

Fostering A Remote Cohort Community of Graduate Student Peers in The Digital Realm

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Abstract: Within this article, we describe what we term a “cohort community” created as a space for graduate students, at both the MA and PhD level, to thrive in their respective programs. As global circumstances closed our campus the cohort community, which began within physical spaces, was forced to adapt to the digital realm, a change that brought with it new opportunities for growth and connection. Over the course of this paper, we present our experiences participating in this cohort community and reflect upon areas of growth and challenge. The reflective data we discuss was collected within an informal focus group and analyzed using the tenants of duoethnography. Common themes which arose out of the data were identified as: barriers to community, benefits of community, and catalysts needed for community. These themes resulted in our consideration of the implications and benefits our community could provide within both online and physical spaces. While the community did exist prior to being pushed online, our discussion is centered on experiences specifically arising from digital spaces as we ponder the future such work will have when on campus education resumes.

Keywords: Community, Collaboration, Cohorts, Duoethnography, Graduate Students

The graduate student experience can be rewarding, frustrating, transformational, and challenging, often all at once. A group of peers at similar stages of graduate programs can be one of the strongest sources of support for graduate students as they navigate their degree programs (Wenger, 2010). The five authors of this paper are a group comprised of graduate student peers in Educational Research MA and PhD programs at a Canadian research-intensive university. In one sense, we are “a group of graduate students coming together in both academic and social platforms to share our thoughts, our ideas, and to develop a sense of belonging” (Adil). The community under investigation herein became, through conscious effort, an experience of equilibrium between people both giving and taking to hold the group dynamic in a delicate but strong balance. The community was formed with the goal of growing “very organically” (Brian) in such a way as to invite one another into a living conversation. What began on campus in workspaces and lunchrooms became informal online mediums of connection, such as group text chats and casual meetups, following the shift to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such online spaces evolved into an open forum free of judgement for members to speak freely about our lives as graduate students and members of the wider university community. We developed a mutual trust to share with each other not only our experiences of success or achievements, but also the stories of failures. Important to mention here is that this was not a single isolated event that allowed for such freedom; rather, it was an ongoing process of discovery and negotiation over almost a year of community-building.

Through time, place, and action, the group became a space that fostered active feedback on assignments, scholarship applications, and publications. Additionally, it allowed for networking with other budding scholars, comradery in learning environments, support between students going through graduate school together, and accountability of progression through mutual encouragement from one another. While each of these aspects may appear commonly as benefits of more formalized peer mentorship programs (Groen, et. al, 2008) such programs also come with their own power structures and limitations (Grant-Vallone, & Ensher, 2000). By limiting the formality of the discussions and conversations, members identified this group as a community of “co-learners” or a “community of like-scholars” (Adil) rather than as peer mentors. Such considerations increased the openness felt among members; this encouraged many to reach out for feedback from peers on tasks that are typically seen as competitive or to seek answers to questions that carried with them a political weight in the life of a graduate student.

Due to our experiences within this group, we sought to explore one primary question: how can the development of an informal community of scholars enrich graduate student experiences? The objectives of our article include identifying factors that contributed to the formation of our community among graduate students, and exploring ways in which graduate students can assist and support each other within a community.

Situating Our Cohort Community (Literature Review)

The graduate student experience contains multitudes of rewards and challenges (Scott & Miller, 2017). Typically, graduate students encounter issues such as self-isolation or impostor syndrome (Parkman, 2016) and peer groups work to resolve some of these issues. Additionally, the expectations of graduate school, especially surrounding assessment and evaluation practices, place high levels of stress onto students (Mackie & Bates, 2019). Such stresses are inevitable but can lead to struggles as students progress through their graduate programs (Baker, 2013). However, there are ways to overcome such stresses, such as the development of supportive relationships among peers in what is often a complex, non-linear, and iterative undertaking (Vasilopoulos, 2016). Furthermore, literature on social connectedness and collaborative learning theory (Stracke, 2010) states that the presence of strong social relationships leads to more meaningful learning experiences and increased perceptions of personal resilience (Dutton, 2003).

Academic programs such as ours utilize cohort models to encourage the development of personal resilience. These involve coordination at the curriculum design level to craft a cohesive experience for students enrolled in each cohort (Groen et al., 2008). Within our higher education setting, *cohort* refers to groups of students who begin their programs together and proceed through academic milestones at similar rates (McCarthy, Tregna, & Weiner, 2005). An example of this from our lived experience is that we all took shared courses together, applied for similar grants, and submitted ethics and other documentation together. Another way to conceptualize a cohort is as a community of practice as described by Wenger's (2010) community of practice model. Within his model, Wenger (2010) describes how members of a community come together to engage in learning around a common interest and shared practices. This model has also previously been used to engage graduate students in academia as a tool for learning collectively and communally (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009). Typically such formal communities of practice are rooted within disciplinary areas, however this is not exclusively the case within post-secondary education (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009).

The importance of peer groups is prolific in the literature and has been investigated from perspectives such as that of graduate students experiencing high stress (Grant-Vallone, & Ensher, 2000; Dutton, & Heaphy, 2003; & Dominguez, & Hager, 2013). With that being said, little has been discussed regarding how student peer groups emerge and how these groups thrive without the dominance of faculty. To define our group, we have woven the concepts of cohorts and communities of practice together in order to articulate what we call a *cohort community* meaning a supportive community of graduate student scholars who self-identify as a cohort with fluctuating membership and scope.

Our Methodological Lens

In May 2020, four months after coming together as a self-defined cohort community, Harrison proposed a spontaneous self-study of the experiences of the community in order to better understand how the community was functioning, share the positive experiences we had encountered thus far, and discuss how to maintain the community in various forms moving forward. All members of the community were invited to participate with the five named authors being the ones who took up the call to write and reflect together. In order to capture our experiences in being a part of this cohort community, we chose to make use of the tenets of duoethnography where we each participated in an ongoing dialogue to better understand our shared experiences. We then made use of emergent qualitative coding (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010) in order to compactify the themes of our many different experiences.

Methodology

We employed duoethnography as our methodological approach to investigate our central question: how can the development of an informal community of scholars enrich graduate student experiences? Duoethnography is defined as a method where researchers position themselves as participants in the study and engage in a dialogical inquiry of the social phenomenon (Snipes and Lepeau, 2017). Duoethnography provided opportunities for each of us to explore our own experiences of being a member in the cohort community. Through this exploration, we aimed to juxtapose the differences in our thoughts and experiences against each other in order to generate new meanings and understandings of being in the cohort community. As Sawyer and Norris (2013) noted, by “juxtaposing their stories, duoethnographers discover and explore the overlapping gray zones between their perspectives as intertwined intersections” rather than converged conclusions or binary opposites (p. 3).

Data Generation

In this study, we generated data through collaborative dialogue. We engaged in three dialogic sessions over a period of one month in June 2020 guided by a set of concepts and associated questions co-developed by all of us (Table 1). After we each were given a chance to respond to each question, an opportunity was provided for anyone to respond to any points that were raised, resulting in a dialogue among participants.

Table 1. Focus Group Guiding Questions.

Concept	Guiding Question
Background	How did you come to your MA or PhD program?
Expectations	What were your expectations about peer relationships when you entered your MA or PhD program?
Relationships	What kinds of peer relationships did you develop among MA and PhD students in your program? Please only discuss relationships among the research team. What stories can you share about your peer relationships?
Strengths and Challenges	What benefits did peer relationships between MA and PhD students provide in your graduate program? Were there challenges related to peer relationships? How have peer relationships helped you cope with the changes brought about by the covid-19 pandemic?
Moving Forward	What do you feel is needed to build stronger graduate student cohorts?

Data Analysis

The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data generated in the three focus groups were analyzed through emergent qualitative coding (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). The initial codes were determined by Brian through the use of NVivo in order to categorize quotes by common themes. These resulting themes and codes were then analyzed for convergence and divergence of themes by Harrison to determine the final organizational structure of the data. The data were then synthesized into a formal narrative draft which wove together the experiences each of us shared in the focus groups.

Findings

Growing as a Cohort Community

To understand what we mean when talking about our cohort community we attempted to determine what this designation meant for each of us. For many of us, the notion of a cohort community centered on the group as being “a space which is *for* graduate students, *by* graduate students” to “survive together” (Adil). It is a type of space which typically forms through shared experiences in classes and solidifies in study groups. Within our *cohort community*, a more diverse group of students from different disciplines and areas of study thrived together. Each member of the community was in the pursuit of vastly different areas of scholarship, and therefore they were not in competition with one another (Brian). This allowed us to embrace opportunities for research work and writing collaboratively that did not seem possible before becoming part of the cohort community (Kristal). This working together without competition allowed us to check in on one another actively and openly, keep each other reaching towards shared goals, and assist one another with large scale proposals, articles, and grants (Harrison). Each community member brought “their own skills and their own perspectives to different questions and discussions” (Brian), often offering “complementary or additional support” to the mentorship a formal supervisor typically provides (Helen & Brian). This type of networking not only enriched our knowledge of our own specific programs, but also connected us to “support networks and communities which exist beyond our own specializations” (Harrison).

Surviving and Thriving Together

As a group, this community stood out due to how much more “cohesive and free forming” (Kristal) it was with opportunities for greater collaboration (Brian). The group felt that the connections formed through engaging with other members supported us “socially, emotionally, and intellectually” (Adil). Such supports were beneficial to all members even though we all were at “different stages” (Helen). The benefits of participating in the cohort community were expressed even by members who were originally wary of the effectiveness of peer groups. Brian expressed that in the beginning, he expected that “at best, we would be antagonistic” (Brian) and Kristal explained that she did “not expect anything at all” (Kristal) given their prior experiences in groups. However, the cohort community became a safe space where MA and PhD students could learn together and share their successes and missteps (Adil). Examples of this include: navigating connections following the loss of on-campus learning (due to COVID-19), finding a rhythm in which to work and study while at home, and keeping in touch within the virtual realm. The willingness of this group to engage with one another and to “interject with advice, comments, or questions that weren't just tied to a formalized goal” (Brian) helped many of us to survive and thrive within our programs.

The Importance of Space

Considering Ideas of Space

In considering our place within the group, we each reflected on our original motivations for pursuing graduate school and determined that we all began this journey “in pursuit of something better” (Helen) such as personal, societal, or professional improvements. Through participation in the cohort community, members were able to achieve a form of social and psychological betterment through like-minded peers, building positive relationships and gaining the confidence to pursue doctoral studies through the support of the cohort community (Kristal).

Physical Space vs. Digital Spaces

Previously, members of our cohort community met within physical graduate student workspaces, collaborative workrooms, lunch spaces, and other campus facilities. However, in the shift to working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were all abruptly disconnected from physical spaces on campus. Because our student experience was no longer connected to physical space, we struggled to feel “socially connected to our academic programs” (Harrison). Additionally, the proximity to peers provided by physical spaces pre-COVID-19 was perceived as an immense benefit to forming relationships. However, these spaces became a “metaphorical space when things transferred online” (Helen) which both stalled the community and opened it up to new possibilities. The benefits were that “just showing up” (Brian) to Zoom meetings and online chats became easier from our desks at home when compared to the physical commute to campus without destroying the benefit of physical check-ins with peers to help to clarify ideas, debrief on courses, and gather feedback, all of which changed within online spaces. In many ways, we did not see the full extent of the possibilities in these conversations until the shift online risked destroying them (Brian) and the shift in modalities risked changing the human dynamic.

Sparks of Challenge

The consideration of time

Time was brought up as one of the biggest factors in the successful development of the cohort community through the idea of the “crunch time” that is pervasive in the life of graduate students. Harrison brought forward the reality that deadlines are directly connected to the anxieties a graduate student experiences by pointing to the fact that “everyone’s SSHRC [grant] is due at roughly the same time within a tight deadline” (Harrison), which naturally impacts members’ willingness to engage with others during “crunch time”. Another time-related challenge, brought up by Adil, was the requirement of being in the right place at the right time to make initial peer connections. Adil mentioned that “I’m glad that I met, for example, Brian, the very first day of the orientation. But I could have not met him” (Adil), implying that, had the two not met that day, the opportunity for Adil to join this cohort community may have never arisen. This feeling was shared by Brian who mentioned that the cohort community was “still like a club, by referral” (Brian), this point was echoed by Kristal who also mentioned that many graduate students within our wider program all have their own unique schedules, goals, and life plans that may not align with the goals of this group (Kristal). Furthermore, to the consideration of unique schedules, goals, and life plans, challenges were faced by a number of ongoing, active

members of the community. For instance, Kristal spoke about moments where she felt a “need to recharge” from other life events that limited her engagement during several weeks. Such feelings were echoed in Harrison’s sentiment that “Brian really had to force my hand to come initially as I worried that I didn’t have time for this” (Harrison) and fed directly into Helen’s own frustrations that “sometimes it feels like pulling teeth to get people all together”. While these kinds of struggles and challenges could be argued to create feelings of empathy among peers, the presence of a cohort community can also feel like one extra burden during such hectic times, as was experienced in the fluctuating engagement in the community activities.

Vulnerability and Trust

For Brian, the creator of this group, there was a great deal of vulnerability inherent in being the point of initial contact for new members. Brian was initially the one who opened himself up to vulnerability by being the only one posting to the online discussion groups and organizing events, however, this vulnerability paid off with a group more “willing to join conversations and help each other out” (Brian). Reflecting upon the burden of setting up this type of community, the group discussed how “we need people who are initiating these things” (Helen) not from a desire for power, but to get people to position themselves as peers learning from and supporting one another through graduate school (Adil). However, Helen also made sure to emphasize that “we need to acknowledge them”, through appreciation of their efforts, when people step up as catalysts of community. By having students take on this role, we worked to address a gap in wellbeing through developing a sense of “belongingness and trust” (Kristal & Adil) between community members. As we reflected upon our experiences together, we used the metaphor of becoming a support village of knowledgeable people, which felt both more real and genuine than other formalized peer support programs we had experienced in the past (Harrison).

As the group was established, we became what we termed a *community of shared vulnerability* (Brian), wherein we had to admit both what we knew and didn’t know in order to best support one another. Within this setting, we did our best to avoid becoming “cutthroat and isolating” (Helen), while maintaining honesty regarding our feelings related to our graduate school experiences. As we worked to create genuine connections across our diverse fields (Brian), we were driven by a need for community and belonging in our own ways and contexts (Helen). Each member of the group took up the call to belong differently with Kristal speaking of it “like a mind map” of possibilities and connections, while Adil saw it as a development of feelings of belonging, and Brian saw it as an opportunity to ensure that he would not “look like a buffoon” to someone with power over him. While this journey may have made each of us particularly vulnerable at times, when each of us did participate, we were always willing and never felt obligated or forced. This freedom made the experience on the whole genuine and engaging.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Graduate school can be an isolating place where students face the perils of transitioning to an entirely new context (Adil). The pivot to using online mediums for learning and community building during the Covid-19 pandemic has “challenged what the idea of coming together and building community means” (Helen). In response, we became an online cohort community established to help graduate students “survive and thrive” together in graduate school. The cohort community we established in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique look into the process of building graduate student communities in online spaces. These types of spaces could exist in physical workspaces, online groups, or other channels (Brian) if they can offer emotional, social, and academic support that helps to develop an overall greater sense of belonging (Adil). We believe that such communities should be student run, and faculty supported, with a focus on supporting community primarily at the student level and tangentially at the faculty level (Helen).

What the cohort community will look like following the return to on-campus learning remains to be seen, however, we would like to express concerns around limited access to physical spaces on campus to facilitate graduate student connections. We worry that without guaranteed access to workspaces on campus, or other designated spaces to connect with peers, that such community will falter. It is as a result of these concerns that we believe more work needs to be done in providing physical spaces to all graduate students in order to more effectively grow community outside of online spaces.

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