

Beyond epistemic silos. The community of philosophical inquiry (CPI) as a space of resistance for PhDs

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper focuses on PhD researchers, exploring the potential of the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI), as a dialogical methodology for making connections across and beyond epistemic silos within contemporary higher education. We argue that the CPI offers a counterpoint to the isolating tendencies of market-like academia, and a model for a space of resistance capable of restoring a sense of belonging often fragile within today's universities. These challenges are particularly acute at the doctoral stage, which occupies a transitional position between student life and academic career, and have been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper proceeds in three steps. First, we examine the distinctive features of doctoral research and the structural and existential challenges associated with this in-between condition. Second, we propose the CPI as a medium through which such challenges can be navigated collectively. Third, we offer a reflective account of how we embedded the CPI within our PhD meetings, creating a non-instrumental space for interdisciplinary dialogue within the university.

Findings – What follows is a conceptual paper and a methodological proposal, supported by the facilitators' reflections.

Originality/value – The originality of our initiative lies in adapting the CPI to an academic context to foster dialogue across epistemic silos, enabling researchers to rediscover the value of their peers' perspectives and to forge conceptual connections across disciplines. Of particular interest to CPI scholars and facilitators is our account of how we supported PhD researchers in moving from discipline-specific research questions to shared philosophical questions, while integrating their disciplinary expertise into the collective inquiry.

Keywords PhD researchers, Community of philosophical inquiry (CPI), Resistance, Epistemic isolation, Existential isolation, Interdisciplinary dialogue, Market-like academia

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

This paper proposes the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) as a way for creating spaces of dialogue within increasingly market-driven and competitive universities [1]. While contemporary higher education increasingly prioritises speed, efficiency, productivity, and performativity within an individualist logic (Mahon and Bergin, 2021; Lynch, 2015), the CPI opens a slower dialogical space where researchers can meet across disciplinary silos and



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reflect on their own research through the others' perspectives while feeling invited into the intellectual world of the others.

The CPI, as conceived by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp (Gregory, 2022), is the “pedagogical signature” of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogy (Laverty, 2016, p. 1040): a facilitated form of collective philosophical inquiry in which a community of participants explores a philosophical question. While originally designed for school contexts (Lipman *et al.*, 1980), we explore its potential within higher education, focusing specifically on PhD researchers. We argue that the peculiar condition of doctoral life often exposes researchers to forms of existential and epistemic isolation, which the CPI can help to navigate [2].

We conceptualise the PhD journey as marked by both an *existential isolation* (the personal challenges of precarious academic life) and *epistemic isolation* (the fragmentation of research into disciplinary silos and the resulting communicative barriers). PhD researchers often inhabit an “in-between” position: no longer students but not yet fully recognised academics either, and often insufficiently supported by institutional structures. In the post-pandemic university, these conditions of existential and epistemic isolation have been exacerbated, the latter intensified by the siloing effects of academic specialisation.

Drawing on Simone Weil (1959)'s and Iris Murdoch (1999)'s ideas of attention, on Mary Midgley (2018)'s description of philosophy as “a form of mapping” and Sharp (2007)'s conception of the CPI as a practice of “going visiting”, we suggest that philosophical inquiry can play a vital role in universities: not only enriching individual research journeys but also fostering spaces of belonging and resistance. Such spaces of slower, critical, creative, and caring thinking – made possible by dialogue, and, as we argue, particularly through the CPI – are increasingly urgent in the face of the market-like university (Mountz *et al.*, 2015) [3]. We therefore present our experience of fostering this kind of community with the aim of offering methodological guidelines for the potential applicability of this bottom-up, informal, and non-instrumental experiment in other higher education contexts.

Our proposal is articulated through philosophical-conceptual analysis and experienced-driven facilitators reflections [4]. The meetings of our collective, from which we draw our reflections, were held at the University of Galway in Autumn 2024 and Spring 2025, running weekly for two months in each term [5]. They were facilitated by three CPI-trained facilitators, one postdoctoral researcher and two postgraduates, all trained at the University of Galway through an innovative practice-led P4C and CPI module created by Lucy Elvis, Heike Felzmann, Annie O'Donovan and Orla Richardson, which brings the CPI not only to primary schools but also among undergraduates to foster student belonging, an ethos that we sought to extend to the local PhD community. Our collective included participants from Business, Data Science, Digital Humanities, Drama, Education, Geography, Languages, Law, Literature, Philosophy, and Sociology. The process we designed invited participants to deconstruct their projects to identify their philosophical-conceptual foundations and to reconstruct them within the dialogical space of the CPI.

In the initial phase, sessions focused on individual research projects, guiding PhDs in transitioning from their discipline-specific research questions to the underlying philosophical questions that grounded them. This work was conducted collaboratively, pairing researchers from different fields. Subsequent sessions were dedicated to the whole community and centred on collectively chosen questions, while experimenting with ways of integrating individual disciplinary expertise into the transversal and democratic space of the CPI. In this way, the CPI allowed for research identities to be deconstructed and reconstructed through dialogue with peers, counteracting the tendency of doctoral research to narrow into isolated “rabbit holes” (Midgley, 2018, p. 17), thus reconnecting projects to broader contexts and shared concerns.

Although contemporary academia often encourages interdisciplinarity as a marker of “success”, such collaborations can remain instrumental or output driven. Our intention was to reclaim interdisciplinarity in a non-instrumental sense: as a shared practice of thinking together, brokered through philosophical dialogue. The originality of our initiative lies in embedding the CPI within academic life precisely to enable this form of non-instrumental interdisciplinary encounter. Of particular interest to CPI scholars and facilitators is our account of how we supported PhD researchers in moving from discipline-specific research questions to underlying philosophical questions, while integrating their academic expertise into a shared dialogical process.

2. PhD identity and the experience of isolation and loneliness

The term “PhD” is so broad that any attempt to speak of PhDs in general risks being flawed from the outset. Doctoral researchers occupy very different statuses and work under highly diverse conditions, not only across different countries, formally recognised as workers in some contexts, while still primarily considered students in others, but also within them. Moreover, the condition of being a PhD researcher is not uniform over time: a doctorate can be undertaken at different stages of life. There are also significant differences between STEM and HASS disciplines; between those embedded in pre-structured team projects, where the research trajectory is already partially defined, and those who begin without knowing where their project will lead, or when it will reach completion. We are therefore fully aware that speaking of “PhDs” entails a degree of generalisation. However, in this paper, we treat this generalisation as heuristic rather than descriptive: our aim is not to erase differences but to identify structural features and recurring tensions and experiences that emerge across diverse doctoral contexts.

In particular, we indicate two interrelated conditions that, while not universally applicable, can help to illuminate the doctoral journey: an existential isolation and an epistemic isolation. A distinction must be made here between isolation and loneliness [6]. Isolation is the material condition that PhD candidates find themselves in (it is a state of things), while loneliness is one of the major inner states that they could experience as a result of that isolation. We understand the experience of loneliness as an individual internal state, yet correlated with one’s interactions with the external environment and even more with the people with whom it is cohabited (Cunningham *et al.*, 2021; Perlman and Peplau, 1981). As such, it is a multifaceted experience: spatial, social and professional, existential, as well as economic, political, and racial (Das, 2024).

Our methodological proposal aims at addressing this sense of loneliness that PhDs often face (Cantor, 2020; Janta *et al.*, 2014), all the more after the COVID-19 pandemic (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2023), suggesting the CPI as a possible response to these two forms of isolation – existential and epistemic.

2.1 Existential isolation

A certain kind of existential isolation makes the doctoral venture unique. PhD research is a transitional journey. As Cantor (2020) notes:

By its very nature a PhD involves a long and often vexatious personal journey. During the three or more years of postgraduate study, the student often undergoes a much more profound personal transformation than is generally involved in an undergraduate degree (p. 62).

To refer to the extended and radical nature of a PhD, the concept of “doctoral ecology” has recently been introduced to highlight the interconnectedness of the different spheres

involved (educational, professional, social, existential), as well as the ever-shifting and dynamic attunements they entail (Cai *et al.*, 2019; Barnett, 2018).

This transformation often places PhD candidates in an ambiguous “in-between space”: no longer students, but not yet academics. Unlike undergraduates, doctoral researchers are not approaching something new together with a group of more or less numerous peers who are embarking on the same, exact path. On the other hand, unlike more experienced researchers or lecturers, a PhD candidate has not yet built up and branched off their network of contacts with other scholars or experts in the specific field (Janta *et al.*, 2014) – as this is often one of the tasks of a PhD (Cantor, 2020). PhDs frequently find themselves falling into the institutional blind spots of the university, struggling to find support, meaning, and companionship. Given the transformative impact of a PhD on the candidate’s overall personal identity (Carvalho and Freeman, 2023), this can lead to a form of isolation that may thus be described as *existential*.

Another distinction is important here. If a PhD is a journey in itself, it must be acknowledged that there is undoubtedly a difference between undertaking it as a young adult, when one’s identity is less defined, and pursuing it as a more established adult [7]. By this, we refer to researchers in their twenties or early thirties, an age range that, over the last two decades, has been characterised as “emerging adulthood”. As Arnett (2000) writes:

Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews. Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course (p. 469).

The PhD journey can be understood as an in-between space within another in-between space. As mentioned, a doctoral programme differs from an undergraduate degree programme. It is perhaps the latter that could most closely be included in what Arnett defines here as emerging adulthood, while the PhD journey could be situated much further from BA and MA students and considerably closer to early career researchers (ECRs) (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2023). However, recent studies have extended the stage of “emerging adulthood” up to 29 years of age (Leontopoulou and Delle Fave, 2022), facilitating the inclusion of young PhDs within it. Nevertheless, there is a deeper aspect that connects the condition of emerging adulthood with that of a doctoral programme: the openness of possibilities that lies before both. Just as young adults are confronted with the innumerable paths that may shape their future lives, PhD researchers find themselves facing a similar unknown. Paradoxically, although doctoral research is often described as highly specialised and confined to a niche area, at its outset it presents an expansive and often overwhelming field within which candidates must determine how and where to situate their own work. Consequently, the beginning of a PhD resembles the search for one’s place in the world that characterises emerging adulthood.

In this sense, we might describe the doctoral journey as a form of “emerging researcherhood”, another liminal space of experimentation and transition between different identities (Atkinson *et al.*, 2022; Keefer, 2015). Yet PhD researchers embody this condition of emergence in an even more emblematic way through what we propose to call a form of “deferred adulthood”. By committing three to six years of their lives to a prolonged transitional status (often still institutionally classified as “students”, even when they act as tutors or lecturers), they linger in an in-between state. During this period, many of their peers enter stable employment, form families, and consolidate their social and professional identities, while PhD researchers often remain suspended at a threshold: not fully students, not yet fully independent scholars. Their autonomy is deferred, and their professional future remains structurally uncertain; they cannot know whether

they will remain in academia, in which country they might work, or whether they will need to leave the field altogether. In these terms, doctoral research can be experienced as a frustratingly prolonged form of emergence, a deferred adulthood that extends both existential and professional indeterminacy.

This transitional identity of the PhD researcher makes it harder to locate a sense of belonging or purpose within higher education institutions. Over the last decades, a broad structural phenomenon has involved our societies in relation to our economies: a shift “from an industrial economy to an information-based economy” (Asanjarani, 2022, p. 222). As a consequence, needs and opportunities for university enrolment have increased, and so has someone’s desire to continue their academic journey with a PhD. This trend has led to a rise in first-generation PhD candidates, who often face particular challenges in navigating the academic environment (Gardner and Holley, 2011). These candidates often experience difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging within the research community compared to peers who have long been familiar with the university context. Additionally, first-generation PhDs frequently encounter challenges in bridging their academic experiences with the perspectives and expectations of the communities from which they originate, where engagement with scholarly research may be limited or uncommon. In their qualitative study, Gardner and Holley (2011) significantly labelled this aspect as “living in two worlds” (pp. 84–86).

A further element to consider is the mobile and international nature inherent to postgraduate study and research (Cai *et al.*, 2019), also due to the growing opportunities for international mobility linked to the globalisation of economies and infrastructures (Leontopoulou and Delle Fave, 2022). Like emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), emerging researcherhood is a period characterised by great residential instability. When research is more specialised, it is also likely to be more place-based, more dependent on specific research centres, laboratories or local partnerships (Livingstone, 2003). Internationalisation, then, when not a structural element of research, has been increasingly considered a badge of distinction for those who wish to pursue a career in research (Barry and Corcoran, 2022). Additionally, the rate of access to postgraduate scholarships is generally significantly low (e.g., Government of Ireland, 2025 Postgraduate Scholarship Call Document, p. 9), stressing the competition and financial pressure. These factors indicate that embarking on a PhD often involves relocating far from one’s familiar social network, and even one’s home country. Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish between different cases among doctoral candidates and international researchers to acknowledge dynamics of power, further exclusion, racism and discrimination (Das, 2024). These factors can exacerbate real isolation and create a pervasive sense of loneliness. This is an important point to recognise, given that scientific research is, and should be, a universal endeavour involving humanity as a whole, and, as such, the flourishing of human (and non-human) beings.

As such, we need to contextualise this within a shift in the systemic institutional paradigm regarding higher education in Ireland, and extensively in universities *tout court*. Scholars have employed various terms, such as: “administrative university” (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Benjamin, 2011), “managerial university” (Kalfa *et al.*, 2018), “capitalist university” (Hall, 2020), “neoliberal university” (Das, 2024; Ball, 2012), “neoliberalised university” (Castelao-Huerta, 2026), “marketised university” (Murray and Weatherburn, 2025), “marketisation of education” (Säfström and Månsson, 2021). Different packaging, same substance: the procedures and values that animate and guide higher education are increasingly “in the image and likeness of market logic” (Bauman and Lyon, 2013). Following Bauman and Lynch, we refer to this phenomenon as the *market-like university*. Departmental policies, academic careers of researchers and lecturers, and even students’

values are measured according to quantifiable and comparable metrics aimed at assessing performance and increasing profit, which often fosters “uncaring/uncareful practices” that, as [Castelao-Huerta \(2026\)](#) says, might be considered a form of violence. In this sense, for example, research identity is understood to be shaped by competition rather than collegiality ([Tekeste, 2025](#); [Mahon and Bergin, 2021](#)). Competition means going fast and arriving first, leaving less time for reflection and growth ([Berg and Seeber, 2016](#); [Mountz et al., 2015](#)), turning the university into a potential “anxiety machine” ([Hall and Bowles, 2016](#); [Hall, 2020](#)). As the sociologist Kathleen [Lynch \(2015\)](#) has successfully highlighted:

Focusing on measurable outputs has the ultimate impact of defining human relationships in the university in transactional terms, as the means to an end – the end being high performance and productivity that can be coded and marketed. This reduces first order social and moral values to second-order principles; trust, integrity, care and solidarity are subordinated to regulation, control and competition (p. 195).

Within this model of scholarship, the research comes before the researcher, the research assimilates the researcher. The researcher’s identity is developed in isolation, raising feelings of loneliness and leaving little space for the flourishing of the person as such. For this reason, we may need to turn to methodologies of resistance ([Riccitelli, 2025](#); [Kalfa et al., 2018](#)), and to courageous and dialogical approaches such as those developed by Lipman and Sharp and bring them within universities themselves. By modelling forms of dialogue and interdisciplinarity grounded in attention and care ([Dianetti and Elvis, 2025a, 2025b](#)), higher education institutions could exemplify alternative educational processes shaped by the same ethos. In doing so, they might open up different ways of imagining both the present and the future of the university ([Barnett, 2018](#); [Nørgård and Bengtsen, 2016](#)).

2.2 Epistemic isolation

What we name “epistemic isolation” reflects an issue that also refers to contemporary academia *tout court*. We refer here to the incommunicability of research as an effect of disciplinisation where academic subjects operate as independent silos ([Midgley, 2018](#); [Lipman, 2003](#)). The highly specialised nature of each research project, combined with the technical language of academic disciplines, makes dialogue between researchers from different fields difficult – and dialogue with the broader public even more so ([Cantor, 2020](#)). To a certain extent, this is inherent in the evolution and sophistication of scientific research. However, it is the aforementioned market-like university paradigm that makes it definitively effective.

Although an awareness of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity has grown in recent years, aiming to develop research more attuned to various social realities, it has been suggested that this trend has, to some extent, followed market-driven logics ([Tabulawa, 2017](#)), even though it cannot be reduced to them ([Barry et al., 2008](#)). Another issue is that the rise of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity has also led to paradoxical outcomes, for “this search for ways of crossing disciplinary boundaries risks fixating disciplines as if they were static perspectives” ([Vereijken et al., 2023](#), p. 1763). [Vereijken et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest a corrective approach, recognising that disciplines and the relationships between them are “ever-evolving”, and that boundary-crossing should be understood, literally, as a way of thinking *the* and *with* the disciplines.

The novelty of the economic and social transition to an information-based society, that is progressively shaping universities at their very core, implies another consequence: while research maintains its specificity, our understanding of personal choices, and of ourselves, has increasingly come to resemble market-oriented logics ([Ward, 2021](#)). An illustrative

example are those initiatives aimed at strengthening PhDs' communications skills, in which PhD candidates are asked to summarise and disseminate their research in just a few sentences and compete against each other. This task reflects a skill that researchers will be repeatedly expected to perform throughout their doctoral studies and beyond, both within and outside academic contexts. Indeed, communicating one's research presents considerable communication challenges, particularly outside higher education contexts. In conversations with family, friends, or even in casual settings such as pub chats, the increasing specialisation of doctoral research meets the demands of colloquial language and simple, *informal clarity*. In these moments, researchers must temporarily step back from disciplinary jargon and technical frameworks, confronting the difficulty of expressing complex projects in ways that are meaningful and accessible to non-specialists (Gardner and Holley, 2011). However, such communication competitions, if on one side can enhance formal clarity and presentation skills, they also intersect with the lived reality of the PhD journey: researchers are often still in the process of defining the precise scope and contribution of their work. The expectation to deliver an "elevator pitch", instead, requires early-stage researchers to present themselves and their projects as fully formed. This need, we argue, calls for a slower and collaborative space.

Using a metaphor, if existential isolation is like a city administration and an urban plan that divides and separates, then epistemic isolation is both the lack of maintenance of the roads connecting neighbourhoods and the absence of a suitable means of transportation.

2.3 Post-pandemic awareness

Both these kinds of isolation were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we sadly learnt, this had a broad impact on society as a whole. Consequently, its effects were cumulative for those in emerging adulthood, college students and PhD candidates, all of whom, among the people gravitating around university, are already in an exposed and vulnerable position (Bergvall *et al.*, 2025; Pyhältö *et al.*, 2023; Leontopoulou and Delle Fave, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2020). This is even more true when internationality entails greater fragility or greater challenges (Das, 2024; Atkinson *et al.*, 2022).

While the pandemic has led to an increase in infrastructure (especially internet-based), resources, and new habits, allowing even PhDs to work remotely (Mahon and Bergin, 2021; Hall *et al.*, 2024), on the other hand, this very fact contributed to a reduced vitality and sense of community in physical workspaces. In their study, Pyhältö *et al.* (2023) observe:

It seems that many of the negative influences of COVID-19 on PhD candidates boil down to the erosion of their support networks, particularly on lack of or limited access to informational, co-constructional, emotional or instrumental support provided by them (p. 415).

If new PhD researchers calibrate their work through informal interactions with peers (shared routines, conversations, common rituals), lockdowns and social distancing dissolved many of these channels or made them harder to reach. As the pandemic lasted over two years, institutional communities of PhD candidates fragmented, common practices faded, and essential knowledge transfer between cohorts was often almost lost. The sense of community diminished significantly, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and disconnection (Pyhältö *et al.*, 2023; Atkinson *et al.*, 2022).

During the last decades, an increasing number of scholars advocate for the importance of community and belonging to improve the quality of research and the well-being of researchers (Guerrero and Dobson, 2025; Pyhältö *et al.*, 2023; Asanjarani, 2022; Atkinson *et al.*, 2022; Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In a collective

autoethnography study, 12 doctoral candidates from an Australian higher education institution reported:

A key realisation for each of us lay in understanding that while doctoral studies are individual intellectual ‘journeys’, such ‘journeys’ have a strong psychological and social component which needs nourishing (Atkinson *et al.*, 2022, p. 1791).

Already in 1995, Baumeister and Leary closed their empirical study by stating that:

If psychology has erred with regard to the need to belong, in our view, the error has not been to deny the existence of such a motive so much as to underappreciate it (p. 522).

Remarkably, we continue to neglect interpersonal care despite accumulating evidence of its vital importance. This is one of the key factors, both theoretical and ethical, that shaped our own experience as PhDs and that led to the establishment of the *PhnoD Collective*.

3. The *PhnoD Collective*: a space of resistance

Communities of practice are the basic building blocks of a social learning system because they are the social ‘containers’ of the competences that make up such a system. By participating in these communities, we define with each other what constitutes competence in a given context: being a reliable doctor, a gifted photographer, a popular student, or an astute poker player (Wenger, 2000, p. 229).

Cai *et al.* (2019) identify four types of communities of practice (CoP). What they call “institutional communities” consist of professional and social networks that emerge from belonging to a specific department within a certain institution. “Disciplinary communities” operate on a broader scale: they are not tied to a single institution but to a field as a wider network of researchers interested in advancing the state of the art in their respective areas. Academic conferences and Twitter (now X) are offered as examples. The other two types – “cultural communities” and “communities of common interests and needs” – are less directly oriented towards research or knowledge production. The former refers to what we would usually describe as co-national networks (the study focuses on international doctoral researchers). “Communities of common interests and needs” are likely the broadest category, which Cai *et al.* (2019) connect to the notion of “third space” (Elliot *et al.*, 2016) mentioning, for instance, religious participation and physical activities.

Our *PhnoD Collective* fits at once all of these categories and none of them. As we will explain below, the same could arguably be said for the CPI, a kind of community that is currently lacking consideration from both the literature on the CoP and on practices related to enhancing PhD journeys [8]. However, a model integrating the CoP and the CPI has been put into action through the aforementioned P4C and CPI module at the University of Galway run by Lucy Elvis, where lecturers and students act as a CoP while learning about and practising being a community of philosophical inquiry. In Elvis’ teaching practice, lecturers assign students to communities in schools (as service learning) or on campus with their peers (peer-assisted learning), and also assign communities to themselves, so that the planning and reflections on the weekly CPI sessions can be undertaken collectively, side by side [9].

In relation to doctoral study, scholars observed that the support to prevent the isolation from becoming an experience of loneliness is more likely to come ‘from colleagues, peers and supervisors who are (a) socially closer to the student and (b) in a better position to empathise with the sense of isolation associated with the doctoral experience’ (Janta *et al.*, 2014, p. 566). Cai *et al.* (2019) also note that “a lot of institutional support provision is centred on formal communities, but less on informal ones” (p. 27). In this regard, the *PhnoD Collective* has been established by philosophy postgraduates – one at the outset of their

doctoral studies – and a postdoctoral researcher who had just defended their PhD thesis. At the same time, from the outset it has been conceived and presented as a trans-disciplinary, informal space, located within the institution yet not ruled by its usual logics: specifically, the logics of speed, competition, and performativity.

In our project with PhD researchers, we conceptualised our work as a form of place-making by *reclaiming a space* – which actively responds to the two forms of isolation that we mentioned before – existential and epistemic. Previous surveys revealed that online *fora* have the potential to be important spaces in this respect, being “effective, informative and emotionally supportive” (Janta *et al.*, 2014, p. 567). This has similarly been explored with regard to virtual communities of practice (vCoPs) (Graham Cagney and Cordie, 2024; Barry and Corcoran, 2022). At the same time, and even more so after the pandemic, we learnt how crucial physical spaces and interactions are (Carvalho and Freeman, 2023). In this regard, the *PhnoD Collective* is an informal and caring space within the university, aligned with the idea of a “placeful university” (Nørgård and Bengtsen, 2016). The latter is diametrically opposed to the disembodiedness of the market-like university.

Awareness of the neoliberal and managerial turn in universities – affecting not only their organisation but their very conception and values – and more broadly in education, has generated a well-established body of critique over recent decades. As early as 2005, Davies and Petersen were already questioning the effects of this paradigm shift on researchers’ identities and on their positioning in relation to the new dominant model of research:

[...] how do academics get caught up, emotionally and in terms of their subjectivities, in neoliberal discourse? How is it, given that neoliberal discourse can so easily be constituted as monstrous and absurd (for example, valuing intellectual work in dollar terms), that academics appear to have engaged in relatively little systematic or widespread resistance and critique of it, given their overt commitment to resistance and critique as a way of life? (p. 34).

Scholars have taken up these questions and asked whether moments, spaces, and strategies of resistance are possible. If one rejects the dominant paradigm of the market-like university, is it possible to act accordingly? Or would such a refusal amount to an induced exit from academia *tout court*? Archer (2008), taking up Davies and Petersen’s concerns, acknowledges the impossibility of standing completely outside the logics of the contemporary university while remaining an academic. However, she also argues for the possibility and necessity of local forms of resistance, of action at the “micro-level”, and offers a modest hope by acknowledging that such resistance is already visible in the actions of some early-career researchers.

Kalfa *et al.* (2018), drawing on Bourdieu’s sociology, show how the commitment to the academic “game” makes competition not only an underlying logic of how universities operate, but also dictates career trajectories of individual researchers seeking stability and permanent positions, thereby leading to an inherent immunity of the system to forms of resistance. They note that the very absence of resistance contributes, even if unintentionally, to the legitimisation of the status quo. Their study shows that resistance is usually confined to the individual sphere, and that one of the most common strategies is often the extreme one: leaving the game altogether. Yet this, paradoxically, still amounts to taking part in it by legitimising it. Kalfa *et al.* (2018) reiterate that:

[...] the collective community is eroded, and one is only as good as the most recent scores. Being a good colleague is not assessed and it is every person for himself or herself (p. 287).

However, despite – or better, because of – the “difficulty of maintaining distinct collegiate, principled projects” (Archer, 2008, p. 282) within a competitive and individualistic environment such as academia, “findings suggest that there is a need for avenues for voice

that can challenge the managerial prerogative in academia” (Kalfa *et al.*, 2018, p. 287). We argue that this need is what can sustain the potential effort of imagining spaces of resistance within higher education. In light of this, our initiative – a philosophical collective for PhD researchers – is situated in continuity with these studies, with the concerns they express, and with their calls for thoughtful change. In this sense, the *PhnoD* represents a local space of resistance: it is part of the university, yet outside its dominant logics; it is a space in which a shared and reciprocal collegiality replaces competition. This does not mean entirely removing the burden of resistance from the shoulders of individual researchers, given the inevitability of continuing to “play the game” to sustain resistance itself. Nor does it mean dissolving the researchers – their passions, ambitions, and professional and personal identities – into a collective that works as a bubble. Rather, it means stimulating, strengthening, and revitalising a plural network of interpersonal relationships by welcoming research identities and differences and bringing them into dialogue.

In doing so, our collective responds to the three facets and tasks of the critical self-care advocated by Riccitelli (2025):

[...] to disrupt hegemonic power through the challenging and dismantling of the current (read: neoliberal) academic culture. [...] [to] aid in redefining and rebuilding the ways by which work is completed and connections are made in the university. Third [...] taking care of the self is intimately tied to taking care of others. In other words, allowing others to practice self-care can be understood as an act of resistance (p. 482) [10].

The *PhnoD Collective* occupies an in-between position, straddling institutional and disciplinary communities. It is situated within a higher education institution insofar as it is oriented towards, and engages with, the local PhD community. It is also non-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary, since rather than advancing a specific field of knowledge, it focuses on the development of researcher identity and on the problematisation of concepts that cut across different disciplines. While in the post-pandemic there has been growing interest in virtual communities of practice (vCoPs) (Graham Cagney and Cordie, 2024; Barry and Corcoran, 2022), we saw how “placefulness” (Nørgård and Bengtson, 2016) can still matter in ways that digital technologies can support but not fully replace (Guerrero and Dobson, 2025). We were also specifically interested in communities of PhD candidates, that, due to the nature of scientific research, are inevitably international. Therefore, while conational ties can be important for those who relocate abroad, our focus was on fostering a sense of belonging within a space that is, by its very nature, multi-cultural. Finally, our *PhnoD Collective* is connected to the idea of a “third space” (Elliot *et al.*, 2016), but it is a third space within the fabric of doctoral journey itself, where philosophy plays a key role.

This is present in its very name, *PhnoD*. “PhD” is an acronym derived from the Latin “philosophiae doctor”. This is due to the wide boundaries of the Greek etymology of the word “philosophy” (“love of wisdom”), and to the fact that, until the Scientific Revolution (XVI-XVII centuries), many of the sciences that would later become autonomous fell under the umbrella label of “philosophy”, with the exceptions of theology, medicine, and law. “Phno-D” means “not-yet Doctors” and “not-only Doctors in Philosophy”, as it is a collective of PhD candidates from a wide range of research areas. Moreover, by inserting the “no”, we wanted to express the sense of unity inherent in the human endeavour that is international scientific research. Finally, it is precisely a collective: if the goal of this initiative could be seen as to address the aforementioned potential sense of loneliness, it sought first and foremost to do so by creating a space that unites and connects.

The *PhnoD Collective* was established and structured using the CPI methodology. The CPI was meant as a methodological “seed” brought into a particular ground, that of academia and of the “in-between” experience of PhDs. The creation of a local, physical, and relational

space, structured by the values of the CPI, addresses existential isolation by fostering a sense of belonging and collegial support. At the same time, the CPI as a way of doing philosophy together inherently addresses epistemic isolation by enabling communication across disciplinary silos. Both forms of isolation, we have suggested, are rooted in a multifaceted problem of incommunicability. As a dialogical methodology rooted in philosophy, the CPI helps researchers discover new ways of thinking about, and communicating, their research and how they experience it. In doing so, it may also help alleviate existential isolation, thereby creating a virtuous circle.

4. Philosophy: mapping concepts across silos

The philosophy behind our practice within the *PhnoD Collective* is inspired by four major pillars: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, and Ann Margaret Sharp. Together with [Dianetti and Elvis \(2025a\)](#), who have traced the influence that Weil and Murdoch had on Sharp, we argue that the CPI can be a space for paying renewed attention – the kind of attention that Weil and Murdoch conceive as a moral value: a space for attending not only to ideas, but also to the lived world of others, a space of “attentive compassion” ([Dianetti and Elvis, 2025b](#)).

If researchers are already engaged in an effort of paying sustained attention to the language they use, we argue that philosophical inquiry into the building blocks of their specialised language – especially when conducted collectively within the space of the CPI – can support the kind of effort that Murdoch saw as necessary, particularly in response to the dry language to which science can often lead. In her view, this language permeates the spirit of our time and calls for the effort of “enriching and deepening” the concepts we use and inherit from our culture ([Murdoch, 1999](#), p. 293). In this respect, [Midgley \(2018\)](#)’s account of philosophy as a form of mapping proved particularly fundamental to our collective. She warns against the increasing specialisation that narrows inquiry into ever-smaller “rabbit holes”, arguing instead for philosophy as a way of mapping across borders. As she writes:

This increasing specialisation continually narrows what is expected of research projects, shrinking enquiries gradually down from goldmines to rabbit holes [...] Arguments are much more like rabbits than lumps of gold. They can never be depended on to stay still ([Midgley, 2018](#), p. 17).

The scientist and science communicator Carlo [Rovelli \(2018\)](#) has written about the importance of an ongoing and dynamic relationship between science and philosophy. The former is a collective enterprise, but not a homogeneous or unified one: there is no single science and, correspondingly, no universal scientific methodology. A central and recurrent question, therefore, concerns how scientific practice ought to be conducted, particularly in light of techno-scientific innovation itself. This question must be continually re-examined:

[...] scientists are depicted as rational beings who play this game using their intelligence, a specific language, and a well established cultural and conceptual structure. The problem with this picture is that conceptual structures evolve as well. [...] And the modification of the conceptual structure needs to be achieved from within our own thinking, rather as a sailor must rebuild his own boat while sailing, to use the beautiful simile of Otto Neurath ([Rovelli, 2018](#), p. 486).

It is its distinctive relationship with concepts that makes philosophy highly relevant in this context, for concepts are always at play in structuring our thinking, language, and research. Defining what concepts are, and *a fortiori* what philosophical concepts are, falls outside the scope of this paper, since this remains an open and contested debate ([Margolis and Laurence, 2019/2005](#)). Instead, what we propose is an operationalisation of Midgley’s account of

philosophy as conceptual mapping by referring to how concepts are used within the practice of P4C and CPI (Lavery, 2016).

Concepts are the building blocks of our knowledge, or better said, of our understanding of the knowledge and the world. The philosopher John Dewey, one of the intellectual inspirations of Lipman and Sharp's theorisation of P4C, writes:

Conceptions are the intellectual instrumentalities that are brought to bear upon the material of sense perception and of recollection in order to clarify the obscure, to bring order into seeming conflict, and unity into the fragmentary (Dewey, 1971/1933, p. 179).

Research projects inevitably rely on philosophical concepts: although operationalised within specific disciplinary contexts, such concepts also resonate with broader existential, ethical, and societal concerns. Any piece of research makes use of ideas that are not only technical but also philosophical. These ideas acquire personal significance when researchers attempt to share their work beyond academia – with relatives, friends, or broader public. In this light, philosophy, as a distinctive exploration of concepts, becomes a valuable companion to reflect on the foundations of one's research. Questioning these concepts can open new perspectives on a project's implications for its field, for society, and for the researcher themselves.

5. The community of philosophical inquiry: a methodology beyond epistemic silos

In what follows, we present i) *what* is the CPI; ii) *how* we embedded the CPI in our PhDs meetings and thus created a space for dialoguing across differences through philosophy (more specifically, how we guided PhDs to transition from their research questions to philosophical questions and how we integrated their expertise in the philosophical dialogues); and iii) the facilitators' experience-based reflections, with the aim of offering an application of the CPI methodology that may be adapted and developed for future use.

5.1 *What is the community of philosophical inquiry (CPI)*

The Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) is the methodology at the heart of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogy developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp. It creates a space where participants form a community dedicated to building answers together to a philosophical question, usually prompted by a stimulus. The facilitator guides the dialogue without contributing substantive content, allowing the community itself to construct reasonable arguments through a variety of dialogical "moves" (Oyler, 2015), which the facilitator continuously reinforces. Such moves include, among others: giving a position, offering a reason, providing an example or counterexample, drawing a distinction, or proposing a definition.

The dialogue fostered within a CPI is not a mere conversation. As Lipman notes:

First [...] the community of inquiry is not aimless. It is a process that aims at producing a product – at some kind of settlement or judgment, however partial and tentative this may be. Second, the process has a sense of direction; it moves where the argument takes it. Third, the Communities of Inquiry process is not merely conversation or discussion; it is dialogical. This means it has a structure (Lipman, 2003, pp. 83–84).

Beyond structure, a further essential feature of the CPI is self-correction. Sharp emphasises this dimension, and Gregory (2007) underscores its significance, observing that:

[self-correction] is an irreducibly social process in which personal convictions are put to the test of public accountability. This means that the maieutic function of dialogue is never merely a secondary benefit, but always an integral part of the process of inquiry itself (p. 178).

Accordingly, dialogue in a CPI session is purposeful, directed by argument, reciprocal, genuinely dialogical, and self-correcting, which means aimed at uncovering hidden assumptions and ensuring participants' accountability. It encourages participants to "go visiting" into others' perspectives and explore previously unconsidered pathways of thought (Sharp, 2007). Finally, as conceived by Lipman and Sharp, the CPI is inherently democratic: it rests on the fundamental commitment to value and include every participant's voice.

This approach has been applied in a variety of contexts, ranging from schools to public spaces and cultural events (Gregory *et al.*, 2026). We argue that it constitutes a highly caring and democratic space where slow-paced dialogue can occur, and where philosophy, drawing on Midgley's image of philosophy as a way of mapping, can connect diverse ways of thinking across disciplines.

Philosophical dialogue resists reduction and opens new connections, especially through the constant effort of imagination required. For both Midgley and the founders of the CPI, Lipman and Sharp, philosophy is always grounded in lived experience. Philosophical reflection on the conceptual foundations of one's research can reconnect researchers with their underlying motivations, values, and intellectual identities [11]. When undertaken through the dialogical practice of the CPI, this process takes on a particular significance. As the philosopher David Kennedy (2004) observes: the "community of inquiry pedagogy, when applied to any discipline, leads to an inquiry into the philosophy of that discipline", insofar as "communal dialogue is characterised by the questioning of fundamental beliefs and assumptions" (p. 750). In highly specialised research contexts, such foundational questions are often forgotten or left implicit. The CPI, however, sustains these persistent and generative questions that can keep alive scholarly engagement and passion. It requires a slower and more reflexive engagement with one's discipline, creating space to pause and critically examine what is typically taken for granted and allowing participants to view their projects not as fixed endpoints to be chased in isolation, but as living, evolving arguments, rabbits to be followed wherever they lead (Midgley, 2018; Lipman, 2003), enriched by the experiences and perspectives of others.

5.2 *How we used the community of philosophical inquiry to create a space*

Through the CPI, PhDs from a wide range of subjects were asked to engage with one another's research and presence in new and unexpected ways. In the *PhnoD*'s first edition, our group comprised 16 participants from different research areas, and the sessions consisted of work done individually, in pairs, in small groups, and then as a whole community when it came time for the philosophical inquiry.

In what follows, we present the procedure that we designed to set the stage for collective inquiries into each researcher's foundational philosophical question. We supported each member of the community with an effort of imagination: to deconstruct their projects and identify the philosophical questions at their core. These are questions of universal significance – questions that could speak to anyone in the room – as well as with those beyond it.

The process would commence with a participant writing out the "full title of their research", along with "three major questions" nested within it. The next instruction was to fill out a table which included three sections:

- (1) "ideas";
- (2) "processes and human practices";
- (3) "human goals or needs".

The intention here was for the participant to fill each category with as many suggestions as possible, working first with a pair for a few minutes and then with their wider group (who were also performing the very same task using the stated research questions).

In the “ideas” section, the community were instructed to identify the concepts and thematic words that seemed central to their research. In “processes and human practices”, the task was to highlight the activities that each PhD candidate might be concerned with and the ways in which concepts and ideas hitherto identified manifest and impact the world. Finally, in “human goals or needs”, the community were asked to propose the goals or needs addressed in their research that possess the widest relevance or application (expanding to the research’s broader discipline if necessary). The group were asked to consider if there were any goals or needs identified that they all agreed were resonant and transversally meaningful. Furthermore, the community were also asked to ponder on the possible consequences, were the research outlined to be widely applied in the real world.

Having explored the conceptual texture and potential consequences of the research questions, the community were encouraged to continue journeying into increasingly philosophical territory. The instruction given initially was to write a “sentence that encapsulates the key concerns of their thesis”, using the table that had been filled out in the first half of the process, with a directive to afford special emphasis to the goals and needs identified. Having produced the sentence, the next task was to “reformulate that sentence into a question” – to uncover the line of inquiry implied in the sentence. Finally, the community were asked to turn this new question “into a philosophical question” – a question that could be asked by anyone, insofar as it is accessible and teeming with a ubiquitous and inclusive significance. To do this, participants were told to consider the societal position of their research or its “contribution to knowledge” and to imagine what sort of consequences might arise if the thesis were implemented in the world, or if the kind of knowledge aimed by the researcher was achieved, or revealed, or made valuable to the larger community outside the gates of the academia. In the *PhnoD*’s most recent edition (second term 2025-2026), we integrated a new activity into the workshop designed to help the community test the accessibility of their philosophical questions. We called this “the *Nonna* test”, and it is structured in three steps: i) language (Can a very lay person – such as a *Nonna* – understand the language of the question?), ii) meaning (Can a *Nonna* make sense of its meaning?), iii) experience (Can a *Nonna* try to build an answer drawing from her lived experience?). We found that this activity was particularly helpful in detaching from the specificities and technicalities of the participants’ PhD projects.

Once they got to their philosophical questions, PhD researchers were asked to take a hermeneutic distance through an imaginative and creative effort – radically different from the everyday, ultra-specialised thinking their research often demands. The seeds for the possibility of this hermeneutic distance were sown in the process of discovering the philosophical question within their research – insofar as generalising the research topic (and its salient concepts) involved stepping out from the level of specialisation and the narrow academic field boundaries to instead consider the project from a multiplicity of perspectives. This hermeneutic distance continued into the inquiry itself, when the philosophical question revealed in their research was subsequently explored by the community in the inquiry.

After the workshop session on question formation as outlined above, each member of the community had developed a philosophical question corresponding to their research and the community began to inquire into a different question in each subsequent meeting. In each session, questions were democratically selected by vote, and the researcher whose question was the most voted was offered a range of “roles” that they could adopt for the duration of the inquiry [12]. These included:

-
- “quiet listener”– the researcher listens carefully and attempts to absorb the various contributions made by the community;
 - “epistemic sightseer” – the researcher partakes in the inquiry, but enjoys an “epistemic holiday” from their research and expertise, such that they can attempt to approach the question with fresh eyes and ears;
 - “post-match commentator” – the researcher listens to the dialogue and, upon its conclusion, offers the community a synopsis of what they heard and responds to the various lines of inquiry that were investigated;
 - “community resource” – the researcher listens to the conversation but is understood to be ready to provide information or “expertise” should the community require it.

While the community only requests a contribution from the expert if they believe that doing so would be beneficial for the inquiry progression, this particular role of “community resource” was especially interesting in the context of this project, in that it hinted at the possibility of integrating knowledge or expertise into the space of the CPI – a practice not coded in the Lipman-Sharp approach. This move is particularly meaningful because it establishes a dynamic balance between the democratic nature of the space and the pursuit of depth in the process of knowledge-building. This balance was secured by allowing the community to decide whether to draw on the “expert in residence” when this was deemed helpful for the progression of the dialogue, or whether to proceed without doing so. In this way, it was possible to sustain a horizontal space of resistance while preserving scientific rigour.

5.3 CPI facilitators’ reflections

This section offers facilitators’ reflections on one session of the *PhnoD Collective*. Rather than reporting outcomes, it recalls aspects of the process as they unfolded in practice.

Across the meetings, participants gathered regularly to explore questions emerging from their own research projects. The pace of these encounters differed from the tempo typically associated with academic work. Time was set aside not for presenting results, but for dwelling with concepts, revisiting assumptions, and thinking together. In this sense, attention was directed both to the relational dimension of the group and to the intellectual process itself.

During the final autumnal session (academic year 2024-2025), the inquiry question of the day was: “Does information create societies?”. The dialogue moved through many phases and touched on a number of different but deeply connected questions regarding the relationship between information and society. As is generally the case in the CPI, both key concepts (information and society) were interrogated and probed to garner a clearer picture of what these words actually represent in the world and how we ought to understand them in the context of our dialogue.

Initially, the community focused on defining “information” and began to make distinctions between different types of information and their function. Information was understood as ranging from symbolic representation, to descriptive language, to DNA, to cultural and social phenomena such as laws and norms. The community wrestled with the idea that information was the ever-shifting common ground upon which the possibility of our intersubjectivity (and by extension society) emerges. This ever-shifting quality spoke to the movement and flow of information through time, constantly being updated, altered, and destroyed.

However, while the community had appeared to be converging on the idea that information did indeed create societies, this notion of information moving through time appeared to insinuate the “conservation of knowledge” – and thus the dialogue was thrust headlong into animated colloquy concerning the relationship between information and power – specifically, the questions of “who decides which information is given significance?” and “who does that information serve?”. At the time of wrapping, the community had tentatively suggested that, in some fundamental sense, information is a necessary condition for societies, but that societies in turn produce information to describe, encode, and make sense of itself to maintain its form and power structures.

This specific inquiry was valuable not only for the richness and high level of participation in the dialogue itself, but also for a particular exchange that took place immediately afterwards, during the reflective phase of the process known in the CPI as “metacognition”.

It was here that one participant, *Participant 1*, a computer scientist who had contributed often in the inquiry, as though the question of the day was central to their *own* research, learned that *Participant 2* (from whose research the question had emerged) was halfway through a PhD in the discipline of History. Such was the nature of their exchange and the relevance of the question to *Participant 1*, that they simply assumed that *Participant 2* must be at the very least in a field related or adjacent to their own; if not themselves a data scientist.

From a facilitator’s perspective, their surprise at how utterly foreign their respective disciplines were to each other highlighted the proficiency of the methodological framework of the CPI in its capacity to generate questions of transversal significance for the community to investigate – questions, so to speak, that anyone could ask. It also suggested that the notion of researchers being trapped within impenetrable silos of hyper-specialisation is somewhat spurious or illusory – insofar as, while their respective research topics might appear superficially to be esoteric to the point of being downright hostile to intercommunication, the deeper questions animating the research, through the procedure outlined above, disclose themselves as transversal and of significance at all.

With this in mind, the *PhnoD Collective* was established to bring these fundamental questions to the surface of each PhD candidate’s project. PhD research is, on the one hand, situated within a disciplinary framework that contributes to scientific or scholarly progress. On the other hand, it is also a personal undertaking, shaped by the motivations and values of the researcher. Thus, alongside the discipline-specific questions that define a field, there are also deeper questions of meaning linked to the wider human effort to address contemporary challenges. These philosophical questions both challenge and reinforce the personal motivations that sustain researchers. We found that revisiting such questions within a dialogical and interdisciplinary setting enabled new perspectives on research and its broader significance and provided a reinvigorating experience to the researcher. It allowed participants to see their projects not as isolated endeavours, but as part of a shared intellectual and social enterprise, thereby helping to challenge the incommunicability that underpins both the epistemic and existential isolation of PhD researchers.

[Sharp \(2007\)](#) describes such dialogue as a form of “going visiting”, taking the term from Hannah Arendt (1977/1961-68): entering another’s lived experience and worldview, while also inviting others to visit one’s own. As [Sharp \(2007\)](#) writes:

By going visiting, she [Arendt] means intentionally entering into the worlds of different people with different views, listening attentively to their stories, trying to figure out the world view from which they are coming, and how they might see you and your perspective as strange (p. 303).

As noted earlier in relation to the role of philosophy and concepts, within the context of the CPI, the “dance of concepts” that unfolds each time the community inquires into a

researcher's question creates an opportunity for that researcher to "visit" previously familiar concepts in new ways. This process unfolds before the eyes of the very researcher whose question is under discussion. Because these ideas are now articulated by peers, rather than circulating solely within the researcher's own solitary reflections, they emerge in new and often unexpected forms. One strength of this methodology lies precisely in this displacement: peers speak about one's research without one's immediate intervention, loosening its attachment to the individual researcher and placing it instead within the circle of the community.

6. Conclusion

This paper is situated within critiques of the market-like university and proposes the CPI as a methodology for creating local spaces of resistance within the university. We focus on a particularly fragile cohort within academia: PhD researchers.

In Section 2, we examine the PhD experience to show how our proposal, namely, the use of the CPI, responds to a specific problematic condition. The literature on doctoral study consistently identifies isolation, loneliness, and a lack of belonging among its defining features. We argue that a common denominator underlying these conditions is the incommunicability of one's experience and one's research. On this basis, we introduce a distinction between epistemic isolation and existential isolation. The former is multifaceted. We highlight, in particular, the "in-between" space inhabited by PhD researchers, who are neither fully academics nor no longer students; the internationalisation of research and the mobility and instability it entails; and the sense of "living in two worlds" often reported by first-generation PhDs as a consequence of expanded access to doctoral education. We show how these factors affect the development of both professional and, even more significantly, personal identity during the doctoral journey.

Building on the concept of "emerging adulthood", we develop the notion of *emerging researcherhood* to capture the uncertainty and precariousness inherent in the condition of PhD researchers seeking a place within academia. Extending this further, we introduce the idea of *deferred adulthood* to emphasise the prolonged transitional status and liminality of the PhD journey in comparison with non-academic peers. In our discussion of epistemic isolation, we connect these experiences to the contemporary university paradigm, characterised by ultra-specialised disciplines and heightened competition driven by market-oriented criteria of speed, performance, and the commodification of knowledge. The highly specialised nature of research projects, combined with the technical language of academic disciplines, makes dialogue between researchers from different fields difficult, and dialogue with the wider public even more so. We also consider how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these dynamics. In response to this multifaceted incommunicability, we propose the creation of a philosophical collective of PhD candidates.

Section 3 of this paper offers an account of the space created by the *PhnoD Collective*: a space of philosophical dialogue among PhD researchers grounded in the CPI, the methodology at the heart of the Philosophy for Children pedagogy. We outline what defines the *PhnoD Collective* and how it differs from a community of practice, noting in particular the relative lack of literature addressing the relationship between communities of practice and communities of philosophical inquiry. We characterise the *PhnoD* as a transdisciplinary, inherently international, and informal space of resistance: situated within the institution, yet not governed by its dominant logics. In this way, we show how the initiative connects to the concepts of "placefulness" and "third space" within a philosophical perspective grounded in the CPI.

In Section 4, we bring together our analysis of the PhD condition and our account of the *PhnoD Collective* by focusing on the role of philosophy within the CPI methodology. Drawing on Midgley's account of philosophy, we argue that philosophical thinking enables researchers to attend to the concepts that underpin their work, making possible forms of connection that extend beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Following this broader account of the role that philosophy can play, we turn to its operationalisation through the practice of philosophical dialogue within the CPI. We open Section 5 with (i) a brief overview of what the CPI entails, including its structure, workings, and philosophical foundations. We then (ii) demonstrate how the CPI was used as a medium through which the challenges identified in Section 2 can be navigated collectively. More specifically, we explain how we supported PhD researchers in moving from their discipline-specific research questions to shared philosophical questions. Secondly, we give an account of how their expertise was integrated into the dialogical process, arguing that philosophical reflection on the conceptual foundations of one's research can reconnect PhDs with their underlying motivations, values, and intellectual identities. Finally, (iii) we present facilitators' reflections on the process, intending to offer a concrete, practice-based example of this methodology that can be adapted and developed for use in other contexts.

The CPI was meant as a methodological seed brought into a particular soil, that of academia and of the in-between experience of PhDs. What flourished from this encounter was not simply the application of a methodology, but the creation of a space shaped by the core values of the CPI. Embedding the CPI within the doctoral journey may support its adaptation in other higher education contexts. Rather than replicating a fixed model, its transferability depends on preserving some core principles:

- the creation of non-instrumental and peer-supportive spaces,
- the use of philosophical dialogue as common ground among disciplines,
- drawing connections across disciplines by deconstructing one's research to its conceptual philosophical core,
- the reevaluation of the epistemic value of peers from different disciplines,
- a way of doing slow-paced collective research,
- the movement from discipline-specific concerns to shared conceptual questions, and
- the cultivation of a community over time.

We did not collect data through surveys, structured interviews, or recordings of the CPI sessions, but relied instead on facilitators' reflections. This choice reflects the nature of the *PhnoD Collective* as a bottom-up, peer-driven initiative that seeks to create an informal and non-instrumental space. Formal data collection, such as recording and transcribing philosophical dialogues, could risk altering the very dynamics on which the space is founded. For this reason, the authors are still considering whether qualitative research of this kind would be appropriate within a context such as the *PhnoD*.

Ultimately, the CPI can contribute to offering a model for a new university paradigm. We think of the university as a community of researchers and students, in which the community (or communities) itself is regarded as co-essential to research, and where professional and social relationships are not merely instrumental to the conduct of research. Under this light, research identities can be nourished through shared reflection, since thinking together helps to restore the interconnections between research, the self, the academic community, and what stands outside its gates.

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Notes

- [1.] This paper was presented as a first draft at *The Creative University*, the 7th Annual PaTHES Conference, held in Dublin from 10-12 June 2025, as part of the symposium dedicated to P4C and CPI, “Creating Community, (De)creating Identity: A Thousand Tiny Lives of Inquiry”, led by Annie O’Donovan, Lucy Elvis, Heike Felzmann, Michela Dianetti, and Nicola Bozzi (see <https://pathes.org/events/pathes-conference-2025-the-creative-university/>).
- [2.] Our approach in the *PhnoD* benefitted from using community building activities and materials designed for these contexts by the *Philosophical Inquiry through P4C* module and *The Philosophical Dialogue Project* at the University of Galway (see ‘Public Philosophy’ at www.universityofgalway.ie/colleges-and-schools/arts-social-sciences-and-celtic-studies/history-philosophy/disciplines-centres/philosophy/publicphilosophy/), and built on the successful use of the CPI in intergenerational contexts developed in the AIRE project (see <https://airecollective.org/how-it-started/>).
- [3.] The ethos of these PhD meetings was influenced by the AIRE Research collective (also based at the University of Galway), which was taking shape at the same time as the *PhnoD Collective* began to form. AIRE focuses on the role of moral attention in CPI spaces, especially in relation to the climate crisis. The collective also uses the CPI as a way for doing collective academic research and writing as a form of resistance to the neo-liberal spirit of contemporary academia.
- [4.] No ethical approval was required because no data were collected. We purposely did not collect data (though surveys, structured-interviews, or recording of CPI sessions) but decided to rely only on facilitators’ reflections because of the very nature of the *PhnoD Collective*, a bottom-up, peer-driven initiative aimed at creating an informal, non-instrumental space. The risk of distorting or altering some of its dynamics arises should an attempt be made to confer an institutional status upon it, thereby transforming it from an in-between space into an academic space in the strict sense. Even collecting data within the group, such as recording and transcribing philosophical dialogues, could undermine the informality and non-instrumental ethos at the foundation of this space. Therefore, the authors are still in the process of deciding whether this kind of qualitative research will enter the *PhnoD* space.
- [5.] These meetings emerged in the context of a larger project at the Insight SFI Research Centre for Data Analytics, led by Felzmann and Elvis, which seeks to explore new ways of fostering dialogue between scientists and the wider public through the CPI (see www.insight-centre.org/job/postdoctoral-researcher-critical-thinking-in-communities-of-inquiry/). Although the *PhnoD Collective* was initially prompted by this broader framework, it was conceived and developed as an informal, non-instrumental space. It was not designed to generate quantitative or qualitative data, nor to function as an evaluative research intervention. Rather, through our involvement in the Insight project and the CPI module with undergraduate (see footnote 2), we began reflecting on the positive affordances of the CPI to foster a sense of belonging among young researchers and to create dialogue across epistemic silos. For this reason, we extended its use beyond data science

and the public, inviting PhD researchers from across the university and from a wide range of disciplines to participate. At the moment of writing, our collective is running its second edition.

- [6.] Isolation and loneliness must be distinguished from solitude as well (Cantor, 2020; Arendt, 1977/1961-68).
- [7.] In making this distinction, we do not intend to imply that younger PhD researchers face greater difficulties, but rather that some challenges they may encounter differ in kind.
- [8.] The concept of community of practice (CoP) has been explicitly established by Étienne Wenger's publication of *Communities of Practice* (2008). Since then, this concept has gained wider consensus among scholars in the field of education and has been extensively studied and applied (Cassidy *et al.*, 2008), including in relation to doctoral students (Cai *et al.*, 2019). In the post-pandemic, recent proposals to use the CoP to improve the overall PhD experience have primarily focused on the opportunities offered by digital technologies and online spaces (Cagney and Cordie, 2024; Barry and Corcoran, 2022). On the other hand, there appears to be no existing literature that directly addresses the relationship between the community of practice (CoP) and the community of philosophical inquiry (CPI). One might ask whether the latter is a special case of the former, or vice versa, and to what extent one is indebted to the other. Cassidy *et al.* (2008), in their framework for 'communities of educational enquiry', draw on various sources, giving particular attention to both the CoP and the CPI. Although an in-depth analysis of the relationship between these two conceptualisations of community has not been their primary focus, in that study, several common features were identified and explored (Cassidy *et al.*, 2008). Our aim here is not to extend this comparative analysis further. Rather, acknowledging that certain affinities between the CoP and the CPI have already been identified and integrated through practice such as in the CPI module at the University of Galway (see footnote 2), and that the CoP has been applied in the context of doctoral education, we suggest that the CPI may also be worth considering. Indeed, by virtue of its specific characteristics, it may offer a different kind of 'third space' (Elliot *et al.*, 2016).
- [9.] Reflections on these experimental integrations of the CoP and the CPI were presented at the ENLIGHT Teaching & Learning Conference 2025, *Playfulness for the Future of Higher Education*, held in Uppsala from 8-10 October, with a paper collaboratively written by lecturers and undergraduate and postgraduate students (see <https://onlineexpo.com/en/enlight-2025/>).
- [10.] Indeed, the notion of "care" we adopt is closely aligned with that developed within feminist studies (Mountz *et al.*, 2015). In Lipman and Sharp's methodology, the emphasis on cultivating "caring thinking" is closely connected to Sharp's philosophical formation, shaped by thinkers such as Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt (Sharp, 2007).
- [11.] An interesting example of fostering intellectual and professional identities of ECAs through dialogue and CoP is presented by Sue Monk and McKay (2017).
- [12.] We thank Lucy Elvis for developing the ideas for these moves with us.

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