

# ‘A CONVERSATION MADE THIS’: THE FORMATION OF A FEMINIST PEER MENTORSHIP MODEL

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, four creative writing PhD candidates (a digital journalist, a playwright, a novelist, a socially engaged theatre maker) explore how finding and connecting with each other during their first year of research (which coincided with COVID-19) helped shore up and galvanise their individual practice(s) and initiated a collective approach that has included regular online meetings and an emerging peer mentorship model. The four discuss how a collaborative writing project sparked into life and changed form, as well as the theoretical and creative practice frameworks they drew on to develop the work. They show how a collegial communications practice emerged and evolved into a long term, ongoing peer support model. This model created a mode of documentation; a useful and reusable trace of vital experience gained during their candidatures.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The PhAb4 is a group of four research candidates in the final years of their PhDs at RMIT’s School of Media and Communication. Emilie Collyer writes poetry and plays and is researching value and feminist poetics. Clare Carlin is a writer and editor, investigating post-nature writing and the novel. Ruth Fogarty is a digital journalist, investigating women’s complex and creative relationships with (and impact on) true crime storytelling. Didem Caia is a writer, theatre maker and educator, researching presence and embodied approaches to storytelling.

## KEYWORDS

Creative practice PhD—Peer mentorship—Collaborative writing—Autoethnography—Navigating Academia—Polylogue

## Introduction

Commencing creative practice PhDs as industry professionals, we four were well versed in enacting conversation and connection in our communities of practice. What was missing, particularly once COVID-19 took hold, was a consistent and dedicated space within an academic context to have conversations around our experiences, joys, and difficulties. What began as an attempt to co-create an outcome in the form of an academic paper, soon proved to be an invaluable peer mentorship model that we have unfolded and refined over our candidatures. In this paper, we trace the emergence and formation of that model. We present this group paper as a record of an in-person conference presentation where we each spoke in turn.

### Emilie: Planting a Seed

In March 2020, Ruth, Didem, Clare and I met as we all commenced, within a few months of each other, our PhDs. In September, I sent this email which started the more formal side of what had already been functioning as an informal peer group for several months:

Hi Ruth, Clare and Didem,

I attended the Publication seminar today and a little seed of an idea got planted ... I wondered if you would be interested in the idea of co-writing a paper about the experience of coming into the academy as practitioners and how it is a de-stabilising but also potentially re-building process? May or may not be of interest or SIMPLY NOT logistically something we can all fit in. But if it is ... we could workshop some ideas and brainstorm where we might pitch it. No rush either ... any time ... Yours in ellipses ...

E x

My urge was driven by curiosity about what we might create together, having formed a strong bond online over the preceding six months, and our potential to make a contribution. I thought our perspectives would be of value to other new PhD candidates, particularly those coming in from industry, such as arts and media practitioners, who have a wealth of skills and knowledge, but often very little academic research training or experience.

In preparation for this paper, we researched feminist models of peer support with a focus on those spontaneously created by academic students and professionals rather than formal support structures created by universities (of which there are many and indeed we benefit from such groups at RMIT). We were curious to contextualise our own organic model and we found many examples to draw on, including women forming an active peer support group to challenge the notion of the 'finite games of the academy' (Garvis et al, 2021,

p. 182) and instead create ‘infinite’ structures within the academy that are more sustaining and that include valuing family and personal lives. We also found more structured groups, such as a peer-mentoring model with monthly meetings, tasks – much more structured than ours – but similar in its core function of providing a place to validate experience, share information and provide unconditional positive emotional regard (Goeke et al, 2011), along with robust critical engagement around ideas. Speaking of unconditional positive regard, here are the emails I received back:

Dear ladies,

I think co-publication is a super idea, as it allows some very different minds and voices to come together. It’s also a creative exercise in itself. Given that creative practice research is still relatively new in academia, and there is a lot of bureaucracy, especially around ethics and data, I think it would be really cool to look at a collection of experiences and how we are all navigating ‘the work’. Do you also imagine we would take COVID-19 into account? I’m up for it Em and think it’s a really great idea to dip our feet into some more publishing ops. Love youse.

Didem

Yes! I’m sure we all have unique and interesting takes, and I think it would be unwise to avoid pandemic-related difficulties. If you follow academic Twitter, you’ll see how much conversation there is around the topic. I am certain there’s a wide audience. Why don’t we have a brainstorming chat about it? Next week?

Ruth

Hi Everyone,

EC that is a great idea and I would be very keen. Agree with thoughts so far. Will start thinking about it all. I can meet either of those days at any time really though I’m better from 10am onwards ... Apologies for slow response. And now Outlook is trying to grammar/spell-check this email, honestly! Thanks for including me.

Clare

What came from this small email chain was several months of meeting and talking and eventually, collaborative writing where we slowly saw that we were forming or doing a kind of collective autoethnography, as Heewon Chang writes: ‘author-researcher-participants are encouraged to listen to each other’s voices, examine their own assumptions, and challenge other perspectives’ (Chang, 2013, p. 112). We shared gritty parts of our early research, the hoops of ethics approvals and wider life challenges to do with COVID-19, geography and feeling less connected than we otherwise might have had our PhDs happened pre-pandemic.

While we all benefited from a generally supportive culture at our university (RMIT) where feminist and creative approaches are embedded, we still felt the demands of developing an academic practice. We were learning about the ‘pressure to publish’, about Tier 1 journals, about ERA statements. We had stepped into an environment that Johnson describes as being driven by ‘performance measures and their use to rank individuals and their various collectives’ (Johnson, 2022, p. 35). Johnson is writing about working within academia, a little different from being a PhD candidate and yet we found ourselves also impacted by that culture. We created a space where we could provide ‘feedback on ideas without worrying about not performing academia “properly”, aka “appearing weak”’ (Macoun and Miller, 2014, p. 291). We further agreed with Macoun and Miller that ‘peer support and practices of feminist solidarity are essential and important resources in this struggle’ (p. 299).

What started for us as the happenstance of meeting, connecting and being engaged in a PhD in the unprecedented conditions of a pandemic and the very ordinary conditions of academic life, transformed into a source of peer mentorship and support. Both a spontaneous and then a considered feminist intervention, a way to navigate our new roles as we sought to transform from practitioners into researcher-practitioners.

### Clare: A Polylogue

Emilie’s suggestion of writing a collaborative essay was the first stage of our ongoing peer-mentorship. The questions she posed in her early emails sparked our conversation: what was my practice coming into the PhD? After one year of being in the PhD, what do each of us hope/imagine might shift—or not—for ourselves and for the research contribution we are hoping to make?

What was it like: entering the academy as mid-career practitioners? As COVID-19 began spreading? Returning to the academy after a long break (and perhaps after thinking we would never return to formal study)? Facing the challenges of creative work from inside academia? After thinking through these questions, we shared our initial thoughts, which as questions in response to questions set us on an investigative, good humoured, conversational track. Should we (could

we?) define a Creative Practice (CP) PhD? In what way/s was the academy determining what we made and how we made it? Were we learning the CP PhD as a genre, and thus unlearning being a novelist, a poet, a playwright, a journalist, a dramaturg, a nonfiction writer? What might professionals gain or lose from entering scholarship, and at that moment? How might the (feminist) practitioner shape or reinvigorate the academy? Was such a thing even possible?

We had too many questions. Let's focus, we said, choosing two: Why do a Creative Practice PhD? and What can a Creative Practice PhD 'do' for you?

We began, shared our words, rewrote, and found what we were doing—annotating resonant ideas and phrases from the essay and elaborating on this in the margin, in this case, break-out Google doc text boxes—became their own conversation. Our marginalia were lively, and frequently this was where we did our most thoughtful investigations. We captured this in the abstract we eventually wrote, and likened it to a script, believing our essay was only complete 'with asides, contemplation, subconscious fury, and moments of tenderness'. Our marginalia became another polylogue that questioned, contradicted, and broke apart the quietly considered, individually written parts of our essay. We found freedom in allowing our essay to unfold and evolve: it was not a palimpsest, rather all our text in plain sight, ready to be examined, denied, and celebrated.

So, this was our essay: a traditional body of text with marginalia that bubbled over. We decided we'd like to share this work. Ruth created two traditionally formatted documents, one of which was a PDF with our colour-coordinated-by-name annotations. We submitted this to the editor of a publication we thought might be a great fit, and with whom we had been discussing our collaboration.

It was hard work to read (see Fig.1, *below*). Our document, to paraphrase, 'ejected and drowned' our generous reader. It was too much, our furious asides resisting the page. We tried again: we removed the side column and inserted edited bits of it into the body of the essay but the whole thing deflated without the energy of the side-script. Our 'doing' would not be caught.

We discussed this situation at the (virtual) 2021 Autoethnography Conference: Conversation Makes Bubbles. Their CFP for which was, 'What thoughts hold your creative and critical autoethnographic attention in this bubble moment?'. In preparation, we again tried to write a paper about our work, our creative and critical collaboration, and our essay. Our paper was boring, yet another deflation. At the conference we instead talked about how we couldn't write about the doing; we talked about the problem of essaying articulation.

When we are doing a creative practice PhD, essentially we are trying to assess what we do creatively as an intellectual act. Coming to the academy feels like a marriage between the material, rational, sense making world (university) and the at times intangible, obscure, quiet yearnings that we each ache through, before finding some way to transmute them (creative practice). The world has become such an objective place, forward motion and outcome orientation. Coming to a university to spend some time analysing my practice and engaging it in conversation, will perhaps unveil parts of the machine that I wouldn't have been able to find ways to articulate otherwise.

Doing a PhD is a way to create accessible vocabularies around the arts and process so that we have the ability to communicate what it is that makes this work vital and necessary. Estelle Barrett, claims that the key term for understanding the relationship between experience, practice and knowledge is 'aesthetic experience' (Barrett, 2007: 115) which I feel is what we are trying to articulate through research into the self and the making process, and then to re-imagine and re-interpret our culture through our artistic voices. If I can become a better thinker, and a better critical writer and even a better teacher, then I can be of use and service to others as a creative vessel and as a communicator.

I fear that universities might become obsolete in six years, everything may be automated, the art of reading may be lost on the next generation all together, we might start losing books through digitization. I think these hyperbolic and existential fears are rooted in personal fears such as a 'loss of control over my own mind'. Having a critical lens through which I can understand my work is a way to become clearer about the function of creative practice over all.

Instead of being caught up in the terror of the next two years, can we force ourselves to become lost in the momentary? To fall in love with the process? To become absolutely obsessed with our offerings? Can we really commit to the day-by-day execution and expression of our own personal project? I think there is a solipsism in that, but I also think that we have the tenacity to reach back outward and connect with our community of practice at will. The 'inward outward' motion conjures an image of an accordion, a subtle process of inhalation and exhalation.

Commented [5]: Transmutation is a great way to think about it. I was just listening to Laura Jean McKay speak at an Australasian Animal Studies Association masterclass on 'non-traditional outputs' (AASA Masterclass: *Tools for Animal Studies Research* 10 February 2021). She said (and I paraphrase, perhaps erroneously) she had quite different modes for the creative and the critical sides of her dissertation. That it is hard to qualify and explain what the research for the creative side was all about (yes, she seemed to separate it somewhat) but it all went into the novel. She talked about the two sides to the self when doing this (CPPracR) and the need to find balance. She said there was a meticulous documenting side and a creative collecting side. That moving slowing and creatively in the world is ok. That process can't always be quantified.

Balancing the meticulous and the imaginative (and seeing their overlapping aspects) and combining them to make a new conversation seems a good idea.

Commented [6]: This resonates strongly with me. I was operating in forward motion for so long that it is only this process that has permitted me to stop and think about what I was doing, what - if anything - it means. (One may have to do this more than once in a long life.)

Commented [7]: What a wonderful phrase.

Commented [8]: This is great. Accessible vocabularies. My therapist and I were talking about this. How he has developed a way of talking about his work to people! [1]

Commented [9]: Love this notion of creating vocabularies. There's so much new language to learn when entering the academy. Then you need to talk [2]

Commented [10]: Also this! I need to read more Barrett.

Commented [11]: I like this tender sharing of a fear. My immediate response is to put a positive spin on it - things are always changing, humans are always adapting [3]

Figure 1. *The Unpublishable Essay (an extract)*

The spark of this enterprise is our conversation. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, p. xxi), whose philosophy of the dialogic resonated with us and generated many conversations during our collaboration, suggests that 'Language, when it *means*, is somebody talking to somebody else, even when that someone else is one's own inner addressee' (author's emphasis). How then, can we translate from marginalia to body of text and talk 'to mean' on the page?

Making and remaking our essay was a satisfying and illuminating process. Through this action, we formed a peer-mentorship group that resisted the idea of the lonely scholar, of caching information, of zero-sum thinking. Through this action we built our own CP PhD experience.

Our essay concluded:

Through this collaborative autoethnography about the why and how of the creative practice PhD, we came to better understand the actualities of the undertaking. Without the availability of a classroom, or in-person gatherings, this evolving digital dialogue became the device with which four professionals-come-academics would progress through the unavoidable uncertainties, isolation, and doubts inevitable in the first year of a higher degree by research. And the exegetical form of the finished text is the fertile merging of creative practice, academic theory, and personal testimony.

And what is the creative practice PhD?

It's the place where creative and professional practice meet scholarly research. Where we (re)discover how to think, communicate, create—critically. While progressing through a higher degree by research can be a solitary undertaking, exacerbated by the dramatic conditions unique to our times, in seeking out the support, mentorship and accountability of a creative/academic cohort, we are rewarded with a constructive, creative and (re)generative scholarship experience.

If you are reading this essay, something of our project has now been published.

### Ruth: Finding Form/at

As evidenced in Figure. 1, we struggled to find a workable format to showcase our collective endeavour and we failed in our first attempt at composing our words and processes into an academic template. Instead of continuing to refine or restrict our collaborations and communication, we moved into other less orthodox spaces. One outcome of our non-traditional exploration was a playful lexicon and we experimented with different modes of self-identification, borrowing language from our respective professions or the virtual platforms we were confined to. We playfully designated ourselves a name, The Fab Four, evolving to The PhAb4, and somewhere along the line we became the Phoxes – self-branding to match Clare's research topic (*Vulpes vulpes*).

Through a shared vocabulary, emerging identities and found things, we generated a rich assortment of intangible material. Our micro-collaborations were evidence of our need to come together and make things through (and despite) the pandemic-induced separation and isolation. We became aware that the most exceptional outcome of this supportive, creative, unstructured, co-authored framework was providing a space in which we could unleash, unravel, and explore, without embarrassment or self-doubt. We had created an opening where vulnerability, failure and uncertainty were not impediments to our academic accomplishments but simply opportunities for creativity and new ideas.

Throughout this phase of play and exploration, we were unable to properly reflect upon our collaborative practice. Our meandering narratives and informal disruptions, though central to our growing self-confidence and connectedness, felt too unwieldy to put into words and even harder to fit onto the page. In our phatic excesses, our first generous reader, a renowned scholar, saw clearly what we did not: that what we were creating was not 'new knowledge' but public acts of care-in-the-making. Our reader gently encouraged us to embrace our potential for 'thinking-feeling-genius' and so we held on to hope but let go of the difficult essay and moved forward with our informal, multiplatform collaborations.

In the first 18 months of our PhD ventures, we were in thrall to the principle of going wide. We had no desire to foreshorten our writing or contract our collaborative selves. As enthusiastic early scholars we came to the academic table with “Beginner’s Mind” – or SHOSHIN (初心) to borrow a concept from Zen Buddhism - and we were open to new knowledge and every lesson. We came to understand that what we were doing together wasn't revolutionary, but within the progressive culture at our university our explorations were deemed a valuable contribution, an homage, to the lively forms of non-traditional practice in action among our peers.

So, what did we manage to create and release in place of the Unpublishable Essay?

There is the long epistolary SMS text, which continues to be a joyful, unwieldy, encouragement-and-care-filled thread.

There were virtual conferences and a Haiku Thesis Competition, which called for novel ways to talk about HDR research. The following is our entangled submission:

four practitioners  
our autoethnography  
the art of peer care

four embarked upon  
cartography of practice  
mapped in talk and text

colloquy of four  
a communal mentorship  
exchange-as-method

hey auto ethno-  
graphers in the academe  
the fab four says hi

(PhAb4 Submission: Haiku Thesis Competition 2021)



There are the admin of distances and the ordinary practicalities of travel between cities and states. Then there's the aptitude of the hive mind that samples vast arrays of content, readings, podcasts and poems, and shares these as insights, understandings, or provocations, building a common knowledge. Not least, there is the fortifying feminist commitment to emotional and moral support and work/life guidance – alongside the sharing of minor or momentous occasions to calming or resounding reinforcements. Another female academic peer mentorship group describes their similar collaborative model in more scholarly terms as '[a] feminist approach to peer mentoring [which] rejects the view of the "disembodied intellectual" by attending to academics' familial, personal, and emotional needs' (Goeke et al, 2011, p. 217).

Most of the artefacts of our co-creation are multimedia ephemera which will remain unseen or are already lost – such is the nature of digital. Yet the effect/affect of these lumpen, moveable, fallible co-constructions are most keenly experienced at the personal level as increasing wisdom, confidence, and strength. The unfinished and Unpublishable Essay is the price of admission for the constancy of a peer group upon whose collective ideas, experiences, support, and interpretations I heavily depend.

The PhAb4 also fulfils something beyond the particular experience. It's the belief in a different academic culture, one that is non-hierarchical, responsive, forgiving, indirect. Borrowing the words of another band of academic allies, the PhAb4 is a mode of '[r]elational ethics using a praxis of care, in line with feminist epistemology [which underpins] the systematic analysis of our shared experiences to enhance intersubjectivity and the co-construction of knowledge' (Rutter et al, 2021, p. 1).

Responding to the Unpublishable Essay, our journal editor remarked: 'a conversation made this, but maybe it wants to present itself to the world as not that'. This paper is our latest attempt to communicate the purpose and value of the care-centred peer mentorship model, and to show how it may serve others. Not as an academically rigorous framework for showcasing scholarly agility or worth, but as one way to navigate and - yes! - to thrive during your PhD.

I recently came upon the Extended Mind Theory (Clark and Chalmers, 1998) which examines our cognitive relationships with, and organisational reliance on, technologies and suggests 'cognitive processes ain't (all) in the head!' (1998, p. 8). Recent applications of the theory consider contemporary examples of extended thinking. Science writer Annie Murphy Paul states 'human intelligence is ... embodied, situated, and socially distributed' (Paul, 2023, p. 157), that we are all creatively informed by 'extra-neural' resources, and she argues that 'the capacity to think well is not a fixed property of the individual but rather a shifting state that is dependent on access to extra-neural resources and the knowledge of how to use them' (Paul, 2023, p. 158). This notion of human intelligence as a collaboration with socially distributed forces, including the minds of those around us, is a compelling one. That our brains are part of a

larger neural network and not solo supercomputers (under)performing in isolation resonates strongly with the PhAb4 model. Thus far, our multiplatform artefacts emerged from a kind of cognitive symbiosis. We urge other newly embarking academics to uncover their own neural networks and to draw from this valuable repository both intellectually and creatively. It will make your PhD pilgrimage a less solitary one.

### Didem: Presence within our Peer Mentorship Model

For two years, our ‘accidental’ mentorship model became a consistent point of fieldwork where many of us began to discover how collaboration and community might look, feel, and function in a university context where higher degree research has been historically disconnected from lived experience and the wider life and lived experiences of a candidate. We experienced first-hand what bringing the self to one’s research might open up and how this might sustain a candidate over the course of a four-year research process.

The act of communal engagement, where individuals congregate to jointly create, is an intrinsic facet of daily life. Whether it's the preparation of a meal, the enjoyment of a board game, the shared viewing of a movie, or the absorption of arts and culture, these instances underscore our collective proclivity to unite for the sake of generating something meaningful. Often, our modes of communication pivot on the anticipation of specific outcomes, serving as utilitarian tools in our interactions. My curiosity, however, centres on the profound duality encapsulated within the term "conversation" – the fusion of "co" and "verse." What emerges when we relinquish the fixation on predetermined results and allow our dialogues to unfold organically? Does the absence of a distinct purpose in conversation strike us as unconventional, discomforting, or atypical? While our initial intention encompassed a collective endeavour to craft a scholarly paper about our immersion into academia as practitioners from predominantly artistic domains, our gatherings gradually metamorphosed—transcending academic and theoretical discourse, transitioning into forums for nurturing community bonds, and candidly addressing our individual trepidations, aspirations, obstacles, and research deadlocks.

*How has it evolved or changed since 2020?*

Our paths have seamlessly transformed into our practice, yielding two years' worth of data derived from spoken and written exchanges—a valuable resource for translating our musings into tangible outputs for conferences and papers. Our initial shared pursuit, centred around understanding the nuances of entering academia as mid-career female practitioners, has evolved. It's now a quest to navigate our roles within academia as individuals with diverse

experiences that defy easy categorisation—a shift which raises deeper questions in light of the vibrancy of current experiences.

As we've navigated our individual research amidst growing scepticism about the purpose of academic and artistic research, we've also grappled with personal commitments, family dynamics, relationships, and professional responsibilities. Amidst these complexities, a question emerges:

*What becomes of the unexpressed thoughts and emotions that inevitably surface during a PhD?*

This question, personally significant, has grown in importance for many of us over the past two years and it extends beyond academia, touching on ethics, compassion, and wellbeing. This collaborative framework of engagement emerges as a potential model for fostering wellbeing through community and dialogue. I found solace in our community that extended beyond the formal confines of the university. Within this space, our conversations and individual explorations found validation and refuge. This arena propelled not only my research but also provided a means to address challenges through discourse, another important theme that emerged from our interactions. This endeavour is part of a larger landscape of creative explorations shaped by the circumstances that have defined academia since 2020. In an age of increased connectivity, it's clear there are gaps in the nourishment that is offered by the university environment.

Candidates seek ways to connect and share experiences beyond research. In an environment where time is at a premium and human-centred communication takes a back seat to personal wellbeing, engaging in conversations within a peer group takes on a countercultural dimension. As a side note, while the humanities delves into the essence of existence, academic systems still prioritise quantitative over qualitative research approaches. This dichotomy raises questions about the toll these systems take on our wellbeing and growth. What support exists for PhD candidates without peer networks? How does academia cater to the needs of introverted individuals, or candidates with neurodiversities, or those for whom English is a second language—individuals who long to express themselves, regardless of the fluency or pace of their communication?

Our group dynamic, which emerged from two years of collective meetings, gained momentum through initial enforced separation and later through principles of sharing and trust. Shifting from striving for concrete outcomes like scholarly papers, our focus moved to more intangible goals: personal and interpersonal safety, forming connections, and nurturing relationships. This endeavour solidified into an enduring human research project, promoting both individual and communal wellbeing.

## Conclusion

As a group we continue to reflect on what this peer mentorship, this model of extended thinking and creating, has given us, as well as our hopes, fears, and uncertainties on how it might be sustained or where it may lead. Presenting at the 2022 AAWP Conference and collaborating on this paper is a worthy and well-timed ‘closing of the circle’. Beyond the release of this single artefact, we want the PhAb4 to continue, and we hope it will extend past our final milestones and beyond the end of our PhDs. We also believe this co-sharing model can be of benefit to others, and that it – and we – contribute to enlivening and enriching the postgraduate academic experience by encouraging and advocating for diverse collaborative and community models.

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