

Contact, connection, and communication: online community building on a professional doctorate

Karen Smith

University of Hertfordshire, UK

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The challenge

The doctoral journey is long and arduous; it is often perceived as lonely (Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014). Students on professional doctorates experience additional challenges associated with being experienced professionals, mature, and part-time, all of which can contribute to feelings of isolation, both academically and socially (Hutchings, 2017). To counter such isolation, the structure and strong cohort culture of our Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) develops a community of doctoral researchers. While the focus here is on a professional doctorate, community building is equally important to others engaged in professional learning, for example, students on vocational courses, particularly those with a placement and those taking continuing professional development courses while working.

The EdD programme has always valued the cohort experience for motivation and development, recognising the importance of EdD researchers physically meeting in a space different to their professional context to share their professional concerns and the challenges of their research with their peers. These facilitated sessions are complemented with concurrent supervisory team support and a centrally provided researcher development programme. When the EdD extended its reach overseas, the same significance was placed on meeting face-to-face, with short, intensive UK staff visits overseas, and longer study trips to the UK by the transnational students.

This EdD, then, was never envisaged as an online programme; how would a programme that was so committed to the benefits of face-to-face community building weather a pivot online? In this piece, I share my reflections, as EdD director, on that pivot.

The response

From the outset, our virtual EdD community was fostered through contact. As EdD director, I reached out to our whole EdD community via email more frequently. This increased contact arose initially from necessity, as updates needed to be shared regarding, for example, ethics protocols, supervisory arrangements, and forthcoming sessions, including the planned conference. The contact was neither scheduled nor systematic, but responsive, and cognisant of challenging and changing times.

Our next move was to provide spaces for online connection. The EdD conference, scheduled for early in the first UK lockdown, was redesigned for online delivery. Asynchronous discussion boards allowed EdD researchers to share and comment on pre-recorded presentations, while a series of separate meeting rooms provided somewhere to discuss the keynote that was delivered synchronously. Meeting rooms, during two online writing retreats, offered an alternative space to connect between periods of individual writing. Facilitated by members of the EdD team, but not necessarily the researchers' supervisors, these spaces sought to offer a supportive environment for writing.

With increased confidence and experience, we extended our approaches to developing communication within and across the EdD community. The functionality of the online meeting platform allowed groups to be formed more flexibly and feasibly than when meeting face-to-face, with different configurations of EdD cohorts coming together, facilitating cross-cohort and cross-national discussions. Within those sessions the opportunities for communication, which are a pillar of the EdD, were re-created, but in more dynamic ways using interactive tools to stimulate debate and meeting platform features (breakout rooms, chat function) to encourage discussion. To foster social interaction and communication, more time and online spaces were offered during study sessions to share in a cup of tea, take part in a Christmas quiz, and have post-session socials. The online environment also supported the development of the EdD supervisor community, through newer supervisors' briefings and the EdD supervisor reading group –

these online meetings provided flexibility for staff who sit not only within our School, but also across the university and beyond.

While the reaction to the pivot online was reactive rather than planned, this combination of contact, connection, and communication online has helped foster and develop the EdD community during these challenging times.

Recommendations

Moving the EdD online was an example of 'emergency remote' researcher development. The necessary move to working online, and the development of our skills, has shown the benefits that online provision can bring in terms of cohering and then supporting a community of doctoral researchers and their supervisors.

Although reactive, our response to the pivot was grounded in the pedagogical principles that have long shaped the EdD. While the technological solutions we employed relied on current and mainstream tools, they met our immediate needs. The small steps made to foster our EdD community virtually have been shown elsewhere to help develop online doctoral communities (Berry, 2019), and online communities more widely (Liu et al., 2007). A key benefit of being online was the ease with which groups could be formed, not just pre-existing cohort groups, but also cross-cohort and transnational groups, thus expanding the community and enabling cross-pollination in what Liu et al. call classwide interaction (2007, p.21); here, this became programme-wide. Working with cohort groups online is important because they give rise to other 'supportive subgroups' (Berry, 2017, p.45) and we should continue to encourage researchers to create their own supportive groups, which are not staff facilitated, for social and academic support (including spaces to support writing). While some subgroups within the EdD develop organically (e.g., cohort messaging groups), support could be provided to facilitate further research student-led cross-cohort communication within the EdD to complement the developing institution-wide online postgraduate research community.

Supervisors also benefitted from the more accessible online groups. These opportunities should continue as they help to sustain the communities of practice that contribute to research supervisor development (Hill and Vaughan, 2018) and could be extended to

include others who support researcher development, such as information specialists and career development and wellbeing support staff. Through social media, the online environment offers further opportunities to extend networks across and outside the university, fostering disciplinary and practice communities, and responding to the challenge of peripherality often experienced by EdD researchers (Vigurs, 2016). This is an area I intend to develop.

Having the opportunity to reflect on these experiences and engage with research and scholarship around online community development has enabled me to validate some decisions we made in the moment, and has opened up areas for further consideration and development. Given our positive experiences online, we will adopt more hybrid approaches to support our EdD community in the future. This will be done intentionally, for, as Lui et al. note 'communities cannot develop on their own without careful planning, continued support, and intentional tasks and activities' (2007, p.22).

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Author details

Karen Smith is Reader in Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire. Her research focuses on how higher education policies and practices impact on those who work and study within universities. She is currently the Director of the university's Professional Doctorate in Education. Karen also leads collaborative research and development in her School, where she engages in externally funded research and evaluation and supports the development of scholarly educational practice through practitioner research.