

RESEARCH-BASED ARTICLES

Extracting the Essence of a Learning Community in an Online Graduate Program: How and Why Peer Connections and Collaboration Manifest and Matter in Meaningful Ways

Linda Dale Bloomberg, EdD^{1,2}, Meral Muyesser, EdD^{1,3}, Jamee Garner, EdD¹, Janelly Garza, EdD¹, Monica Peña-Villegas, EdD¹

¹ College of Education, National University, ² Teachers College, Columbia University, ³ Humanities, Business, and Social Sciences (HBSS), Rowan College at Burlington County

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As learning contexts emerge and transform within the realm of online graduate education, educators face the ongoing challenge of fostering interactive, learner-centered experiences, and there is a greater need to explore teaching and learning in their various modalities. Researchers and practitioners have increasingly highlighted the importance of developing a sense of community in online courses and programs. Learning communities offer a potential informal context for shared and collaborative learning among peers, helping students overcome feelings of isolation and positively impacting individual learning. Many questions remain, however, about ways to develop community in online higher education, and which facilitation strategies within the online learning environment are most effective and impactful. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological research design with in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of a sample of doctoral alumni who had studied in a one-to-one online graduate program. The conceptual framework was based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, which highlights the significance of presence and transactional distance in the online environment. Research questions focused on participants' perceptions of an online learning community and what they understood as the contributing factors to building and sustaining community and collaborative learning. Thematic analysis yielded nine themes, illustrating the richness and depth of the learning community experience, shedding light on how community develops and the resulting benefits that online graduate students derive. In the context of a rapid global adoption of online learning, this research underscores the need for community and collaboration throughout the doctoral process, offering a deep understanding of the student experience. The implication is that an instructor's thoughtful facilitation will pave the way for the quality of the interaction and connections that contribute to community-building. The findings of this research will be valuable to educators in designing and implementing a more collaborative and interactive online learning environment, ultimately fostering peer connections, improved student engagement, deeper learning, and enhanced academic performance. This study was nominated for the AERA 2026 Exemplary Contributions to Practice-Engaged Research Award in recognition of a collaborative research project that has a sustained and observable effect on contexts of practice.

Learning communities have rich historical roots and a broad reach of branches across humanistic ideas, sociological and psychological concepts, and organizational learning. There are ongoing efforts to explore the foundational construct of learning communities more deeply, particularly in an era of advancements in the learning sciences, technology, global collaborations, and participatory cultures, highlighting areas of opportunity for scholarship on learning communities (Hod et al., 2018). Researchers and practitioners have increasingly emphasized the importance of developing a sense of community in online and blended programs through the design and facilitation of quality interactions (Allen et al., 2024; Bloomberg, 2021a; Kaiser et al., 2023).

The current research study emanated from the lead author's keen ongoing interest in the phenomenon of online learning communities: their etiology, development, and value. Linda Bloomberg's own doctoral dissertation, completed in 2006, addressed the need for and value of collaborative learning in online graduate education. At the time of that dissertation research, online higher education was in a nascent phase, and videoconferencing was the primary method of delivery. Over the upcoming years, additional studies were conducted to further explore learning communities in online graduate education and their impact on student engagement and learning (Bloomberg, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2020, 2024b; Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018).

Theoretical Foundations of Online Learning

While an expanding and ever-increasing phenomenon, and with all the benefits that it offers, studying at a distance continues to raise questions about the difficulties of isolation and motivation, with the sense of exclusion and detachment becoming potential barriers to learning (Bradley, 2023; N. Brown, 2025; Melián et al., 2023). The theory of transactional distance, developed by Moore (1997), explains the perceived psychological and communication gaps in the online learning environment, often causing learners to participate minimally, disengage, or completely withdraw. This theory defines distance as pedagogical and social, rather than merely physical and geographical, emphasizing the need for intentional structures that foster dialogue and collaborative learning as this relates to levels of structure or learner control, maintaining that the greater the level of dialogue, the lower the psychological feeling of separation. In particular, learners with a lower level of autonomy tend to seek additional structure and support from instructors and/or fellow students, depending on others for their own learning and understanding (M. G. Moore, 1989). The theory of transactional distance and ways to "bridge the distance gap" forms the basis of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Model, which is the most frequently cited conceptual framework that shapes research and practice in the field of online learning in higher education (Garrison, 1993, 2017; Garrison et al., 1999, 2001, 2003).

The construct of *presence* is a key component of the CoI Model, encompassing multiple dimensions that pertain to online learning environments, all of which are interconnected and interactive. *Teaching presence* relates to instructors developing collaborative working relationships and interacting with learners in order to bridge transactional distance and generate greater engagement, with research illustrating how *learners' perceptions* of instructor involvement instill a greater likelihood of course completion (Cole et al., 2017, 2019; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Van der Stap et al., 2024). The dimension of *social presence* is the perceived connectedness with the instructors and peers, and is one of the cornerstones for the development of distance learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Rovai, 2001, 2002). *Social presence* thus becomes an important component that must be established to initiate learning in the online environment, with the challenge being to facilitate this degree of interpersonal contact among instructors and other participants (Annand, 2011; Aragon, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2005). The dimension of *cognitive presence* relates to instructors and learners being able to co-create meaning through dialogue and critical reflection within a community of inquiry. *Emotional presence* and *learning presence* are more recently added dimensions to the original CoI model, incorporating the impact of feelings and emotions on motivation, self-regulation, and engagement, thereby emphasizing a more learner-centered approach (Boston et al., 2019; Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Jiang & Koo, 2020; Shea et al., 2022). Essentially, the CoI Model is based on the assumption that teaching and learning in online higher education occur within the conceptual domain of collaborative constructivist pedagogy, which is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist approach (Shea et al., 2022; Woo & Reeves, 2007). The CoI Model has been used as a framework to assess *presence* in online graduate education (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019; Boston et al., 2019; Stenbom, 2020) and also serves as a conceptual map for enhancing course quality and learner engagement in online graduate learning communities (Caskurlu et al., 2021). With the expansion and diversification of online learning opportunities comes a greater need for the continued exploration of the capacity for collaboration and community development across multiple educational contexts, and how students can be most effectively supported in the learning process.

Fostering Community in the Online Environment

In the online environment, social belonging and a sense of community are associated with increased engagement and motivation (Allen et al., 2024; Avery, 2023; Berry, 2017, 2019; Croxton, 2014; R. L. Moore, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2024). Belonging to a community in the online environment has also been positively associated with course satisfaction and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2024; Bettinger et al., 2017; Chan & Ng, 2024; Hoven et al., 2020; Kosar, 2023; Lu & Smiles, 2022; Producers et al., 2022). As a result of the benefits involved, developing a learning community has been at the heart of online education since its inception

(Carabajal et al., 2003; Conrad, 2002, 2005; Garrison, 1993; Harasim et al., 1996; Hiltz, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2005, 2007; Roper, 2001; Stacey, 1999). Early proponents presented a compelling vision of computer-mediated communication as a medium uniquely capable of supporting the creation of communities of learners actively engaged in time-and-place-independent group interaction. The prediction was that distance education would develop a new type of learning community which would provide a space for increased participation and collaborative learning.

Many researchers and practitioners viewed digital technologies as capable of breaking down collaborative interactivity and becoming a potential barrier to effective learning due to feelings of exclusion and detachment (Beckett, 1998; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2005; Perrin & Mayhew, 2000). Distance education was framed by critics as “disembodied learning” (Beckett, 1998, p. 1) and a “pedagogy of (dis)location” (Edwards & Usher, 2000, p. 3). Concerns were based on the notion that what online students are often missing—and which is a vital part of all education and learning—is the *informal sustained contact with other learners*, drawing attention to Dewey (1916) who proposed that higher order thinking and learning is better accomplished through learner interaction, and that learning with and from others by way of dialogue and reflection yields deeper understanding. Admittedly, the rich educational value of collaborative learning was not available to students involved in first generation distance education (i.e., correspondence study). Technological advancements over the past decades have, however, certainly offered an expanded dimension of interaction, enabling learning experiences that are increasingly collaborative and participatory (Bloomberg, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Cardullo & Burton, 2016; Croxton, 2014; Kaiser et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Mare & Mutezo, 2025; Mohamad et al., 2025; Rodezno & Shahjahan, 2025; Wang et al., 2024; Zhu & Ergulec, 2023).

Online Higher Education Practice and Research

A growing body of literature suggests that because higher order thinking and learning is accomplished through a variety of learner interactions, learning communities are integral to the online graduate learning experience. A common issue across the current reviewed research, that is expanded upon below, is that potential enhancers of community include three key elements: (a) synchronous interaction and collaborative opportunities; (b) belonging to a cohort or community of practice; (c) role of the instructor in building and sustaining community. These same elements that are present in the recent research (2020-2025) are also present in much of the seminal literature on online community development that was conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s. These three elements were integral in informing and supporting data analysis for the findings of the current study.

Synchronous Interaction and Collaborative Learning Opportunities

Current research strongly suggests that collaboration is key to sustainable online community development, and peer-to-peer learning facilitates community building and collaborative learning skills (Bradley, 2023; Campbell et al., 2024; Donelan & Kear, 2024; Han & Resta, 2020; Imran, 2022; Lu & Smiles, 2022; Rodezno & Shahjahan, 2025; Scales et al., 2024; Smith, 2005; Song & Elftman, 2024). Imran (2022) describes how synchronous techniques can help improve socialization and collaboration in online graduate programs, illustrating how an increased sense of community could potentially have an impact on student persistence and retention. As Cardullo & Burton (2016) stated, relationship-building through synchronous interaction has long been considered essential in creating a collaborative online learning community. A primary goal, therefore, is to make the online learning environment conducive to active participation by implementing synchronous strategies that will increase learner engagement not only with the course content and with the instructor, but also with peers by way of collaborative learning opportunities (Bloomberg, 2020, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Rodezno & Shahjahan, 2025). Earlier studies also supported this finding. Cox (1999) indicated that sustained online discourse is crucial to the creation of a supportive structure for collaborative learning and is seen as a key element in fostering transformative learning. Critical thinking and dialogue are both central to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2003, 2009). Koku and Wellman (2004) illustrated how formal work relations and informal friendships, with regular synchronous contact, play a strong role in collaborative learning and community development.

Significance of Belonging to a Cohort or Community of Practice

Recent studies support the value of learning collaboratively by belonging to a cohort or community of practice (Allen et al., 2024; Avery, 2023; Generalao et al., 2025; Lambrev & Cruz, 2021; Lively et al., 2021). Studying with the same group of people over an extended period of time establishes the bonds and support that enhance the learning experience. Allen et al. (2024) synthesized 20 years of literature showing that belonging—often structured through peer cohorts and learning communities—is linked to student engagement, satisfaction, and lower attrition. Findings of this review directly inform online doctoral program design. Hoven (2020) reported findings from two online doctoral program cohort models, showing that cohorts enable early identification of at-risk students, create accountability structures, and foster a sense of belonging and community that improves persistence and program completion. Lambrev and Cruz (2021) explored how a cohort in one professional education doctoral program perceived the effect of pedagogical strategies on learning and community development. Findings from this study highlight the pivotal role of purposeful teaching presence—including structured “critical friends” peer groups, frequent synchronous sessions, and informal interaction. Similarly, Lively et al. (2021)

illustrated how an online professional doctoral cohort intentionally developed community through structured program elements, including instructor support and peer connections within a cohort model, leading to the emergence of a community of practice and shared professional identity. The findings of Avery (2023) augmented previous research, illustrating how doctoral cohorts function as communities of practice, fostering belonging, knowledge sharing, and persistence, thereby reinforcing the importance of cohort-based structures in sustaining supportive academic communities. More recently, Generalao et al. (2025) employed an appreciative inquiry model to explore how mentorship networks within a learning community are strengthened by purposefully engaging graduates of a teacher education program in guiding and supporting new teachers. The value of belonging to a cohort was also highlighted in two seminal studies, showing that this sense of belonging plays a significant role in developing and sustaining community (Choi, 2001; Conrad, 2005). Choi (2001) emphasized how the online learning cohort structure in higher education promotes engagement, participation, and community-building, leading to sustained relationships even after the program of study has ended. As Conrad (2005) explained, the details of program delivery, how long learners are involved with their online group, program length, and how much actual interaction is involved (both synchronous and asynchronous) are critical to the process and quality of community-building.

Instructor Role in Building and Sustaining Community

While community can develop organically, research reveals that the role of the instructor is central to building and sustaining an online collaborative learning community. Bloomberg and Grantham (2018) explored ways in which faculty efforts build and sustain community among learners in an online graduate program, highlighting the support structures that online instructors must establish to supplement students' self-directed pathways, thereby facilitating and promoting engagement. Major and Sumner (2018) explained how faculty implement explicit expectations in building successful relationships with their students, starting before the course begins and continuing throughout by way of genuine and substantive communication and interaction. Prodgers et al. (2022) emphasized that students benefit when instructors deliberately foster peer connection through collaborative tools, frequent communication, and informal engagement opportunities. The review of Melián et al. (2023) found that strong supervisory relationships and sense of community are key to persistence and success, demonstrating the necessity of structured social supports, even in fully asynchronous programs. Welmer et al. (2025) offered valuable insights into asynchronous engagement strategies, underscoring faculty efforts to counter isolation by promoting active engagement in online doctoral learning environments. These recent studies support seminal literature that suggests that course designers should develop online learning community through intentional and thoughtful support (R. E. Brown, 2000; Chen, 2003; Conrad, 2005; Edelstein &

Edwards, 2002; Gray, 2004; Hill, 2002; Lebaron & Miller, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2005, 2007; Riggs & Linder, 2016; Roper, 2001; Schwier, 2001). Conrad's (2005) findings indicated that the instructor's role in cohort-based online learning is to initiate a sense of community, and that learners themselves will also recognize the need to become a community. As the community grows and develops it will become more intentional and sustainable with both instructor and learner input (Conrad, 2005).

Synthesis: Research Implications and Practical Application

The above review offers an overview of the theoretical base and empirical research related to issues surrounding the creation and development of learning communities in the online learning environment. Built on what is known about effective educational practice related to interactive learning, it is clear that developing a learning community is conceived of as a complex *process* that involves cultivating a shared sense of purpose and commitment on the part of both faculty and students. An apparent and consistent theme among the various descriptions in the literature is that it is the culture or *shared experience* itself that has the potential to create and shape this social dynamic. Overall, an underlying premise among all the studies reviewed is that community-building in the online graduate environment should be an important educational goal. The phenomenon of community building is viewed as significant in promoting engagement, facilitating effective collaborative learning and critical thinking, and encouraging continuous communication and interaction among students. What is common across all the reviewed studies is that it is essential to develop an understanding of what characterizes the phenomenon of online learning communities, and whether and how these communities are established and maintained.

The need to foster community in the online environment remains a focal issue by implementing strategies that will increase learner engagement not only with the course content and with the instructor, but also with peers (Allen et al., 2024; Bloomberg, 2021c, 2021d, 2024b; Rodezno & Shahjahan, 2025). Whether the online learning environment is blended, hybrid, or entirely online, it is essential that multiple support structures be set in place. Addressing this need will mitigate the experience of transactional distance and supplement learners' self-directed pathways, thereby ensuring a learning experience that promotes and facilitates deep learning (Bloomberg, 2021c, 2021d, 2024b). To create a collaborative environment that fosters a community of learning, Riggs and Linder (2016) explained that in the absence of an actual physical space, an *architecture of engagement* must be intentionally created. The implication is that an instructor's thoughtful facilitation will pave the way for the quality of the interaction and connections that contribute to community-building.

The Current Study

National University offers individualized “one-to-one” PhD and EdD programs whereby doctoral candidates work together with their dissertation chair, receiving regular weekly feedback on their work. This program model provides accessible and flexible education tailored to working professionals, particularly at the graduate level. While many students are working simultaneously on completing their dissertation research, there are no established cohorts and no formal collaborative learning activities. Over the past decade, in her role as dissertation chair and subject matter expert (SME), Linda Bloomberg has initiated peer groups with her doctoral candidates, pairing students working on similar or related topics in the hope that as “learning partners” they would derive benefit and value from informal shared experiences and the support of one or more peers. While in her role as dissertation chair, she has witnessed the benefit derived from these developing relationships, no formal research was previously conducted on this specific phenomenon and so any knowledge and experience were purely anecdotal. The findings of the current study have practical and theoretical implications for the design and implementation of instructional interventions for group collaboration in graduate online learning communities.

Research Methodology and Design

The current research was conceptualized as a qualitative interpretive phenomenological study, grounded in collaborative inquiry (Bray et al., 2000), to explore and better understand the lived experiences of a sample of doctoral students enrolled in a one-to-one graduate online program. Qualitative research is well suited to promoting a holistic understanding of an experience or phenomenon with the researcher becoming immersed in the world of others (Bloomberg, 2023, 2026). Phenomenology is based on the assumption that there is commonality in human experience, with researchers seeking to understand and describe this commonality, or *essence* of a phenomenon (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990, 2016). The researcher reflects deeply on essential themes that constitute the nature of the common lived experience and then constructs a description of the phenomenon (Tatano Beck, 2021). The use of interpretive phenomenology as a design and method in the educational research literature has risen in popularity, particularly by researchers interested in understanding and generating knowledge about first-person events or describing the lived experiences of learners in educational contexts (Bloomberg, 2023, 2026). The collaborative nature of this research was itself a defining strength. Faculty and graduates partnered as co-researchers and co-authors, modeling the very principles of community development dynamics that the study sought to examine. This authentic researcher–practitioner collaboration enriched the research process, reflecting shared knowledge construction that bridges theory and practice through sustained collaboration.

As the online graduate education context continues to evolve, educators face the ongoing challenge of fostering interactive, learner-centered experiences. Students often struggle with high transactional distance (M. G. Moore, 1997), and especially with asynchronous learning, where there is often less interpersonal dialogue and higher course structure, students with low learner autonomy (i.e., those less adept at self-directed learning that is required in independent study) can feel isolated and unsupported. This challenge becomes especially significant for “accidental asynchronous learners”; those students who may prefer synchronous learning but find themselves compelled to participate in asynchronous activities due to scheduling or situational constraints. As such, there is a greater need to explore teaching and learning in their various modalities to ensure engagement and success for all online students. The research problem for this study was that online learning environments can present challenges for collaborative learning and the establishment of a sense of community. The research purpose was to shed light on the capacity for collaboration and community development in a one-to-one online graduate program. The research purpose incorporated two research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of doctoral candidates working in a “one-to-one” online doctoral program and how do they perceive the value of collaborative learning and community-building opportunities?
2. What elements of their “one-to-one” online doctoral program did students find most significant in developing a learning community?

Research Sample

The study’s sample consisted of four alumni who graduated from National University PhD or EdD programs between 2020 and 2025. Sample selection was purposeful and was based on the criterion that participants had engaged in collaborative learning opportunities during the course of their doctoral program that were instructor-facilitated. Participation was voluntary, and all participants accepted the opportunity to participate in this study. Although a fifth alumnus initially agreed to participate, scheduling constraints prevented the interview from being completed, and thus they were not included in the study. All four of the study’s participants were offered the choice to be identified by their real names in the research report, to serve as co-authors on this article, and to collaborate as peer-reviewers in the writing process.

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth interviews are typically the primary data collection method in phenomenological research (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018; Seidman, 2019). In phenomenological research, the researcher is a writer, as the craft of writing is central to this design (Bloomberg, 2023, 2026). Writing is intricately linked to

analysis, as the researcher attempts to capture, through in-depth interviews, the essential nature of the phenomenon. Each of the study's four consenting research participants received the interview protocol and provided rich and in-depth responses to the interview questions (Appendix A).

Data were analyzed by way of reflexive thematic analysis, which is a cornerstone of phenomenology. As stated by Frechette et al. (2020), "An interpretive phenomenological methodology calls for data analysis that truly moves beyond description, to interpretation, in getting at the 'so what?'" (p. 11). Open coding is the starting point for qualitative research where the goal is to uncover initial ideas in the data and identify significant concepts and categories (Bloomberg, 2023, 2026). Following initial coding, axial coding was applied to identify relationships between codes and integrate and synthesize categories of codes into broader themes. Development of themes was also informed and supported by the literature and previous research. Once analysis was complete and themes had been identified with supporting verbatim quotations, member checking occurred whereby each of the study's research participants received a copy of the findings for verification and approval. All participants who chose to serve as co-authors also agreed to have their real names associated with their responses. Additionally, they were permitted to redact any quotations they preferred not to share in the final article.

Findings

The findings of this research underscore the need for community and collaboration throughout the doctoral process. In the absence of a formal cohort, a sense of community was developed among students in a one-to-one online doctoral program through relationships formed with dissertation faculty (most notably the dissertation chair), peer support, student support services, and the University's online social platform, "The Commons." Verbatim quotations elicit participants' voices in telling the story of their lived experiences as is typical of qualitative phenomenological research.

Themes

Thematic analysis yielded five themes related to the study's first research question: *What are the lived experiences of doctoral candidates working in an online one-to-one program and how do they perceive the value of collaborative learning and community-building opportunities?*

Theme 1: Seeking Connection and Support to Overcome Isolation. Online learning has historically been construed as isolating or detached (Aragon, 2003; Beckett, 1998; Bradley, 2023; N. Brown, 2025; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Melián et al., 2023; M. G. Moore, 1997; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2005; Perrin & Mayhew, 2000). Participants in the current study thoughtfully responded to a question that asked if there were any times in their program that they felt alone or isolated, what contributed to that sense of isolation (or non-isolation), and whether there were any ways they managed to combat the sense of isolation or aloneness.

The concern regarding isolation in this online program, that is designed for independent study, was expressed by all participants. Most participants had previously been accustomed to traditional classrooms which incorporated face-to-face interaction as a means of teaching and learning.

Jamee: I was not necessarily worried about being alone but it was a minor concern. Mainly because I know that one of the best ways to learn and gain experience is through the experiences of others. Those who have been there before can share their experiences and insights and it helps provide useful tools for coping and persevering.

Janelly: Online learning can initially feel isolating especially when you're transitioning from a traditional in-person educational background. In my case, I had completed both my undergraduate and master's degrees in face-to-face settings, where hallway conversations and group discussions were part of daily life ... As a first-generation Latina doctoral student, I was nervous about joining a one-to-one online program, especially not knowing what to expect or how much support I would receive. It felt intimidating at first, and I worried that I would have to figure everything out alone.

Meral: My online experience at NU was both challenging and rewarding. This might sound a bit unusual, but when I first enrolled, I hadn't realized the program was structured as a one-to-one doctoral format. I remember logging into my first course and suddenly realizing that it was designed for independent study, where I would read, complete weekly assignments, and receive feedback directly from my professor—without any classmates. At first, I was bewildered. I was frustrated with myself for overlooking such a key detail, and honestly, a bit scared—not having classmates to connect or ask for clarification felt isolating.

Monica: When one is used to the traditional learning methods, which rely on natural face-to-face interactions, moving to online learning, one does not necessarily have this. Until one connects with other individuals not just with virtual resources, one feels alone as one tries to figure things out. This part can feel isolating because one has to connect virtually, and there is no face-to-face interaction; it is not like we can go into a building and say I need help. The lonely part, I suppose, would come when one wants to discuss one's experience with someone and build a connection with other students to support one another on the journey.

Theme 2: The Value of Connection as it Relates to Deeper Learning.

A learning community is a shared and supportive experience which has the potential to contribute to a sense of belonging and help online learners to achieve their academic goals or objectives (Berry, 2017, 2019; Bettinger et al., 2017; Bloomberg, 2020, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2024b; Chan & Ng, 2024; Cox, 1999; Croxton, 2014; Imran, 2022; Koku & Wellman, 2004; Kosar, 2023; Lu & Smiles, 2022; R. L. Moore, 2014; Prodgers et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2024). One of the most valuable outcomes of peer interaction for this study's participants was the impact on their own learning, critical thinking, and academic progress in their online graduate program.

Jamee: Other students go through the same challenges and struggles and so they can relate...The two peers I was in the most contact with had experience in the same line of research and were able to help me locate information and provided excellent feedback that helped me improve my research and writing.

Janelly: To me, a learning community is a supportive network of individuals, students, alumni, faculty, and staff who are all engaged in the process of learning and growing together...These peer interactions gave me a space to ask questions I wasn't always sure how to phrase in formal settings and helped me feel validated in both my progress and struggles. It also gave me insight into how others approached their research, which inspired me to think critically about my own work. I'm grateful that Dr. Bloomberg made those connections happen. She understood the importance of community and mentorship, even in an individualized doctoral journey. Those peer connections were motivating and encouraging, and they reminded me that I wasn't alone in this process...I felt excited about the learning that was happening. It wasn't just about finishing a dissertation. It was about growing together as scholars.

Meral: I believe a strong learning community fosters collaboration, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging where everyone contributes to and benefits from the collective learning experience...Every individual I connected with brought a unique perspective, shaped by their expertise, challenges, lifestyle, cultural background, and experiences. I learned a great deal from these interactions. In academia, growth is continuous, and having an open-minded, curious, and supportive attitude helps foster that growth. Supporting one another enriches not only your development as a scholar but also as a human being.

Monica: A learning community values the learning that takes place and looks for opportunities to bring people together to create an environment where individuals come together and support each other with their educational objectives...Their [peers'] personal examples, related journeys, and dissertation guidance made it a real connection for me. Knowing that they were moving forward at their own pace empowered me to continue moving forward at my own pace...The ability to get advice and see different examples of the dissertation outcomes assisted me in completing my dissertation.

Theme 3: The Value of Connection as it Relates to Camaraderie and Sense of Community. All participants felt a sense of connection and community during their program. They richly explained the value of ongoing and sustained camaraderie resulting from informal social activities, friendships, and professional networking, through the University's social media platform "The Commons", as well as through connections with peers that were initiated by their dissertation chair. This sense of community was experienced by the study participants both with peers in their own graduate program and also with the broader University community.

Jamee: I was able to form not only a working relationship but also a friendship with the peers I met... When we all work together, it forms a strong group of individuals who can take on anything together...It was like having a group of friends to cheer me on and support me, as well as giving me great advice that would improve my efforts. Everyone I met was so nice and really gave me such a sense of belonging.

Janelly: The connections I made with my peers and the broader NU community created a strong sense of belonging and support throughout my doctoral journey. Whenever I had doubts or felt unsure about something, whether it was related to course content, dissertation progress, or even balancing work and life, I knew I had people I could reach out to who genuinely understood what I was going through. That sense of community made a huge difference. It reminded me that I wasn't doing this alone, even in an online environment... Meeting her [doctoral student] in person after years of virtual support reminded me just how powerful and lasting these doctoral connections can be.

Meral: I had the opportunity to connect with my SME, Dr. Linda Bloomberg, toward the end of my dissertation process...Over the past few years, she has been incredibly encouraging—celebrating my achievements and expressing appreciation for the work I do...Staying connected with your

professor—even after completing the program—fosters a sense of belonging and ownership toward your institution, and it also inspires you to pay it forward by supporting others who are navigating the same journey...Meeting her in person and developing a genuine academic and social-emotional relationship has been incredibly valuable to me. That connection made me feel seen, respected, and appreciated—not just for my academic work, but also for who I am...I have also witnessed the strong connections Dr. Bloomberg maintains with other alumni and how much she values building and nurturing those relationships...Professors who actively foster and maintain these relationships, like Dr. Bloomberg, model the kind of supportive, engaged community that is essential for student success—especially in an online learning environment.

Monica: We cannot remove the human touch and the different modes of communication when we genuinely want people to be successful. In addition, these are the professional peers that we connect with. How else would we make connections with other “Dr.’s,” especially when many of us are first-generation students ourselves?...At the tail end, I began to build some connections with some other students, but I must admit that it was more because they reached out than I reached out. The connection really began at our graduation commencement, where we were looking for each other. When we did see each other, it affirmed that I was part of something that was not virtual but a tool towards success, and behind it all, we had individuals who were supporting us all the way through. I just wish it had not happened towards the end.

Theme 4: The Value of Ongoing Collaboration and Professional Relationships. All participants stated that following completion of their doctoral program they hoped to maintain connections with peers with whom they interacted during their program because of the value derived from the shared experiences. Both personal and professional reasons were shared.

Jamee: I plan on working with all those with whom I have made connections, in one form or another. I would love to write academically with them, and I will most definitely keep in contact via email or phone. Those who assisted me in completing my dissertation are part of my academic family and I value them so much. I have to gain some experience in the field of academics somehow, but once I do, I want to work with each and every one of them in some manner...My greatest hope is to find a job where I can pay forward to other students the guidance and support which was given to me.

Janelly: Knowing that we did it makes the journey more meaningful. It's incredibly rewarding to see each other thrive in different professional paths, and stay in touch as our conversations, goals, and dreams begin to unfold in real life... I've chosen to maintain my connections with alumni and graduates by staying in touch through platforms like LinkedIn and social media. It's been incredibly rewarding to watch our lifelong goals come to life and to celebrate each other's successes beyond the doctoral journey. These connections continue to inspire me, as we share updates on new roles, publications, and projects that reflect how far we've come...My hope is that, in the near future, we'll have the opportunity to partner on research projects or educational initiatives that reflect our shared interests and diverse expertise.

Meral: I plan to maintain the academic and professional connections I've made by staying in touch through email, social media, and academic networks. I'm especially interested in continued collaboration, whether through writing, research, or mentoring opportunities. These connections inspire me and contribute to my growth as a scholar and educator. They also help sustain a sense of community and shared purpose—something I deeply value even beyond the completion of my degree. The connections I've made through my NU journey—particularly with Dr. Bloomberg and fellow alumni—will continue to play a meaningful role in my academic and professional life. These relationships offer more than just support; they open doors for future collaborations, shared research interests, and mutual encouragement.

Monica: I hope we can help each other stay motivated to continue to publish our respective areas of expertise so that we can continue to create change. I am also hoping that somehow we can be a resource for each other, but what the resource would look like, I don't know...I do hope that they reach out to ask for my input in the area of my expertise. I hope we can collaborate on providing written works.

Theme 5: Metaphorical Description of the Online Community Experience. The rich descriptive metaphors that were created by this study's participants shed light on the power and value of a learning community in its many facets, and the dynamic nature thereof. A common thread running through this theme is the idea of being a part of a larger whole, where guidance and connection served as a source of ongoing motivation and perseverance.

Jamee: The peer-to-peer connections at NU and the learning community that has been formed makes me think of a big tree! All of us are the tiny roots which form and grow the tree. Everyone is important, from the enrollment advisors to the dissertation Chair. We all have a part to play and without every one of us, the tree would not grow as strong and healthy. We all have a part to play and I think, especially with online learning, it is important to remember this metaphor...Once our academic journey is done, it still continues. We have so much to give and contribute to other students and I am so thankful for the help and support I received. The roots at NU run deep and I am so honored to be a part of the learning community here!

Janelly: Even from a distance, we built small fires, places to gather, share knowledge, and offer warmth. The glow from those fires lit the path forward when the journey felt long.

Meral: My peer-connection experience has been like a lighthouse in the fog. The journey was often solitary, filled with long stretches of uncertainty, isolation, and self-doubt—much like navigating through dense fog without a clear direction. But connecting with a professor and a few peers felt like spotting a distant lighthouse: a steady light that reminded me I wasn't alone, helped me reorient myself, and guided me forward. Even though we were geographically far apart and on different paths, their presence offered clarity, encouragement, confidence, and a renewed sense of direction. These connections gave me not only support, but also new perspectives and opportunities that continue to shed light on my path.

Monica: A lighthouse providing a ship with a sense of safety, hope, and guidance through the waters to successfully reach its destination. No one makes it alone; there is always someone else there to provide some sort of support. We are each other's missing link towards success.

Thematic analysis yielded four themes related to the study's second research question: *What elements of their one-to-one online doctoral program did students find most significant in developing a learning community?*

Theme 6: Proactively Seeking Community and Connection with Peers. Conrad (2005) described how community develops organically, with learners often actively seeking ways to interact with others and derive benefit from existing support systems. The findings of the current study indicate that these support systems, which offer value on multiple levels, existed within the university and sometimes these are external resources. As this study's participants explained, they proactively sought connections with peers as a

form of support and motivation. This finding supports Conrad's (2005) assertion that as the community grows and develops it becomes more intentional and sustainable.

Jamee: Online learning could be isolating because you are not learning in a class of other students. Also, because you do not get to meet your instructor face to face. However, I found NU's program to be the opposite. Almost all of the instructors made it a point to get to know me on a personal level and were available to talk any time I needed them. The Commons is also a good way to meet students and be able to feel connected to others who are learning in the same way as you.

Janelly: Entering an online doctoral program felt unfamiliar at first. I didn't know what to expect in terms of peer interaction and navigating everything on my own felt overwhelming at times. However, what helped ease that transition was the intentional support built into NU's program...Once I took the time to engage with those resources, I realized that the experience didn't have to be isolating, it just required a different kind of effort and mindset. The support systems are there *we just need to tap into them* [italics added]...Consistent engagement helped me feel less alone and more confident in my journey. I discovered that I wasn't just in a program I was part of a community.

Meral: Online learning can feel isolating or lonely, especially when there is limited interaction with peers or instructors. Unlike traditional classroom settings where students naturally engage in discussions before or after class, online environments require more intentional efforts to build those connections. In NU's one-to-one doctoral program, this sense of isolation can be even more pronounced because you're not part of a cohort or discussion-based class. There are no built-in peer interactions *unless you actively seek them out* [italics added]...During my dissertation sequence, my chair did not connect me with other students in the program or with alumni who had already graduated. ...The only partial connection I had was through reading posts on the NU platform ["The Commons"]. Reading announcements and students' shared experiences on that platform helped me feel somewhat connected—not physically or even fully emotionally, but it reassured me that I wasn't alone. I even came across a student who shared a similar cultural background with me, and we briefly connected during the program, which meant a lot.

Monica: I did try to engage with others via established Zoom meeting sessions. This created a safe place to say “this is where I am at in my journey” or state “I have this concern/challenge” and be able to get affirmations and guidance from other fellow students and alumni...Many times, I thought there must be more students and alumni in the Sacramento, California area, and yet there was no community here for us to come together and build that network of support. If there is, then I am not aware of it. As I say this, I ask myself, “Why did I not ask this and try to bring us together?” Maybe because the dissertation was my main focus.

Theme 7: Instructors’ Presence through Facilitation and Mentoring Support. Establishing an online teaching presence contributes to deeper learning, reduces feelings of isolation, and a sense of community, and research has illustrated how *learners’ perceptions* of instructor involvement instill a greater likelihood of course completion (Cole et al., 2017, 2019; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001; Van der Stap et al., 2024). This study’s participants’ perceptions of community were related to their instructor’s active interaction, guidance, and the establishment of ongoing collaborative and supportive working relationships. Mentorship provided by their dissertation chair was acknowledged and appreciated and this was often actively pursued as a strong and valuable form of support.

Jamee: The main thing were the instructors and especially my dissertation Chair, Dr. Bloomberg. The instructors made it a priority to make me not feel isolated. Dr. Bloomberg kept in touch on a regular basis and we formed a bond immediately. I am beyond grateful for her and the efforts she made to make me feel comfortable and to assist me in my journey.

Janelly: One of the most impactful sources of support came from my dissertation chair. Her consistent communication, timely responses, and constructive feedback made a huge difference in my experience. I never felt like I was working in isolation because I always knew I had someone guiding me, asking questions, and pushing me to think more critically about my research. *That kind of mentorship made the process feel collaborative* [italics added].

Meral: Building a strong, constructive teaching-learning relationship between student and professor can greatly impact the learning experience. In some of my courses, I was fortunate to establish that connection, and it made a noticeable difference in both my engagement and the quality of my work... I believe students often feel lonely in online learning environments not only because the program is structured as one-to-one, but also

when there is little or no connection between the professor and the student. If the course is designed in a way that limits interaction beyond submitting assignments and receiving feedback, students can easily feel isolated, lost, and disconnected. In my experience, the *professor's presence* [italics added], responsiveness, and willingness to build a supportive relationship are essential in reducing feelings of isolation and making the learning experience more engaging and meaningful...It took time for me to adjust to the one-to-one structure, and there were other points throughout the program when I experienced similar feelings—especially when some of my professors were not present or did not show genuine interest in my learning and progress.

Monica: I did not feel isolated when my professors were willing to make telephone or Zoom meetings so that we could talk, discuss, and address concerns and questions....I did not know that I had the right to advocate for my needs and tell the instructors that I need to be able to converse to communicate my needs and lack of understanding clearly. During these times, I felt isolated, as if I were on my own to understand and make it through... so I began to seek out assistance. *I began to look for the opportunity to be mentored and guided* [italics added].

Theme 8: Instructor's Active Intervention to Develop Connections among Students. Meaningful student-student interactions can involve discussion, collaborative group work or peer review. Learner connections and support, particularly opportunities for peer review, is one way to develop collaboration by offering opportunities for students to read and respond to one another's academic writing (Bloomberg, 2005, 2008, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). As this study's participants explained, if offered, this is a valuable activity in online doctoral coursework, particularly in a one-to-one or individualized model, in that this activity serves to establish mutually beneficial academic support and connections.

Jamee: I absolutely welcomed this [connection with peers]! I related to a few peers, two of whom kept in contact the whole way throughout. They were both able to share relevant information about how to improve things in my research and writing, as well as providing encouragement to keep going and helping me know I could do it!

Janelly: My dissertation chair connected me with other students throughout my dissertation journey, and it was something I wholeheartedly welcomed and truly appreciated. As someone who was navigating the doctoral process for the first time, it meant a lot to be able to speak with others who were either

going through a similar experience or had recently completed it. Being able to talk about our dissertation topics, share challenges, and exchange ideas created a sense of online community that made the process feel better...I've also stayed connected with my dissertation chair, Dr. Bloomberg, through both email and LinkedIn. Her continued support and mentorship mean a great deal to me, and I value being able to share my post-graduate milestones with someone who played such an important role in my journey.

Meral: Being connected to Dr. Bloomberg [Subject Matter Expert] also opened the door to other meaningful academic relationships. She introduced me to fellow alumni and even connected me with a doctoral student working on a dissertation in my area of expertise. I had the chance to support that student by reviewing and providing feedback on her final manuscript, which I found deeply rewarding. These connections meant a great deal to me.

Monica: I welcomed these connections! This was something that motivated me to continue to push forward. Their [peers'] experience and positivity made it so that I, too, could believe in my capabilities. When you connected me with another student who was on their journey, I wanted to help them be successful and was more than happy to review their data and give them insight from my perspective. I desired to give back as I was given. I also felt like this is more than an "I" experience, but a "we" journey.

Theme 9: Benefit of Collaborative Learning Opportunities. Current research strongly suggests that collaboration is key to sustainable online community development, and peer-to-peer learning facilitates community building and collaborative learning skills (Bradley, 2023; Campbell et al., 2024; Donelan & Kear, 2024; Han & Resta, 2020; Imran, 2022; Lu & Smiles, 2022; Rodezno & Shahjahan, 2025; Scales et al., 2024; Song & Elftman, 2024). More specifically, working together collaboratively in the online graduate context fosters community, reduces feelings of isolation and detachment, and enhances the learning experience (Allen et al., 2024; Avery, 2023; Bloomberg, 2006, 2008, 2020, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2024b; Donelan & Kear, 2024; Generalao et al., 2025; Hoven et al., 2020; Imran, 2022; Kaiser et al., 2023; Lambrev & Cruz, 2021; Lively et al., 2021). This study's participants explained how they perceived and experienced collaborative learning opportunities that were provided to them and the support and benefit thereof.

Jamee: Collaborative learning means to use others' experiences, thoughts and insights, recommendations, and perspectives to assist you in learning, as well as you sharing yours with them to assist them. It is just like working on a project at your job. Each person contributes and shares to make the project the best it can be. That is what collaborative learning does. It maximizes your learning experience!

Janelly: At NU, collaborative learning meant engaging with professors, coaches, peers, and alumni to exchange ideas, challenge each other's thinking, and grow together. Even in an online environment, I was able to build strong connections and participate in thoughtful discussions that deepened my understanding of complex topics. Whether it was through one-on-one coaching, peer feedback, or conversations in the Commons, every interaction contributed to my learning. Collaborative learning reminded me that knowledge isn't built in isolation, it's co-constructed through dialogue, support, and shared goals.

Meral: Collaborative learning refers to the process of supporting one another's learning—both intentionally and unintentionally—through the exchange of knowledge, ideas, perspectives, and experiences. It involves engaging in meaningful dialogue, working together to solve problems, and respecting diverse viewpoints. Collaborative learning can take place in formal settings, such as group projects or discussions, as well as informally through conversations, peer feedback, or shared experiences. At its core, it emphasizes mutual growth, shared responsibility, and the idea that learning is enhanced when people work together.

Monica: We learn from each other's experiences when we can share the lived experiences, what has worked, what has motivated us, how we have come to understand experiences, and what resources we used. It allows others to learn and lessen their burden, reinforcing our learning outcomes. We are a resource for others.

Discussion and Synthesis

Participants of this study shared their lived experiences as doctoral candidates working in an online one-to-one program that was designed for independent study, explaining how they perceived the value of collaborative learning and community-building opportunities and describing the support and benefit thereof. The rich experiences that were shared addressed the study's first research question. Essential aspects of community include

mutual interdependence, trust, interactivity, common expectations, and shared goals, all of which drive critical thinking and deeper learning. Participants also shared their initial concerns about the potential isolation inherent in the one-to-one model, especially since most of them were previously accustomed to traditional learning methods which relied on face-to-face interaction. Participants emphasized a strong need for connection and support in their online program, often describing this as a key factor in overcoming feelings of isolation. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that online learning environments have historically and typically been construed as isolating or detached (Beckett, 1998; Bloomberg, 2006; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2005; Perrin & Mayhew, 2000). Online learning can initially feel isolated, especially when transitioning from traditional in-person education. Moreover, isolation can be especially prevalent in the one-to-one online format that is designed for independent study, because students must connect virtually with little or no face-to-face interaction with peers. As such, the sense of exclusion and detachment can become potential barriers to learning.

Both seminal and current researchers in the field of online graduate education have expressed concern in this regard (Beckett, 1998; Bradley, 2023; N. Brown, 2025; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Kosar, 2023; Lambrev & Cruz, 2021; Lively et al., 2021; Melián et al., 2023). While technologies have become increasingly more interactive there is still a need to combat transactional distance (M. G. Moore, 1997) through various forms of presence as outlined in the CoI Model (Garrison, 1993, 2017; Garrison et al., 1999, 2001, 2003). The CoI Model is based on the assumption that teaching and learning occur within the conceptual domain of collaborative constructivist pedagogy, which lies at the very heart of developing and nurturing a learning community (Shea et al., 2022; Woo & Reeves, 2007). A consistent theme among the various descriptions of learning communities in the literature is that the culture or *shared experience* has the potential to create and shape this social dynamic. According to Dewey (1916), learning occurs not just through experience itself, but through the process of reflecting critically on that experience to derive meaning and deeper understanding; thereby yielding deeper learning. Moreover, Dewey (1916) asserted that higher order thinking and learning is better accomplished through learner interaction rather than in isolation. Indeed, one of the most valuable outcomes of peer interaction for this study's participants was the impact on their own learning and academic progress, something that has been noted repeatedly in the literature (Chan & Ng, 2024; Kosar, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Lu & Smiles, 2022; Producers et al., 2022; Wimpenny et al., 2024). In addition, the sense of connection and community that was felt by all participants contributed to ongoing interaction that included informal social activities, friendships, and professional networking. All participants explained that following completion of their doctoral program they hoped to maintain connections with their peers because of the value derived from these shared

experiences. This provides evidence that the value of a learning community, even in the absence of a formal cohort, can extend beyond program completion and offer continued support for future career and professional development.

Participants also shared their ideas regarding those elements of their program they experienced as most significant in developing a learning community, which addressed the study's second research question. As the findings of this study illustrate, participants engaged with available resources as a way to feel less alone and part of a community. Furthermore, peer interaction not only positively impacted their learning and academic progress but also helped them realize they were not alone in their journey. Actively "seeking out" or "tapping into" resources, including mentoring opportunities, helped reduce feelings of isolation and provide needed support. These ideas and experiences contribute to the online learning literature which consistently emphasizes the need for intentional structures that foster dialogue and collaborative learning (Bloomberg, 2021c, 2021d, 2024b; R. E. Brown, 2000; Cardullo & Burton, 2016; Chen, 2003; Conrad, 2005; Edelstein & Edwards, 2002; Gray, 2004; Hill, 2002; Kaiser et al., 2023; Lebaron & Miller, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2005, 2007; Riggs & Linder, 2016; Schwier, 2001). Moreover, research continues to illustrate that first-generation and historically underrepresented college students withdraw at higher rates and have a greater need for support (Bloomberg, 2024a). While informal groups and friendships provide support for first-generation or underrepresented students, formal groups that are intentionally facilitated by instructors have been shown to offer a strong sense of community and expanded relationship-building and camaraderie. (Bloomberg, 2021c, 2022, 2024a; Diaz Vazquez & Lundsteen, 2021). As such, educational institutions must strive to better understand these students' experiences and specific educational needs within the context of online education, finding ways to keep them meaningfully engaged through supportive collaborative opportunities.

In this study, in addition to students' proactivity, instructors' active intervention and mentorship to facilitate connections among students contributed to establishing and maintaining collaborative and supportive peer relationships, thereby further enhancing a sense of community. Previous research supports this study's finding that the intentional and thoughtful facilitation of collaborative learning opportunities contributes significantly to a sense of belonging among online learners (Bradley, 2023; Campbell et al., 2024; Han & Resta, 2020; Lu & Smiles, 2022; Scales et al., 2024; Smith, 2005; Song & Elftman, 2024). Conrad (2002, 2005) asserted that community develops organically, with learners often actively seeking ways to connect and interact with others and develop ways of deriving benefit from existing support systems. While community can, and often does, develop organically in online environments, research has revealed that the role of the instructor is central to building and sustaining a collaborative learning community

(Bloomberg, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2024b; Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018; Major & Sumner, 2018; Melián et al., 2023; Prodgers et al., 2022). Ongoing efforts to research facilitation strategies and explore the capacity for collaboration and community development in online graduate education will indeed continue to build new knowledge and contribute to enhanced practical application regarding collaborative learning experiences, mentoring, and the design and implementation of online learning communities.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

With a growing number of non-traditional students in online graduate programs, educators must adapt to the challenges faced by adult learners and their specific needs. As online learning continues to be a topic of inquiry in higher education, the task of facilitating collaboration and building community among geographically diverse learners becomes an important component of a successful learning experience. The potential development of learning communities in the online education environment is linked with the foundational concepts of *transactional distance* and *teaching presence*. As such, instructors in online graduate programs, especially those that are not cohort-based, should prioritize collaborative learning and provide space for the development of a learning community, thereby instilling a strong and pervasive culture of collaboration and academic support. In the context of a rapid global adoption of online learning, this research underscores the need for community and collaboration throughout the doctoral process, offering a deep understanding of the student experience.

Creating opportunities for sharing ideas and knowledge builds a culture of collaborative learning and enhances learner engagement and success. As this research has indicated, while community can organically evolve in the online environment, engagement must be intentionally and thoughtfully facilitated by instructors in order to be sustainable and offer value. This starts with understanding what engagement and presence imply and how to proactively develop authentic interactions and meaningful working relationships among online learners. A key implication of this study's findings is that an instructor's thoughtful facilitation of meaningful collaborative learning opportunities that encourage interaction and sharing of ideas and resources can pave the way for the quality of the interaction and connections that contribute to community-building. This study augments existing research that can help further enhance the online learning modality and support institutions in their quest for learner success in all teaching and learning formats. Specifically, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for online graduate programs seeking to foster meaningful connections and support among students by laying the groundwork for sustained online engagement and meaningful peer relationships. In light of the prevalence of isolation in the online environment, the findings of this research suggest ways forward for higher education pedagogy and are valuable in enabling educators to provide collaborative and interactive online learning environments and promote productive learning communities. A primary recommendation is

that online educational institutions would benefit from increased and sustained dialogue around issues pertaining to collaborative learning opportunities and community development. Becoming better informed, online institutions of graduate study will be positioned to create more collaborative learning environments, ultimately fostering peer connections, greater engagement, deeper learning and critical thinking, and enhanced academic performance for all.

Author Biographies

Dr. Linda Bloomberg is a Full Professor at National University in the College of Education, where she serves as dissertation chair and subject matter expert. She is a cofounder of Columbia University's Global Learning and Leadership Institute and previously served as senior researcher for the South African Human Sciences Research Council and National Institute for Personnel Research. She consults to numerous research and nonprofit advisory boards, including the *Future Talent Council*, Global Advisory Board for Faculty and Staff Development, Mentor in Residence for SAGE Publications, educational blog contributor to Teachers College Press. She serves as peer reviewer for academic journals, presents regularly at national and international conferences, and is the author of multiple journal publications in the fields of qualitative research, leadership development, adult learning, and online learning, and is a contributor to *The Sage Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement and Evaluation* (2018). Her three recent books include [*Designing and delivering effective online instruction: How to engage adult learners*](#) (2021), the 5th edition of [*Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end*](#) (2023), and [*101 Golden Nuggets for Preparing a Qualitative Dissertation*](#) (2026). She holds Master's degrees in counseling psychology, organizational psychology, and adult education. In 2006, she completed her doctorate in adult education and organizational learning at Teachers College, Columbia University, completing the AEGIS Program under Dr. Jack Mezirow founder of Transformative Learning Theory. In 2021 Linda received a diploma in executive coaching from the Goizueta Business School, Emory University, and is qualified as Associate Certified Coach with the International Coaching Federation (ICF). In 2025 she received the National University Award for Excellence in Scholarship.

Dr. Meral Muysesser is a Full Professor and Chair of the ESL Department at Rowan College at Burlington County, where she has taught since 2010. She also serves as the Adjunct Observation Coordinator and chairs the Professional Development Committee for the RCBC chapter of the American Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC). She holds an M.Ed. in TESOL from The College of New Jersey and an EdD. in Curriculum and Teaching from National University. Dr. Muysesser is certified in K–12 ESL instruction, Inclusive and Ethical Leadership, and Educator

Development. Her research interests include applied linguistics, pragmatics in second language acquisition, multicultural education, teacher preparation, and online learning. She presents her work at national and international conferences, develops Open Educational Resources (OER), and serves as a peer reviewer for academic journals.

Jamee Page Garner, EdD., recently completed her qualitative dissertation at National University. Her research focuses on bilingual education, ESL/Dual Language programs, and Culturally Responsive Education. She obtained her Master of Education from Northcentral University, a dual MBA/MS from Grand Canyon University, and a Bachelor of Arts from Grand Canyon University. Jamee's professional background has been in business administration and she is excited to join the field of education! Jamee has been a caregiver for the past 20 years.

Dr. Janelly Garza is an educator with over 13 years of experience supporting bilingual and multilingual learners from K–Higher Education. She has served as a dual language teacher, dyslexia specialist, bilingual/ESL coach, and multilingual specialist, and has taught at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and Texas A&M International University. She has supported statewide professional development for dual language educators in Texas and presents nationally on biliteracy strategies at conferences such as La Cosecha and NABE. Her research interests include biliteracy, dual language education, and bilingual policy. Dr. Garza holds a Master's in Reading and Literacy and an EdD. in English Language Learning from National University, and remains committed to advancing Spanish and English biliteracy through culturally sustaining practices. She continues to collaborate with educators and institutions to elevate the field of bilingual education through scholarship, practice, and community engagement.

Dr. Monica Peña-Villegas is the associate director of the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) at UC Davis. She earned her MSW from California State University (1998), and EdD. in Special Education from National University (2024) where she received the President Circle Award. Her doctoral research explored the transitional gap of students with learning disabilities from high school to postsecondary education. She developed the *Peña-Villegas Empowerment Model*, a strengths-based framework that emphasizes collaboration, self-advocacy, and holistic support to address the transitional and matriculation gap of students with learning disabilities. Monica is a CliftonStrengths certified coach, experiential facilitation trainer, and LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® certified facilitator. With over 20 years of experience, she has worked with schools, districts, and community organizations to foster a college-going culture among underrepresented students and their families. Her publication [*Reimagining Inclusivity and Access: A Transformative Model to Empower Students with Learning Disabilities for Successful Postsecondary Transitions, Persistence, and Completion*](#) featured as Chapter 14 in *Frameworks for Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Trauma-Informed Educational Settings* (IGI Global, 2025).

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Appendix A: In-Depth Interview Schedule

Thank you for responding to the following questions about your doctoral experience. Please be as detailed as possible in your responses:

1. How would you describe your online learning experience in National University's Doctoral program overall?
2. In what ways might online learning be said to be isolating or lonely? Use the following prompts:
 - Why would this be the case?
 - In choosing our one-to-one Doctoral program were you at all concerned about learning alone or being isolated?
3. Think back over the course of your entire Doctoral program (EdD or PhD). Were there ever any times in your program that you felt alone or isolated? Use the following prompts:
 - If no, what contributed to that sense of non-isolation?
 - If yes, were there any ways you managed to combat that sense of isolation or aloneness?
4. At some point in the dissertation sequence, in my role as your dissertation Chair or SME, I intentionally connected you with another student (or students) who were currently studying in your program or who had already graduated. Can you please explain from your perspective how you felt about meeting or interacting or working with another peer (or peers). Use the following prompts:
 - Was this something you welcomed or would you have preferred to continue without the peer connection/s?
 - What do you think it is about peer connection/s that encourages and fosters learning?
5. On reflection, what if at all do you value most about the connection/s you established with fellow students or alumni? Why?
6. Did the connection/s establish a greater sense of community for you? Please explain why or why not.



Figure 1: Placeholder

7. In what way/s, if at all, was the connection/s beneficial? What benefits (if at all) came about for you as a result of meeting, interacting, and working with your peer/s? This can include in-school or out-of-school activities (academic and/or social) that you engaged in together with your peer/s.
8. In your own words please explain what you understand by the term “collaborative learning”
9. In your own words please explain what you understand by the term “learning community”
10. Now that you have completed your doctoral degree in what way/s, if at all, will you choose to maintain the connection/s that you made with your peer/s while in your program?
11. In what way/s (if at all) will the connection/s that you made with your peer/s during your doctoral program be important or valuable to you going forward? What do you hope for?
12. Can you think of a metaphor to describe your peer-connection experience? Please think as creatively as needed, and the image below can be used as a prompt.

Supplementary Materials

Figure 1: Placeholder

Download: <https://joge.scholasticahq.com/article/147364-extracting-the-essence-of-a-learning-community-in-an-online-graduate-program-how-and-why-peer-connections-and-collaboration-manifest-and-matter-in-me/attachment/310499.png>
