

Creating a Community of Care: The Role of Care, Community, and Belonging in the PhD Journey

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Abstract

The PhD journey is often depicted as solitary and grueling—a test of endurance marked by cycles of doubt, anxiety, burnout, isolation, and relentless institutional pressures. But does it have to be this way? Building on our keynote presentation, this paper draws from our personal doctoral odysseys, our involvements in the graduate student council, and research-based insights to explore the transformative power of care, community, and belonging in navigating the challenges of academia. Through reflective storytelling, we bring to light the invisible struggles that define the PhD experience—moments of despair, the quiet longing for validation, and the critical importance of being seen and heard. By revisiting our doctoral journeys, we share the so-called 'tricks of the trade'—rites of passage shaped by our own trials, setbacks, and celebrations. Together, we reimagine what it means to create spaces of care—where students feel safe to express vulnerability and build connections. Whether it is a kind word from a colleague, a supportive community during tough times, or simply having someone in your corner, these acts of care have the power to transform a lonely path into one of shared strength and connection. This paper challenges us to rethink the culture of graduate studies, shifting the narrative from one of survival through endurance to one of thriving together. Ultimately, it is a call to action: to build a culture where PhD students do not just survive through endurance but thrive through community and care.

Keywords: *PhD experiences; autoethnography; voice; communities of care*

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Introduction

The Annual Graduate Student Conference in Education, held virtually in March 2025 by the Graduate Faculty of Education at York University, provided an opportunity for Sheetal and Kofi to deliver a keynote presentation, with Kofi serving as discussant. Framed by the conference theme, *con-currents*, which invited participants to consider the “tensions and possibilities encountered in our scholarship and our pedagogical relationships” (YGSE, 2025), the keynote explored the potential for cultivating spaces and pockets of community in times of deep isolation.

This article takes the form of an autoethnography. Following Haynes (2011), we understand autoethnography as a mode of inquiry that encapsulates “a personal, intuitive knowledge, deriving from a knowing subject situated in a specific social context” (p. 134). Writing autoethnographically enables us to situate our personal experiences, emotions, and identities within broader social and cultural structures, while remaining attentive to the interplay between lived experience and theory. Although autoethnography does not claim generalisability, we believe that individual stories can resonate with others in meaningful ways, offering insight, affirmation, and connection. In this sense, autoethnography requires a reflexive, dialogical engagement with the self in relation to theory (Haynes, 2011).

Building on our keynote and subsequent reflections, this paper explores how care, connection, and belonging shape the PhD experience. We consider the ways in which community-building becomes possible, even in contexts marked by distance, disruption, and uncertainty, and reflect on how stories of vulnerability, solidarity, and support can reimagine the culture of doctoral education.

A Whisper of Care: Reimagining the PhD Journey

Safra

When we think about the PhD journey, we often picture long hours spent alone—hunched over a screen, whispering lines of text to ourselves as we write and rewrite. We’re taught that this path is supposed to be hard, demanding, exhausting and tedious. The dominant narrative surrounding the PhD is one of a lonely endeavour. We’re led to believe that pushing through in solitude somehow makes the work more legitimate, more meaningful. That isolation is a rite of passage. And in doing so, we normalize practices that cause mental suffering.

This is not new to the realm of academic capitalism. We rarely pause to ask: *What does community and care look like in academia? Do they even exist?*

During the dissertation writing phase, I felt like I was drowning in uncertainty and impostor syndrome. I didn’t know if I could reach out for help. I worried that admitting my struggle would make me seem incapable. Among peers, it often felt like everyone had it figured out. I internalized the endurance culture we’ve normalized—expecting loneliness, anticipating silence and believing that the inability to reach out was just part of the process.

But then something shifted.

One moment of receiving feedback, gently delivered, grounded in care, taught me that small gestures of kindness can simultaneously be powerful reminders that we are not alone in this journey. I want to share this moment of doubt, of vulnerability, and ultimately, of care. It came while I was deep in the writing of my dissertation: unsure, exhausted, and entirely unprepared for what I was about to receive. A moment that quietly whispered, *something has to be different:*

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My hands trembled as I opened the document. Her feedback on my latest chapter stared back at me, and I braced myself—for the sharp critique academia had trained me to expect.

Lonely days and sleepless nights weighed heavy. The isolation of the PhD journey echoed in my chest. This path—a grind, a test, a solitary climb—had stripped me bare, leaving me with nothing but self-doubt and a quiet voice that whispered: *You're not enough.*

But as I read her words, the tears came.

Not the tears of defeat I'd grown used to, but something warmer, softer—a release. Her feedback wasn't just feedback. It was care, woven into every thoughtful suggestion, every note that seemed to say: *I see you.*

She worked closely with my writing, yes. But more than that, she worked closely with *me*.

In that moment, I realised how isolating academia can be when care isn't actively practiced, and how even a single act of kindness can be pivotal in shifting self-doubt into motivation.

Her kindness became an anchor in the storm of my doubts, reminding me that even here, in the cold rigour of academia, there is space for compassion, for connection, for belonging.

And in that moment, I realized: care isn't a luxury. It's a lifeline.

One act of kindness—and I didn't feel so alone anymore.

As the Professional Learning and Community Coordinator on the Graduate Student Council, I was frequently approached by fellow students who expressed a deep desire for more

opportunities to connect with peers and faculty through informal, in-person gatherings. While there was interest in virtual options, the need for face-to-face connection was especially pronounced. Students suggested social events such as games, community-building activities, and graduate student panels, emphasizing that even sparsely attended events held meaning. As one student shared, “Even when the events are only attended by a few, they are still meaningful and important. Thank you for organizing!”

We often treat community and care in academia as something external to the “real work.” But it is the real foundation that allows scholarship to flourish, that allows students to not just endure but thrive. According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is socially constructed: it develops through social interaction. Learning is social and cultural, not merely an individual phenomenon, suggesting that connection plays a central role in knowledge production. Building on this, hooks (1994) reminds us that education is a practice of freedom, one that requires dialogue, vulnerability, and care. From this perspective, care is not peripheral to scholarship but integral to it, creating the conditions where students can resist isolation, belong, and thrive within academic spaces.

There remains a sizable gap in our understanding of PhD candidates’ lived experiences (Stanley, 2015). Mantai and Dowling’s (2015) analysis of PhD thesis acknowledgements found successful doctoral candidates valued three types of support—emotional, academic and instrumental from families, colleagues and supervisors, as well as others. Their study confirms the critical importance of community and care in the PhD journey. Similarly in more recent literature, Sibomana (2021), in writing about how to endure the PhD journey, emphasizes the value of establishing communities of practice to increase peer support and reduce isolation.

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As I reflect on my PhD journey, it wasn't the accolades or word counts that carried me forward, it was the whisper of care, the quiet presence of those who reminded me I wasn't alone. Independent research does not have to mean isolated research. The smallest gestures—a kind word, a shared conversation, a generous read—can shape the way we move through this journey. They remind us that we are not just minds producing knowledge. We are whole people, moving through complex lives, yearning to be seen and supported. Perhaps my sensitivity to the absence of care comes from my background as an early childhood educator, where care is not peripheral but foundational. When care is missing in education it's impossible not to feel that something essential has been left out. And once you notice its absence, you cannot unsee it. Care makes learning and thriving possible. If we want students to emerge from their doctorates not just as graduates, but as transformed scholars and humans, then care must not be the exception, it must be the ethos.

My experience showed me how even small acts of kindness could transform isolation into belonging. But the question remained: how do we find or build these spaces of care when larger structures pull us toward solitude? Sheetal's reflections, beginning during the early days of the pandemic, illustrate how such spaces of care can emerge through deliberate choices to reach out and connect.

Pockets of Community

Sheetal

When I was accepted into the PhD program in the Winter of 2020, I was excited to become a scholar. I thought about, through my rose-tinted glasses, what I would be doing in the program. I thought about how I would be surrounded by support, friendship, and various experiences. I watched videos of people's lives in their PhD journey (Outfit of the Days, Get

Ready With Mes, Day In The Life of a PHD, etc.). I imagined who I would be in the program.

That all came to a halt on March 15, 2020, when COVID lockdowns were initiated, and isolation became a primary experience in the next chapter of my life.

In the summer of 2020, I spent those months preparing

Forms and contracts – signed

Handbook – read

Checklists and timelines–created

Those months were spent alone in my bedroom at my family's house.

Orientation was just as lonely

With a sea of faces and names in individual squares

There was no room to introduce myself and make connections

After that, I close my laptop and sit in the silence

2020 and 2021 were one of those lonely years

September 2020 is when people forge connections in their various courses

However, in online spaces, there's not much room for those interactions

Classes are lecture-based, with awkward discussions

I doze off most of the time – they don't call on people

Teaching is the same

I face blank boxes with names

I try to be uplifting and happy

Even though I know they, too, are struggling

2021 is where you start thinking about your journey into the proposal

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Who am I by this point?

Who do I want to be?

I was too tired and unmotivated to do anything

Eventually, enough was enough.

I took back the isolation in the Winter of 2020 and decided to take chances;

Say yes to an online writing group.

Say yes to weekly morning writing.

And eventually saying yes to attending online events.

Eventually, my community was growing;

A virtual community.

Yes, it's awkward—

But at least I'm not alone.

In 2021, I moved out, and eventually found myself alone again despite the virtual community and my partner visiting from time to time.

This is a new loneliness, a yearning for more in-person connections.

From 2021 onwards, I have created pockets of communities.

My virtual community, which I've grown to cherish and support and eventually have interacted with in person.

My Friday writing community, where we have created support for our writing (though I use that time for cleaning rather than writing).

My grad lounge community is comprised of various students who come and go, and I'm excited to learn from.

My student association community, where I've learned to be more confident and involved and take initiatives.

My supervisory community, who knows my fears for the future.

And my computer room community, comprised of two other people who (by a chance encounter) created a space .

Where knowledge flows and ebbs in interesting ways.

Where, for those moments, we forget that we were once isolated during our studies.

Notes from our Conference Discussions

The early part of my PhD journey was shaped by the disruptions of 2020, particularly the abrupt transition to virtual learning during lockdowns. The year-long doctoral seminar (DOCSEM), which should have been a space for building foundational relationships, felt lacking in care and intentionality. Being online removed opportunities to connect meaningfully with peers, which are crucial for fostering community and support early on. Even when we returned to in-person learning, that sense of care did not automatically return. It was only through the efforts of a thoughtful student coordinator and my own decision to engage more actively with events and initiatives that I began to feel a renewed sense of community and purpose. Throughout the program, the most genuine care often came from peers. Small acts like checking in or noticing when someone is struggling created a powerful sense of being seen and heard—something vital in an often-isolating academic journey. However, the structure of the program, where we only take one course as a cohort, made it difficult to maintain those connections. After that course, many of us simply lost touch. This lack of structured community-building opportunities made it harder

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to feel a sense of belonging, especially without the informal interactions that usually happen in physical spaces.

On the supervisory and institutional levels, open communication and a model of care are essential but often missing early on. Initially, I did not feel comfortable being honest about personal challenges, assuming that the PhD required constant output and professionalism. Over time, I learned that setting expectations and building rapport with supervisors can open space for care. Professors, especially in education programs, should model this kind of care from the beginning, bridging hierarchical gaps and encouraging openness. While the university fosters community well at the undergraduate level, the graduate experience is often left to individual departments. There is a real need for faculties to take a more active role in building those bridges and ensuring that graduate students do not navigate this experience in isolation (Mantai & Dowling, 2015).

When we think about the PhD journey, we do not think about the loneliness after our coursework is done. Just like the conference's theme, *con-currents*, the journey can be rough and crash in unexpected ways. But it is in those crashes where you can find solace in communities and thus care (Mantai & Dowling, 2015). When I think about my PhD journey, I think about the need for care for students. The University, being a commuter campus, forces us to make those connections. It is through the community that I was able to navigate the PhD journey without feeling anxious or lost. As we all collectively navigate our journeys together—and pull and support each other wherever we can—think back and reflect on your journeys and think about when you felt a sense of caring.

Despite these progressions of care, I question how care is delivered to students in various communities. Kofi will examine the role of community and care for international students. Kofi questions whether care is delivered differently due to status.

Reflections from an International Student

Kofi

At every level, not just at the PhD level, being an international student comes with challenges. My experience, however, is not that of every international student. My experience is from the perspective of a Black male student from sub-Saharan Africa. The period I started this PhD is instructive, because I embarked on this journey in September 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown. I, therefore, situate my experience within the broader conversation of Black students and Black living in North America during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Black student in the diaspora, I was always conscious of the larger issues happening around me. Mention can be made of police brutality, culminating in the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement (Hammonds & Kerrissey, 2022). Although I was in Canada, which on the surface, appeared to be free of discrimination against Blacks (Jean-Pierre & James, 2020), the pandemic and all the stuff happening in the US had a massive impact on my well-being in the first year of my doctoral journey. I was constantly thinking about my safety, constantly worried that even if the pandemic did not kill me, the police might do so. In the first year, the focus was not on excelling in the program; rather I was focused on surviving academically and surviving the pandemic.

Regarding the feeling of an absence of care, I can discuss the experience of having to take all my first-year classes virtually. The virtual class contributed to the feeling of isolation, as many of my colleagues had their cameras off and were constantly in a hurry to log off right after

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classes. For an international student who looked forward to networking and collaborating with other students, the virtual format proved to be a significant setback, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation. Having said that, it is vital to note that whenever our professors provided “formal” ways for us to collaborate on group projects, my colleagues were forthcoming and open to collaborating.

This situation changed to some extent after the COVID-19 pandemic. Three factors accounted for this: (1) the resumption of in-person classes, (2) working together as teaching assistants (TAs), and (3) the student groups. These factors, especially when working together as TAs and holding regular social gatherings, some of which were attended by faculty members, created a sense of community among my colleagues and me. At these gatherings, we shared our ever-present frustrations with doctoral studies, rejoiced over our research and writing triumphs, and acknowledged our challenges. Sharing and listening to stories, particularly those that touched on our shared challenges, remained a constant reminder to me that my challenges were not unique and that most students were facing the same hurdles I was. This knowledge played a major part in addressing the feeling of imposter syndrome and the feeling of isolation that accompanies the PhD journey.

Mainstream literature has highlighted the lack of support for international students during the pandemic, both at the institutional and personal levels (Firang & Mensah, 2022). In my opinion, the situation at the University was quite different. The university announced that it had “secured a limited number of laptops for students, faculty, and staff who do not have a home computer.” This move ensured that lack of access to digital resources for studies did not significantly impede teaching and learning. Aside from this, virtual classes were offered in both

synchronous and asynchronous formats. This ensured that students on different time zones could access lecture notes and discussions at their convenience.

Aside from the institution's support regarding access to digital resources, I received significant support from the professors who taught me during the pandemic. One lecturer told the class, "Deadlines are not cast in stone, and if ever there was a time to be flexible and compassionate, it is now." She added that life was the most important thing in times like these. As someone who has been at the same university since 2017 (for my master's), I had a strong sense that professors got even closer to me in the virtual world than in the real one. Of course, I have always preferred face-to-face interaction in the lecture theatres to talking to headshots on a screen. Nevertheless, even as the distance between my classmates and me got wider and wider, the distance between my professors became narrower. I woke up to emails from my supervisor, such as 'Kofi, how are you hanging in over there? How is it with you? "If you need help, you can just call out." This show of concern not only gives assurance but also motivates.

Aside from this, my supervisor established a close-knit co-mentoring group where we held regular writing workshops focused on mutual support. During these meetings, we shared our writing challenges and recommended readings to one another. Importantly, we celebrated milestones, including completing coursework, defending proposals, obtaining ethics approval, and finishing chapters. This approach helped me view the PhD process as a collective journey rather than a solo one. In addition to our workshops, my supervisor organized regular gatherings—often including our families—to break bread. Regular, informal meetings of this nature demystify the supervisor-supervisee relationship, blurring the lines between the personal and professional, fostering a relationship that is both collegial and hierarchical

And as my friends have suggested, feedback is a form of care. This care is not just limited to how it is conveyed, but also to how timely the feedback is. In these neoliberal times, where many people are driven by the pressure to publish or perish, timely and comprehensive feedback is a manifestation of care. It serves as a reminder to students that their supervisor is willing to set aside everything and focus on their work, helping them improve it. To me, and as my colleagues have shared, this is the greatest love of all for any doctoral student.

Conclusion

Lived experiences vary enormously and this paper aims to highlight the importance of connection, care, and community in the PhD experience by offering a look into three racialized, two mature PhD students' embodied, lived experiences during the pandemic. Giving voice to doctoral students who live this reality daily, allowing them to break the silence that has long been inflicted upon them, is a necessary first step to reconsidering the culture of graduate studies. Our stories, here, then, are only a few of many.

We also acknowledge the limitations of this work. As an autoethnography, the scope is intentionally limited to our own perspectives, situated within particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts. These narratives are not meant to claim generalisability but rather to invite resonance, reflection, and dialogue. Other doctoral students' experiences shaped by different identities, geographies, or institutional structures may diverge from what we describe here.

Taken together, our narratives underscore a shared truth: care is not peripheral but central to the PhD journey. Each of us entered doctoral study under different circumstances, yet we were sustained by similar gestures of compassion, connection, and solidarity. The intention of this paper is not only to allow access to PhD experiences but, more importantly, to call for a cultural reorientation, one that centres care as foundational to graduate success, not ancillary. Where we

hold space for vulnerability. Where feedback is offered not just with precision, but with empathy. And where every student, in every stage of struggle, can hear someone whisper: “I see you. You’re not alone.”

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