

Trainee Section

Breaking Isolation During Doctoral Studies: The Example of a Community of Practice

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A society needs to invest in its human capital—more specifically in postgraduate studies—to ensure that its knowledge bears fruit and that it remains a leader in innovation as well as research and development.¹ According to the Quebec government's Conseil supérieur de l'éducation,² training received during graduate studies not only guarantees the continuing development of skills and knowledge in all sectors of human activity, but also contributes to the population's quality of life and the implementation of solutions adapted to meet societal challenges. However, the academic journey during graduate studies can be difficult. Indeed, a study of 10 Canadian universities shows that doctoral students can take up to 10 years to obtain their degree,³ although the expected duration of a PhD program is approximately 5 years when the studies are undertaken full-time. There are different reasons that cause students to delay or abandon their doctoral studies. According to the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, compared with other countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, this phenomenon is particularly common in Canada. In 2010, the percentage of PhD candidates who obtained their degree in Quebec was 56%.² According to the Conseil national des cycles supérieurs of the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec,² the dropout rates at the doctoral level are unfortunately high: close to 50% of students will not obtain their degree, which represents an incredible loss for society, in terms of finances and the need for the next generation of scientists.

In the past, an entire generation of university professors was hired with only a master's degree in hand, a degree that helped develop independence in research. But today, for the same job, a doctorate, even a postdoctorate, is the basic requirement.⁴ In 2006, according to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, there were almost as many doctoral students as there were full-time university professors in Canada—that is 40,800.⁵ Despite the high number of doctoral students over the past few years, certain disciplines that lead to a profession, such

as nursing science, have fewer students than graduate programs that lead to research. Indeed, because nursing science is a young discipline, certain Canadian professors are still being hired while they are doing their graduate studies. Just like several PhD students who must balance their studies and their jobs, these professors, who are often isolated, sometimes without any affiliation to research groups, and overwhelmed by the academic work culture they need to learn, would benefit from a space where they can share their experiences and learn from others. The idea of creating a committee for professors doing their PhD within the Nursing Department of the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières was put forward in 2014 after a successful experience within a community of practice in academic pedagogy that had enabled professors to gather and share. The objective was to enable these professors to have a space where they can share and discuss subjects that are directly linked to the completion of their thesis and thus break isolation while providing motivation.

A Committee for Professors Doing Their PhD

The committee of professors doing their PhD came to life as monthly lunchtime meetings, from September to June. The meetings that take place at the beginning of the school year help plan the subsequent months: What are our needs, as doctoral students and future researchers? Which lecturers would we be interested in inviting? What training experiences would be useful? It is also at that time that tasks are assigned to members, such as contacting potential lecturers, booking rooms, buying equipment, etc. Certain meetings—approximately 3 per year—are replaced by activities organized by the committee. These are always open to all of the faculty and students of the Nursing Department and sometimes to other departments of the university. The committee's regular meetings are spaces in which members can discuss, share experiences, and talk about the progress of

their research projects, along with their highs and lows. Support is always there and there is no competition. A short summary of the subjects discussed and the way each meeting unfolded is written every month and a report of the committee's accomplishments is drafted at the end of the year.

Several themes, selected according to the members' needs, were discussed during these meetings. Whether the presentations covered methodological, ethical, or philosophical aspects, every member found information that was relevant to their own work. Table 1 shows a summary of the subjects discussed during the meetings.

A Unanimously Supported Committee

The committee for professors doing their PhD will be 5 years old next September. Year after year, its members continue to feel the need to get together. Indeed, when answering the question, "What advantages, both personal and professional, did you get from the committee?" members are unanimous—these monthly meetings are a precious source of motivation and enable members to learn from the doctoral journey of others:

... sharing accomplishments and objectives with the group becomes a motivating element since it shows our progression and highlights our achievements. . .

—Maude Dessureault

Members also highlight the power of sharing experiences related to doctoral studies:

Considering the varying progress of members, our discussions enabled me to profit from the experience of others (eg, advice for the comprehensive examination) and to recognize my learning needs (eg, research paradigm).

—Anne-Marie Leclerc

... especially since I knew that the committee members understood the scope of the work related to doing your doctorate degree as well as teaching.

—Maryse Beaumier

Table 1. Discussed subjects

Lectures open to the academic public
Mixed methods
Session on Canadian Common CV writing
Qualitative analysis software
Writing a doctoral thesis
Popular science writing
Research in particular contexts
Responsible conduct in research
Philosophical and historical aspects of health
Media serving research
Discussion subjects within the group
Epistemological positions in research
Balancing work-family-studies
Must-read, research-related books
Preparing for the doctoral exam
Presenting the thesis's subject
Work progress report
Publication opportunities and grant requests
Guiding students
Document search

CV, curriculum vitae.

The committee members have also highlighted the importance of being able to think and work as part of a team toward a common goal (ie, the progress of their doctoral studies, within a context of collaboration and collegiality):

Working with my colleagues, in an atmosphere without judgment or competition, makes me feel safe and enables me to collaborate, which is precious in academia where individualism is the driving culture.

—Émilie Gosselin

Sharing difficulties and coming to solutions helped me feel less awkward and progress constantly throughout the PhD program.

—Jacinthe Leclerc

Finally, the different activities and lectures organized by the committee members not only offered another opportunity to gather, but were also relevant in that they met certain needs related to progress within the graduate program:

The events organized by the committee are very rewarding as they meet the members' common needs or interests, either in terms of their doctoral studies or their role as professors-researchers. These events are inclusive and unifying, with the members of our department or other departments, which, in my opinion, contributes to the integration of new professors in the faculty.

—Maude Dessureault

Each activity also brought many advantages, which enabled me to hone the necessary skills to become a researcher.

—Anne-Marie Leclerc

Conclusion

Nearly half of the students pursuing doctoral studies in research will drop out. Among those who will obtain their degree, some will have taken up to 10 years to do so. Isolation, among other reasons, helps explain this dropout rate or the time it takes to complete a degree. Joining a group of people facing similar challenges, based in a community of practice, is a viable solution that can help students obtain their degree. A thriving career in research awaits us; we can't give up!

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