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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

The experience of being a member of the Student International Community of Practice: a collaborative reflection

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Abstract

Background: In 2010 a community of practice was set up for and by doctoral students engaged in person-centred and practitioner research. After three years, this community became part of a larger international community of practice.

Aims and objectives: Captured under the stanzas of a poem and supported by the literature, this paper uses member narratives and creative expressions in a critical reflection on the experience of being a member of the Student International Community of Practice.

Conclusions: Membership in the community of practice was experienced as beneficial, providing both support and challenge to enrich the doctoral students' development as person-centred researchers. Retaining connectivity across an international landscape and finding effective ways to integrate new members into the community presented the greatest challenges.

Implications for practice development:

- The theoretical foundation and experiential knowledge could assist others considering support structures for the development of person-centred practices
- Shared learning and co-creation of knowledge add value to the experience of being a doctoral researcher
- Membership fluctuations present challenges to continuity of learning and the maintenance of a safe space with communities of practice. Such fluctuations, however, create chances for community members to experience diverse roles within the group and encourage explicit attention to person-centredness

Keywords: Community of practice, person-centred practice, doctoral student, knowledge development, learning, narrative

Introduction

In 2010 the Person-Centred Practice Research Centre, at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, inspired and supported doctoral students engaged in person-centred, action-orientated research to set up a community of practice. The term 'community of practice' was first introduced by Wenger (1998), and Wenger et al. (2002, p 4) define a community of practice as:

> '[A group] of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.'

The main aim of this Student International Community of Practice (SICoP) was to provide a forum for collaborative learning, networking and meaningful connection, while making a positive contribution to creating and sharing knowledge of person-centred and action-orientated research practices.

After three years, the community expanded and became part of a large international community of practice focused on development of and research into person-centred practice. The SICoP has members from England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Malta and Australia. Although it has grown from being small and localised to being large and international, the SICoP's underpinning philosophy has remained the same and has been captured in a poem written by Brighide Lynch: *SICoP and the Four Elements* (SICoP, 2014). The community members used narratives and creative imagery to develop a booklet (SICoP, 2014), illustrating what membership meant to each individual. This paper synthesises these narratives and creative expressions with evidence in the literature and presents this synthesis under each of the four stanzas of Brighide's poem. SICoP members are referred to by forename; there is a full list at the end of this paper. We aim to provide a picture of our experience of community of practice membership and to describe how person-centredness was (and is) lived within the SICoP.
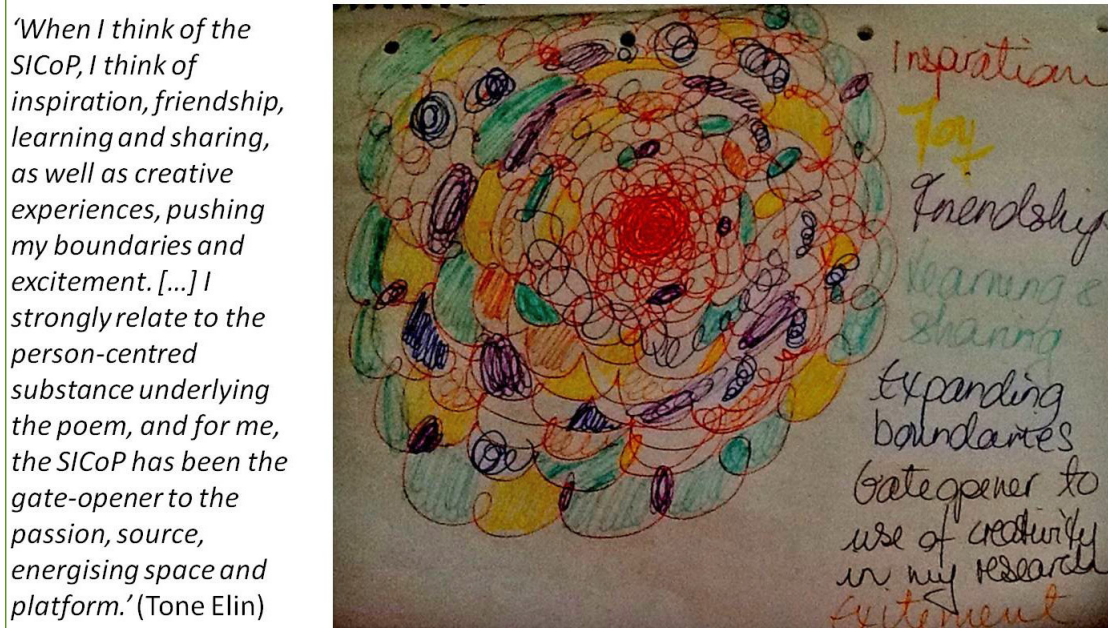
Fire
> *Fire is the passion at the hearth of the SICoP*
> *Keeping true creativity alight*
> *Diversity is honoured, inclusive interaction occurs*
> *And warmth and acceptance burn bright*

The concept of passion features quite extensively in the literature on communities of practice and is used to describe the strong emotion that drives the interaction and the search for knowledge that takes place in a community of practice (Barab and Duffy, 1998; Wenger, 1998; Cox, 2005; Roxå, 2014). The greater the intensity of trust that exists within a community of practice, the deeper the debate between members can be. Passion also appears in the opening line of the poem, and Brighide's narrative revealed the emotion as almost tangible:

> *'Passion relates to the palpable feeling that I experience when the students in the SICoP share both the positive aspects and the challenges they are facing during the course of their PhD study and/or their present life experience.'* (Brighide)

Roxå (2014) even suggests that in some situations, members of a community of practice cannot help but be fully engaged in a dialogue with each other – to such an extent that the emotion involved is comparable to 'falling in love'. This strongly emotive language is too intense to be applied to the SICoP. Emotional connections within the community were not experienced as being quite so powerful but several members did describe feelings such as passion and belonging, highlighting them as the emotions that energised them and bound them to the SICoP (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: SICoP membership associated with intense emotions. Creative expression by Tone Elin

'When I think of the SICoP, I think of inspiration, friendship, learning and sharing, as well as creative experiences, pushing my boundaries and excitement. [...] I strongly relate to the person-centred substance underlying the poem, and for me, the SICoP has been the gate-opener to the passion, source, energising space and platform.' (Tone Elin)

The discovery of common ground and co-creation of an accepting and safe space, in which trust could grow and passion flourish, were neither taken for granted nor left to chance. We worked hard and intentionally to give space to each SICoP member during our meetings and we committed to speaking up if we felt that the space was not being valued or respected. We stepped out of our own comfort zones; we witnessed each other taking risks, for example, by sharing new and barely formed ideas or taking on unfamiliar roles within the group. We took time to practise with untried or challenging ways of working, such as painting in a group, using creative movement or learning to summarise our PhD research in a one-minute sales pitch. These experiences were then the focus of collective reflection. Our shared passion united us, but we took intentional creative action to cultivate successfully the conditions in which our relationships, knowledge and competence could develop (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Parallel journeys and parallel stories: creative expression and haiku representing the experience of SICoP membership by Catherine

Supportive friendship,
Learning to trust, risking much,
Professional surge.

'Within the group I have experienced a set of relationships that have been empowering and energising, there is a sense of trust, mutual respect and equality and all ideas are welcomed. It is this energy and balance where the diversity [...] of each member is valued in an interactive and proactive way that enables us all [to] engage and connect on both personal and professional levels.' (Catherine)

It is this shared passion and shared learning among members of a community of practice that keep it together and distinguish it from a 'team'. While a team is often defined by an individual task and is legitimised principally through the establishment of formal roles, a community of practice is defined by knowledge, and members establish their legitimacy through participation and interaction (Lesser and Storck, 2001).

Two challenges the SICoP faced with respect to the passion and energy had to do with maintaining balance: how were we to 'keep the fire burning' when geographically distant from each other, as we were for most of the year, and how could we avoid overpowering new members with the 'heat of the blaze' when we did meet up for our short but intense periods of contact? We return to these questions throughout the paper.
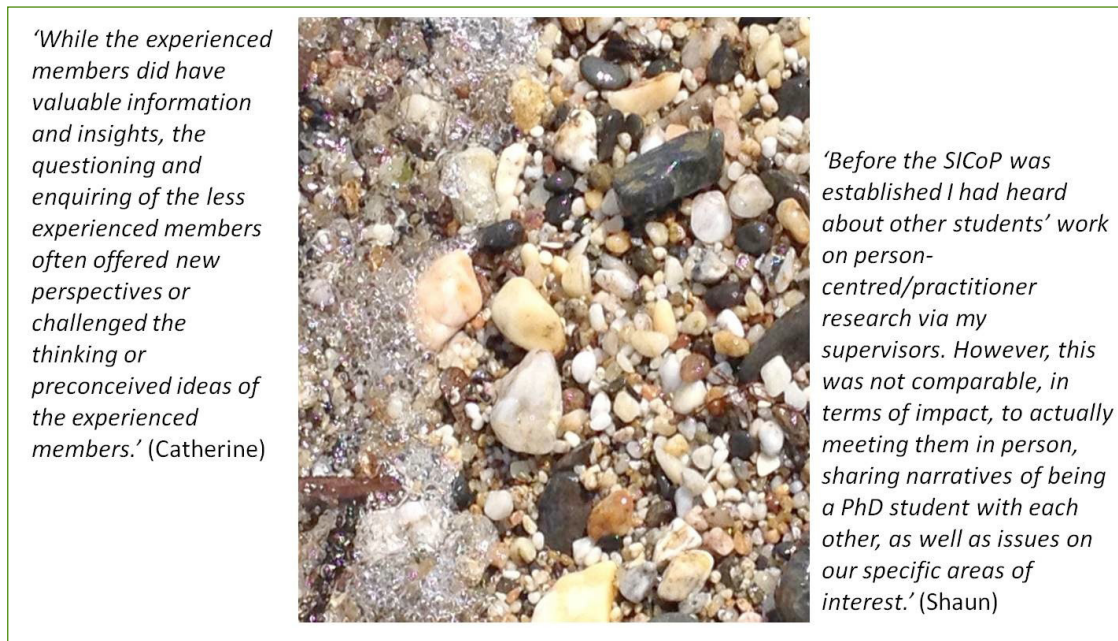
Water

Water is our source, the stream of consciousness
That enables action research to flow
It invites wonderful imagination into our minds
And allows our knowledge to grow

Roxå (2014) suggests that the collective knowledge base of a community is formed through a repertoire of shared beliefs, shared goals, and collective narratives that capture the members' experiences of their practice. Community knowledge is a key characteristic of a community of practice and the collective knowledge of the members is considered to be its most valuable feature. Unlike a team that is often formed to achieve goals set by others, a community of practice evolves through participation and mutual interest; goals are set by the members themselves to generate new and meaningful knowledge (Wick, 2000).

The creation of shared knowledge has had a significant impact on the research undertaken by the doctoral students in the SICoP. Members have felt encouraged to adopt different, innovative methodologies and creative approaches to data collection and analysis. In her narrative, Tone Elin described the creation of shared knowledge in the SICoP as having inspired her *'to include critical creativity in the process of analysing and co-creating knowledge in participatory action research…'*

The quality of the knowledge passed on through members' narratives is much 'richer' than that of journals or texts, and contributes to reshaping the individual member's identity in relation to the community. Each member's identity therefore becomes interwoven with their identity as a community member and they inherit the 'common cultural and historical heritage' of the community, thereby legitimising their membership (Barab and Duffy, 1998, p 14). Shaun and Catherine expressed elements of this in their narratives, shown in Figure 3 adjacent to Michele's creative expression.

Figure 3: Narratives flowing together, becoming interconnected. Creative expression representing the experience of SICoP membership by Michele

'While the experienced members did have valuable information and insights, the questioning and enquiring of the less experienced members often offered new perspectives or challenged the thinking or preconceived ideas of the experienced members.' (Catherine)

'Before the SICoP was established I had heard about other students' work on person-centred/practitioner research via my supervisors. However, this was not comparable, in terms of impact, to actually meeting them in person, sharing narratives of being a PhD student with each other, as well as issues on our specific areas of interest.' (Shaun)

Francis' experience suggested that this group identity could be extended fairly quickly to new members:

'The SICoP offers an atmosphere without competition. There are no wrong questions. [...] That was my experience at the first meeting I attended and I already had the feeling of being an accepted member of the group.' (Francis)

This ease with which new members identify with the group may due (in part) to the fact that the members of a community of practice share a similar mindset and membership is voluntary. In contrast, membership in a team is usually assigned through a formal process and reporting relationships are often with someone in authority who may not be a member of the team (Lesser and Storck, 2001).

The development of knowledge in tandem with the development of one's identity is a central phenomenon within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Roxå, 2014). The literature on communities of practice advocates the accessibility to experts to support learning through the communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Barab and Duffy, 1998; Wenger et al. 2002). As articulated in their narratives, SICoP members also wanted access to experts and this was achieved by three of our SICoP doctoral supervisors participating in the SICoP. The supervisors became members of SICoP as role models and coaches (Figure 4). These experts helped us maintain the 'clarity of our water source' and encouraged us to channel our 'wonderful imaginations' into concrete action.

Figure 4: SICoP members could function as lifesavers for each other (creative expression of the experience of SICoP membership by Famke). Supervisor members had a particular role as coaches and guides
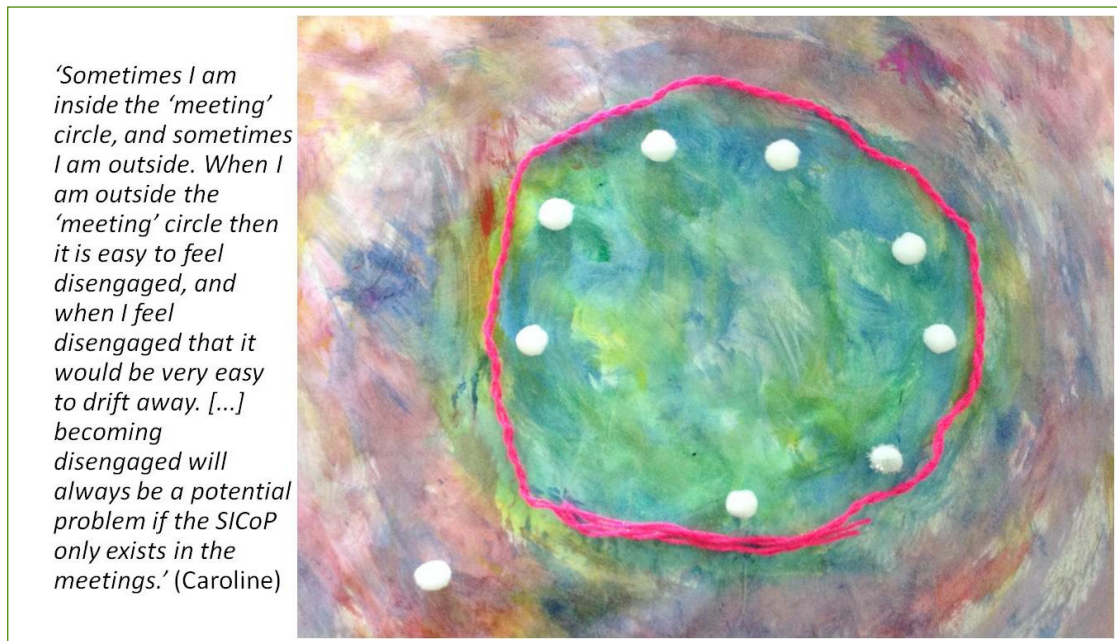

'I believe there is still a need to have experts in the SICoP to actually take the group further and to inspire us to develop and test out strategies in practice, [to] share their stories and provide us with further challenge and support.' (Famke)

'The critical eye for academic accuracy [within the SICoP] was achieved by the unobtrusive presence of professors attached to the international CoP, and had its advantages in maintaining effectiveness.' (Shaun)

Air
> *Air is the element of energising space*
> *Empowering SICoP members over time*
> *The colours of their intellectual wisdom come together*
> *To blend and to merge and to shine*

Various member narratives discussed the nature of the space created within the SICoP. Caroline described a 'space that somehow feels calmer than the everyday reality of the PhD.' Donna echoed the experience of calm and went on to describe the co-creation and evolution of the space over time:

> *'Meeting up with other SICoP members, sharing our stories, struggles and triumphs, has sometimes felt like stepping into a green restful glade, becoming refreshed, re-energised and supported, better able to continue on my PhD journey.[…] Now, as I move closer to the end of my PhD journey, the SICoP feels more like a garden than a glade; a garden which we have tended and nourished and which holds new surprises for us every time we return.'* (Donna)

As mentioned, it was initially a challenge to maintain this sense of space between the biannual meetings, particularly for those who were not able to attend in person. Caroline articulated this struggle, referring as well to the third of four paintings (see Figure 5) she created to illustrate the experience of SICoP membership.

Figure 5: Struggling with disengagement when unable to attend SICoP meetings, creative expression by Caroline.

'Sometimes I am inside the 'meeting' circle, and sometimes I am outside. When I am outside the 'meeting' circle then it is easy to feel disengaged, and when I feel disengaged that it would be very easy to drift away. [...] becoming disengaged will always be a potential problem if the SICoP only exists in the meetings.' (Caroline)

In addressing this challenge, we experimented with group email and file sharing systems but these placed the focus on the 'outputs' of the group, rather than the relationships and sharing of ideas and learning. Using a private group on Facebook was more successful. We were able to share photos of ourselves and our creative expressions, files and information, as well as offer encouragement and support, thereby enacting the shared values of the SICoP even in a virtual environment. New members were easily invited and no longer had to wait for an actual SICoP meeting to get an impression of the community and what we could offer. Those who were not familiar with social media were supported to learn. While this virtual aspect of the SICoP was conducive to the group's being able to enlarge and be maintained, it somewhat restricted the participation that was key to the community's evolution. Indeed, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that the physical periphery of a virtual community of practice has an influence on participation and makes it harder for the community of practice to develop.

> *'I must acknowledge that I am undertaking the personal journey of using a virtual network to communicate with SICoP colleagues, 'Facebook'. This can present challenges but because of the nature of the group and commitment of other members within the group to share and support the process, I feel that I have been empowered, supported and energised to participate'* (Liz).

As the SICoP members worked together towards the shared goals of the overall group, these collaborative endeavours fed into, and were nested within, the larger ICOP. The main focus of the ICOP was the development of and research into person-centred practice. Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) state that such an interdependent perspective places a community of practice within the wider society, providing purposefulness, as well as an identity for the individual members and the community as a whole. Barab and Duffy (1998, p 15) also describe the sense of 'being part of something larger' as characteristic of community of practice membership. As the following passages show, a sense of connection and interconnectedness was present for SICoP members, and through their membership and participation in the community, individual members fundamentally developed their sense of 'self' within the 'energising space' of the SICoP.

> *'The SICoP has provided a space for me to grow and develop as a person exploring my values and beliefs and understanding what is happening around me. Although we come from many different countries, cultures and language we are united in our "sameness"'* (Michele).

'Trust, honesty, being open, giving and being accepted are key phases that remind me of how the group operates in a practical sense. I can then clearly link these phrases to the person-centred philosophy which is inherent within the research journey we are undertaking' (Liz).

Earth
*Earth is the platform on which the SICoP stands
Spanning our research time and beyond
It honours the different constellations of its participants
And nourishes a life-long bond*

The last stanza of the poem captured the characteristic of the SICoP that is dependent on 'reproducibility' (Barab and Duffy, 1998, p 16). New members tended to move carefully and gradually into the community of practice through irregular posts on the SICoP Facebook page, staying on the periphery of the community for an average period of 12 months. Roxå (2014) states this happens because the 'self' is at stake since the new member risks rejection by the group. The threat to 'self' could also be experienced by a new member joining a team for the first time. However, because team membership and structure are defined through more formal mechanisms, staying on the periphery of a team for a period of time would prove much more difficult for a new member.

Recent experiences of new members joining the SICoP resonates with the literature. A new member enters the community of practice through legitimate 'peripheral participation' (Hoadley, 2012, p 290). Initially a person gradually participates through discursive practice, mainly through our Facebook group page, supported by our biannual face-to-face meetings. Over time, the new member takes on more of the identity of group membership, increasingly adopting the central practices of the SICoP and becoming a core member. As community members complete their PhD they leave and create space for newcomers to take on new roles and become central to the community.

A persistent challenge for the established members of the SICoP was paying sufficient attention to the needs of new members: 'tempering the fire' as it were. This could be particularly apparent when the dialogue became energetic or the suggested work form was challenging. During Tone's first SICoP meeting, for example, we were testing the use of dance as a metaphor in Shaun's PhD by engaging in partner dancing with each other. Tone later described this as certainly having expanded her boundaries! It was essential to pay attention to the co-creation of a safe space as discussed under the first stanza, 'Fire', for us all but particularly for Tone as a new member, and to remain grounded on the 'earth' – or values on which the SICoP stands. When we were successful in enacting person-centredness, SICoP meetings could be a source of encouragement for all participants, as Francis explained, and illustrated, in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Membership in the SICoP helped even new members to cope with the uncertainty inherent in a PhD journey

'As I just started my PhD I'm a new member of the SICoP and I've only participated in one meeting so far. [...] Starting a PhD program means to leave one's own comfort zone and to enter an uncertain area. Being a member of a SICoP is an occasion to meet people who have had the same experience and probably had the same problems and questions in the past. People who probably felt the same uncertainty and surely know how difficult it could be.' (Francis).
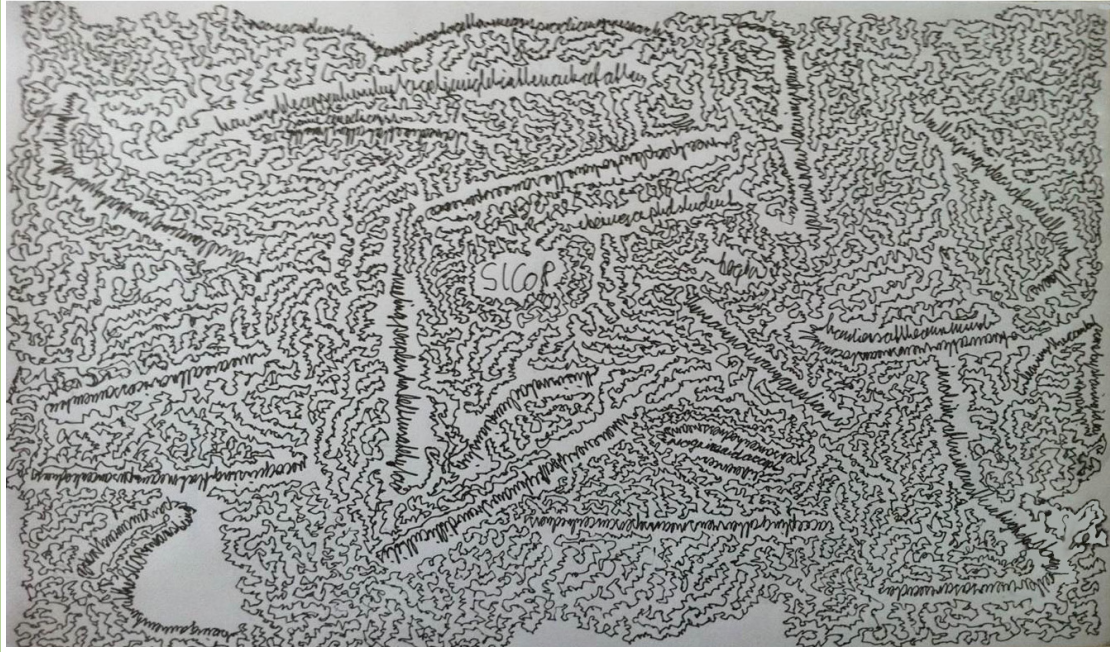
The person-centredness of the SICoP was strengthened through our informal social gatherings, as mentioned by Shaun in his narrative, where the interesting conversations that took place during our formal meetings continued into the evening as we relaxed over a meal and drinks. The social gatherings embodied the informal and emerging character of the SICoP. Learning and ideas that were generated during these social events were captured through the shared stories. As Shaun said:
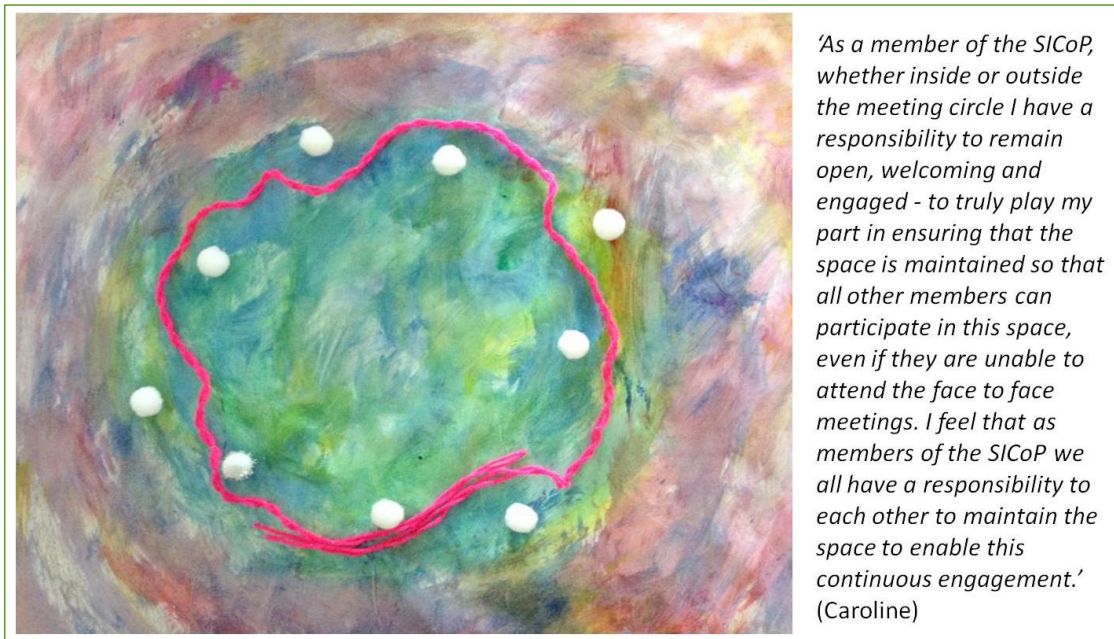
'Spending the evening together was just as important for learning and bonding as the structured daytime activities. We started to "live" person-centredness, getting to know each other as individual persons, not just PhD students' (Shaun).

The relationships proved meaningful, so that past members of the SICoP remained somewhat connected to the group through a process similar to peripheral participation, where they continued to offer support and friendship from the periphery of the community. This overall process of reproducibility fed into the common cultural and historical heritage mentioned earlier.

Looking forward
For the future, it is important that we work together to develop the reproducibility of the group and to pay attention to the process of helping new members become integrated into the community, rather than have them linger in the phase of peripheral participation. We see this as crucial in sustaining the community, maintaining a common cultural and historical heritage and enabling the SICoP to continue contributing to the larger community of person-centred and action-oriented researchers. As illustrated in Figure 7, although our meeting together may not always have been physical or face-to-face, we shared responsibility for maintenance of our community.

Figure 7: Meaningful participation in the space we created and maintained was possible, despite geographical separation. Creative expression by Caroline (the fourth of four paintings)

'As a member of the SICoP, whether inside or outside the meeting circle I have a responsibility to remain open, welcoming and engaged - to truly play my part in ensuring that the space is maintained so that all other members can participate in this space, even if they are unable to attend the face to face meetings. I feel that as members of the SICoP we all have a responsibility to each other to maintain the space to enable this continuous engagement.' (Caroline)

Summary

This paper has used extracts from SICoP member narratives, captured under the stanzas of the SICoP and the *Four Elements* poem, to reflect critically on the experience of being a member. The narratives reflected themes found in the literature, such as participation in a community of practice proceeding from and evoking passion and energy in its members. The narratives were discussed in relation to three characteristics of a community of practice, as found in the literature, namely: a common cultural and historical heritage, being part of something larger and reproducibility. While the member narratives revealed particular benefits of participation in a community of practice for doctoral students, the feature of reproducibility presented a challenge for the future of this particular SICoP, as we worked together to develop effective ways to enthuse, support and welcome new members into the energising space of our community.

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