



Reconnecting People with Educational Technology and with each other in an Online Doctoral Study Setting

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23 Things International (<https://www.23thingsinternational.com/>) is a 14-week, online, self-paced course for doctoral students, early-career researchers and doctoral supervisors, providing the basis of engagement with 23 tools/techniques to build academic and research networks, increase familiarity with resources to underpin research, and establish professional profiles. The course was launched in 2020 as a collaboration among a UK and two NZ universities. It attracted 250 participants. In 2021, the collaboration expanded to include six universities (two in the UK, two in NZ, and one in each of Australia and the USA) and 400 participants enrolled. An attraction for participants is the opportunity for them to network, especially across institutions. To facilitate that networking, each participant is allocated to a 'pod'. Pods are small groups of participants from across institutions and with similar research/discipline interests. Each pod is allocated a volunteer 'chair' from its membership; the chair has the role of coordinating pod interaction. Evaluation data from 2020-2021 showed that engagement among pod participants was generally limited and did not meet participant expectations. The experience was a reminder to the course organisers that networking does not happen simply because participants are grouped into pods. To increase the likelihood of useful and meaningful networking, supporting structures need to be built into the fabric of the course.

In 2022, *23 Things International's* cross-institutional collaboration was extended to include doctoral networks and additional partners: two more UK universities and one in Ireland, the Techné doctoral training partnership for 10 UK Universities, and the Africa Research Excellence Fund, a network for researchers across Africa. The course attracted 550 participants. To address the limitations of the networking aspect highlighted through the 2020-2021 evaluations, an engagement mentor role was introduced into the 2022 course. The engagement mentor role was to facilitate greater interaction among participants within pods, largely via the chairs of each pod, while remaining removed enough so as not to interfere with the 'natural' development of each pod network.

The 2022 evaluation data indicated that many participants found the engagement mentor to be beneficial in supporting ongoing interaction among pod members and being useful for helping them to understand how to navigate the course. Positive experiences were not universal however, with some individuals saying that they were not even aware of the engagement mentor and that little to no interaction occurred within their pod.

Within the context of *23 Things International*, while building on a theoretical framework describing relationships between humans and technologies in doctoral education contexts (Sim & Stein, 2019), these reflections highlight that participants' sense of connection and reconnection can happen efficiently and effectively when the process is 'humanised'. The course is self-driven and paced, and largely asynchronous, but the human relationships that were intended to be generated through the pod structure and the added facilitation of the engagement mentor seemed to be factors that had an impact on the overall quality of experience. More interestingly is that in 2022, the nature of relationship connections, positive and negative, appear to be different from previous years

Keywords: Doctoral Study, Online Engagement, Reconnection

References

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Stein, S., Sim, K. N. & Rose, M. (2022, December 4-7). *Reconnecting People with Educational Technology and with each other in an Online Doctoral Study Setting* [Pecha Kucha Presentation]. 39th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education, ASCILITE 2022, Sydney, NSW, Australia. <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2022.43>

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