Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

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11. PhDForum: An online quiet study room providing a public space that nurtures the personal experience of being part of a global community

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Abstract

This chapter explores the significance of collaborative power dynamics in academia, emphasising the alignment of words and actions to foster genuine solidarity within the neo-liberal educational landscape. It advocates for creating spaces, particular for students—in this case PhD students—that nurture collective support and challenge the competitive, individualistic norms prevalent in Higher Education. The chapter critically reflects on the ethical implications of research practices, including respecting the right not to be researched, and highlights the need to prioritise agency and autonomy. By acknowledging the strength of relationships and resisting narratives of doubt, this work calls for a more compassionate and equitable academic culture that values trust, reciprocity, and shared growth—for hope.

Keywords: being human; community; collaboration; doctoral; online

The PhDForum began as an inclusive Twitter community I founded in 2012. While curating that Twitter feed, I was saddened by postgraduate researchers expressing their poor mental wellbeing but undecided about how I could assist. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to the use of online rooms provided an opportunity to extend the support I could offer this doctoral community.

In June 2020, I used the platform GoTo Meeting, as it had, in my view, the best security, to launch a quiet online study room. Underpinning the room are deep-rooted values designed to counter neo-liberal capitalism and its intrusion upon the way we perceive ourselves and others. As such, the room is free to use and open twenty-four hours every day.[1] Over the last three years, a community has emerged that is rich in relational strength, a factor too often dimmed by the noise of those who drive the neo-liberal narrative.

To aid accessibility, the code to enter the room is available to new users through an Eventbrite link, which is listed on the PhDForum's webpage.[2] The code never changes, allowing users to enter and leave the room at will. The room is a quiet study space, and users are asked to keep their microphones turned off, but they can choose to have their cameras on or off. There is a chat box, and most who began using the room used the chat feature to make connections with one another by discussing their writing challenges and sharing their writing goals. I keep the room active on my computer, but the link does require refreshing, and over time, a group of amazing individuals have volunteered to help keep the room open. Those acts of kindness enabled me to sleep and go to work without being anxious that the room would shut.

During lockdown, I was working at home and thus able to deliver scheduled writing sessions in the room every Wednesday and Saturday. I would turn my microphone on to provide oral announcements to schedule breaks and offer support. Gradually, with encouragement, other people in the room also began to deliver interjections. People loved to hear each other's voices, and these announcements began to include other ways in which those in the room shared experiences. On occasion, people would play the guitar, and for some time, one person would treat the room once a day to "bunny cam". If you were in the room at those

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1   See https://thephdforum.com/study-room
2   See https://www.thephdforum.com/

times, you would see a computer screen full of smiling faces watching someone's pet rabbit eat a lettuce leaf.

Those using the room began to find other ways to connect and support each other by using Google Docs to share information and organise the room announcements. Some began to work in groups and use Forest App,[3] a popular mobile phone app that aids concentration by sharing the responsibility to grow a virtual tree. A year after the room had launched, those virtual plants had been converted into real trees planted worldwide in the name of our community. Other numerous acts of kindness have since occurred, including sponsorship for people who are homeless and those impacted by war.

Some relationships that developed in the room have gone beyond its virtual boundaries, with friendships blossoming and groups arranging to meet up. Over time, people have completed their doctorates, and they keep using the room. Post-doctorate, many will face precarious employment, requiring them to travel to different cities and countries, which can increase their sense of isolation. A remarkable interaction occurred when someone in the room was relocating to another country to begin work at a university. That person was greeted by a surprise welcome party of room members who met her at the airport and settled her into her new city. They then arranged a lunch in a room member's home, and the rest of the room was invited to join online. It was a surreal experience to observe the impact that one human action can have. We have had a wedding and attended multiple vivas (when observers are permitted), and generally, we support the ups and downs of each other's lives.

Post-lockdown, as we returned to campus, I wondered if the need for the room would diminish. That question was answered as people began to appear in the room when on campus. Social isolation measures were still in place at that time, and people who were on campus could be seen (with their cameras on) wearing face masks. I realised that even when students are on campus, there is something intrinsically isolating about doctoral study, especially for subjects such as the humanities, which are rarely lab-based. That loneliness is also evident away from study, and some people stayed in their rooms while they packed boxes to move

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3   See https://www.forestapp.cc/

house and even while they fell asleep (with their cameras off).

The PhDForum is a community built on trust (Mezgar, 2006), initially founded on my belief in people who were strangers to study together in a shared space without formal moderators. I also reflected on the confidence I had in myself to respond adequately to any issues that arose (Peach, 2021). As with any human interaction, miscommunication and upset can occur between people. On the rare occasion that this has occurred, members of the room have successfully reached out to one another or to me for support with reconciliation. Although the room is always open and new people join frequently, those using the room experience it as a private space that they wish to be protected. As such, over time, we have learned that the community does not want snapshots of the room to be shared on social media or wish to be the subjects of research.

The room is a co-constructed space in which all attendees have contributed to the development of a meaningful online community, which has helped transform our social reality as postgraduate researchers (Reicher et al., 2005). It exists in a world where, for many decades, Higher Education has been restructured by neo-liberalism, and students are increasingly viewed as customers and commodities (Traykov & Timcke, 2012). Learning is often driven by economic gain, with the customer experience of the student being the public-facing marker of the value of their experience (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2023). Many current doctoral students were born into neo-liberal societies and have no alternative experience. They are children of the technological age, which can lead to increased social isolation and constant monitoring of their movements and interactions. There is an increased expectation of presenteeism and performance, leading postgraduate researchers to hide for fear of being stigmatised (Berry et al., 2021).

I have written about my experience of the room, as I do here. Additionally, I have been interviewed about the room[4] and delivered keynote presentations to doctoral schools in England and Northern Ireland. The community appears to accept these activities, which helps explain the principles and values by which the room was established and is sustained.

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4   See The Digest. (2020). PhD hacks: Dr Donna Peach & the PhDForum journey [video]. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_UfZx4nLdo

I have resisted praise from members of the room for its success; each one of us makes the community what it is, and those who use the room provide far more human sustenance to each other than I do. However, my humble actions do make a difference, and should the room continue for decades, I might have to make provision for it upon my death. The post-neo-liberal world is likely to look very different by then, but people's need for connection will remain constant.

Steps toward hope

- Ensure consistency between stated values and actual practices to foster authentic solidarity in academic settings.

- Design and maintain environments—especially for PhD students—that encourage collaboration and collective support over competition.

- Actively resist the individualistic and competitive culture of neo-liberal Higher Education by promoting shared success and mutual aid.

- Respect students' and participants' right to choose how they engage, including the right not to be researched.

- Reevaluate research practices to ensure they uphold dignity, consent, and the well-being of all involved.

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