

Enabling part time doctoral researchers to develop effective support villages

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Introduction

For part-time doctoral scholars, the hidden curriculum can feel not just hidden but locked away from view with no keeper of the keys in sight. Proximity to other doctoral scholars and ‘hidden curriculum agents’ can provide the keys to the hidden curriculum through ‘informal interactions’ (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 6) and yet the nature of the part-time doctorate often limits these interactions, thus hiding the keys. Corridor conversations are a prime example of valuable informal interactions (Elliot et al., 2020) but what about when the corridors are removed? To facilitate these, this chapter argues that part-time doctoral scholars need to develop a ‘support village’ or multiple ‘support villages’ where these interactions can take place and enable them to find the keys they need. Whilst we can exist in isolation, it is often the people around us that provide support, companionship and help us make sense of the world around us. The village as a metaphor allows us to think of what neighbours might be able to help us in our search for the right keys. What support is needed from this village may change over time but broadly it is likely to fall under a banner of practical, academic, psychological or personal support.

It is no surprise that during competitions, athletes also live in villages. Even in the most individual of sports such as long distance running, a whole range of other people contribute to success including coaches, nutritionists, physiotherapists, and many others. Like any good athlete, doctoral scholars also they need a team around them to ensure they are given the best chances of performing well (Mantai, 2020; Rainford, 2021; Rainford & Guccione, 2023). For the doctoral scholar, however this notion of a village might be more metaphorical than an athletes support village and equally may be less likely to be constrained by place. Through foregrounding what makes a valuable support village, researcher developers can help improve access to the hidden curriculum through supporting part-time doctoral scholars to build their own support

villages. Whilst the notion of a support village is not unique to part time doctoral scholars, they become even more important when the proximity to other doctoral scholars and institutional support mechanisms is removed by this mode of study.

What is different for part-time doctoral scholars?

There are numerous forms of part-time doctorate which vary in the opportunities provided for proximity to other doctoral scholars (Rainford & Guccione, 2023). In the case of taught doctorates, there may be a cohort element for example, but this tends to be focused upon short, condensed interactions, often with peers at the same stage of their journey. This is unlike the frequency with which full-time doctoral researchers are likely to encounter peers and other hidden curriculum agents. They are also likely to encounter fewer different agents when the limited-on campus contact is likely to be focused on academic teaching staff. Furthermore, chance encounters less likely, so more planning and scheduling is needed to create these connections, thus slowing down access to this support and impacting the informal support available.

Demystifying the belief of the lone scholar

One of the often-forgotten steps in the journey to researcher independence is the value of interdependence to help scholars transition to a position of increased researcher agency. In order for researchers to gain their agency and become independent, a certain level of support is needed to first to help them build knowledge, expertise, and confidence. As Elliot and colleagues (2020,

p. 134) have argued, ‘agency is essential to thriving as a doctoral researcher’ yet there is an inherent danger that agency is interpreted as going alone on the journey as opposed to taking control of the journey and seeking the support of appropriate guides along the way. Therefore, independence is better framed as knowing who and when to ask for the help you need.

To return to the athlete metaphor, coaches can offer an external perspective, physiotherapists physical support and guidance, and training partners offer motivation to maintain consistent training. Each member of the support village plays a unique role, for example, no one would expect their coach to drag them through those early morning training sessions. Likewise, expecting a supervisor to provide all the support for a doctoral scholar is likely to cause frustration on both parts.

More than a support team, other peers within the support village can also act as valuable critical friends (Costa & Kallick, 1993). It is often through these critical friendships that learning of the hidden curriculum takes place. For example, in discussing a rejected funding bid or academic paper, conversations can be sparked about the practices and issues that underpin success in these areas. Having critical friends within a support village at a similar stage of their journey or a short way ahead on the road can also provide recent hot knowledge of these issues that academic and support staff may be one step removed from.

A local village for local people

Each doctoral scholar is unique in terms of their discipline, personal and professional identities. This means each may have a slightly different idea of the ‘perfect’ village. Elliot and colleagues (2020) highlight the values of communities as playing a key role in doctoral thriving but for part time-doctoral scholars, the range of communities they are part of may be more

complex and extensive. Often part-time doctoral scholars come to the doctorate with extensive personal and professional experiences and furthermore, these contexts may be nested and also contribute to doctoral success (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Therefore, some of the elements of the hidden curriculum that are highlighted as 'hidden' to recent graduates entering a full-time doctorate may already be well understood. Likewise, some of the already understood elements by institutional graduates might appear alien. This creates an impetus underpinning the need to support individuals curate the village that they need in imperative.

The inhabitants of these villages, like any village may change over time. Luckily with a support village, if a neighbour becomes a nuisance, it is easier to replace them than in an actual village. However, it can be hard for people to realise that. As such it is important to help doctoral scholars understand that people might, to use a cliché, come for a reason, a season, or a lifetime.

Institutional scaffolding

If each individual needs to build their own village, then the role of the researcher developer should be to provide the space and support for them to understand who valuable assets to their village might be. The adage that you don't know what you don't know holds up here. In helping doctoral researchers to build their own villages, they need some candidates to be able to select from. For a doctoral scholar, the supervisor is a given, as might be a director of studies but there are innumerable support services that can also play a key role. Often institutions may signpost doctoral scholars to staff and services as crucial to doctoral success without ever explaining how they can help or why they are there. This can lead to them being sidestepped in favour of an overreliance on supervisors for information and support better provided by other services. A strong induction programme is likely to be a solution to some of this if it helps

scholars to understand they why and how of the support available as opposed to simply providing a list of services.

Additionally, often the best people to promote their value for doctoral scholars are the individuals from those services themselves. Not only does this allow for the development of an interpersonal connection but they can also go beyond what their role involves and highlight how this can be of value at different stages of the doctorate. For example, knowledge of how invaluable librarians can be to research is often downplayed in a focus on the services a library offers.

Whilst Elliot et al. (2020) highlight the value of mentoring or coach-based approaches to support this. However, it is important to reflect on the time pressures of the part-time doctoral researchers who may not have the time or understand the value in their sort of training when they see the primary focus of their limited time as the thesis itself. They can therefore often see anything beyond working on key stages of the thesis with their supervisor as simply and additional drain on their time. This is not to argue that part-time scholars will not engage with these approaches but that three factors need to be carefully considered in the planning: Accessibility, promotion of the value, and providing conditions for peer connections.

Accessibility

A prime consideration of course needs to be timetabling. Unlike full-time doctoral scholars, part timers are likely to have a range of complex personal and or work commitments. Time to focus on the doctorate is often carved out between other things and as atypical times of the day or week. Therefore, activities focused within the working week are likely to be problematic. Equally when many part-time doctoral scholars are likely to be working at a distance, travelling to campus for a one-hour session is likely to be prohibitive. Often these

barriers are not deliberate but created because researcher developers are not pausing to consider how to make these activities accessible.

What's in it for them?

A secondary consideration is the often lack of an explicit rationale for why these activities matter. If informal interactions are essential to understanding the hidden curriculum, then this assertion itself needs to be clear and not hidden. For example, in Waterhouse et al. (2022) study of supporting professional doctorates at a distance, not all students saw the importance of interpersonal contact in their learning journey. This might be that those developing these activities have not spelled out the value of these activities and why they are a valuable investment of time, but it could also be that time stretch scholars are seeing the thesis as the necessary focus of their time and everything else as additionality and therefore not engaging with where learning about the hidden curriculum takes place.

Enabling peer connections

Beyond the initial support to identify who needs to be in support villages, some consideration needs to be made as to how to maintain the conditions for these connections to thrive. This is especially important in terms of providing the spaces and encouragement for peer networking. Peer learning builds accountability (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 70) and in a shared space, this is easier to encourage than at a distance. This therefore means rethinking how to encourage peer learning communities at a distance although it can be done through online forums and Virtual learning environments (Waterhouse et al., 2022) and Twitter (Vigurs, 2016).

Writing groups can also be an ideal space for learning about the hidden curriculum through experience sharing relating to writing practices but also persistence and self-motivation (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 87). Encouraging part-time doctoral scholars to join or run such groups can be invaluable. These can also be a great opportunity for ECRs to support other doctoral scholars and pass on some of that hidden curriculum learning which simultaneously offering a space to focus on their own writing.

Developing connections beyond the institution

It should not be assumed that all the inhabitants of a support village should come from within the institution. In fact, developing villages that span beyond institutional boundaries is likely to be invaluable in understanding elements of the hidden curriculum focused upon employment, the wider discipline, writing, and publication practices. Some ways researcher developers can help support doctoral scholars to expand their villages beyond the institution follow:

Social Media

Whilst twitter and other social networks can be used to foster institutional communities, they also provide useful connections beyond the institution. It's immediacy, brevity and ease of engagement can make it an invaluable tool for all academics (Carrigan, 2020). It can also provide a way to construct a professional academic identity (Sheldon & Sheppard, 2022) which can enable practical application of the learning from the hidden curriculum they are developing. Whilst it is important not to assume every doctoral scholar will want to engage with social

media, for myself and many part-time doctoral scholars, it has provided an importance space for connection and reflection. They can offer a space for mutual support, accountability and talking through ideas. However on the flip side they can be a time vortex, combative or have a negative impact on confidence (Rainford, 2016; Rainford & Guccione, 2023). In supporting the use of these networks, it is important to forewarn of the potential issues that might be faced whilst also promoting the value of this for identifying and bringing in individuals to the support village who might be more geographically remote.

Postgraduate subject networks

From a researcher developer perspective, it is unlikely that we can be aware of every relevant subject association. Research projects are also rarely bounded in one neat discipline. For example, the topic of my own doctorate spanned several disciplines, each with their own learned societies: Education, Sociology, Higher Education. Therefore, it is not as much about informing doctoral scholars of which networks to affiliate to but providing the understanding of the importance of these networks, what the benefits might be and then allowing them to find the networks that sustain them best. This is of course something supervisors can help with but might require informal conversations with other researchers whose work sits within similar domains to the doctoral scholar, especially when the supervisor's own specialism is slightly different.

The home-village connection

Whilst not directly supporting in learning the hidden curriculum per se, it would be impossible to talk about a support village without mentioning this key area in doctoral success.

Home is being used in a broad sense to encompass friends, family, and work colleagues. Whilst some scholars might try to keep their doctoral and home life separate, these is likely to be overlap and individuals from these parts of their lives are likely to be important to their journey. Practical and emotional support from these groups can be invaluable. In providing space for doctoral scholars to think about their home support villages, for some this may surface agents who have key skills that may help them – a friend or family member that is a great proof-reader, one who is a whizz with common software packages, or even an interested colleague that will provide the space to improve their communication skills to aid their oracy skills.

Conclusion

Returning to the initial metaphor of a hidden curriculum locked out of sight, the role of the researcher developer needs to go beyond unlocking the door and helping part-time doctoral scholars to find their own set of keys. Where full-time scholars might be able to ask someone nearby to borrow their key, the part-timers need access to their own set or a way to easily access them from someone else in their village. In doing so, it is more likely that as they navigate the maze of the doctorate and come up against the next locked door, they will be able to open that door with the help of someone in their support village and avoid being trapped in the unknown.

It is important for researcher developers to not just adopt a build it and they will come approach to this support though. It needs to be carefully planned and promoted so that it is accessible to these doctoral scholars at an appropriate time and that the understand the value for them in engaging with it. One valuable way to do this is by showing and not telling. Using doctoral scholars and postdoctoral researchers to show how their villages have been invaluable will make hesitant scholars more likely to engage than a list of ‘selling points’. This also requires

ongoing support and encouragement for informal spaces of support with consideration of how this can be done in both face to face and remote permutations.

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