

## Reflections on International Graduate Students and Their Community of Practice

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### **Abstract:**

*Most times, international students at higher education institutions find support amongst themselves as they share similar experiences related to adjusting to a new environment. We, as international students, share our experiences of forming a community of practice. Through our personal experiences as narrated in this article, we outline certain resources and support that we believe can contribute towards supporting international graduate students to thrive in a Canadian university.*

### **Key Words:**

International graduate students, community of practice, leadership, education, personal experience, narrative, post-secondary education.

### **Introduction**

Research has shown that international graduate students face many difficulties when adjusting to higher education in Canada (Andrade, 2006, Ballard, 1996, Barker et al., 1991, Lacina, 2002, Myles & Cheng, 2003). The difficulties they face can be grouped into academic difficulties and socio-cultural difficulties. Academic difficulties could manifest as academic knowledge, language, and managing workload (Abel, 2002, Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Socio-cultural difficulties can manifest in personal challenges, such as finances and family support; psycho-social challenges, such as making new friends, isolation, loss of social status, and understanding the rules that apply in specific social situations (Myles, & Cheng, 2003).

Community of Practice is a broad terminology that has been applied by various practitioners across many fields and contexts. Through engaging with others, individuals with a common goal or interest come together to enhance their knowing and learning. The work of Wenger (2002) was the start of a body of research on communities of practice. Many subsequent studies investigated different aspects of a community of practice, such as how to create it, design it and maintain it, in addition to creating frameworks.

In our case, our community of practice was self-sustained and created unintentionally, although it manifested the three characteristics of a Community of Practice (CoP). These characteristics are: the *domain* – a community of practice has a shared identity based on mutual interest; a *community* – a sense of belonging where individuals develop a relationship that helps them learn and grow; and lastly, the *practice* – where a group of individuals (practitioners) share a common practice and work towards enhancing it (Lave & Wenger, 1998). The exchange of experiences, tools, strategies, stories, and ways of improving a certain practice are the building blocks of a community of practice. Our CoP was a result of a need, and it was maintained because that need kept evolving into different needs as we progressed in our doctoral work and in our integration into the Canadian context.

We discussed reasons that made us a Community of Practice and not just a group of friends. We thought about this question often, and every time we concluded that we were indeed a Community of Practice. It is true that friendships were formed between some of us, but the main reason we reached out to each other was for the doctoral work, which was our “shared domain of interest.” We often found ourselves in discussions about our practice. During these discussions, we shared our experiences and we built on each other’s learned lessons. Our discussions were the main source of knowledge to us on how to navigate graduate life.

Our interest in this paper is beyond the CoP; it is focused on the lessons that we can learn from this CoP in regard to the needs that were addressed, the resources and the support that we wished existed. We hope that by writing this reflective piece, we contribute to creating a space to discuss the unique needs of international graduate students.

### **Eliana’s Reflection: Multiple Levels of Support**

As I think back on my five years in my PhD program in Canada, I realize that I learned and changed a lot. Definitely, this change was painful at times. Painful because it did not only pertain to academics but to my whole existence: my cultural background, my intercultural competencies, and the power dynamics. In addition, it was due to a lack of knowledge about the resources and sometimes a lack of existence of the resources. If you talk to people in academia, they tell you about how important supervisory relationships are; for international graduate students, it is even more important, due to the fact that the supervisor is sometimes the only person the student knows. In addition, often students are here on a student visa; therefore, any trouble with their studies could be a threat to their visa.

They say that graduate school is lonely because it is a personal journey. For an international graduate student, it is even a lonelier journey considering that we have no family anywhere close by, and sometimes we do not even know any person in the whole country. This was my case; I came to Canada on my own, and I did not know anyone. The only person I talked to was my supervisor.

### ***Academics***

One of the major things I struggled with at the start was the difference in pedagogical approaches between my home university and the Canadian university I was enrolled in at that time. I came from a teacher-centred pedagogy, and without any introduction, I was asked to do group work, presentations, and classroom discussions. When I think back on that, I remember the mistakes I made and the pushback I exhibited. Now, I wish somebody would have explained to me what was expected of me in these new situations as a student.

### ***Academic Writing***

Also related to academics, I had little understanding of what academic writing was and the techniques I was expected to use. One of my supervisors at that time invited me to her house and gave me a one-on-one tutoring session to explain academic writing. Later on, I discovered that some writing support was offered, and I used that to improve my writing. It took me three years to understand what was required of me. I shared these resources within our CoP. I shared what I learned as well as the location of the writing support because it should not take someone three years to figure these things out. I remember the professors gave me As for all my assignments in my six courses, and now when I look back, the courses did not deserve an A. I would have appreciated some constructive formative feedback on the writing. This would have helped me realize that I needed to seek help for my writing. The “everybody gets an A” approach slowed my process in learning, and when the time came to write my candidacy proposal, I was not ready.

### ***Professional Relationships and Expectations***

Similarly, informal relationships with professors and faculty members as well as expectations, rights, and procedures were things that we struggled with. Our CoP often had conversations about how to send emails and how to address a professor informally with their first name. I personally struggled with metaphors, and I couldn't understand what they meant exactly. In addition, one main point that occupied our conversations was the expectations, the difference between domestic and international students, and what we could apply for in terms of scholarships. This support expanded to include preparation for candidacy. I was fortunate with a great supervisor who helped through candidacy and had three mock defenses with me while others did not receive any support from their supervisors. For many of us, preparing for candidacy was a time that we spent together, reviewing each other's presentations, practicing together and sharing questions that we had gathered from our supervisors. For me, it was very important to hear that other people were also not able to write, or that they also got rejected from a conference or that they also needed writing support. When I was not

sure about my writing style, my community helped me by pointing out what the problem was and how to avoid it because they had been there.

On a socio-cultural level, the new lifestyle, intercultural communication, lack of friends, homesickness, and finding a job without having a Canadian experience were some of my major challenges. My community members gave me advice on how to adapt to my new lifestyle and how to adapt to political correctness. They explained the difference in communication styles that I was not understanding. They helped me "subsidize" my lack of friends by becoming my friends, by introducing me to Canadian activities like board games, indoor trampolines and hiking. By sharing their homesickness and difficulties finding a job themselves, I felt that I was not alone on an island and that it wasn't my fault. It helped me overcome the feeling of guilt that it was me who was doing something wrong to help me realize that it was the norm and that I had to be patient.

### ***Support I Wished I Had***

Since I did not grow up in Canada, and I came straight for my PhD, I did not have the social and professional capital, and most importantly, I did not have publications. Looking back at the last five years of my life, I do have a wish list. I wish my instructors gave me honest feedback on my papers and directed me to get help. I wish my faculty had a mandatory academic writing class that I had to take at the beginning of my degree. I wish all the homework required in my six classes were targeted toward a conference proposal or journal submission. I wish I had a mentor who was Canadian and ready to support me with intercultural competencies. I wish I had more networking opportunities to meet people in my new environment. I wish there was a formal CoP where all these things were facilitated. I also wish I was given the opportunity to publish with peers or professors. I wish there were more structured service learning opportunities that would help me integrate into the work environment.

### **Fouzia's Reflection: Re-entering the world of Academia**

Most graduate students return to pursue their studies further after they have gained some experience in the field. As with me, with six years of work experience, I sought to pursue my doctoral degree. As most graduate programs are demanding and require a student to be highly committed to their studies, I was literally "married" to my studies, where most of my time was spent reading and drafting my research proposal. With the added stress came the need for an outlet. I started to look for other sources of guidance, beyond my professors, where my struggles were well understood and others faced similar challenges and aspirations as me. As an international student, I felt lost and alone in this journey for the most part, and I did not know where to begin.

### ***A Sense of Belonging***

Every international student that I have personally known, regardless of where they are in their program, goes through a phase of loneliness. This could encompass homesickness, lack of friends either due to cultural or language barriers, or just by being too occupied with studies. I too, experienced this. However, over time, I took the initiative and decided to step out of my comfort zone.

Over time, I had the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions with other graduate students through my classes, and I started to build a bond with them. What mainly brought us together was our research interests and how we could explore our options while seeking growth, both professionally and personally. In doing so, we started to meet regularly, talking about our research plans for the near and distant future. We started taking pride and joy in helping each other, either by proofreading the other's proposal, or by participating in a mock defense for one another. We informed each other about upcoming conferences, workshops we had attended, and lessons learned from past research. Through continuous knowledge sharing, we supported each other in and outside the classroom. Subconsciously, we were ensuring that each other succeeded. We fully embraced each other's company, and I started to find solace in our little community.

### ***Scholarly Writing***

As an international graduate student, I have been able to engage in scholarly writing by being part of a Community of Practice. Through networking and seeking other graduate students who have similar aspirations to publish in the field of academia, I have been able to team up with them in order to explore certain research topics further. There have been times when I have asked my colleagues to proofread my work, and through their valuable feedback, I have been able to improve my writing. Learning, in this essence, has been a two-way process.

### ***Culture Shock***

Lastly, given that I have spent many years studying in the US, I thought to myself that moving to Canada would not be much different. How wrong I was! Canada exudes culture on a whole different level, and I realized this within my first year here. However, talking with both Canadians and non-Canadians helped me to understand and immerse myself in the Canadian mindset. I was quick to pick up the mannerisms, thought processes, work ethics and style just by conversing and working with my graduate student colleagues. I also learned of the various challenges that certain groups in Canada face, particularly in the world of academia. Minority groups and First Nations issues in Canada differ significantly compared to other countries, such as the US and Australia. Having a support system such as this opened a whole new discourse for me where I was exposed to Canadian history and politics that further deepened my understanding of the issues at hand.

## **Benefits of International Students Forming Communities of Practice**

In summary, we found that five overarching themes emerged from our Community of Practice. These themes outline the areas where we received support and are listed below:

### ***Theme 1: Writing support and advice***

Our community helped us to identify the gaps in our scholarly writing, which led to us seeking the right support.

### ***Theme 2: Supervisor relations and academic expectations***

Interestingly, through our Community of Practice, we have gained a broader understanding of the inner workings of our department or faculty. Specifically, the etiquettes and expectations of working with a supervisor.

### ***Theme 3: Trust***

Being part of a Community of Practice provided the comfort in knowing that our struggles are not just limited to us, but they are also the struggles of others. With our experience, comfort set in and we all eventually became comfortable in each other's presence, which led to building a relationship of trust.

### ***Theme 4: Intercultural competencies***

Through our sharing of stories, we grew a firm understanding of our new society and surroundings. Each one of us contributed with our personal experiences, and each of these little stories painted a broader, fuller picture.

### ***Theme 5: Job finding/volunteering/service learning***

Within our network, we formed a directory of resources that encompassed skills needed for potential jobs; it included where and how we could acquire those skills. Most importantly, the feeling of not being "alone" with our struggles helped us to move forward.

## **Conclusion**

With the experiences that we have shared above, there is a clear indication that Communities of Practice is an area that needs to be explored further within higher education institutions. A Community of Practice is commonly seen and experienced within the higher education arena, but it is rarely recognized for its potential to help graduate students, particularly international students, succeed while pursuing their degrees. An underlying principle of this phenomenon is to provide authentic support, so there needs to be further study on how this can be incorporated into daily practices in higher education institutions. Possibly a policy framework or a model can encapsulate the key themes we have listed above.

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