

Becoming the Researcher Within: An Experiential Peer-Review Model for Scholar Identity Development in Online PhD Programs

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Abstract:

Using a collective autoethnographic approach, we explored how an experiential peer-review process embedded in a PhD research course fostered our confidence and scholarly identity as online PhD students and faculty. Our research team consisted of five doctoral students and two faculty mentors engaged in a semester-long project of peer-reviewing manuscripts submitted to a national academic conference. Team members engaged in reflective journaling using guided prompts and participated in group interviews. Findings highlight a progression from impostor syndrome to scholarly confidence, identity development through collaborative mentorship, and the value of community in academic socialization. Experiential learning through authentic academic engagement offers transformative potential for online PhD students and faculty.

Keywords: scholarly identity, experiential learning, peer review, online PhD, autoethnography

Online PhD students face distinct challenges in developing scholarly identities, often shaped by isolation and limited informal academic interaction (Janta et al., 2019). Without a cohort model, students in fully online PhD programs develop their research identities differently from their traditional doctoral peers. Despite completing rigorous coursework, many experience low confidence and impostor syndrome (Akojie et al., 2019; Chandra et al., 2019).

To address these barriers, we formed an experiential, faculty-guided peer-review project within an online PhD research course. The purpose of this study was to explore how participation in a conference peer-review group shaped students' scholarly confidence and identity. We were guided by the research question: How does participation in a conference peer-review group embedded within an experiential research course shape the confidence and identity of online PhD students as emerging scholars?

Literature Review

Scholarly identity refers to how individuals construct and perceive themselves as competent, legitimate contributors within academic communities (Choi et al., 2021; Culpepper et al., 2020). Identity develops through recognition, participation, and confidence-building in scholarly practice (Choi et al., 2021). Online PhD programs aim to foster scholarly identity through structured research experiences and dissertation work (Znamenak & Holyoke, 2025), yet students frequently face isolation, self-doubt, and impostor syndrome (Akojie et al., 2019; Chandra et al., 2019; Melián et al., 2023).

Intentional, collaborative learning experiences, such as faculty-mentored peer-review groups, can mitigate factors that inhibit scholarly identity formation by promoting research self-efficacy and a sense of belonging (Bieschke et al., 1996; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2022). According to Wenger et al.'s (2002) Communities of Practice (CoP) framework, participating alongside individuals with similar interests completing real-world tasks supports identity transformation.

Authentic tasks embedded in coursework and carried out in collaboration with established members of the group help create protected spaces where doctoral students can transition from peripheral participants to central contributors (Coffman et al., 2016). Scholarly identity, therefore, becomes embodied through practice and relational learning.

Methodology

We employed a collective autoethnographic approach (Karalis Noel et al., 2023) integrating autoethnography, participatory research, and narrative inquiry. In this design, PhD students and faculty served as both researchers and participants. This democratic, co-created process emphasized meaning-making through shared inquiry among peers and faculty. To facilitate reflection on how our scholarly identities were cultivated through the peer-review project, we incorporated journal prompts adapted for our purposes based on Olszewski et al. (2022). We individually reflected on our identities after each team meeting and then participated in two focus groups to discuss our experiences.

Researcher-Participants and Context

Our team consisted of five self-selected PhD students (Alexis, Avery, Harper, Hudson, and Lee) and two faculty mentors (Alan and Taylor) from a fully online PhD program in Leadership & Organization Development at an R1 institution. All student members were working professionals who contributed diverse perspectives, and the faculty acted as co-inquirers by modeling reciprocal mentorship and shared reflection. Together, we served as peer reviewers for manuscripts submitted to the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) conference proceedings as part of a PhD research course assignment. Over one semester, we reviewed manuscripts, offered feedback, and evaluated revisions. We self-selected peer partners and collaborated in pairs outside team meetings to exchange and refine feedback on manuscripts, then met in group sessions to synthesize and further refine our feedback collaboratively.

Data Collection Methods & Analysis

Data collection followed the four-stage structure of collective autoethnography outlined by Karalis Noel et al. (2023). In the first stage, preliminary data were gathered through modified Brookfield One-Minute Papers (Brookfield, 2015), which were completed at the end of most meetings. The short reflections captured expectations, insights, and the evolution of scholarly identity throughout the process. During the second stage, summative reflections were collected through individual essays focused on scholarly development, accompanied by two transcribed focus groups, one with students only and another including faculty mentors, both guided by reflective prompts. The third stage involved collaborative analysis and interpretation, during which we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), used member checking to ensure accuracy, and applied the constant comparative method across journals, reflections, and

transcripts to develop themes. Finally, in stage four, the writing process was co-constructed among students and faculty to capture the collective experience. Multiple perspectives were intentionally represented, ensuring diverse voices and interpretations were woven throughout the final autoethnographic narrative, linking personal experience to broader academic contexts.

Ethical Considerations

We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to data collection to ensure that all procedures adhered to ethical standards. In keeping with these requirements, all members of the research team completed informed consent, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To maintain confidentiality, we used pseudonyms in all reporting of findings, and we stored all data securely in accordance with institutional guidelines for research data management.

Findings

The purpose of our study was to explore how participation in a conference peer-review group shaped students' scholarly confidence and identity. Three themes were co-constructed to help answer the research question: curbing impostor syndrome contributed to confidence; architects of scholarly identities contributed identity formation through relationships; and purpose found us contributed a sense of emerging scholarly purpose and stewardship.

Curbing Impostor Syndrome to Step into Scholarly Identity

Across students and faculty, participation in the peer-review process raised strong imposter feelings that gradually shifted toward a supported sense of scholarly confidence. This theme highlights the way the peer-review process both revealed and reduced impostor syndrome. Avery questioned, "...if I have what it takes to write a manuscript to be... 'good enough' for publication." Similarly, Harper admitted uncertainty in the peer-review process by "not know[ing] how to assess the type of manuscript." However, she "look[ed] up what these processes entail." Others, like Alexis, preferred to be led rather than take the lead, reflecting similar uncertainty. Faculty also confronted self-doubt in leading the process; Alan noted, "Sometimes my 'guide on the side' approach might lean too laissez-faire."

Time pressures initially amplified imposter feelings, yet structured, repeated practice gradually normalized uncertainty and built confidence. Despite these pressures, there was still a willingness to jump into the peer-review process. Lee explained, "I'm just going to jump in... and get some experience" of what it is like to engage with others' writing. Jumping into peer review turned it from a high-stakes test into a way to learn and feel they belonged. Over time, persistence in the peer-review process translated into growing confidence. Lee reflected, "feeling like I needed to know something... to being comfortable." Avery added, "...the opportunity to use my writing to help someone else... instilled a confidence in our scholarly identity that cannot be accomplished in a classroom setting."

Avery's description of using writing to benefit others illustrated a shift from self-focus to stewardship orientation typical of emerging scholars. Faculty also found affirmation: Alan shared, "I've learned from [Taylor's] vulnerability and how she models the process for students." Seeing faculty grapple with impostor feelings legitimized students' doubts and modeled that even established scholars are still learning. With peer support, mentorship, and trust in the process,

initial uncertainty and novice experience gradually gave way to grounded scholarly confidence, opening space for identity work.

Architects of Our Scholarly Identities

Through ongoing dialogue, peer learning, and reciprocal mentorship, the peer-review group became a relational space where students and faculty co-constructed their scholarly identities. The students' growth was iterative and deeply human, marked by vulnerability and reflection and shared by faculty as well. Four interwoven elements shaped this process: peer learning, belonging, and mentorship.

Peer interaction allowed us to bond over our shared uncertainty about the peer-review process and to find a sense of safety as we navigated and grew together. Harper described, "This space is safe, and we can all ask questions without feeling inadequate." Shared reflections made it clear that everyone was dealing with imposter syndrome. Taylor reflected that feedback "helps me become a better reviewer," and Avery found helping others "incredibly rewarding." Recognizing the shared experience of imposter syndrome transformed a private deficit into a shared reality of a community of emerging scholars learning the craft together.

The faculty acted as collaborators rather than evaluators, modeling both rigor and authenticity. Avery said, "The more I do, the more confidence I gain...helping me become a scholar," showing that authentic experiences lead to better learning than class assignments. Mentorship was reciprocal; as Alan shared, "I'm starting to question aspects of my teaching style... I don't want to be too teacher-centered." Together, these moments of safety, reciprocal feedback, and collaborative mentoring show that scholarly identity was not constructed in isolation but through a web of relationships.

A Serendipitous Outcome: Purpose Found Us

Over time, the peer review process changed from a technical task to a humanizing practice of scholarly stewardship, giving an unexpected sense of purpose as emerging scholars. Avery wrote, "I see my identity as a scholar evolving... we have a duty to help other scholars along the way." Alexis observed that peer review "showed more of a sense of community[and] whole person development," rather than just "critiquing what others are doing."

The act of the peer review shifted from a technical exercise to a relational, humanizing act of scholarly stewardship. Harper noted, "This kind of tacit knowledge is not learned from a book, but exactly in this type of environment." Reading and discussing manuscripts together provided insight into "how others read and make sense of writing."

Psychological safety allowed us to set boundaries and engage authentically. Avery described becoming more comfortable as the "brave space" to ask questions grew. While meetings were demanding, participants later found them deeply fulfilling. The experience normalized uncertainty and transformed students into confident contributors.

Discussion and Implications

Participation in the peer-review group moves students from self-doubt to confidence, isolation to belonging, and learning to purpose. Confidence enables engagement; belonging anchors identity within community; and purpose marks the transition to scholarly stewardship.

Consistent with Wenger et al.'s (2002) CoP framework, participation in authentic scholarly practice facilitates movement from peripheral to full engagement. Reviewing real manuscripts normalizes imperfection, fosters belonging, and cultivates purpose. Faculty as co-mentors create a “brave space” (hooks, 1994), promoting agency and identity formation. Authentic engagement thus becomes a mechanism for transforming assignments into journeys of collective meaning-making and scholarly confidence.

Implications for Theory

Findings contribute to doctoral identity literature by illustrating a developmental sequence—confidence, belonging, purpose—emerging through authentic participation. Identity development is relational and cognitive, shaped by social learning, safety, and recognition. Purpose, as a culminating outcome, extends existing models by showing how students evolve from knowledge consumers to contributors through service-oriented scholarship. Faculty co-mentorship and peer collaboration are central mechanisms, suggesting doctoral socialization theory should integrate co-constructed practice as foundational to becoming a scholar.

Implications for Practice

Embedding authentic scholarly practice within coursework—such as peer review and manuscript evaluation—builds confidence and legitimacy. Structured, reflective collaboration and psychologically safe “brave spaces” allow students to voice uncertainty and set boundaries. Faculty, as co-mentors, can model disciplinary norms and developmental feedback, accelerating identity formation for students and themselves. For online programs, synchronous, collaborative activities counter isolation, normalize struggle, and affirm students as emerging scholars.

Future Research

Future studies could explore how confidence, belonging, and purpose evolve across disciplines and modalities. Quantitative or mixed-methods designs may extend this work by developing or pairing validated measures of scholarly identity, research self-efficacy, and sense of belonging with qualitative reflection to examine patterns of change over time. Longitudinal research might examine whether discovering purpose predicts dissertation persistence or sustained scholarly engagement. Further inquiry into co-mentorship and peer review as intentional interventions could illuminate their role in reducing attrition and strengthening doctoral identity. Examining the affective dimensions of recognition, vulnerability, and mutual support would deepen understanding of how online doctoral programs cultivate scholars through community, reflection, and authentic practice. Our work establishes a foundation for future research into how online PhD programs in education facilitate the development of scholars through the dynamic interplay of institutional structures, academic experiences, and individual engagement. Continued exploration of these factors is essential to advancing research on effective and inclusive models of doctoral education in virtual environments.

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