











# The Interstitial Doctoral Life of #thesisthinkers: When the Hidden Curriculum Might Be All There Is...

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## #THESISTHINKERS: WHAT IS IT?

#thesisthinkers is the name we've given to our long-term scholarly collaboration together as doctoral scholars (or students), graduates, and supervisors in the field of HES. Currently, there are 11 of us: 4 supervisors, 4 PhD graduates, and 3 doctoral scholars, and we are all university workers. The #thesisthinkers' context is this: we're not all in the same

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department (or an academic one at all in some cases) or even in the same University (we work and study across 6 universities at last count). Many of us have uneven attachments to HES as our primary field—especially where there are cognate fields and professions that have shaped our subjectivities (including design, science, secondary education, philosophy, library studies, and allied health among them). For some of us, #thesisthinkers is the only research community that supports our labour, identities, and projects as doctoral supervisors and scholars. It is not sanctioned as a supervision pedagogy by any Department, School, or Faculty; it doesn't count as a developmental activity on any institutional register for supervision development; there's no milestone requirement that mandates student participation in it as part of their candidature, and the supervisors involved do

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not even receive workload for the work that goes into establishing, nurturing, and maintaining #thesisthinkers. One might say that the work of #thesisthinkers is hidden, underground, and unacknowledged. Yet between 2016 and 2022 through sheer persistence, #thesisthinkers will have acted as the main pedagogical mechanism to support 4 part-time doctoral scholars to complete, and together and separately, we will have produced over 85 peer reviewed scholarly outputs. While completion and publication are often standard metrics for research success, much more interesting to us is how a pedagogical practice like #thesisthinkers—one that has an interstitial life in the curriculum underground—survives and remains productive as a form of interdependence. Given its institutional slipperiness, what might explain how #thesisthinkers continues to sustain itself?

### WHAT DO WE DO TOGETHER IN #THESISTHINKERS?

First, it is important to note that #thesisthinkers complements the arrangements of individual doctoral supervisors and scholars (and those in panel mode too). It is not a substitute for the labour that is specific to the close-up work generated by supervision's attention to the scholar and their production of text (or designed to be one); rather, #thesisthinkers is intended to articulate, join, extend, and challenge those conversations—it is a place of communal puzzling infused with the generosity and interdependence of co-inquiry. Second, as much as #thesisthinkers supports doctoral scholars' candidature and progress, it can also be understood as a place of shared supervision pedagogy—where supervisors participate in learning about supervision alongside the company of colleagues. Third, what we also have in common is a curiosity about the field of HES, and how our projects enact care and challenge for a field of inquiry (Peseta et al., 2021). #thesisthinkers brings together scholars and supervisors who are exploring the way HES may be the field they are producing new knowledge in, for, and about. (See also Frick's chapter discussing creative pedagogues and Wisker's chapter on 'Fridaying'.) That commitment and context can change as the research proceeds and new paths are explored and forged. So, what do we do together? Is it all that unusual?

Since 2016, we have met for 2 hours each month, sharing the responsibility for curating a collective agenda. The first hour is typically devoted to one or two doctoral scholars' work—a draft article, thesis chapter, conference paper, a discussion about data, methodology, conceptual and

theoretical spines—something a doctoral scholar has written (or is thinking about) and is seeking conversation to take the next step. Their piece is circulated a week before the meeting, alongside a set of questions/puzzles they are inviting us into. The second hour is more variable. Over the years, we have engaged with research topics and doctoral practices that run across our projects (e.g., reflexivity, identity, theory, publishing, reviewing, impact) as a block (say for 3 months) or as something more one off. As we puzzle our way through the particularities of being HE researchers and how our projects contribute to the field, we also engage with the scholarly literature about doctoral life and with practitioners who offer insight about it.

Since 2017, we also make time for a dedicated four days away writing together, twice a year. Based on Grant's (2006) Women Writing Away residential model, we commit to a set of writing goals before we go on retreat so that our energies are focused on writing. Structured mainly around individual writing time, with optional and short activities (for new researchers, i.e., stylish writing; first sentences), a Critical Friend pairing for the entire retreat, a Slow Reading session over wine and chocolate (we read an article together, each person reads a paragraph out loud, after each one we pause to discuss it before moving to the next), a compulsory work-in-progress session (in a trio, each participant has 45 minutes to bring a puzzle from their writing for collective problem-solving and reflection), a trivia night, and much laughing and chat over food and wine, our aim is to reconnect with our writing lives as researchers without the daily grind of distraction. We do not count word production like some doctoral retreats and writing boot camps do (we can see some merit in the pleasure of watching a daily word count increase). Instead, we design the retreats in ways that move us between the solitude a writer so often desires, the conviviality we crave, and the responsibility of accounting for our writing and thinking to each other while on retreat.

### WHAT MAKES #THESISTHINKERS STICKY?

There are likely five things.

#### *The Work of Usefulness Is Shared and Co-created, and It Shifts*

#thesisthinkers keeps going because it does something useful. Leaning on Roxå and Mårtensson's (2015) work on microcultures in HE where

aspects of trust, significance, and shared responsibility for a collective developmental agenda are crucial, we too must decide our ‘usefulness’ as a way of showing how, and why, we matter to one another. Each of us has a hand in keeping #thesisthinkers going, making it work, and contributing our labour to it. No doubt there have been moments of frustration, of waning energy, and of asking: Should we keep this going? Of what ‘use’ is this to me, and to us, now? On ‘use’, Ahmed (2018) writes:

queer use [is] the work you have to do to be. The more you are blocked, the more you have to try to find a way through. The less support you have the more support you need. We might become each other’s resources, we prop each other up, because we understand how diminishing it can be to have fight for an existence, to have to fight, even, to enter a room.

For some of us, the act of keeping #thesisthinkers alive and active is our way of remembering, declaring, and keeping alive our identities, practices and contributions as researchers and supervisors in work environments that can be ambivalent at best, and hostile at worst.

### *It’s Specific to Individuals’ Research Projects*

To complement individual supervision, many universities (including the ones we work in) offer an array of centralised support and conversation for both doctoral scholars and supervisors. Workshops, mentoring, modules, seminars, Shut Up and Write sessions, conferences, and the like now litter the online international environment. The response to COVID has also made it possible for doctoral scholars to access a larger community of researchers. In #thesisthinkers, we aim to keep the focus (and the expectation) on care for the student, their research project, and their wrestling with research as it plays out alongside the demands of new knowledge production. The time in #thesisthinkers monthly meetings is for doctoral scholars to exercise their judgement while the rest of us are encouraged and facilitated to see how that student’s wrestling offers lessons for our own research.

### *It’s Relational*

The PhD is a long commitment, and we need colleagues beside us. Over the course of #thesisthinkers, we have gotten to know one another. We recognise Giedre’s theoretical writing demands a certain kind of clear-headed attention from us. We know Fiona has just finished a writing

course with a noted Australian poet and we notice the transformations to her writing. We are alongside Delyse as she shapes a post-PhD research programme. We share in Robyn's joy at wonderful examiners' reports. We are there as Britt and Gina encounter the frustration and minutiae of an ethics application, and we marvel at how disciplined Sarah is in publishing articles to be included in her thesis. In summary, we commiserate and celebrate when one of us reaches a milestone or achievement: graduation, a new job, a successful grant, an academic promotion, a book, article, and on occasion, a new family addition. While #thesisthinkers draws us together as HE researchers and workers, the conversations consolidate into a connection with each other that travel well beyond the PhD.

*Outputs Are Not the Focus: Cultivating Good Thinking  
and Academic Judgement Are*

While we are proud of the 85+ scholarly outputs we have generated, at the heart of #thesisthinkers is feeding our research imaginations so that our contributions prise open an inquiry for others. It has become too easy for doctoral scholars to be inducted into a research disposition that pursues quantity and outputs that is now endemic in an academic culture of over-work and over-production. Our focus together in #thesisthinkers is to develop our judgements about what good thinking is, to practise justifying our judgements to one another as researchers, and to learn from the responses offered by others. In the main, the outputs follow the thinking; although on occasion, they can also function to push along the communication of our thinking too.

*It's Expansive*

At one level, the endpoint of #thesisthinkers for doctoral scholars (and their supervisors) is graduation. It marks the end of the doctoral road and launches the beginning of a life as an independent researcher. Yet, that is not the only narrative we cultivate in #thesisthinkers. We encourage colleagues to continue and reset their participation as an opportunity to craft the next phase of their research life. This might include shaping a new programme of research, taking a step into a funded grant collaboration, or indeed, becoming doctoral supervisors themselves and bringing their own students to #thesisthinkers as an act of expansion. The act of continually co-creating a collective #thesisthinkers agenda suggests that these research

transitions can be accommodated (side note: all of us currently work at a university, and we've not encountered yet a non-university post-PhD life in the way doctoral scholars in other fields may be likely to).

### #THESISTHINKERS: A CURRICULUM HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT?

In our deliberations about #thesisthinkers as a productive interstitial doctoral space, it is worthwhile reflecting on the conditions and boundaries that mark some aspects of learning (and curriculum) as secret and visible, intended and unintended, formal and informal. In much of the scholarly work about the hidden curriculum in doctoral education, there is very often a distinction about the location of students' learning experiences (in or outside of the academy), and whether the institutional structures and systems set up for doctoral scholars' learning, signals an intention by the university for students to learn something in particular (usually related to academic knowledge). Below, Eliot, Bengsten, Guccione, and Kobayashi (2020) offer their definition:

we regard the hidden curriculum in doctoral education as the unofficial (and informal) channels of genuine and useful learning that can be acquired within or outwith both the physical and metaphorical walls of academia. By contrast, the formal curriculum from which knowledge is specifically gained by study refers to activities where learning is typically acquired via the official (or structured) doctoral courses, seminars, workshops, and supervisory meetings—strictly within what we regard to be the academic setting. (p. 4)

While Elliot et al.'s (2020) distinction is no doubt analytically helpful, by this definition, #thesisthinkers effectively confounds these boundaries. They make far more sense when the supervision relationship appears more typical: where supervisors and students are co-located in the same university, and together, they can take advantage of the structures and resources on offer as part of an institution's doctoral programme. In #thesisthinkers' case, the supervisors often work at a different university than where the student is enrolled; in some cases, there is no local discipline-based expertise where the student is enrolled; and owing to students' part-time candidature, their access to, and subsequent participation in, a research culture is limited. #thesisthinkers is a response to precisely these kinds of anomalies.

Because of our context, there is great deal about #thesisthinkers that is intentional, but we are invited to adapt to curriculum systems that do not acknowledge our cross-institutional circumstances or its particularity. #thesisthinkers emerged exactly because the doctoral education and supervision pedagogy we wanted was absent from the menu of experiences our institutions had laid out for us. Indeed, we had to co-create the research relationships, interdependencies, and cross-institutional conversations we were seeking. Despite its lack of institutional recognition, #thesisthinkers is sustained by us because it is local, emergent, co-created, useful, and the care for it, is shared among trusted friends and colleagues. To our minds, it is exactly the kind of curriculum that a doctoral education invites.

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