How do Doctoral Students Socialize into the Profession of Researcher in Academic Writing Cafés?

Catherine E. Déri

Professor – Long–Term
Appointment at the Faculty
of Education of the University
of Ottawa

This article features results from a research project aimed at understanding how doctoral students socialize into the profession of researcher in academic writing cafés.

For further details, please consult: Déri, C. (2022). *La socialisation des doctorants au métier de chercheur: Étude de cas d'une communauté d'apprentissage dans le contexte des cafés de rédaction universitaire* [doctoral dissertation, University of Ottawa]. Recherche uO.

Background

The Development of Skills Essential for the Profession of Researcher

In Canada, the dropout rate from doctoral programs has been around 50% for several decades (OECD, 2022). Among the reasons given by students to explain this interruption is the lack of experience and skills in academic writing (Lison & Bourget, 2016). This shortcoming can hinder the progress of novice researchers' projects, but also their integration into a coveted professional field. Whether it is for conducting research in academia, in the public and private sectors, or for non–profit organizations, written communication is essential. However, doctoral programs do not explicitly teach this type of skill, even though one of the learning objectives of these programs is socialization into the profession of researcher, that is, «the internalization of the norms in a community that one wishes to integrate» (Kapp, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, many students find themselves having to meet their academic needs outside of their university.

We looked at a learning mechanism called «academic writing cafés» inspired by the «Shut up & Write» movement that emerged in cafés of San Francisco in the United States of America in 2007. This initiative is used by students who meet up via social media to write in public places: cafés, museums, libraries, co-working spaces, parks, etc. These gatherings promote much more than the development of writing skills, considering the richness of the exchanges that arise among peers at these locations (Mewburn, Osborne & Caldwell, 2014). Social learning thus emerges among doctoral students to support their academic journeys and their professional transitions.

Key Concept

What Does it Mean to Socialize into the Profession of Researcher?

In a professional context, the socialization process involves a transfer from old members to new members of an organization, in both formal and informal ways (Skakni, 2011). This transfer concerns knowledge and skills, as well as behaviours related to the practice of a chosen profession. Through their graduate studies, students become socialized into the academic environment and the profession of researcher to integrate a research community associated with their field of interest. This organizational and professional socialization aims, among other things, to facilitate the understanding of doctoral programs and of the skills that must be developed to become an independent researcher.

Methodology

A case study involving doctoral students

Type of research: case study (*Thèsez-vous* Facebook group[1])

Study population: 25 doctoral students (23 women, 1 man and 1 non–binary person) in 12 universities (from the provinces of Québec and Ontario) and 15 different disciplines

Locations and time of research: Academic writing cafés in public places from 2020 to 2022We extended an invitation to a learning community of over 4,500 graduate students. Data collection was carried out through individual interviews and the extraction of messages posted on social media (Facebook). The analysis using the NVivo software allowed the identification of challenges related to exposure to work places (socialization), skills development (training) and the comparison of experiences (normalization).

---

[1] *Thèsez-vous* is a non–profit organization whose mission is to "design physical and human environments considered to facilitate academic writing."

Results

Three challenges to overcome in order to socialize into the profession of researcher

1 **Socialization challenge: Doctoral students are not exposed to all aspects of the research profession.**

Doctoral students are not clearly explained what the job of a researcher consists of or the different professional environments in which it is possible to work. A participant to our study explained:

> "We are not told what we need to continue [after the PhD program]. So what I know are things I've heard here and there.» (translation)
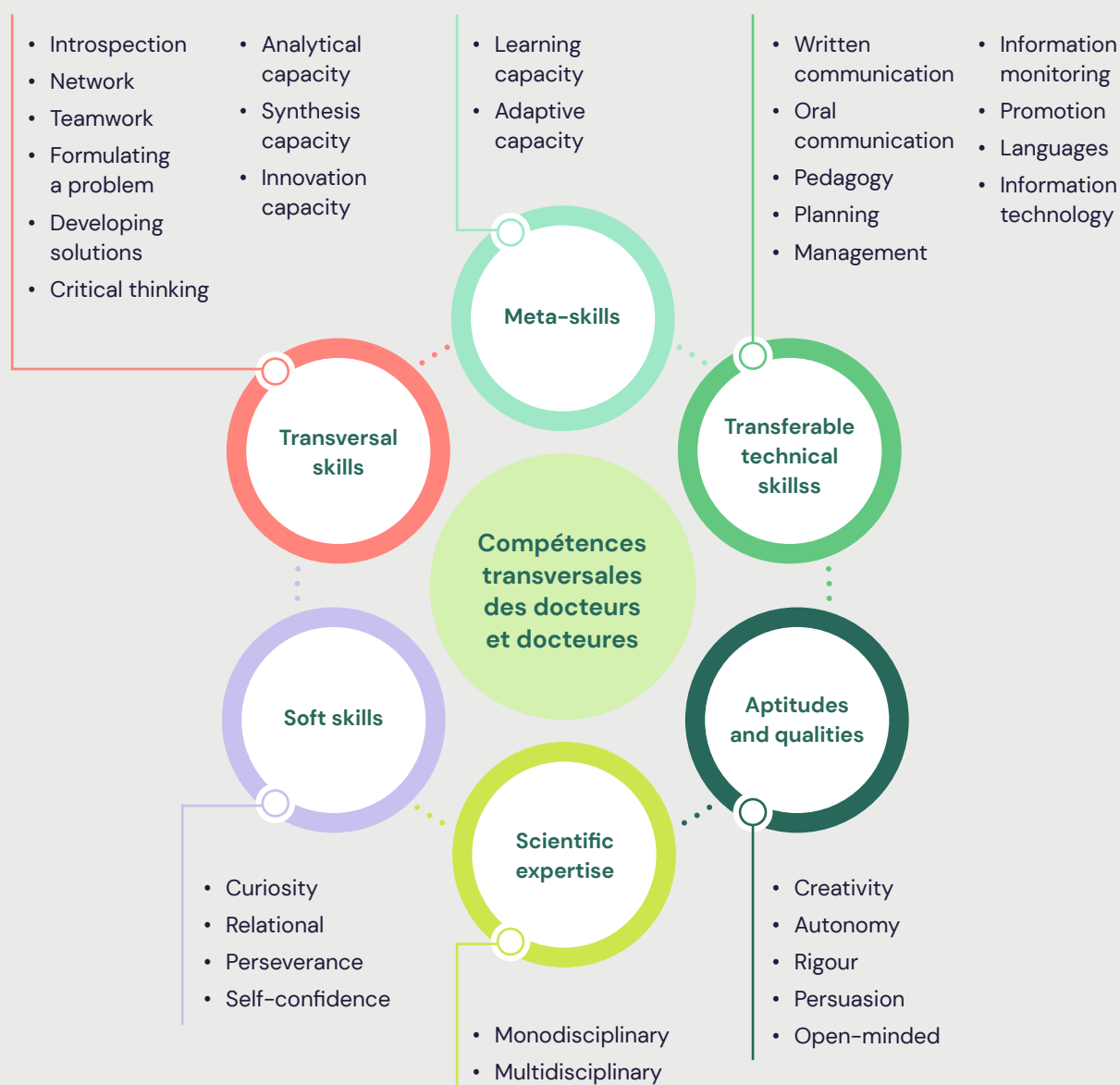
Nowadays, researchers are expected to tackle several tasks simultaneously, especially when working for a university: research, teaching, administration and community service. However, doctoral programs consist of advanced training in research, by doing research, thereby limiting the opportunities to acquire experience in other spheres of responsibility.

Only half of the participants to our study were considering the possibility of working in academia. These participants benefited from exchanging with their peers, in academic writing cafés, and were exposed to different types of documents, such as grant applications or course syllabus.

2 **Training challenge: Doctoral students do not develop all of the transversal skills needed to become a researcher.**

Professional socialization involves the development of knowledge and skills necessary for practicing a coveted profession. The profession of researcher requires transversal skills (see Figure 1) that must be developed during one's doctoral studies, regardless of the targeted work environment.

Figure 1.
Adaptation of the Typology of Transversal Skills Required from Doctoral Graduates

- Introspection
- Network
- Teamwork
- Formulating a problem
- Developing solutions
- Critical thinking

- Analytical capacity
- Synthesis capacity
- Innovation capacity

- Learning capacity
- Adaptive capacity

- Written communication
- Oral communication
- Pedagogy
- Planning
- Management

- Information monitoring
- Promotion
- Languages
- Information technology

Meta–skills

Transversal skills

Transferable technical skillss

Compétences transversales des docteurs et docteures

Soft skills

Aptitudes and qualities

Scientific expertise

- Curiosity
- Relational
- Perseverance
- Self–confidence

- Creativity
- Autonomy
- Rigour
- Persuasion
- Open–minded

- Monodisciplinary
- Multidisciplinary

Source: Durette, B., Fournier, M. & Lafon, M. (2012). *Compétences et employabilité des docteurs* [Field report] Adoc Talent Management.
©Adoc Talent Management. Reproduced with permission.

The majority of participants to our study planned to pursue a career in research. Even though they had completed an average of 5 and a half years in their doctoral program, they were only able to identify five elements recognized as essential to the profession of researcher: scientific expertise, communication skills (oral and written), and project management, as well as rigour and perseverance.

There appears to be a lack of transfer or understanding of the skills to be developed during doctoral programs. In academic writing cafés, students improve their skills far beyond written communication. For example, the peer review of draft texts helps develop critical thinking, scientific rigour, and multidisciplinary expertise.

3 Normalization challenge: Doctoral students have few opportunities to put into perspective their experiences as emerging researchers.

The dynamics that are established between doctoral student and those in charge of their study program can facilitate their integration into research communities. On the other hand, it also places the students in a vulnerable situation, due to the constant performance evaluations for obtaining research assistantships, grants, and the actual diploma. A participant to our study mentioned the competitive spirit that reigns in academia:

> "When doing a PhD, there is a lot of competition.
> You have some people who are in the competitive game,
> but it doesn't suit me.» (translation)

A majority of people interviewed consider it beneficial to meet with peers outside of their department or faculty, where it is possible to call into question certain university practices. Academic writing cafés are opportunities to share experiences with peers from different backgrounds to normalize the challenges encountered in graduate studies. Students benefit from the support of others, namely, to break the feeling of isolation.

What Can we Learn from our Results?

Academic writing cafés, a beneficial venue to socialize into the profession of researcher

1 **The socialization into academia involves the exchange of experiences with peers.**

The discussions that take place in academic writing cafés highlight the similarities and differences in experiences across academic disciplines. For instance, research labs for students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) facilitate their formal and informal socialization. On the other hand, the work of students in social sciences and humanities tends to be carried out in a solitary manner. These latter individuals will be more inclined to join writing groups to socialize into academia (Déri, Vincent & Tremblay–Wragg, 2023).

2 **The training in academic writing facilitates the development of other skills.**

When doctoral students engage in academic writing cafés, they set goals and discuss them with others. Such exchanges with peers allow students to recognize the challenges encountered and discuss strategies to overcome them. In addition, the writing sessions take place in a sequence alternating between productivity blocks and breaks to maintain a continuous writing rhythm without becoming exhausted. This time management technique can be replicated once back home, so that students can advance their projects, even when writing alone (Tremblay–Wragg, Mathieu–C., Labonté–Lemoyne, Déri & Gadbois, 2020).

3 **The normalization of difficulties encountered in doctoral programs materializes as peers share their experiences.**

By comparing the circumstances of other graduate students with one's own, it is possible to better understand the difficulties encountered. In academic writing cafés, testimonies of successes or failures are shared among participants. These exchanges help put experiences into perspective, such as the lack of understanding of those close to them regarding the nature of the work to be carried out in a doctoral program. Academic writing cafés thus offer a way to legitimize one's work in the eyes of family members or friends (Murray, 2015).

4 **Doctoral students can benefit from different types of academic writing groups.**

Academic writing cafés represent one formula among several other types of writing groups that can foster the success of graduate students and their socialization into the profession of researcher (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Academic Writing Groups

Writing workshop — A training session delivered by an expert in academic writing that includes active learning components for participants to exchange ideas and engage in peer review.

Writing studios — A physical space designed to optimize the comfort of writers, while enhancing academic writing productivity and providing them with networking opportunities.

Writing team — A group of writers who meet on a regular basis with a specific collaborative writing or publishing goal in sight.

Structured

Spontaneous

Writing cafés — A gathering initiated by writers, who invite their peers to public places, to work on their individual academic writing projects, and socialize together.

Writing retreat — An off-campus gathering to focus on academic writing projects, during a short and intensive period, while limiting any sources of distraction in an stimulating physical environment.

Writing platforms — A virtual space designed to connect writers together, while enhancing their academic productivity and providing networking opportunities.

Source: Déri, C. E. (2024, à paraître). Academic Writing Cafes: Public Spaces where Graduate Students Socially Learn and Support Each Other. Dans R. Cayley, F. Coll et D. Aureliano Newman (dir.), *Writing Together: Building Social Writing Opportunities for Graduate Students*. University of Michigan Press.

Depending on one's academic journey and specific needs, each individual can choose to participate in the type of group that suits them best and that offers benefits similar to those already mentioned regarding academic writing cafés.

RELAIS.

Courses of Action

For doctoral students

- Take initiatives to accumulate a diversity of experiences, in academia and in other research contexts, to better understand the different facets of the research profession.

- Be proactive in finding out about the transversal skills to develop to become a novice researcher, without relying solely on the content of doctoral programs.

- Surround yourself with like–minded people for intellectual and emotional support, by participating in academic writing groups, in which there are opportunities to model winning strategies and put lived experiences into perspective.

For universities

- Expose doctoral students to a variety of research environments to better prepare them for various professional projects inside and outside academia.

- Provide doctoral students with clearer information about transversal skills that must be developed to integrate into the profession of researcher, regardless of the targeted work environment.

- Integrate explicit teaching of academic writing into the curriculum of doctoral programs and organize academic writing activities between novice and experienced researchers, at the university, faculty or department level.

Lines of Research

🔍 Experiment with different study program formulas that depart from the traditional doctorate to develop qualified individuals able to work in a variety of research environments, including private corporations, the government or non-profit organizations.

🔍 Compare different typologies of transversal skills among doctoral graduates to ensure their coherence with the contemporary profession of researcher, as well as their consideration in the curriculum of doctoral programs.

🔍 Examine mentorship opportunities between generations of doctoral students from an interdisciplinary and interuniversity perspective, including through the participation in academic writing groups.

For Further Reading

Déri, C. E., Tremblay-Wragg, É. & Mathieu-C., S. (2022). Academic Writing Groups in Higher Education: History and State of Play. *International Journal of Higher Education, 11*(1), 85–99.

Duchesne, C., Déri, C., Le Callonnec, L. & Gagnon, N. (2023). La transition identitaire de doctorant à professeur d'université : entre continuités et ruptures. *Revue canadienne de l'éducation, 45*(4), 962–986.

To cite this article

Déri, C. E. (2024). How do Doctoral Students Socialize Into the Profession of Researcher in Academic Writing Cafés? Relais. The Popular Scientific Journal on Success in Higher Education, 9.

References

Déri, C. E. (2024). Academic Writing Cafes: Public Spaces where Graduate Students Socially Learn and Support Each Other. Dans R. Cayley, F. Coll et D. Aureliano Newman (dir.), *Writing Together: Building Social Writing Opportunities for Graduate Students*. University of Michigan Press.

Déri, C. E., Vincent, C. & Tremblay-Wragg, E. (2023). L'accompagnement par les pairs au doctorat pour socialiser les femmes au métier de chercheuse. *Revue internationale de pédagogie de l'enseignement supérieur, 39*(1), 1–22.

Durette, B., Fournier, M. & Lafon, M. (2012). *Compétences et employabilité des docteurs* [Rapport d'enquête]. Adoc Talent Management.

Kapp, S. (2015). Un apprentissage sans normes explicites ? La socialisation à l'écriture des doctorants. *Socio-Logos, 10*.

Lison, C. & Bourget, A. (2016). Pourquoi faire une thèse ? Dans E. Bernheim et P. Noreau (dir.), *La thèse: un guide pour y entrer… et s'en sortir* (p. 13–22). Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Mewburn, I., Osborne, L. & Caldwell, G. (2014). Shut up and write! Some surprising uses of cafés and crowds in doctoral writing. Dans C. Guerin et C. Aitchison (dir.), *Writing Groups for Doctoral Education and Beyond: Innovations in Practice and Theory* (p. 399–425). Routledge.

Murray, R. (2015). *Writing in Social Spaces: A social processes approach to academic writing*. Routledge.

Organisation de coopération et de développement économique [OCDE]. (2022). *Taux d'obtention d'un diplôme tertiaire*.

Skakni, I. (2011). Socialisation disciplinaire et persévérance aux études doctorales : Un modèle d'analyse des sphères critiques. *Initio : Revue sur l'éducation et la vie au travail, 1*, 18–34.

Tremblay-Wragg, E., Mathieu-C., S., Labonté-Lemoyne, E., Déri, C. & Gadbois, M.-E. (2020). Writing more, better, together: How writing retreats support graduate students through their journey. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 45*(1), 95–106.

Biographical Note

Catherine E. Déri is a long-term appointed professor at the Faculty of Education of the University of Ottawa, where she is involved in the training of future teachers in the provinces of Ontario and Québec. She is also a Lecturer and Postdoctoral Fellow at the Université du Québec en Outaouais, where she conducts research on the prevention of plagiarism in academia. In this regard, she works as part of an international partnership involving more than 60 researchers in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Such involvement in the field of education comes after a 25-year career as a Logistics Officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. As far as distinctions are concerned, she was awarded the Pierre-Laberge Thesis Prize from the University of Ottawa for the excellence of her doctoral dissertation in the field of humanities and a prize from the University of Guelph for her professional impact after completing a Master's Degree in Leadership.

oresquebec.ca
info@oresquebec.ca