

# International Practice Development Journal

Online journal of FoNS in association with the IPDC and PcP-ICoP (ISSN 2046-9292)



## CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

### Community of practice as a tool for reflexivity: creating space for novice nursing researchers to flourish

Martha Whitfield\*, Paulina Bleah and Jovina Concepcion Bachynski

\*Corresponding author: PhD Student at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada  
Email: [martha.whitfield@queensu.ca](mailto:martha.whitfield@queensu.ca)

Submitted for publication: 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022

Accepted for publication: 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022

Published: 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022

<https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.121.009>

#### Abstract

*Background:* A community of practice was established in 2020 by three doctoral nursing students during the Covid-19 pandemic, when in-person learning was on hold. The group members were intentional about using the community of practice as part of their personal and collective reflexive learning strategies. An expanded 'Occasional Community of Practice', open to doctoral students in the health professions, developed from the core group's initiative.

*Aim:* The aim of this article is to critically reflect on the experience of participating in a community of practice focused on the development of an intentional reflexive practice, and to explore how self-knowledge as students and novice researchers was cultivated through collective reflection and discussion.

*Conclusion:* This article contributes to the literature on communities of practice in the context of doctoral nursing studies. Participation in a community of practice provides a person-centred approach to learning and self-knowledge for novice researchers.

*Implications for practice:*

- A community of practice can create space for an intentional reflexive practice for doctoral researchers
- Engaging in collective reflexive inquiry has potential to expand the perspectives and outlook of individual researchers
- Participation in a community of practice can transform the doctoral student experience by encouraging a participatory, person-centred approach that promotes student flourishing as novice researchers

**Keywords:** Communities of practice, novice researchers, person-centred learning, reflexive practice, doctoral students, student flourishing

## **Introduction**

At best, the path to completion of an online or hybrid PhD nursing programme is paved with the usual and expected scholastic challenges. The all-pervading Covid-19 pandemic has further intensified the impacts associated with learning in physical isolation, notwithstanding the convenience of videoconferencing platforms. To mitigate this, we, as three doctoral nursing students, established a community of practice (CoP) at the beginning of the pandemic as a space for informally discussing our respective research-related concerns. Over time, our core group interacted with and learned from one another through reflection and dialogue around our individual and shared research interests and experiences (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Born out of necessity during the pandemic, our CoP gradually transformed into an intentional tool for reflexivity as we participated in collective reflection and self-questioning about how our subjectivities and self-locations shape our research (Pillow, 2003; Lincoln et al., 2018). We have found that using our CoP as a medium to engage in reflexivity is critical to our development as researchers, especially when articulating our individual positionalities and social identities. For example, we individually completed positionality maps (Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019) and engaged in discussion in preparation for our thesis proposal readings. Reflexivity is key to the essential principle of connectivity in person-centred research, in which research is co-constructed with others with the aim of creating a research culture of human flourishing (Titchen et al., 2017). Using Rolfe's (2011) framework for reflexive practice, we provide an account of how we have used our CoP as a space for shared learning, and have explicitly aimed to use it to reflect on person-centred research approaches and on learning and acting reflexively.

## **Communities of practice**

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in the process of collective learning in a shared domain of interest, and deepen their knowledge on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al., 2002). A CoP can provide PhD students with a safe space for informal discussion of their research (Arber, 2006). Trust is critical in this setting to facilitate timely and honest disclosure by researchers about methodological concerns arising from their participation in and engagement with data collection and analysis (Blanco and Rossman, 2022). A CoP can foster academic growth for student researchers (Lynch and Frost, 2015; Sanders et al., 2020) and contribute to the individual research identity of each member (Lynch and Frost, 2015). In this milieu, PhD students can support one another in improving their research practice (Blanco and Rossman, 2022).

## ***Applications of CoPs in nursing***

The depiction of CoPs in the literature is not always consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991) original conceptualisation of a group of people who interact around a shared concern or passion. Some CoPs exist only for a limited duration and are not self-sustaining (Abiodun et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020). The degree to which CoPs are allowed to evolve versus being a planned activity can vary (Landeem et al., 2017, King et al., 2017). For example, Landeem and colleagues (2017) describe a CoP that was intentionally designed, by invitation only, with desired outcomes in the form of the production of a research project by each participant.

Formal support mechanisms and pathways appear to be lacking for professional nurses who are transitioning to academia (Lanlehin, 2018), with CoP membership potentially filling this gap. For example, Garrow and Tawse (2009) describe a CoP designed to help novice academic nurses take the step from clinical practice to academia and navigate the student assessment process. CoP membership by nursing faculty has been proposed as a way for nurses to build professional connections in the research community (Lanlehin, 2018), and to facilitate teaching and curriculum development (Barton, 2005).

Each CoP has its own rhythm and identity, which can be the source of both strengths and challenges. Challenges include concerns associated with keeping the momentum going across distances and between infrequent meetings. For CoPs consisting of graduate students, part of the group rhythm or

cadence is determined by the influx of new students, and the loss of students from the group as they graduate (Sanders et al., 2020). Even though a CoP often evolves organically, it may be important for members to attend to the rules and ways of working unique to that CoP (Sanders et al., 2020), and to consider how to onboard new members without overwhelming them (Lynch and Frost, 2015).

### ***Community of practice as a person-centred research approach***

Person-centredness is defined as an 'approach to practice that is established through the formation and fostering of healthful relationships' (McCormack and McCance, 2017). Elements of the person-centred nursing and practice frameworks (McCormack and McCance, 2017) have been expanded to describe person-centred research (Titchen et al., 2017). Sustained participation in our CoP is helping us to fulfil the prerequisites for person-centred research articulated by Titchen and colleagues (2017), which include self-knowledge and values clarification. We have gained an increased awareness of and curiosity about our research context, our related values and beliefs, and our relationships with the research process. Researcher reflexivity is paramount – as we strive to understand our context as researchers and, by extension, the particular contexts of our participants (Titchen et al., 2017). Connectivity is a key principle of person-centred research, and this is facilitated by critical reflexivity through which research and knowledge are co-constructed between the researcher and participant within a culture of human flourishing (Jacobs et al., 2017; Titchen et al., 2017). Paralleling this person-centred process, participation in a CoP results in the formation of new relationships and the generation of new knowledge (Terry et al., 2020), solidifying the place of the CoP as an intentional reflexive exercise within a person-centred approach to research. We have found that membership helps us to flourish as students and as nursing researchers – to grow, develop resilience, and work towards realising our potential (Dewing and McCormack, 2017).

### ***Reflexivity***

Reflexivity is an important methodological tool in qualitative inquiry (Pillow, 2003). It entails critical self-reflection about the subjectivities researchers bring to bear during each stage of the research journey (Pillow, 2003; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). The researcher's attention to 'politics of location and positioning' (Koch and Harrington, 1998, p 882) can shape the research product. Researchers, particularly doctoral students, must also engage in activities of self-preservation; they may need support as they engage in emotional labour while navigating through the various liminal spaces in the research process (Arber, 2006). This has implications for collaborative practice (for example, through a CoP) as a viable reflexive strategy for PhD students. Although memo writing is traditionally used as a way of engaging in reflexive practice, participating in a collaborative practice is an innovative way of keeping true to one's reflexive stance. To our knowledge, the literature does not include any descriptions of a CoP being used as part of an individual or collective reflexivity strategy.

### ***Confessions from a doctoral nursing student community of practice***

Using Rolfe's (2011) framework for reflexive practice, we offer the *What?* (description), *So what?* (theory and knowledge building), and *Now what?* (action-oriented) elements of our CoP and collective reflection.

#### ***What? A case of serendipity***

We are the three founding members of a small CoP comprising our core group and a larger Occasional Community of Practice with a more fluid membership. Our initial meetings were prompted by the curtailment of in-person learning for our PhD cohort due to Covid-19, which left us hungry for opportunities to connect with others in our group. Although we did not set out to become a CoP, we soon realised that our structure was closely aligned with the model outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger and colleagues (2002). A shared practice of knowledge building organised around a common purpose distinguishes CoPs from other entities, such as work groups (Wenger and Snyder, 2000; Andrew et al., 2008). The distinctive features of our CoP include our small core group, and our focus on using membership as a key part of our individual and collective reflexive practice.

### ***The core***

As of this writing, we three core CoP group members continue to meet weekly for one to two hours via video conference. Since our initial meetings 18 months ago, our commitment to meeting weekly has rarely faltered, and the rhythm of this collective practice has been a defining feature of our experience as PhD students to date. Meeting agendas are fluid and rotate between a focus on a specific topic (for example, approaches to the literature review or methodological concerns) and more general discussion and reflection on our progress as doctoral students. Additional communication happens informally on an almost daily basis through our WhatsApp group, and through impromptu one-on-one meetings. WhatsApp has been widely used by nursing and medical students to establish community and for quick communication (Abiodun et al., 2020) and we have found messaging to be an invaluable addition to our communication. As core CoP members, we have collectively completed several conference presentations, and hosted multiple events open to other doctoral students through the Occasional CoP.

### ***An Occasional Community of Practice***

Meetings of the Occasional CoP are open to doctoral students in the health sciences. To date, we have hosted five meetings with invited experts and have further sessions at the planning stages, after a networking session helped us to generate ideas for meetings. We have also held five mock proposal reading sessions. We are equals in the CoP as students; experts are invited by us but they do not determine our agenda. We have found that open sessions provide a good balance between the intimacy and familiarity of our work as a trio of researchers and students, and the stimulation of broader conversations and discussion of research ideas with a larger and more diverse group. Communication to the larger Occasional CoP group is through email and Twitter.

### ***Using our CoP as a reflexive practice***

As junior nursing researchers, we strive to be transparent with ourselves and others about the assumptions we bring to our research. The CoP is a place where we can 'try things on for size', allowing us to consider our research choices and hear ourselves defend those choices. Feedback and dialogue inform our next steps. One of us (PB) referred to the CoP as 'almost like a spoken word journal – instead of writing things down I have brought my questions to the group. It has broadened my thinking'. We have shared resources and dialogued about ways to prepare for key elements of the PhD journey. Reflective conversations have influenced our research topic selection, methodology choices, proposal development, writing, positionality and more. We see the CoP as separate from other more formal or informal forums that may be provided by the PhD programme. One member (MW) expressed that 'for me, the CoP is at the centre of the PhD – a constant source of connection and support that pushes me to grow and reflect as a novice researcher and as a student'.

### **So What? Lessons learned**

As we move towards expanding our CoP and broadening both our membership and activity structure, we have referred to the learning articulated by Lynch and Frost (2015), and Sanders and colleagues (2020). We recognise that a CoP that is self-sustaining takes on an identity of its own, outside that of its original creators, and continues as a resource for future participants (Sanders et al., 2020). An intentional approach to the development of a CoP can provide opportunities for each member to participate in a safe space that fosters their passion for learning and allows the CoP and its members to flourish (Lynch and Frost, 2015; Sanders et al., 2020). Having allowed our CoP to take shape organically over the past 18 months, we feel ready to propose some guiding values and principles, drawing on the work of Titchen and colleagues (2017) and their depiction of person-centred outcomes:

1. Creation of a culture that values connectivity and attentiveness to dialogic interaction between group members as a collective reflexive practice
2. Commitment to the rhythm of CoP meetings, recognising that weekly meetings have enabled the group to sustain interest and engagement, and provided an accessible and timely forum for discussion

3. A focus on mentorship and knowledge sharing, both within the group and with the larger community of experts, as a way of developing our identities as doctoral researchers and building a network of colleagues
4. A shared commitment to an organic evolution of the CoP – recognising that too much structure initially might be detrimental to the natural evolution of the group

### **Now What? Sustainability**

Our CoP participation has helped make learning explicit that might otherwise have been assumed or implicit. For example, mock proposal readings helped us reflect on how we responded to questions and tackled potential issues of contention. Ultimately, these sessions have helped us to feel more confident and comfortable discussing our work. In this time of a global pandemic, membership has provided us with reassurance and validation as junior nursing researchers. We therefore suggest that membership of a CoP is a valuable – if often undervalued – activity for PhD students.

As a core group, we are committed to sustaining our weekly practice, and to thinking about how it might evolve after graduation, even while the larger CoP group remains as a legacy for future students. As we envision life 'post PhD', we see our core group gradually moving to the periphery of the Occasional CoP, and eventually pulling away to a new iteration. The work of our CoP has complemented and cemented our own individual learning and helped us to hone our research interests and broaden them to include CoP as a reflexive strategy. We anticipate that our experiences in the CoP will transform our collective and individual practices as we co-construct new knowledge with our research participants. We continue to dream of new collaborative efforts.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we offer a model of participation in a CoP as a person-centred approach to learning and self-knowledge for novice researchers, and as a contribution to the literature on CoP in the context of doctoral nursing studies. Our CoP has evolved from an informal source of support to an intentional tool for reflexivity, and we propose the use of CoP as an emergent strategy for reflexivity, particularly for doctoral students in the early stages of their journey. As researchers, we have used the CoP to support our own wellbeing and flourishing, recognising that without this, we cannot attend to the wellbeing of our research participants. Our ongoing participation as CoP members has been valuable in making our subjectivities and preconceptions explicit to ourselves and to a larger audience within a dialogic space.

### **Ethics**

We did not seek formal ethics approval for this critical reflection. However, our writing process included discussions of the best ways to present our collective experience and the implications of writing about our process, which is sometimes intensely personal and private.

### **References**

- Abiodun, R., Daniels, F., Pimmer, D.C. and Chipps, J. (2020) A WhatsApp community of practice to support new graduate nurses in South Africa. *Nurse Education in Practice*. Vol. 46. Article 102826. pp 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102826>.
- Andrew, N., Tolson, D. and Ferguson, D. (2008) Building on Wenger: communities of practice in nursing. *Nurse Education Today*. Vol. 28. No. 2. pp 246-252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2007.05.002>.
- Arber, A. (2006) Reflexivity: a challenge for the researcher as practitioner? *Journal of Research in Nursing*. Vol. 11. No. 2. pp 147-157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987106056956>.
- Barton, A. (2005) Cultivating informatics in a community of practice. *Nursing Administration Quarterly*. Vol. 29. No. 4. pp 323-328. Retrieved from: [tinyurl.com/NAQ-Barton](http://tinyurl.com/NAQ-Barton). (Last accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022).
- Blanco, G. and Rossman, G. (2022) As a qualitative study unfolds: shifts in design and analysis. Chp 1 in Vanover, C., Mihás, P. and Sadaña, J. (Eds.) (2022) *Analyzing and Interpreting Qualitative Research: After the Interview*. Thousand Oaks, US: Sage. pp 7-22.

- Creswell, J. and Poth, C. (2018) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, US: Sage.
- Dewing, J. and McCormack, B. (2017) Creating flourishing workplaces. Chp 10 in McCormack, B. and McCance, T. (Eds.) (2017) *Person-centred Practice in Nursing and Health Care: Theory and Practice*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. pp 150-161.
- Garrow, A. and Tawse, S. (2009) An exploration of the assessment experiences of new academics as they engage with a community of practice in higher education. *Nurse Education Today*. Vol. 29. No. 6. pp 580-584. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2009.01.013>.
- Jacobson, D. and Mustafa, N. (2019) Social identity map: a reflexivity tool for practising explicit positionality in critical qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. Vol. 18. pp 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919870075>.
- Jacobs, G., van Lieshout, F., Borg, M. and Ness, O. (2017) Being a person-centred researcher: principles and methods for doing research in a person-centred way. Chp 4 in McCormack, B., van Dulmen, S., Eide, H., Skovdahl, K. and Eide, T. (2017) (Eds.) *Person-centered Healthcare Research*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. pp 51-60.
- King, K., Porr, C. and Gaudine, A. (2017) Fostering academic success among English as an additional language nursing students using standardized patients. *Clinical Simulation in Nursing*. Vol. 13. No. 10. pp 524-530. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecns.2017.06.001>.
- Koch, T. and Harrington, A. (1998) Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. Vol. 28. No. 4. pp 882-890. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1998.00725.x>.
- Landeen, J., Kirkpatrick, H. and Doyle, W. (2017) The hope research community of practice: building advanced practice nurses' research capacity. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*. Vol. 49. No. 3. pp 127-136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0844562117716851>.
- Lanlehin, R.M. (2018) Boundaries between professional nursing and midwifery academics and scholarly research activities: transitioning through communities of practice. *Nurse Education Today*. Vol. 64. pp 130-131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.02.004>.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lincoln, Y., Lynham, S. and Guba, E. (2018) paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. Chp 5 in Denzin, N., and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2018) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Los Angeles: Sage. pp 108-150.
- Lynch, B. and Frost, D. (2015) The experience of being a member of the Student International Community of Practice: a collaborative reflection. *International Practice Development Journal*. Vol. 5. No. 1. Article 9. pp 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.51.009>.
- McCormack, B. and McCance, T. (2017) Introduction in McCormack, B. and McCance T. (Eds.) (2017) *Person-centred Practice in Nursing and Health Care: Theory and Practice*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. pp 1-10.
- Pillow, W. (2003) Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. Vol. 16. No. 2. pp 175-196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635>.
- Rolfe, G. (2011) Models and frameworks for critical reflection. Chp 3 in Rolfe, G., Jasper, M. and Freshwater, D. (Eds.) (2011) *Critical Reflection in Practice – Generating Knowledge for Care*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). New York: MacMillan International Higher Education and Red Globe Press. pp 31-51.
- Sanders, K., Marriot-Statham, K., Mackay, M., McMillan, A., Rennie, K., Robinson, B. and Teeling, S.P. (2020) The Student International Community of Practice: a critical reflection on the shared experience of being a member, using creative hermeneutics. *International Practice Development Journal*. Vol. 10. No. 1. Article 11. pp 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.101.011>.
- Terry, D., Nguyen, H., Peck, B., Smith, A. and Phan, H. (2020) Communities of practice: a systematic review and meta-synthesis of what it means and how it really works among nursing students and novices. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*. Vol. 29. Nos. 3-4. pp 370-380. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15100>.

- Titchen, A., Cardiff, S. and Biong, S. (2017) The knowing and being of person-centred research practice across worldviews: an epistemological and ontological framework. Chp 3 in McCormack, B. and McCance, T. (Eds.) (2017) *Person-centred Practice in Nursing and Health Care: Theory and Practice*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. pp 31-50.
- Wenger, E. and Snyder, W. (2000) Communities of practice: the organizational frontier. *Harvard Business Review*. Vol. 78. No. 1. pp 139-146.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R. and Snyder, W. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston, US: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) Introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses. Retrieved from: [tinyurl.com/WT-COP](https://tinyurl.com/WT-COP). (Last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> January 2022).
- Wright, R., Ferguson, C., Bodrick, M., Balkhy, H., Jackson, D. and Davidson, P. (2020) Social media and drug resistance in nursing training: using a Twitterchat to develop an international community of practice for antimicrobial resistance. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*. Vol. 29. Nos. 13-14. pp 2723-2729. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15185>.

### Acknowledgements

The authors have received funding for their PhD studies from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

**Martha Whitfield** (APRN, MS, MEd), PhD Nursing Student, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Nurse Practitioner, Hardwick Health Center, Hardwick, Vermont, United States.

**Paulina Bleah** (MN, NP-PHC), PhD Student, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Nurse Practitioner, Toronto General Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

**Jovina Concepcion Bachynski** (MN-NP[Adult], RN[EC], CNeph[C]), PhD Student, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Nurse Practitioner, Halton Healthcare, Oakville, Ontario, Canada.