributing to progress and completion of the doctoral degree, impacting in particular on students' experiences,



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This article discusses how participation in an online community of practice (CoP) can play a crucial role in doctoral student support and provide a transformative learning experience that supports degree progress and completion. We share examples based on perspectives from Irish and American doctoral programmes. Engaging doctoral students in an online CoP may create better learners and leaders to navigate the complexities of life and work.

persistence, and degree completion. Belonging to a doctoral CoP supports students in three ways: belonging to a specific community, academic development, and peer support (Lahenius, 2012; Wisker et al., 2021). Characteristics of doctoral CoPs have been identified: self-selection of members; a group focus on identity and skills development; and participation influenced by level of engagement, discipline, and expertise both within and outside the doctoral institution (Cai et al., 2019). Thus, identification with and commitment to the CoP may support the doctoral journey by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice.

However, the research literature is lacking on student-driven activities (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012) and online community support in doctoral education. We propose in this article that participation in an online community of learners can play a crucial role in doctoral student progress and provide a more transformative experience that supports degree progress and completion.

Methodology

Practitioner research is understood to be a form of inquiry that supports educators during periods of external reform that destabilise previous ways of working and contribute to the development of 'adaptive expertise' (Menter et al., 2011). Gregson et al. (2019) make the case that practitioners interested in improving educational practice should begin with themselves and value their direct experiences of practice for learning.

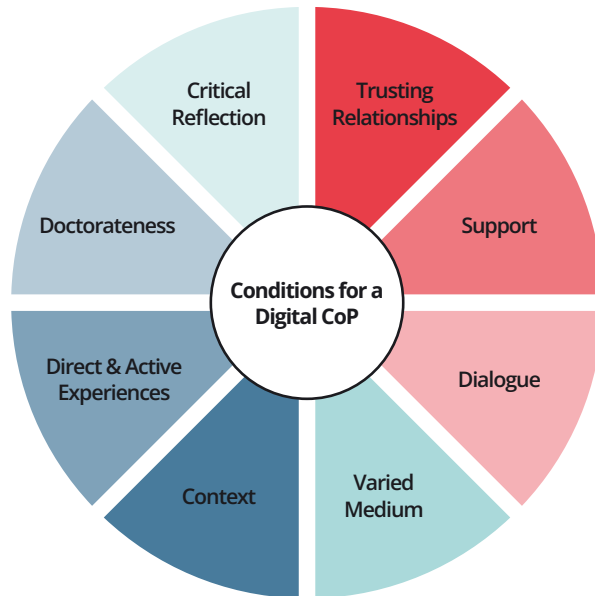
In 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, two independent online CoPs were created in the US and Ireland. In March 2020, both had to adapt to the new online world. Each supervisor was a member of their own CoP, not its owner or controller (beyond having the university Zoom or Teams account). The CoPs did not replace normal one-to-one doctoral supervision meetings. US CoP members were doctoral students registered on differing programmes, while Irish CoP members were a more diverse group of PhD registered students, and master's students, some of whom had completed their programme of study and were interested in continuing their research journey.

As participant researchers, we sought to answer our guiding research question: What components of our online doctoral CoP experiences support the learners, the learning process, and their degree progress during the research? In this way, a theory of action was developed and provided insights into ways of improving practice, the understanding of practice, and an epistemology of practice (Raelin, 2007).

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Findings

Eight conditions supported the doctoral digital CoP spaces of learning:



Conditions for a digital CoP space of learning (adapted from Graham Cagney, 2011)

The three most important conditions arising from our data were:

Increased personal engagement, based on meaningful social and technological support, led to the acquisition of new online collaborative working practices.

Trusting relationships: Listening, respectful interactions, rapport, and authenticity combined to create a psychologically safe learning space where members shared their challenges and concerns, such as 'not knowing' disciplinary knowledge or research-related skills.

Support: Increased personal engagement, based on meaningful social and technological support, led to the acquisition of new online collaborative working practices. Also, part-time students felt more in control, not 'missing out' compared to their full-time peers.

Dialogue: Profound discourse on particular topics took place after presentations and informal group discussions. These ranged over areas of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and research expertise.

The remaining five conditions related predominantly to the design of the digital space of learning, use of tools, platforms and online facilitation techniques, the

cross-programme mix of participants, and access/sharing of resources and literatures on the university learning platforms.

Discussion

Being a doctoral supervisor requires ongoing development of oneself as an adaptable, self-reliant learner, with a concurrent commitment to supporting and facilitating a high-quality learning environment for one's doctoral students. The research development (hard skills) and interpersonal skills (soft skills) that are critical components of the PhD programme can be developed and enhanced through doctoral CoPs (Berry, 2017).

In both CoPs, participants reported experiencing new and different opportunities to learn and collaborate. They pursued (online) professional learning and development as researchers through formal, informal, and non-formal opportunities (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). In many cases, students learned things they were unaware they did not know before taking part in the CoP, and that would only have come to light through the online CoP learning space (Bastalich, 2017). For some, the learning curve was steep and frightening: learning to learn and conduct research-related activities online, while also learning how to use the technology itself. Exploring this further in future research is a must for support of online peer learning.

Creating digital spaces and connections for graduate students is challenging, particularly with respect to their peer online interactions, which is one of the most important parts of a successful digital learning space (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012). Consistent with Berry (2017), students in our CoPs identified that the interaction between group members determined the quality of learning and the knowledge produced.

The organic and emergent CoPs on which this article is based were created at a specific time in response to a mutual need to create knowledge collaboratively. While individual motivations may have differed, both groups continued learning and working together and in this way worked to 'learn from and with one another as they pursue interests, opportunities, and challenges' (Watkins & Marsick, 1992, p.66).

Thus, we argue that the online doctoral CoP creates a peer learning space that strengthens professional identities and promotes successful progress toward the degree. This short article provides a guiding lens towards understanding how the online CoP can be sustained and grow critically reflective doctoral digital practitioners.

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Conclusion

Developing a doctoral CoP supports the graduate student and practitioner to manage the process from learner to leader. CoPs provide recognition for doctoral work, support from peers, and access to resources. They increase the skills of members and create an environment where people will share authentic personal and professional experiences.

This article provides support for the best-practices literature on how CoPs can create a more positive experience for doctoral students and their successful progress. Creating these high-quality learning experiences for doctoral (or indeed any graduate) students can mitigate the diversity of student experiences and enhance interdisciplinary influences. The doctoral CoP supports students in becoming practitioner-researchers, building their scholar identity, and moving towards successful degree completion. Engaging doctoral students in an online CoP may thus provide the world with better learners and leaders, no matter the discipline, career, or country.

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