

Building Community

I feel that there is a certain level of isolation. (...) I wish there would be more systems or ways of coming together. I felt that even before the pandemic.
 (Miriam Phillips, PhD student, 2020)

Most doctoral degrees involve an individual project completed over 3 – 8 years: this can feel lonely if you don't have or actively build a community of PhD students going through the same process. Students sometimes report isolation as a challenge and a lack of community as one of the things missing in their programmes. To counteract this, you can actively organise and build forms of peer-support. A focused small group of 3–6 students in your field would be a good starting point. If your programme has a small cohort, ask your supervisor/head of department to put you in touch with staff/students in other universities. While this may take time to set up, these strategies can help you develop a community, and provide you with an invaluable support structure throughout the degree. Before exploring some ideas, reflect on what you want to get out of the peer group:

- **Purpose of the group:** for example, the group can focus on artistic critique, readings of philosophical texts, methodological explorations, purpose/meaning of Artistic Research, scratch performances of work in progress, working towards a collective showing of doctoral work, a place to reflect on challenges that come up during the journey, a social space. The building of community in this way is always about informal as well as formal structures; a cup of tea and a chat is as important as discussing Foucault / improvisation.
- **How often, when, and where you meet:** a monthly afternoon or evening meeting would be a good starting point to fit around different schedules. This can change and adapt according to the needs of the group.

Some ideas which you can adapt to your context:

- **Reading group.** A reading group can be a great motivator for engaging with reading. It is really important that the content of the readings is relevant for all students involved, so avoid texts that are specific to your research. You could explore core texts in your field, texts

which are helpful in developing methodologies, texts on what is Artistic Research, or texts relevant for doctoral study (for example, literature on writing, documentation, publishing). Decide on a core structure and ensure everyone participates in how texts are proposed and how sessions are led.

I wanted more time to discuss articles and discuss that dialogue and reflect on ideas with my cohort. (Miriam Phillips, PhD student, 2020)

- **Artistic practice critique.** A regular session focusing on sharing work in progress and excerpts of practice can offer a structured way for engaging in reflection, thinking, and articulation of the practice, and for testing how potential audiences may perceive your work. There are several models of critique which you can adopt to guide the session, some are outlined below.
- **Collaborative explorations.** A space for working together with other practitioners can get creative juices flowing, let go of the intellectual pressure of the doctorate, and experiment. You can explore different models or create your own. You might choose to rotate who leads the sessions, or that each person leads a series of sessions. You might decide on boundaries, materials, contexts, or keep it open and experimental. See some models suggested below.
- **Peer-support group.** A peer-support group can offer a context to discuss similar challenges, ask for advice, and see how other students responded to emerging situations along the journey. This can be as open or as closed as the group decides: you might decide to keep conversations confidential. A supportive non-judgemental structure could be: the speaker talks for a few minutes uninterrupted on the issue at hand, the listeners provide open supportive questions such as ‘what do you think you can do next’. The idea being not telling the speaker what to do, but to help the speaker think through how they might deal with the situation.
- **Social space.** A social and informal space to meet and socialise.
- **Writing Group.** A structured time where you focus on writing together offering support. You can share your goals at the start of the session, have writing blocks with breaks, and debrief in the end sharing what you achieved and the struggles of the process. This is helpful for accountability, motivation, and gradually learning to set realistic goals. Check out Rowena Murray’s publications on [writing groups](#).

See the following models which you can implement or adapt:

- **[Critical Response Process](#)**, by Liz Lerman and John Borstel. This method was designed to give constructive feedback on work in progress through dialogical approaches. You need at least 3 people. See further resources for more information [<https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process-resources/>].
- **[Creative Articulation Process](#)** (CAP), by Jane Bacon and Vida Middelw. Developed by the Choreographic Lab, CAP provides a six-facet score to support the creative process – particularly appropriate for movement and performance fields – which aims to bring haptic or embodied knowledge to the fore. You can also explore how this model may be a starting point to work collaboratively. Article available here:
<https://www.choreographiclab.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/s2.pdf>

If you are interested in exploring other models for developing the creative process, see for example **[The Five Facets Model of Creative Process](#)**, by Josiah Hincks and **Resources Scores Valuation Performance Cycles**, by Lawrence Halprin (2014), published in the journal *Choreographic Practices*.