Through and Towards an interdisciplinary Research Community: Navigating Academia as a Lone Doctoral Scholar

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INTRODUCTION: AN ACCIDENTAL DOCTORAL SCHOLAR

I became a doctoral scholar by a complete accident. Of course, the doctoral study position did not simply drop down from the sky; to acquire it, I had to create a solid research plan, discuss my ideas with potential supervisors, and finally become accepted to a doctoral programme at the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä. However, what led me to do all this was a series of unplanned, serendipitous events, which were *not* on my to-do list when I finished my Master's degree in 2012. At the time, in fact, I had said to myself that I would never write a single academic text in my life again. Obviously, I was wrong.

If I could characterise my work in academia with one word, it would be: coincidences. Still, after two and a half years since obtaining my PhD, I do

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not have a career plan or a clear idea what I want to do "when I grow up". Therefore, it is challenging for me to advise or provide tips to potential doctoral scholars. How can I tell others how to plan their doctoral studies when mine were very messy: working outside of a research group, from abroad, first part-time and later with several short, separate funding periods? Who am I to mentor anyone, knowing that all doctoral journeys are different, depending on one's background, the country or the university where they are studying, the discipline(s), the surrounding academic community, and the sudden surprise opportunities that we have no way of knowing about before they are right there in front of us.

What I *can* do, however, is to look back at all the happenstances of my doctoral journey and reflect on *what was actually going on*. What were the key opportunities I spotted and took? In this chapter, I provide an auto-ethnographic (Ellis et al., 2011) account of two *key incidents* (Kroon & Strum, 2007) which ended up shaping my doctoral studies in a way I did not perhaps realise at the time, but retrospectively examined had a long-term influence on how my future research and collaboration would look like. As Elliot et al. (2020) pointed out, however, *learning* that happens within hidden curriculum might often seem accidental or unintentional but should not be underestimated because of that. Instead, this type of learning can be genuine and valuable, and, therefore, as important as the one taking place within formal curriculum.

Given that my research topic as well as my *learning space* during my doctoral studies was highly interdisciplinary, I have built the chapter around the concept of *the world of opportunities* by Brodin and Avery (2020), who examined early-career researchers' development of researcher independence in multidisciplinary learning environments. In their article, Brodin and Avery (2020) presented two ways of developing researcher independence: *away from* the epistemic/social community or *through and toward* the community (Brodin & Avery, 2020, p. 420). According to them, what determines the outcome between these two trajectories is (1) the quality of the social interactions but also (2) one's temporal (career-stage) and spatial (geography, epistemology) position. For example, if a doctoral scholar is supervised by a highly mono-disciplinary supervisor, it is possible that they will not encounter viable opportunities for interdisciplinary engagement in their learning space. Alternatively, a doctoral scholar might feel lack of acceptance (of their knowledge) in the interdisciplinary environment that they are in. In both these cases, the interdisciplinary community might feel *alien* or become *avoided* altogether. By

contrast, doctoral scholars who have chances to engage in interdisciplinary learning spaces also have the most optimal conditions to create collaborative networks, as well as to develop their researcher independence (Brodin & Avery, 2020).To illustrate how I developed my researcher independence *through and towards* the community of higher education researchers, I first present two key incidents which significantly contributed to me gradually becoming an independent scholar. In both incidents, the hidden curriculum and *hidden curriculum agents*—other doctoral scholars, colleagues, and supervisors supporting my doctoral journey (Elliot et al., 2020)—had a crucial role in my doctoral learning. After presenting the key incidents, I will show how the positive learning experiences during my doctoral studies led to several research networks and collaborations now that I am a postdoctoral researcher, before concluding the chapter. By doing this, I want to offer valuable insights to other early-career researchers engaged in interdisciplinary research, particularly the ones working outside of a research group.

Key Incident 1: Organising an International Conference

In the spring of 2017, my PhD funding was about to come to an end. By that time, I had been working on my doctoral project for a year and a half; first part-time alongside a non-research job at the university, and afterwards on two short grants from my department. Fortunately, I did not have to abandon my goal of becoming a doctor, as I was then contacted by the institution where I had worked previously, inquiring if I would be willing to accept a six-month contract to work on a research project on multidisciplinary peer-mentoring and to organise an international higher education research conference. Having no other funding in sight, I accepted the job offer, even though it meant less time for working on my thesis.

Both the research project and the conference organisation turned out to be highly valuable experiences not only in terms of doctoral learning but also in developing researcher independence towards the higher education research community. The tacit knowledge I acquired during those six months, especially prior and during the conference, was my first introduction to the "messy world" of higher education research. As many scholars have concluded, *higher education research* is a scattered field and difficult

to define (e.g. Clegg, 2012; Macfarlane & Grant, 2012; Tight, 2020). This is because those studying higher education represent several different "background disciplines", such as education, sociology, economics, or history, meaning that whenever higher education researchers come together—to publish at a journal or present at a conference, for example—the epistemological understanding of those involved might highly differ from each other. Negotiating and reflecting those differences could be considered vital for those who want to work their way *towards* the higher education research community. Otherwise, that community might remain alien or become avoided, in Brodin and Avery's (2020) terms.

The reason why understanding this mélange of researchers and their backgrounds was so important to me at the time was because I would also participate in the conference as a doctoral scholar, presenting my preliminary research on doctoral education. In other words, this versatile crowd of higher education researchers would be my audience and potential future collaborators. Thus, knowing who would be in the conference, what they had researched before, who they were doing research with, and whether or not they were approachable for an early-career researcher were some of the issues that were important but that I could not possibly know without help.

I was organising the conference with a colleague whom I had known for five years at that point and who, like me, was doing their PhD in higher education research. Unlike me, however, they had already attended several international higher education research conferences, written articles with several scholars around the world, and worked on different projects for several years. From this colleague (and friend), I would come to learn a great deal in those few months that we were planning the event. The learning would happen in the most mundane of situations: while creating the conference programme, planning who should present with whom in the same session, responding to participants' emails, or creating nametags for them.

While the formal outcome of the conference—the fact that it happened, as well as my presentation in it—is what stands in my CV, it is not what was the most helpful for me as a doctoral scholar at the time. Instead, it were those boring, often also quite hectic moments in the midst of the organisation process that would serve as valuable *mini-learning opportunities* (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 6). By doing this organisational work with my colleague, I gradually began to get a preliminary idea of the higher education researcher community and whether or not I wanted to be part of it in the

future. Given that my experiences of mono-disciplinary conferences in linguistics had not been equally positive, I had a feeling that I had found "my crowd".

Key Incident 2: ECHER

About a year after the conference, I received an email from the same colleague I had organised the conference with. They explained that there was a small group of scholars who were thinking of "reviving" the network for Early-Career Higher Education Researchers (ECHER[1]), which had been established in 2011 but had since become dormant. My colleague had recommended me for the other group members to become involved due to my interest in doctoral education and my writing skills. The opportunity sounded fascinating, so I said yes and met with the group.

A few months later we launched the ECHER blog, which celebrated its fourth anniversary in December 2022. During these four years, ECHER has published dozens of blog posts on higher education research, written mostly by early-career scholars around the world. We have also gathered resources on various topics, such as academic writing and higher education research as a field, and interviewed editors of higher education research journals about writing and publishing.[2]

Again, however, it is not the visible outcomes, such as the blog posts, that have contributed most to my (post)doctoral learning. Even though creating those texts has been interesting and taught me a great deal about writing and editing, it is the informal, hidden communication "behind the scenes" that has been the most beneficial in terms of becoming part of a higher education research community. Within the past four years, I have had hundreds of hours of informal chatter and email exchanges with people around the world that I know because of ECHER. In these chats, I have learned about writing and publishing, events, interesting scholars and their work, differences between different higher education systems, and generally about how to navigate the 21st academia as an early-career higher education scholar. In other words, for me, ECHER has become a network of each other's hidden curriculum agents, sharing the tacit

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[1] https://echer.org/
[2] A colleague and I wrote about this journey and our community development in 2021 (see Brankovic & Aarnikoivu, 2021).

knowledge we have received throughout our academic journeys in a variety of disciplines.

Had I said "no" to ECHER back in 2018, my research network would most likely be much smaller now. Surely, there might have been other, alternative networks for me to join but ECHER has given me a unique space to grow as a researcher, as being its co-coordinator has allowed me to do more or less what I want. Having such freedom as a doctoral scholar is uncommon. Finding like-minded early-career scholars willing (or able) to do a great deal of voluntary work for an online community is also uncommon. Moreover, I would most likely not have gone and taught in Siberia in 2020–2021, met many of my current colleagues, or even do research on academic writing because I would not have met some of the key people who, in one way or the other, contributed to the path that I am on right now. Finally, and most importantly, I would not have been able to see all the fruitful discussions that can take place when early-career higher education researchers from all continents come together to discuss the challenges of the twenty-first-century higher education.

Transitioning to Being a Postdoctoral Researcher: Who to Say "Yes" or "No" To?

Moving on to the postdoctoral stage, I have kept working outside of an established research group. While it is sometimes lonesome not to have a group with which to meet regularly to discuss a specific research topic, I have constantly been able to create new joint projects with researchers around the world. This has been essential, as I have kept working at distance from abroad, not having a regular campus access.

What has been different within the past two years compared to my doctoral studies is that my research network has quickly grown immensely. These new collaborators did not appear from nowhere: I knew them because of something I already did during my PhD—through a conference or ECHER, for example. And, like the two key incidents above, also my current networks and collaborations are largely a result of an accident—being in the right place at the right time, and expressing interest to the right people. In Table 1, I have listed my current research networks and collaborations, when they began, how I became involved, and what their explicit or hidden outcomes are.

Table 1 My postdoctoral collaborations or networks and their origin

Collaboration or network	Discipline/field/ theme	Start (and end)	How I became involved	Outcomes
Network of Early-Career Higher Education Researchers (ECHER); ~400 members from around the world	Higher education research (multiple disciplinary backgrounds)	Fall 2018–	A colleague told another scholar that I have the skills needed to edit a blog	Network coordination, an academic blog, online meetings, further networking, a published paper
Journal of Praxis in Higher Education (JPHE): An academic journal with an editorial team of ~15 scholars from several different countries	Praxis in higher education	2019–2023	I volunteered to become part of the editorial team at a symposium	Publishing an OA journal in higher education research
Postdoctoral projects on academic writing (four collaborators)	Academic writing and writing support	2020–	I was contacted by different co-authors by email. Some of them knew me from before, some of them did not	Three published papers (currently in progress); future ideas for collaboration
A peer-mentoring group consisting of early- and mid-career women scholars	Doctoral education	Fall 2021	I knew a scholar who had joined the group earlier and later invited me to become part of the group as well	Regular support, potentially an open network/ platform for researchers around the world
A COST Action (ReMO)	Researcher mental health	Fall 2021	My article on peer-mentoring was spotted by the COST Action Grant Manager	Several initiatives around the topic of researcher mental health and wellbeing

(*continued*)

Table 1 (continued)

Collaboration or network	Discipline/field/ theme	Start (and end)	How I became involved	Outcomes
Alternative Internationalisms group consisting of several scholars around the world	Internationalisation of higher education	Spring 2022	I was contacted by my PhD supervisor, asking if I was interested in joining a writing project	A published article-to-be in a special issue; regular online meetings

Looking at Table 1, and particularly the column *How I became involved*, it becomes clear that most collaborations are a result of someone knowing someone, being in the right place at the right time, or someone reading or hearing about your earlier work. In fact, I might claim that none of the items listed in the table resulted from me consciously pursuing those opportunities. Instead, they came to be by accident and by seizing the opportunity when it presented itself because I felt it would be something fun and interesting at the time.

The *world of opportunities* has, in fact, become so immense that I have had to turn some offers down, no matter how interesting they have been. This is where the skill of saying "no" has been incredibly important, as most opportunities are not typically funded, at least in the beginning. Which opportunities to take is, however, not an easy question, and sometimes there are attempts to collaborate which simply end up wasting time. While we can never get those hours back, what we can do is learn to recognise what makes a collaboration successful. For me, it is not the "prestige"—publishing in "top journals" with those from "top universities". Nor is it getting a long list of good-looking CV items or ticking boxes of "this is what I should do to advance in my career". Instead, it is working with people whose ways of working, research interests, and research values align with my own—people who work in higher education to make it more accessible, just, and equitable.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have looked back at two key incidents that ended up shaping my research networks and collaboration in unexpected, yet positive ways. In these two interdisciplinary learning spaces—an international higher education conference and ECHER—I could develop my researcher independence *through and towards* the community of higher education researchers, instead of away from it. As a result, the world of higher education research became familiar and comfortable to me, rather than alien or avoidable. This, in turn, helped me to form further research networks and collaborations within higher education research after obtaining my PhD.

As Brodin and Avery (2020) pointed out, for the work towards the community to be successful, (1) the quality of the social interactions and (2) the scholar's temporal/spatial position matter. Looking at (1), there were two hidden curriculum agents or group of agents who shared their tacit knowledge on the community, helping me to navigate it. Without these interactions, it would have been more difficult for me to understand the interdisciplinary field of higher education research as a doctoral scholar with a background in applied linguistics. Moreover, I argue that it would have been more difficult for me to learn to recognise which opportunities in Table 1 to take, and which opportunities to pass. In itself, such skill is crucial in becoming an independent researcher: instead of doing what other scholars seem to be doing—or telling others to do—assessing what types of opportunities are suitable for one's own researcher and career development is a must not only as a doctoral scholar but also later in one's career.

Looking at (2), not only was I a novice researcher trying to make sense of what my researcher identity is but also someone fairly detached from the physical environment where both formal and informal doctoral learning typically took place—at the campus and its meeting rooms, offices, corridors, and coffee rooms. It was not until COVID-19 that this would drastically change, but for me, having these interdisciplinary learning spaces was crucial as a doctoral scholar who was primarily working at distance during a time when most other people were not. Without such spaces, it is likely that I would have become alienated from the higher education researcher community or actively began avoiding it by exploring other types of career alternatives after finishing my PhD.

Doing a PhD is difficult in many ways, and it is difficult in different ways, depending on what your background is, what you are studying, and where. However, what is shared by all researchers is that we cannot work alone—we need others, and we need communities for doing our work. (Learning via communities is explored further in Makara et al.'s and Rainford's chapters.) Therefore, the role of both hidden curriculum and hidden curriculum agents, whether doctoral scholars themselves, their supervisors, research developers, and institutions (Elliot et al., 2020), is of crucial importance when ensuring that all doctoral scholars have the necessary support to work *through and towards* a community, whichever community that is.

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