

Humanists in the House of Learning: Academic Research Libraries' Role in Fostering Communities of Practice

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Introduction

A number of recent studies have reported that doctoral students in the humanities take longer to complete their programs and drop out at a higher rate than those in the sciences and social sciences.¹ Some of the main reasons identified include availability of funding, jobs after graduation, and the quality of student relationships with faculty advisors.

In order to investigate the local needs of doctoral students in the humanities and whether the library can positively impact their success, the Cornell University Library and Columbia University Libraries undertook a collaborative ethnographic user needs study in 2010-2011.² Library staff at the two institutions conducted five focus groups and 45 individual interviews with doctoral students in the humanities, focusing on those in English, Religion, History and Classics programs.

In this paper, our analysis is limited to the 21 individual interviews with Cornell graduate students. Our interviews revealed that there is no typical humanities doctoral student, yet there are institutional and library-related concerns that these students share and consider essential to their pursuit of advanced degrees. While interviewees confirmed

the importance of other factors already identified in research on degree attrition, our interview protocol elicited comments on what the library does and might do to contribute to their success. The opportunities for libraries that emerged from the study included results we anticipated, such as offering space, improving access to deep research collections, providing research assistance, and most notably, nurturing the development of scholars through fostering community.

This paper therefore describes how the doctoral students we interviewed formed supportive groups that enhanced their program environment.³ More specifically, we examine how students transform themselves into independent scholars through the concept of “communities of practice,” which we assert as an essential element of a successful program environment. Significantly, the Council of Graduate Schools' 2010 publication includes “program environment” as a key factor undergirding the success of graduate degree completion.⁴ It is in the context of program environment that we consider how communities of practice are built in the humanities, how communities of practice shape learning, and how research libraries can play a role in fostering communities of practice.

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Communities of Practice and the Academy

It's having community. Belonging to your community, having friends that are doing this and feeling that you have something worthwhile to say that other people are recognizing it. That is obviously a very particular perspective because I was isolated. But I think that even before I left, if I had had stronger community ties here to other students I think I would have been less likely to have stayed [away]. And I would've felt more of a duty and responsibility to my peers and to my community that I finish this thing [the dissertation], that I do this thing and want to be a part of it. (10th year, Comparative Literature student).

The term *community of practice* denotes a group of people who share and participate in an activity of common interest, learn together in the process of interacting, and pass on and create new knowledge about the shared endeavor.⁵ They help us to understand how learning as a social activity may occur in the context of knowledge production. Communities of practice are everywhere; we all belong to one—at school, at work, in social settings. Membership is usually voluntary and shaped by shared activity. Students entering a Ph.D. program join a community of practitioners: other graduate students at various stages of coursework or writing, professors, advisors, librarians, and administrators. These overlapping communities, from intellectual and informal social groups to institutionally-supported ones, influence and foster the development of individual scholarship.

A new doctoral student enters the community of practice as a beginner, someone learning how to negotiate graduate school, fulfill requirements, and become a scholar. This is what Lave and Wenger call “legitimate peripheral participation”—students’ initial engagement at the margins of the academic community as they learn the art of becoming full-fledged scholars. As their degree of mastery, experience and fulfillment of requirements progresses, so do their status, advancement and membership in the community of practice.⁶

The academy is a community in and of itself, as are the particular university and the individual program. Neither, however, is solely a community of practice. Each is a formally recognized and validated program or institution with governing bodies and explicit pro-

cedural goals and roles and students participate in and subscribe to the roles and values of the academic community through its formal channels.

The formal academic structure consists of faculty and the student’s cohort of classroom interactions and one-on-one meetings with advisors, committee members, and peers. Students participate in discipline-related academic activities such as organized workshops, colloquia, speaker series, and discussion groups. The intellectual academic structure also reflects the particular discipline or academic department to which the student belongs. By joining an academic program or intellectual community framework, students gain valuable professional socialization by witnessing firsthand how scholars think, behave, listen, address questions, offer criticism and act as practicing academics. Simultaneously, they may be part of less visible, less well-known or informal communities of practice that they or their peers create during their graduate careers. These communities overlap with the formal associations encountered in the course of an academic pursuit, but they are not closed, fixed, institutional units.

Socialization and Communities of Practice

Socialization is the “process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of society.”⁷ Supportive socialization in a graduate program plays a vital role in the student’s successful career and is usually strongest in the groups that students themselves build and affiliate with in order to provide an intellectual, social, and/or emotional armature for their lives as graduate students. Graduate students are socialized into the appropriate and accepted practices and expectations within their chosen fields and also as part of the larger university setting. We found evidence of three important stages in the socialization of graduate students as identified by Weidman et al.: anticipatory, formal, and informal. Navigating these stages of socialization is vital to the student’s success; indeed, unsuccessful socialization into the graduate program can contribute to the decision to abandon the degree program.⁸ One of the ways in which developing communities of practice may help students is by promoting peer support soon after arrival. Students we interviewed often identified this crucial anticipatory stage as especially confusing and challenging, given their personal expectations and ideals—ideals that actual practice subsequently altered.

Anticipatory socialization is closely connected to preconceived and often idealized expectations. For our interviewees, these varied according to their experience as undergraduates, and their aspirations and self-perceptions. To some extent, all incoming graduate students have a basic understanding of what getting a doctoral degree entails, but cannot yet fully appreciate the process. One of our interviewees, a fourth-year student in Classics, best captured this recognition in stating, “I think grad school is something that you can’t understand what you’re getting into until you’ve done it.” Graduate school is seen as a learning experience itself, not just in terms of intellectual growth but also self-discovery, as a sixth-year Medieval Studies student revealed: “I think part of school is just learning what routines and what strategies work best for you through a trial and error process.”

Most of the graduate students we interviewed arrived at Cornell with specific expectations about what their graduate careers would entail. Many felt their undergraduate experience might not have been appropriate or rigorous enough to prepare them for the demands of graduate work. A third-year student in History explained, “...you don’t want to sound like a moron and ask, ‘What is a historiographical paper?’ Things like that were [ones] I didn’t know, and maybe people who’ve gone to different undergraduate education ... [it] probably prepared them differently for that.”

During the anticipatory stage, students are often unfamiliar with the subject content and the terminology of their academic environment. They are uncertain of the acceptable social norms and behaviors in this new setting and often glean information from observations of and interactions with veteran graduate students, faculty, and department personnel, and it is through this formal and informal socialization that they learn them.

While the process of learning in the academy appears linear and well-articulated, with explicit rules—including those about expected completion times—part of the harsh reality of what actually happens at grad school includes the realization that expectations about finishing quickly are often unrealistic. Many of our interviewees expected to be much further along than they were and although most volunteered explanations why they were not—such as personal life events or circumstances that required a change in ad-

visors—most allowed that their anticipated schedule for completing a doctoral degree had been unrealistic:

I came in thinking that I was going to finish in four years. Which I think was somewhat naïve. Apparently, I was going to take my A (qualifying) exam early, and then I was going to write the dissertation in one year. I was going to finish the whole thing in four years. Obviously, here I am going into a sixth, so that was definitely altered. (5th year, English/Medieval Studies student)

In addition to acknowledged stages of socialization the recognition of implicit rules and expectations plays an important role in the concept of communities of practice. Communities of practice are organically-developed communities that grow and expand and constitute themselves through a variety of collaborative processes.⁹ Students often learn from their peers or advisors in ways that may not be explicitly articulated. Our interviews reveal that the building of support groups that may become communities of practice is the result of different motives, such as the perceptions of program flexibility and competitiveness or support among cohorts. Some of our subjects found their programs “very rigid” and wanted more flexibility in terms of learning, while others expressed a desire for more structure: “Knowing my personality and my work habits, I expected and found precisely that the lack of structure would cause me great difficulty” (4th year, Classics student). In extreme cases, instead of the expected structure, the student found the new environment “bizarre and random”: “[I expected to] receive guidance and structure and instead I got a whole world of trouble and no structure at all... So you can imagine the shock that I was in coming into this institution and experiencing all these things... I was 21 and it was little scary.” (3rd year, Medieval Studies student). It is in such situations that a cohort of like-minded students confronted with similar experiences helps to foster and build communities of practice to support learning and growth as students move through their graduate program.

The development of communities of practice is crucial in doctoral students’ success since it is both a vehicle and a space in which inherently social identities of self and community are fashioned, altered, magnified and developed through practice.¹⁰ Participation is thus a crucial component of learning—by

“both absorbing and being absorbed in—the ‘culture of practice’”.¹¹

The Learning Process

Learning in an Academic Setting

Learning in academic settings is formally measured through recognized markers of achievement. Generally, those milestones transcend any one program or institution, and validation is granted by accepted demonstrations of scholarly output. At Cornell University, as at other US doctoral institutions, students are expected to complete a set of requirements in coursework, advancing through established stages meant to prepare them to write and defend original research in the form of a dissertation.

In the humanities, the 19th-century Humboldtian ideal of scholar-as-solitary-researcher continues to dominate not only paradigms for research and publishing, but knowledge acquisition. It also encourages the notion that solitary research and writing is tied to academic success. This process of professional acculturation that humanities students experience heavily emphasizes one-on-one interactions through authority-based teaching, rather than the development of integrated learning through communities of practice. This paradigm allows students to obtain useful knowledge of normative role expectations by observing their more experienced peers and through formal instruction from faculty. Communication in this stage of socialization is “informative through learning material, regulative through embracing normative expectations, and integrative through faculty and student interaction.”¹²

Structured learning also occurs in response to individual advice from faculty, self-guided reading, or solitary research and writing. Our interviewees’ perceptions about their learning environment and its effect on their academic and professional success varied. Doctoral candidates in our study who characterized their graduate learning process in positive terms were most often students who entered their program prepared to embrace solitary learning and whose expectations about learning were informed by their experiences in pursuit of a master’s degree at other institutions. They typically defined learning as a form of one-on-one communication: “I think the ability to do one-on-one reading classes and really tailor your curriculum ..., at least for me, I really liked. I could then read in-depth in ways that would probably an-

noy a whole class of people and that was really good for me to be able to focus on certain areas.” (4th year, History student).

Many interviewees reported satisfaction with the experience of solitary research and writing. However, for others, the solitary approach often did not produce desired outcomes. Several students discussed their frustration with infrequent advice from committee members whose expertise or interests did not align closely with their own and increased their sense of isolation. A third-year student in Medieval Studies stated, “I struggle here to find ways to do what I want to do because no one on my committee does what I want to do...So I’m really walking alone in the dark here, trying to figure out what’s what.” Students reported that when committees did not provide a cohesive support structure, they were stymied in their efforts to progress:

You know, one committee member says, “dissertation, dissertation, dissertation, you can worry about publishing later.” And another one is like, “Well, if you publish something that is great.” And the other one is like, “You should really try to publish something.” And I am like, “well okay, you know, I am trying.” (7th year, History student).

Some of our interviewees valued learning opportunities that happened outside the classroom and were organized through official channels. Department-sponsored workshops were cited as providing a valued shared learning experience. A fourth-year History student explained,

So the prospectus workshop (which was last fall), was actually quite helpful. Unless you talk to someone who has written one, you kind of have no idea of what it is supposed to be doing so it was really helpful to have a young faculty member...run this little workshop...It was really helpful to get a sense of what was expected.

Learning Through Building Communities of Practice

In contrast to formal academic markers of accomplishment that indicate an individual has achieved mastery, learning in communities of practice is often intangible and immeasurable through formal assessment, and can best be characterized as an informal

stage of socialization, but one that can be profoundly transformative. Transformative learning modifies the way we do things and the way we think about them and the way we structure our life. Learning as an aspect of social practice involves the whole person, and denotes not only a relationship to particular activities or tasks, but a relationship to the social community that creates meaning and value for those tasks and activities.¹³

Numerous potential communities of practice exist. In rare cases, students draw their support solely from one community; in most instances, they utilize overlapping or co-existing support communities. They usually arrive on campus with an established personal network of friends and family who provide a support mechanism by offsetting the stress of academic life and bring a sense of balance and perspective. Throughout their graduate careers, students expand their personal/social community to include fellow students, and often mentors, too. These support communities differ from the communities of practice that students develop in the pursuit and advancement of their graduate career. Janson and her colleagues, doctoral students from New Zealand, indicate that the isolation and difficulties of navigating a doctoral degree were overcome by the spontaneous and critical development of a support group. Their group learned, developed skills together, and supported each other so that learning took on both problems of content and skill, as well as “experiences of process and feeling.”¹⁴ Membership in these communities of practice is fluid; their longevity, intensity and purpose is determined by its members. Individuals may participate, join and move in and out of several communities of practice that help shape their scholarly identities.

In communities of practice, learning is incremental, self-recognized and validated by its members which usually includes peers and peer experts. A student’s focus shifts from the formal acquisition of knowledge (classroom or faculty instruction) and tools to mastering the challenges of academia, to developing a community of support, among their cohort in the process of writing prospectus, proposals, preparing for exams or conferences. Students receive behavioral clues from role incumbents and seek validation through the establishment of their own peer group or groups. It is this type of learning from peers and self-built communities of practice that, according to Wenger, offers the most transformative experience

in the sense that it modifies self-awareness and effectively shapes identity.¹⁵

Yes, just [working] together. And everybody is working and sometimes we’ll talk, stop and talk about things, or I’ll have a question, like what do you think this means in French or something and somebody else will answer it. Stuff like that so it becomes sort of a helping thing as well. And sometimes we just gossip, or we’ll gossip for 15 minutes and then work and then gossip again. This next year we have a group that we got money to be a dissertation writing group and we’ll be doing that with more than two people. It’ll be like six of us. We’ll be working together and I hope we can organize it a few times a week. At least for me that’s a really good way to get work done. (6th year, Medieval Studies student).

Creating peer communities can be difficult, however. Two oft-cited stumbling blocks to the development and sustainability of communities of practice identified by our subjects were lack of access to adequate meeting space, and an inability to find other like-minded group members. The latter can be a particular challenge, as humanities student cohorts are often small in size, with individuals progressing through their programs on different timetables, often in different geographical locations. In our study, however, we learned of several examples of working groups that describe this type of intellectual and emotional support as essential for growth, progress, and wellbeing.

Organically-formed communities of practice offer crucial learning experience that can only happen outside the classroom. As a fifth-year English student explained,

I think I’ve probably been at times closer with that [reading group] community than I have with [my department]. Some of that is just because we all took courses together. We worked on the lecture series together and we go to the same lectures, the same reading groups. I am not a big reading group person, but I think that’s one of the main ways that social groups here form—they are on the reading groups. There’s sort of overlapping. I feel as though I have two overlapping communities here.

One student said that interacting with her cohort “is helpful in some way because you have the feeling that you are doing something with other people” (3rd year, Asian Religions student). In the process of learning through an informal community of practice, students cultivate their skills and develop as professional scholars; the process underscores their adherence to the values and perspectives of their community of practice, ensuring the continuity of those traditions.¹⁶

In this type of social learning, transformation and growth may be individual, but competence is given meaning and value by the community of peers engaged in the same activities.¹⁷ Our interviewees often talked about the insular qualities of their experience, primarily in the dissertation writing stage, but also pointed out that valuable aspects of learning to become a scholar were not necessarily insular or isolated:

In fact I usually meet with a friend, we have a “group” together, and once in a while we have other people come and we meet at the same coffee shop for at least three times a week for at least five hours. There is something about the friend thing. There is only so much screwing up you can do if there is somebody else there watching, so I find I do good work when she is there, when we’re working together. (6th year, Medieval Studies student).

Thus, our interviews revealed the impact of informal socialization in an organic, self-organized, and voluntary community of practice on learning.

Research Libraries and Communities of Practice

As we considered the importance of communities of practice, we wondered what role libraries could play in supporting, fostering, and sustaining them for doctoral students. Libraries are repositories of knowledge; they provide subject and information management expertise. In addition, they offer a neutral environment where students are supported but not formally evaluated. In analyzing our interview data, we identified a number of opportunities for the Cornell University Library to facilitate and strengthen the community of support for doctoral students and assuage some of the stress that they experience as they progress through their programs.

Traditionally, academic libraries provide research and teaching support through the dissemination and

preservation of scholarly information; discipline- or subject-specific workshops, classroom instruction, one-on-one research assistance, and study spaces. Yet many of them (e.g. the provision of individual study carrels and customized research consultations) continue to reinforce the model of scholarship as a solitary pursuit.

Given the value of communities of practice to socialize and empower doctoral students to transition into successful scholars, we propose that the library can move beyond its traditional role to foster an environment conducive to the development and growth of communities of practice. According to Wenger and his colleagues, such an environment should prioritize “valuing the learning they do, making time and other resources available for their work, encouraging participation, and removing barriers.”¹⁸ The direct ways in which the library can foster communities of practice is by bringing students with similar interests together, i.e. by making available dedicated space within the library—a natural and neutral location that invites intellectual discussion and work, outside of departmental offices, pressures and constraints. As a fifth-year History student suggested, “having some kind of work space that is ...just [for] graduate students, where maybe [I could] talk to a librarian if I needed would be really helpful.” At Cornell, we are building a communal space reserved for graduate students that offers group study rooms that promote collaborative work as well as quiet spaces for students who prefer individual research.

Many students we interviewed stated that often, it was only by chance that they discovered learning sources alternative to the traditional advice venues endorsed by department and program guidelines. Those who reported having learned valuable lessons from people or groups (including librarians) outside their immediate academic circle found these mentors through informal means. Connections were often forged as a result of chance encounters, such as through research consultations, course-related instruction sessions, and library workshops. A third-year Medieval Studies student explained, “I came to one of [the librarian’s] workshops..... Then I corresponded with her a couple of times, and then we started to meet very frequently. Now whenever I want to research something I go right to [her]. She’s been tremendously helpful in my study...”

Sharing practices requires regular interaction.

Our interviews reveal that the co-location of students who share similar experiences promotes the development of successful communities of practice. The library can bring together like-minded students to learn particular skills, such as finding grant sources, writing prospectuses, structuring dissertations, managing time, etc., in the form of intensive immersion programs or workshop series. This is particularly important since cohorts are often too small and people advance through their degrees at different speeds, leaving some students without a network of colleagues. A workshop series focused on one topic attracts students from various departments, regardless of discipline and year in the program. This structured environment can stimulate and inspire ongoing group discussions and practices within a sustained, supportive network of colleagues. Such a program is similar to dissertation or reading groups that larger departments support and that students in our study cited as positive collaborative experiences. Libraries can also help graduate students build communities of practice by establishing discipline-based programs for doctoral students. At Cornell, we have developed an annual, three-day immersion program for humanities PhD students that focuses on library research and digital archiving skills, and introduces scholarly communications and professional development practices.

Conclusions

While the majority of doctoral students we interviewed arrived at Cornell with preconceived expectations of what their graduate experience would entail, most found that they could not fully understand or appreciate the process of navigating a doctoral program. Many first-year students felt overwhelmed or under-supported as they struggled to negotiate the often-confusing environment. We identified socialization and participation in communities of practice as crucial components in the students' ability to acquire the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to succeed in their doctoral studies.

Our subjects reported developing and participating in overlapping communities throughout their time as graduate students. Entering graduate school situated them within an academic community of practitioners consisting of faculty, administrators, librarians, and fellow students. This formal framework of regu-

lated learning with a defined set of requirements and expectations provided an initial, seemingly straightforward roadmap for their journey toward a doctoral degree. However, as students progressed through their graduate careers, their networks of support evolved through the creation of informal, self-defined communities of practice that helped them move forward.. They often cited these means of learning outside the formalized academic community as vital in assisting them through the difficult initial transition.

The communities of practice our subjects described were varied and often overlapping. In some cases, groups developed organically as a result of students encountering or seeking out others who shared similar activities. Self-formed groups were also highly valued because they frequently existed independently and did not rely on formal recognition or oversight by academic departments or the academy. Students in our study also indicated that close physical proximity with others undergoing similar experiences frequently led to the successful development of communities of practice. Often, self-initiated communities of practice took the form of reading or writing groups, with informal meetings held at students' homes or in coffee shops. Other communities of practice, such as dissertation writing groups, also enjoy formal institutional support. Students in our study who identified an affiliation with a community of practice noted that these groups provided structure, accountability, support and a validation of their work—all instrumental components in the successful resolution of their doctoral careers.

As a result of our study, we identified a variety of ways in which libraries can provide support for doctoral students in the humanities. Examples include the provision of neutral meeting spaces outside of academic departments, the promotion of "neutral" librarian subject experts without departmental affiliation, the development and delivery of workshops that appeal to doctoral students across multiple departments (who nonetheless share interests and goals), and the creation of communities through sustained, "immersion"-style programs. Libraries can indeed play a key role in providing and supporting student-initiated communities of practice and thus contribute to students' ability to complete doctoral programs and to transition smoothly and in a timely manner from students to scholars.

Notes

1. Some large-scale projects that have studied the issue include the *Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools, 2008), the *Graduate Education Initiative*, funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation (Ehrenberg et al., 2009), and the *National Research Council Assessment of Research Doctoral Programs* (20). In addition, the National Science Foundation tracks the number of degrees awarded in its annual *Survey of Earned Doctorates* (SED) and produces other reports such as Thomas B. Hoffer and Vincent Welch, Jr., *Time to Degree of U. S. Research Doctorate Recipients Report* (National Science Foundation, 2006).
2. The study was supported by grants from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, the Council on Library and Information Resources, and funding from the respective Graduate Schools at Cornell and Columbia.
3. For the full results of our study see Gabriela Castro Gessner et al., Supporting Humanities Doctoral Student Success: A Collaborative Project between Cornell University Library and Columbia University Libraries (Council on Library and Information Resources, 2012).
4. Council of Graduate Schools. *Ph.D. Completion and Attrition: Policies and Practices* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools, 2010).
5. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also: Andrew Cox, "What are communities of practice? A comparative review of four seminal works," *Journal of Information Science* 31, no. 6 (2005): 527-40.
6. Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
7. J. C. Weidman, D. J. Twale and E. L. Stein, *Socialization of Graduate and Professional Students in Higher Education: A Perilous Passage?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
8. Council of Graduate Schools, *Ph.D. Completion and Attrition: Policy, Numbers, Leadership, and Next Steps*. (Washington, D. C.: Council of Graduate Schools, 2004).
9. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*. See: Annick Janson, Laurie Howard and Michèle Schoenberger-Orgad, "The Odyssey of PhD Students Becoming a Community of Practice," *Business Communication Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2004): 168-81. Accessed February 13, 2013. doi: 10.1177/1080569904265421.
10. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 146-47; 149-50.
11. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 95.
12. Weiden et al., *Socialization*, 13.
13. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 53.
14. Janson et al., *Odyssey*, 179.
15. Wenger, *Communities*.
16. Wenger, *Communities*, 6.
17. Wenger, *Communities*, 138.
18. Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002): 13.