

# Fostering Support and Community: An Auto-Ethnographic Exploration of a Doctoral Community of Practice for Faculty and Staff—Part One

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\*Essays advance a new idea, summarize a development, or initiate or engage in discussion. They may be narrower in scope than the above categories, but the subject matter should be of general scholarly interest.

## Abstract

This paper explores the formation and growth of a Doctoral Community of Practice (CoP) that supports faculty and staff at Humber Polytechnic through their doctoral and research journeys. Through monthly informal discussions, the community offers opportunities for knowledge sharing and mutual support among its members. The Doctoral CoP strengthens professional growth and cultivates meaningful engagement across the polytechnic.

The following auto-ethnographic paper presents reflections from members of Humber's Doctoral CoP, who share how collective learning, encouragement, and peer connection have shaped their doctoral experiences. Through their insights, the significance of belonging, shared knowledge, and emotional support becomes clear. Members describe how the CoP has reduced isolation, strengthened confidence, enhanced research practice, and fostered a sense of motivation and resilience. Across diverse disciplines and stages of study, their voices reveal how collaboration transforms the doctoral experience into one grounded in growth, connection, and continual learning.

## Introduction

The arranged interplay of an orchestra offers a useful metaphor for a community of practice (CoP), where diverse members contribute distinct expertise toward a shared purpose (or sound). Relying on collaboration and responsiveness, both the orchestra and our Doctoral CoP at Humber Polytechnic cultivate a space where individual strengths are harmonized through collective insight and learning. As Wenger and Snyder (2000) describe, CoPs are “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” – a definition that resonates with the intentional, evolving culture we continue to shape within our doctoral community.

At Humber, a leading polytechnic institution in Canada, research engagement continues to be actively fostered and supported for faculty and staff. In response

to the growing number of scholars pursuing or considering doctoral research, the Doctoral CoP was established through the Office of Research & Innovation to create a strong, collegial network of support in 2022.

The primary goals of our Doctoral CoP remain to encourage conversation and reflection, foster scholarly connection, and support members in navigating the personal and professional dimensions of doctoral research—much like an orchestra, where collaboration across diverse roles is essential, our interdisciplinary group brings together varied perspectives that are integrated in pursuit of deeper understanding and collective scholarly growth. Our monthly meetings focus on doctoral pursuits, mentorship through peer and cross-disciplinary support, and the co-creation of open resources for our scholarly community. We laugh together and offer a safe and compassionate space for moments of uncertainty and vulnerability.

Online platforms help sustain our connections between meetings; offering a moment of reassurance and reinforcing our sense of cohesion. These virtual interactions are complemented by in-person writing sessions, which provide opportunities for focused work and peer encouragement. Together, these practices foster a sense of continuity and support across our community while also strengthening our research culture at Humber.

As part of our collaborative efforts, we also developed an evolving Expertise Library—a shared repository that documents members’ research topics, methodological approaches, technical skills, and spoken languages. This resource frequently serves as a starting point for those seeking guidance, interdisciplinary collaboration, or insight into unfamiliar areas. Building on this, our 2024–2025 cohort created a virtual Resource Guide that compiles personal advice, practical tips, and key references. Informed by lived experience, this guide continues to support both current and future members as they navigate the complexities of doctoral research.

## Methodological Approach and Reflexive Positioning

This paper is grounded in Wenger’s (1998) *Communities of Practice* theory, which views learning as a social process shaped by participation, shared meaning-making, and

collective identity. Within this framework, knowledge develops through collaboration and dialogue among individuals who engage around a common purpose. The Humber Doctoral Community of Practice (CoP) embodies these principles—offering a space where doctoral scholars learn not only from formal academic practice but also through the exchange of lived experiences, mutual support, and reflective conversation.

The research approach draws on *Autoethnography* (Adams, Ellis & Holman Jones, 2017), which emphasizes the value of lived experience as a source of insight and acknowledges the researcher’s presence within the inquiry. This reflexive orientation invites diverse perspectives that challenge dominant academic narratives, positioning everyday interactions and personal experiences as meaningful sources of knowledge.

Through reflexivity, we continually examine our positionality as researchers and community members, recognizing the ethical and relational responsibilities we hold in contributing to collective understanding. The following reflections emerge from our shared experiences and ongoing learning within the Doctoral CoP. Together, they illustrate how scholarly growth is enriched through belonging, dialogue, and collaboration.

All members of our group were invited to participate and share their experiences—either anonymously or with attribution—based on their comfort and preference. Their voices bring the community to life, each one a distinct note within the collective harmony of our practice. The reflections in this paper were written while all contributors were participating in Humber Polytechnic’s Doctoral Community of Practice. Some contributors have since moved into new roles or institutions; their accounts are retained here as part of the documented history of this community.

## Our Reflections

**Muge Abac, PhD**

**Office of Research & Innovation**

When I joined Humber’s Office of Research & Innovation in 2022, while actively pursuing my PhD, I was welcomed into a dynamic Doctoral Community of Practice that became a cornerstone of my academic journey. Discovering that less than 2% of people worldwide hold a PhD—and that women comprise just 45–55% of that minority, representing roughly

0.8–1% globally (OECD, 2022)—was a powerful reminder of both the rarity and significance of this achievement. This reality fueled my determination to succeed and to fully engage with this supportive community.

The Doctoral CoP has proven essential not only as a source of resources but as a vibrant ecosystem of social support, shared knowledge, and belonging. Being part of this collective has expanded my perspective, enriched my research approach, and strengthened my resilience through the inevitable challenges of doctoral work. The connections forged here foster motivation, accountability, and emotional stamina needed to sustain progress. More than a network, this community is a catalyst for personal and professional transformation—demonstrating how collaboration and mutual encouragement propel us forward, both as scholars and as individuals committed to meaningful growth.

**Arun Dhanota, *PhD Candidate***  
**Faculty of Social & Community Services**

The Doctoral Community of Practice has been helpful to me in numerous ways throughout my PhD journey. I used to feel isolated and question myself a lot with the duality of working full-time while pursuing full-time graduate studies. The CoP took that isolation away from me and eased my load quite a bit. I learned about my peers' challenges and how they're overcoming them, discovered best practices and the value of celebrating small wins—and realized that many share the same doubts I do. I also get to share my experiences and advice, which reminds me of how far I have come (rather than focusing on how far I have to go). Although we are academics, this group eases the emotional and psychological pressure that comes with pursuing graduate studies, which allows me to keep those pressures at bay and successfully focus on my PhD work. I am very appreciative of the facilitators (Emma and Muge) who have built this, and of the guest speakers who attend, so we can learn from them how to persevere, remain resilient, and have a support network to lean on. I think it would have continued to be harder for me if I wasn't a member of this group.

**Rossie Kadiyska, *MBA, LLM, M.Sc.***  
**Longo Faculty of Business**

I found COP to be a very important factor in, and contributor to, my PhD progress. The following main factors determined this role: a) the place and space of COP meetings where we could share difficulties, achievements, struggles and

daily routine, tips for success in our PhD work, b) guest talks—having some experienced researchers with PhD joining for a talk served as benchmarking, inspiration, and idea generation, c) having a very strong, experienced leader was key. The leader who offered the right support was instrumental—Dr. Ginger Grant was a fireball and one that you could always rely on with her creative ideas to support you.

**Christine McCaw, *PhD Candidate***  
**Longo Faculty of Business**

Graduate work at the PhD level, particularly after coursework is completed, can be extremely isolating and lonely. Because study topics are so specific, it can be challenging to find others who can help when one gets 'stuck' along the way. Having communities of practice, where one can connect, commiserate, and collaborate, can help in so many ways. It helps with social connection, knowing that you are not alone when facing challenges. It helps with idea-sharing and brainstorming to help with research approaches or methods. And it can help to simply vent with others about the crazy obstacles that everyone faces at one time or another during their research. Groups like the Humber CoP for Doctoral students are an important support to help folks get across the finish line.

**Shyam Mohamed, *EdD in Health Professions***  
*Education candidate, MSc., certified Lean*  
*Six Sigma Black Belt*  
**Faculty of Health & Life Sciences**

When I look back at my career, one thing stands out: real progress in education and workforce development happens when people from different corners—schools, businesses, and the wider community—work together. Over the years, I have seen how these collaborations can reshape learning so it's not just about theory but about preparing students for the world they will enter.

Participatory and inclusive research, where community members and industry professionals are engaged as co-researchers or advisors, brings a diversity of perspectives that lead to more meaningful and actionable outcomes. For instance, applied research initiatives I have supported have resulted in the creation of new programs, process improvements, and innovative learning opportunities that directly address sector challenges such as the integration of advanced medical technologies and the shift toward competency-based education.

Research, in this context, isn't just an academic exercise. It's a tool for solving real problems. I have been involved in projects that led to new programs and process improvements, especially in healthcare, where the pace of change is relentless. By inviting community members and professionals into the research process, you gain practical insights and a sense of ownership that makes change more effective and lasting. Using this approach, my current research project, which examines bureaucratic processes versus value-added processes within higher education, may lead to a change in educational policies within the sector.

If there's one piece of advice I'd offer, it's this: treat research and collaboration as ongoing conversations and action. Stay open to feedback, be willing to adjust, and never lose sight of the broader impact your work can have. That's how you build programs that matter—and graduates who are truly ready for what comes next.

**Joe Musicco, PhD Candidate**  
**Faculty of Media, Creative Arts, & Design**

When I began my doctoral coursework, one of the first books my cohort read was *Images of Organization* by Gareth Morgan (2006). In it, Morgan proposes that organizations can be understood through a variety of metaphors which shape how we see, interpret, and act within organizations. It is through this lens (and one of his metaphors in particular) that I like to view my experience and participation in Humber's Doctoral Community of Practice (CoP)—that of the organization as Organism.

In the *Organism* chapter, Morgan (2006) suggests that organizations are living systems which allow us to adapt to our environments and needs, especially in dynamic or uncertain settings. Just as organisms evolve and adjust to fit within an ecological niche, organizations similarly adapt to fit within their social milieu or environment.

Humber's Community of Practice very much reminds me of this image of organization; it is an open system for exchanging information, resources, and energy. Its aim, just like a Morganian organism, is to improve the group's health, communication, and adaptability. One of the strengths of the community is that it emphasizes well-being, motivation, and organizational culture. As this is my second academic year being part of the community, I can confidently say that I have benefited enormously from my participation in it, especially

to the extent that it has offered a space for growth, fit, and alignment within the broader institution. This is perhaps because, as Morgan would put it, the community acts like a Chinese box which contains "wholes within wholes" (p. 39). The CoP has certainly made me feel more whole during my doctoral journey in that it has allowed me to develop symbiotic connections that operate within a beneficial subsystem of like-minded individuals.

**Sophia Pacini, PhD Candidate**  
**Faculty of Social & Community Services**

Imposter syndrome is a phenomenon that negatively impacts one's ability to accept success and is well-documented among doctoral students (Sverdlik et al., 2020). Research indicates that feelings of imposter syndrome increase experiences of stress and depression among doctoral students (Sverdlik et al., 2020). However, membership in academic communities actively reduces feelings associated with imposter syndrome, improving psychological well-being among doctoral students (Sverdlik et al., 2020).

A Doctoral Community of Practice (CoP) exemplifies these findings by providing participants with an open, welcoming, and collaborative platform to engage with fellow students and further their academic skill sets. In addition to actively reducing experiences of imposter syndrome by bolstering a sense of belongingness (Sverdlik et al., 2020), CoPs create a co-learning environment where participants share skill sets and ideas to support academic success.

Most importantly, CoPs create the space for peer support. This support, which fosters mutual belongingness among participants, creates an avenue for self-accountability and motivation. Moreover, one of the many strengths of a Doctoral CoP is that participants will be at different stages in their academic journeys. This creates the opportunity for peer-mentoring and guiding, as well as informal workshopping and problem-solving, to flourish. Informally, Doctoral CoPs provide a venue for participants to share milestones, feel celebrated and encouraged, be academically and professionally challenged, and have fun.

**Redwan Siddiqui, PhD Student at the University of Waterloo**  
**Longo Faculty of Business**

I was working full-time in the industry and teaching part-time while contemplating whether following my passion to pursue

a PhD was a good idea. In early 2023, I attended a meeting of what was then called the PhD Support Group at Humber Polytechnic. I was thrilled by the positive encouragement from everyone present. When the Doctoral Community of Practice (CoP) was formed in January 2024, I became a member. By that time, I had decided to join a PhD program and was exploring my options and preparing my applications.

The CoP meetings were instrumental in helping me navigate my journey to find the right program and match for my research interests. I successfully got accepted into multiple PhD programs and ultimately joined the PhD in Management Sciences program at the University of Waterloo in Fall 2024. The CoP meetings have been like a beacon of support, guiding me through my journey and helping me achieve success. I am grateful that everyone who joins the meetings opens up and shares their experiences, including their failures and successes. Many of us, at different stages of our PhD journeys, quietly listen and learn from these shared experiences.

This CoP is a safe haven where we can open up, forget our vulnerabilities, and seek support from the community. I feel fortunate to have a place where I can unwind, share my challenges, and feel supported and cared for. The CoP has not only fostered my professional development but also cultivated a sense of connection and community, making the rigour of academia at this stage of our careers more manageable.

**Emma Smith, PhD**  
**Scholarship of Teaching & Learning,  
Innovative Learning\***

\*At the time of writing, Emma served as Associate Dean, Scholarship of Teaching & Learning in Innovative Learning at Humber Polytechnic.

Building meaningful connections with mentors and peers played a vital role in my graduate education. Finding opportunities to celebrate milestones, share challenges, and exchange ideas helped me feel part of a larger, motivating community. My colleagues at Humber were an integral part of this support system, offering consistent encouragement, valuable insights, and helpful resources. I am a better researcher because of their generosity, collaboration, and unwavering support.

Our Doctoral Community of Practice celebrates researchers from all disciplines and at every stage of their graduate studies. Each meeting brings something new—guest speakers, collaborative problem-solving, research support, and chances to connect with peers in a welcoming and supportive space. We're also reminded to acknowledge our progress and recognize the importance of our voices in shaping research and change.

One perspective that continues to ground me is the reminder that a dissertation is not the culmination of a career, but one meaningful contribution among many. Embracing this perspective has helped me approach research with more clarity and less pressure.

**Doug Thomson, DPhil**  
**Faculty of Social & Community Services**

Collaboration is vital in any process, and even more so when doing a PhD. Research can be a very lonely pursuit, writing even more so. Combining them, as a PhD requires, means that all too often we operate in an archipelago of isolation. This Doctoral Community of Practice allows scholars to connect; to share ideas, insights and stories of success and of “and then it went horribly wrong”. This Humber community is a perfect place to co-operate, to support and encourage, it creates bridges between our islands and reminds us all that we can achieve this goal.

**Conclusion**

These shared reflections capture the varied and dynamic experiences of graduate school, highlighting the challenges, milestones, and moments of connection that shape both our research and our growth as scholars. An autoethnographic approach has encouraged the development of an intentional space for reflecting on and exploring our identities as researchers. Like members of an orchestra, we each bring distinct voices and rhythms—together creating something richer than we could alone.

**Note on Contributors**

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**Shyam Mohamed** has an EdD in Health Professions Education candidate, MSc., certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, and is a Professor and Program Coordinator - Faculty of Health Sciences and Wellness at Humber Polytechnic.

**Joe Musicco** is a professor in Humber Polytechnic's Bachelor of Creative Advertising program and a doctoral candidate at Athabasca University.

**Sophia Pacini, MA**, is a part-time professor in the Faculty of Social & Community Services at Humber Polytechnic and a doctoral student at McMaster University.

**Redwan Siddiqui** has an MBA and is a Professor of Supply Chain Management. Redwan is a PhD student in Management Sciences at the University of Waterloo.

**Emma Smith** has a PhD in Communication and Culture from Toronto Metropolitan University and York University. At the time of writing, she served as Associate Dean, Scholarship of Teaching & Learning in Innovative Learning at Humber Polytechnic.

**Doug Thomson** has a D.Phil from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and is a professor of Criminal Justice in the Faculty of Social & Community Services.

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