**Community-building for Practice-based Doctoral Researchers: Mapping Key Dimensions for Creating Flexible Frameworks**

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**Summary**

Undertaking a practice-based doctorate is brings new challenges. Being part of a community can make navigating the challenges not only easier, but also more rewarding. This chapter maps the dimensions and elements to consider in building and supporting community for practice-based doctoral researchers. These dimensions are not exclusive facets of community, but should be conceived of as entangled and fluid. As practice can be the mode, method, tool, object, subject and/or embodiment of research in a doctorate, so too can institutional contexts and individual research projects differ. Each thematic section includes some key questions that offer important points for consideration in supporting practice-based doctoral communities in different institutional contexts. I also offer suggestions for practice-based doctoral researchers as to how they might individually engage with and benefit from particular types of community-building activities. The relative importance and priority attached to each suggestion here will depend on the possibilities and particularities of your own context.

**Introduction**

Undertaking a practice-based doctorate can be challenging. There is clear need for community for practice-based doctoral researchers and distinct benefits that can result from being part of a community.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, as with other forms of research, practice-based research itself is not homogeneous (and nor should it be) and there are different disciplinary contexts as well diverse institutional contexts in which doctoral education occurs. The activities and elements that build and sustain doctoral communities for practice-based researchers will need to respond to and reflect particular contexts. As argued elsewhere in this volume, such research communities also need to be fluid and enable agency; a sense of community cannot be successfully imposed.

Whilst this chapter has arisen from both my own experience supporting doctoral researchers in Art and Design, and my research into doctoral communities across Art and Design, Performance, Music, Digital Arts and the Humanities internationally, my aspiration is that the ideas and questions it prompts can be beneficial whatever the particular flavour and discipline of practice-based research context. My intention here is not to provide a blue-print or template for practice-based doctoral research communities, but rather to offer possibilities and points of departure for institutions and individuals.

I begin by briefly examining some of the reasons why higher education institutions should build and support communities for practice-based researchers undertaking doctorates. Initially, you need to know what you hope to achieve from supporting and/or belonging to a community as that will inform your selection of appropriate types of community-building activities. However, this is not a set of recipes from which outcomes can be predicted if instructions are followed. Doctoral community is a community of practice[[2]](#endnote-2) in fact often several interlocking communities of practice, each involving a common focus but diverse individuals and all the complex power and social dynamics that can involve. The equally amazing and frustrating thing about research communities particularly in practice-based research is that they retain an element of unpredictably.

I outline the dimensions and elements that I believe should be considered and can be mixed in building and supporting community for practice-based doctoral researchers. These dimensions are not exclusive facets of community, but should be conceived of as entangled and fluid. The relative importance and priority attached to each will depend on the possibilities and particularities of your context. Then taking each core dimension in turn, I will use them as lenses to outline types of activities and structures that could form and encourage community. Each thematic section includes some key questions that are not merely rhetorical, but offer important points for consideration in supporting practice-based doctoral communities in different institutional contexts. I also offer suggestions for practice-based doctoral researchers as to how they might individually engage with and benefit from particular types of community-building activities.

**Reasons for building and supporting community in doctoral education**

Arguably there has never been a greater need for community support in doctoral research. For example:

* In a doctoral landscape in which the expectations of professional development activity have increased alongside the precarity and competitiveness of the academic job market, the numbers of doctoral candidates has grown significantly worldwide.
* Recent literature has drawn attention to the mental stresses faced by doctoral researchers, and to the need for higher education institutions to support their well-being and professional development alongside their contribution to knowledge made through independent research and articulated as a thesis.
* The doctoral landscape and academic job markets are evolving, and supervisors whose own lived experience may quickly become out-dated should not and cannot be the only source of preparation and intelligence that practice-based doctoral researchers have access to.
* Building community can enable peer-sharing and broaden perspectives and opportunities, as well as inviting in others from different disciplines, practices and from outside higher education.

It is not just about joining an intellectual community, for all doctoral researchers a sense of collegiality and community has been shown to significantly benefit the doctoral experience[[3]](#endnote-3). As a higher-level qualification, and an induction into the processes of academic research, undertaking a doctorate should be a complex, stimulating and challenging endeavour. Importantly:

﻿Institutions need to find ways to support PGRs to disconnect the ‘healthy stress’ related to the intellectual challenge of undertaking a doctorate from other stresses that have a negative impact on wellbeing and mental health.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Recent literature has drawn attention to the mental stresses faced by doctoral researchers in all disciplines[[5]](#endnote-5). For example, a much-cited large-scale European study concluded in 2017 that almost a third of doctoral researchers were at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder[[6]](#endnote-6). *The Wellbeing Thesis,* an online resource developed by the University of Derby and King’s College London in collaboration with the Student Minds charity, is an initiative that demonstrates growing recognition that higher education institutions need to pay greater attention to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their doctoral researchers and of the academic staff that support them.

Alongside the inherent intellectual challenge, and the supervisory relationship which is the focus of a separate chapter in this volume, Mackie and Bates identified a wide range of other factors that potentially impact on the mental health of doctoral researchers including a lack of transparency and unclear expectations in university doctoral processes[[7]](#endnote-7). This can be particularly challenging for practice-based doctoral researchers as most university doctoral processes still assume that a doctorate is articulated in a text[[8]](#endnote-8), leading to additional anxieties around perceived issues of hierarchy and legitimacy.

There are significant benefits in interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary communities of practice-based researchers as approaches and knowledges are shared, translated and appropriated. Challenges can be exacerbated by traditional models of doctoral education that focus on supervision and the research project, rather than considering more holistically a doctoral experience. Such traditional models can be reinforced by the implicit assumption that because our doctoral researchers are often highly regarded creative professionals, the majority having a Master’s degree and are viewed as experienced students, there is less need for attention to psycho-social support for the doctoral becoming of practice-based researchers.

Research has also shown that doctoral researchers are actively seeking support mechanisms and a sense of community to support their wellbeing[[9]](#endnote-9). The growth in popularity of twitter hashtags and accounts such as #phdchat and #phdlife, and of blogs such as Inger Mewburn’s *ThesisWhisperer* testify to the need felt by doctoral researchers to share their doctoral experiences and challenges, and to feel a sense of belonging. Informal support networks are important for doctoral researchers[[10]](#endnote-10). These informal support networks can include family, friends and peers within and outside academia and have been characterised as part of a rich penumbra of the doctoral landscape[[11]](#endnote-11). Recognition of such a penumbra on the peripheries of more formal doctoral education does not however absolve institutions and academics who supervisor practice-based doctoral research from needing to consider how they support their doctoral researchers as communities.

**The dimensions and elements of community: mapping a framework**

There may not be a singular “Framework” that can be applied to build and support doctoral community for practice-based researchers, there are however key dimensions of community that I argue should form part of any such doctoral community. These key dimensions of doctoral community are the:

1. discursive
2. active
3. social
4. virtual

In particular for practice-based research there are particular needs around provision for sharing and engaging in practice, for active elements of community for doing as well as thinking and socialising.

These are not necessarily discrete and separate dimensions: an event can be both discursive and social, and an activity can promote doing, thinking, discussing and socialising. A space whether studio or office can enable making, thinking, doing and being as well as informal social connections that create the sense belonging that differentiates community from simply gathering. These dimensions need to be considered as entangled, fluid and responsive - think more of constellations coming together at different times and places to create and sustain community rather than a static map or structure. Similarly, doctoral community whilst a useful generalisation as a term, in an institution will actually comprise multiple communities and should not be conceived of as homogenous or singular.

It is also important to recognise other significant aspects that orbit and influence these four key dimensions of doctoral community. For example:

* There will be times when a distinct focus on *disciplinarity* will be appropriate, at others the focus and community itself may well be distinctly *cross-disciplinary* or *interdisciplinary*. Institutions have a responsibility to support doctoral researcher communities and provision the environment, concurrently opportunities and support for the *agency* of doctoral researchers themselves is as important. Practice-based doctoral researchers are experienced practitioners and deserve respect as such alongside opportunities to learn to be a researcher. There is more sustainability and engagement with community where there is a sense of common endeavour and ownership, self-directed community activities promote this.
* Alongside this, the *position of staff* is a further significant orbiting aspect for consideration. There are multiple potential roles for supervisors and academics in relation to doctoral community and it is also important that practice-based researchers are welcomed into the research communities of their schools, departments and institutions.
* The *inclusivity* of research communities needs to be kept in mind to avoid hierarchical positioning and the worst of academic competitiveness, territorialism, othering and disenfranchisement.
* Finally, I want to draw attention to the significance of *serendipity* in practice-based research communities. Community works when it is valued by participants and when it is enjoyable. We cannot know for certain what will work or precisely how, and we should allow flexibility and space for unknowing and the unexpected.

In summary, the key dimensions of doctoral community for practice-based researchers are the **discursive, active, social** and **virtual**. A local framework for community must all consider and make space for *disciplinarity***,** the*cross-disciplinary*and *interdisciplinarity*,*agency*,*inclusivity*and*serendipity***.** Taking each core dimension in turn, I will use them as lenses to outline types of activities and structures that could form and encourage community amongst practice-based doctoral researchers, with key questions from an academic and institutional perspective as well as tips directly aimed at doctoral researchers. Inevitably there are overlaps and repetitions as an activity can encompass more than one dimension.

**Dimension 1. Discursive communities**

A crucial dimension of community for doctoral researchers is the opportunity to discuss research with others. For practice-based researchers this is particularly important in enhancing confidence and further legitimising practice-based research within institutions. It is also important that activities that promote discussion and critique of research also facilitate engagement with practice and not just with the more standard academic formats. Table 1 identifies some of the elements and activities that can build discussion in communities that are critical but supportive.

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In reality, almost any community activity that brings researchers together can facilitate creative and critical conversations. In a context of growing number practice-based researchers graduating with doctorates and growth in the precarity and competitiveness of the academic job market across most disciplines, it is important that doctoral programmes prepare candidates for multiple career routes. Skills workshops and professional development activities obviously address this need, they can simultaneously be framed and critiqued in relation to practice-based research discourses.

When developing the discursive dimension of a community it would be helpful to consider these key questions:

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*Key questions when thinking about the discursive dimensions of community:*

* What discursive formats for events can encourage respect for difference and exploratory conversations about practice-based research?
* How can we balance embedding practice-based doctoral researchers in active research cultures in our institutions whilst also providing spaces for them to share experiences of learning to be researchers?
* What is the role of academic staff in supporting practice-based doctoral researchers as a community, and how is this supported by the institution?
* How can we be honest about the positives and negatives of academic careers, whilst enabling a supportive environment for developing our doctoral researchers?

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If you are a doctoral researcher and you intend to go to an academic event or an event that focuses on academic careers, here are some tips that have proven to be beneficial:

*Tips for doctoral researchers about academic events and academic careers:*

* If practical, don’t just go to events that seem to have an obvious link with the subject of your own research. There are always links to be made with another’s work, even if it just provides reassurance and confirmation that you don’t want or need to do something a different way!
* Try not to view participating in events as time away from your ‘research proper’, the discussions and networking are as important for your development and will move your thinking forward.
* Think about how you can find out what events are running in your department or school, but also elsewhere across your institution and beyond. What conversations do you want to be part of and how can you seek them out?
* Work at finding and building your networks, and at bridging professional and higher education communities. It takes time, but does open up opportunities.
* Don’t see an academic role as the pinnacle of post-doctorate achievement, it isn’t.
* Seek opportunities to understand the reality of academic life, and the range of professional and hybrid roles with higher education.

**Dimension 2. Active practice-based communities**

It seems self-evident to state that community for practice-based doctoral researchers needs to facilitate and activate the sharing and doing of practice, the bringing of significant knowledge from the direct execution of the relevant practice. With the wide range of practices that can be encompassed in practice-based research, the precise facilities and forms of practice-sharing will vary. Table 2 illustrates some of the elements that can support community building through doing, through activity and the processes of practice, not just the written articulation of research.

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Practice is individual and can be collaborative. Practice-based research is centred on the individual practitioner and their knowledge and skills with their practice; practice-based research also stretches and develops practice. There are technical and professional skills that practice-based doctoral researchers may need to acquire, and adopting cohort or community-based models for skills training can aid the sense of community and belonging. Within a doctoral community there will be a variety of skill sets that can be shared, particularly if the doctoral community is interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary. The provision of space to enable practice-based researchers to carry out, share and disseminate their research needs consideration, even if institutionally problematic. Even the potentially less creative practices of learning referencing or additional forms of software can encourage community learning and a sense of shared challenges and frustrations. Writing retreats often include the use and testing of different writing strategies live in the moment, with the sharing of experiences, strategies and tips facilitating the sense of collective challenges and possible solutions. Writing is after all a practice in itself with many forms.

When developing active space dimension for community building it would be helpful to consider these key questions:

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*Key questions for thinking about active spaces for community building*

* How can we create spaces for community amongst practice-based doctoral researchers that are playful and creative?
* What opportunities might there be for doctoral researchers to share in the *doing* of practice?
* Can the different activities in practice-based research be co-located?
* How can we create inclusive communities that enable and include doctoral researchers who cannot be as physically present due to part-time status, caring responsibilities and/or health conditions?

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If you are a doctoral researcher, here are some tips about how to get the best out of shared spaces and the sharing of skills, even across disciplines:

*Tips for doctoral researchers about sharing space and skills:*

* Not everyone uses office, studio or making space in the same way. Think about what you need and want, and about how can you play your individual part in helping to create an ethos within a space that is inclusive and supportive, playful but respectful.
* Think about the skills that you have that might be useful to your peers, these might be disciplinary, professional, technical or even from other previous work roles. What can you offer to share?
* Identify skills or techniques that might it be useful, interesting or just fun to learn or try out yourself. Who do you know in your community who might help you learn?
* If there is a particular workshop or skill that you think you need, speak up as there may well be others who would also benefit. Talk to your peers, your supervisors and doctoral education leads as they can signpost to opportunities. If it doesn’t exist already, help them make it happen.

**Dimension 3. Social communities**

The social aspects of community and the sense of belonging are crucial in addressing the recognised mental health issues that doctoral researchers may face. Yet the social aspect of doctoral communities can be the most fragile, as the community membership is in constant flux. Whilst all community events and activities that bring doctoral researchers into contact with one another will have a social dimension, there are particular types of activity that can encourage the ethos of peer-support and psycho-social support as Table 3 suggests:

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The informal social interactions within a community can also address the additional concerns that practice-based doctoral researchers may have concerning creative identity and the legitimacy of practice-based research. Shared experiences can help dissipate concerns regarding hierarchical positioning and lack of institutional recognition, though of course checks and balances may be required to ensure that such sharing is supportive and constructive rather than fanning the flames of anxiety and othering. Enabling the agency of doctoral researchers to define and create their own community activities can assist with engagement and create the sense of ownership that facilitates belonging and peer-support.

When developing the social community dimension, it is important to consider these key questions, especially if you are supporting doctoral researcher-led initiativesor they are dealing with psycho-social support for doctoral researchers:

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*Key questions for thinking about supporting doctoral researcher-led initiatives and psycho-social support through community*:

* How can we balance intellectual debates, professional training and social support in practice-based doctoral communities?
* How can we balance enabling individual success without engendering competitiveness, rivalry and antagonism?
* How might peer-support and peer-mentoring be enabled across disciplines and without segregating practice-based research as other?
* What opportunities are there to co-create doctoral community and co-design support for practice-based doctoral researchers?
* How do we advocate to create budgets to fund doctoral-researcher-led initiatives, and to provision the environment not least through catering?
* How do we balance enabling the agency of doctoral-researchers whilst providing support and guidance as staff?

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If you are a doctoral researcher preparing and developing community events, here are some tips to help you maximise these opportunities:

*Tips for doctoral researchers wanting to create community events*

* There are various doctoral support communities on social media (twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp etc) that you can join and participate in. Does your department have student-led and/or doctoral-researcher-led groups, if not, could you start one?
* Create informal reading groups if there a few of you interested in a particular subject or theory. Similarly, Crit-clubs can be formed to share practice.
* Something as simple as a regular ‘coffee and chat’ arrangement can be a great starting point.
* Be kind. Territorialism, extreme competitiveness and rivalry are rarely valued inside or outside the academy.
* Try blending physical and virtual participation in community activities yourself, this will help you understand how best to enable virtual or offsite engagement by others.

**Dimension 4. Virtual and blended communities**

Our collective recent experiences of the Covid19 pandemic and lockdowns which prevented physical gathering and face-to-face educational activity, mean that the consideration of virtual and online community activity to support doctoral education has been imperative. Blending on-campus events with virtual spaces and online activities also helps to address inclusivity issues to support doctoral researchers who are part-time, live at some distance from campus, have caring responsibilities and/or disabilities; groups who have historically been less able to access on campus provision and thus disenfranchised. With a little creativity, almost every activity and element of community introduced so far can be moved online, as table 4 shows:

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The benefits of online events can to some degree outweigh the lack of informal real-life social interactions. The affordances of platforms such as MSTeams, Zoom and Skype with screensharing, collaborative whiteboards, file-sharing, and chat functions can enable rich conversations and interactions. Whilst there can be accessibility issues in terms of bandwidth, technology, health and/or neurodivergence with screen interactions, online events which do not require travel can be more convenient for many. The online world also makes national and international connections more feasible without either the financial resource or carbon footprint of travel (not that the digital is without its own carbon footprint). The challenge is in enabling community that exists across on-campus and virtual spaces.

Here are some key questions to consider when developing this virtual dimension:

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*Key questions for thinking about online activities for community building*

* How can a balance and boundaries between professional and private lives be maintained in online environments (for staff and for doctoral researchers)?
* What professional development in online pedagogy and technical support is available to assist staff with moving activities online?
* Are there ways to blend encourage community across online and on-campus activities both asynchronously and as blended events?

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As a doctoral researcher engaging with online and virtual events here are a few tips to help you maximise the experience and opportunity for further development:

*Tips for doctoral researchers about online events*

* When identifying key words for literature searching, think also of potential hashtags to follow on social media platforms.
* Participating in online events can help you build networks and links beyond your own institution to include national and international communities. How will you find these events and online discussion fora?
* Always double check the time-differences for international events.
* Reflect on your own online profile, does it represent you as both a practitioner and a researcher?

**Some concluding thoughts**

Communities are built and supported through the provision of spaces, discursive activities as well as making and doing opportunities for engaging in and sharing practice. The sociality of community can be encouraged through thinking about how to provision the environment, and the importance of coffee cannot be underestimated[[12]](#endnote-12). Community cannot be imposed or forced by staff; doctoral researchers need a reason to come together. The role for academic staff here is complex, needing both to be part of the community and also to acknowledge the difference in positionality to handle the power dynamics sensitively; fostering and sustaining community, whilst enabling the agency of doctoral researchers rather than leading or imposing. Securing resources, whether financial or spatial for doctoral research can be difficult. Also, we should not underestimate the issues in recognising such academic citizenship and in supporting and enabling staff to have the time and energy to in turn support doctoral researchers as communities as well as individual supervisees.

I have here presented dimensions, elements and activities of a framework for supporting and building community amongst practice-based doctoral researchers that is not a “Framework”. The individual nuances of each practice-based research project, the shift in individual needs across the lifespan of their doctoral research, and differing disciplinary and institutional contexts mean that a singular “Framework” would be inappropriate and ultimately ineffective. We need a parallel plurality in the models and methods that we use to build and support community. Different activities will meet different community needs and be more appropriate to some contexts than others. The modes of community for practice-based doctoral researchers need to be fluid and to evolve alongside our changing doctoral populations. As Daučíková states, we need to:

Develop the research milieu, building upon specific local (albeit ‘globalised-local’) resources, traditions and issues rather than presuming that there is an international norm or ready-made ideal model of research milieu to which we can all adhere. ﻿Consciously consider the challenge of maintaining an openness to new insights and the radical unpredictability of research practices.[[13]](#endnote-13)

There are also still significant challenges in how such community participation is enabled for part-time doctoral researchers and those with caring or other responsibilities and conditions that restrict their physical access to higher education. Virtual and blended community activity is part of a response but not a panacea and challenging in the contexts of material practices. Within an institution or particular context, any framework for encouraging and supporting community for practice-based doctoral researchers needs to diverse, fluid, inclusive and ultimately enable passion for practice and for research to flourish.

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1. Elsewhere in this volume I explore the diverse lived experiences of academics who have tried to build and support community for practice-based doctoral researchers in their own institutions, revealing the benefits of community but also the challenges in creating it – please see *Understanding Doctoral Communities in Practice-Based Research*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. (Lave & Wenger 1991), [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. (Wisker et al 2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. (Metcalfe et al 2018, 30) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. (Schmidt & Hansson 2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. (Levecque et al 2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. , (Mackie and Bates 2019, 567) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. (Vaughan 2021) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. (Mantai 2019; McAlpine & Amundsen 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. (Mantai 2019; Sweitzer 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. (Wisker et al 2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (Boultwood et al 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. (Daučíková 2013, 71) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)