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Disputatio in the Digital Agora: Opening the Doctorate Through Dialogue

Dr. Helen J. DeWaard
Lakehead University, CA

Dr. Verena Roberts
Thompson Rivers University, CA
University of Calgary CA

Dr. Leo Havemann
University College London, UK
The Open University, UK

Dr. Gabi Witthaus
University of Birmingham, UK
University College London, UK

Correspondence:
Helen J. DeWaard
Faculty of Education, Lakehead University, Orillia, Ontario
Email: hdewaard [at] lakeheadu.ca

Abstract
In this collaborative autoethnographic study, we examine the tensions between open doctoral experiences and traditional doctoral research processes. We describe the open research process through individual reflections and shared conversations. This research illuminates digital spaces, or agoras, where doctoral knowledge is shared and debated. The authors share personal stories, writings, and lived experiences, building on the work of others who have agitated and ruptured knowledge building by shifting dissertations into the open.

Through our stories about discourse and dialogues in open and digital spaces, we share our perceptions as practitioners and advocates for opening the dissertation. The shared debate revealed inherent ethical values, risks, and challenges to researching openly. Nuanced questions and decisions are woven into all levels of opening a dissertation process and product. We explore where, when and with whom doctoral candidates can openly share, build connections and networks, join professional partnerships, use media production tools to enhance communication, and draw on the feedback and support of others. These open practices can support innovation and collaboration and help to advance doctoral knowledge for global knowledge communities.

Keywords: discourse, doctorate, open scholarship, stories, open thesis

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Introduction

The discourse and discussion of scholarly works within doctoral programs can result in rich and rewarding learning for scholars; however, the processes and productions at this height of academic endeavour are often hidden behind closed doors. Doctoral programs have been described as monastic (Stewart, 2021); as sites of academic elitism and gatekeeping (Bali, 2016); as well as being seen to produce “tenure-eyed texts” (Salmon, 2020, p. 4). Change agents promoting the opening of the dissertation process heed Denzin's (2017) call to "unsettle traditional concepts of what counts as research, as evidence, as legitimate inquiry" (p. 8).

Opening the dissertation is a form of critical academic practice that involves making scholarly activities, workflows and products publicly accessible. For doctoral scholars who choose openness, the extent and range of sharing and garnering feedback can encompass the entire length of the doctoral program. Artefacts created throughout the doctoral process can be shared partially or fully to others around the world (e.g., through social media or peer reviewed open-access journals). An open dissertation is multifaceted and complex, encompassing processes, presentations, and document productions (Gogia, 2016b).

Proponents of open doctoral processes question the form and contexts of scholarly productions, and how to invite participation within scholarly works (Salmon, 2020). Traditional doctoral work includes periods of isolation, research and writing culminating with the production and defence of a dissertation manuscript. Dissertations tend to hold entrenched conventions for linear, alpha-numeric formats that create “tension between the safe and familiar closure of print literacy and the wild and unknown openness” (Troll Covey, 2013, p. 544). Seeking to openly share doctoral work exposes individual ethics, values, biases, and risks; often revealed through the selection and application of publication formats, digital tools, and spaces.

We define *disputatio* as a reciprocal process of public discourse and debate, which we applied in our scholarly journeys as practitioners and advocates for opening the dissertation. The concept also applies to our collaborative process for producing this paper. Our title draws playfully on historical notions of debate in the public sphere, reframed for the present moment in which the public sphere tends to be a digital space rather than a geographically located town square. Stewart (2021) argues for “opening the dissertation process to the support, scrutiny, and scholarly exemplars that social media communities can offer” (p. 1). The doctoral process and products become an “authoritative discourse” not emerging from a solo voice but from a “dialogue of voices, a *disputatio*” (Troll Covey, 2013, p. 552).

In this collaborative autoethnographic research (CAE), we, as reflective practitioner-researchers examine our doctoral experience by responding to the questions (a) How have our experiences with doctoral programs and research resulted in productive discourse in open/digital spaces—disputatio in the digital agora?; and (b) How might disputatio in the digital agora shape doctoral work?

As co-authors working in different contexts and at different stages of the doctoral journey, we began with individual reflective accounts of how we opened our dissertating. We then examined and shared our individual experiences through a series of three conversations held on Zoom’s video meeting platform. We recorded, transcribed, and coded each conversation. We consolidated insights into our past, present and future doctoral practices, productions, and presentations that informed the potential for opening the practice of disputatio in the digital agora. In this way we engaged in discourse around, and reflection on, our doctoral work within

assemblages of individuals through web-based, socially connective, places and spaces (Tagg & Lyons, 2021).

Conceptual Framework: Opening the Doctorate

Openness in doctoral programs, both institutionally and in scholarly communities, can support novice researchers as they become inculcated into academia. Through our own reflective practice and lived experience, and drawing on the work of other open dissertation advocates and practitioners (Belshaw, 2011; Dixon, 2014; Gogia, 2016b; Jacobs, 2008; Salmon, 2020; Sousanis, 2015; Stewart, 2013), this paper explores the public discourses resulting from the opening-up of the dissertation that can occur in digital social media spaces on the internet or *digital agora* (Cometta & Marcio Cid, 2022; Evans, 2023). Unlike the constrained participation available in the ancient Greek agora, a commercial or religious space reserved for male citizens, today's digital agoras are places for all members of society to openly exchange ideas and conduct social debate.

Dissertating is defined for this paper as both the processes undertaken and products created and completed throughout the doctoral program. Dissertating visibly in the open (Gogia, 2016a) means making decisions about where, when, and with whom doctoral researchers build relationships, join professional partnerships, enhance communications with media production tools, and support others to innovate and collaborate to create new knowledge (see Appendix A). What if, as Gogia (2016a, 2016b) suggested, more dissertating was to happen in the open? Doctoral candidates can benefit from the development of their research acumen with the guidance of critical friends, personal learning networks, and communities of practice, while discussing and disputing positions and ideas within digital agoras. One such agora where we openly connected is offered by the Global OER Graduate Network (GOGN) (Farrow & Mathers, 2020) which aims to advance openness as a core part of doctoral research. Critical change can be seen in how the dissertation process and products are opened to larger audiences through nuanced decisions by candidates, supervisors, and supporting committees (Stewart, 2021). Dissertating in the open requires critical questioning, intentional decision making, and continuously negotiating sharing in global (macro), network/community (meso), individual (micro), and interactional (nano) levels (Cronin, 2017) of research when seeking and accepting feedback, navigating tensions, making connections, and opening scholarly work to others.

Open Education

Broadly speaking, the open education landscape incorporates actions, events, activities, and people focused on sharing, co-creating, collaborating and iterating resources, knowledge, and experiences. Open education is global, multiple, and meaningfully focused on educational stewardship including educational practices, pedagogy, assessment, courseware, degrees, research, policies, advocacy, awards, tenure and promotion, and business models (Stacey, 2017).

This paper focuses on our efforts to open the doctorate through open discourse and sharing our dissertations in multiple and meaningful ways. As open educators as well as doctoral researchers and advocates of open education, we attempt to both live our open values and model open practices for our communities, research participants, supervisors and committee members, and global networks.

Collaborative Autoethnography

Through this CAE exploration (Ellis et al., 2011; Miyahara & Fukao, 2022), we reflect on our open disputatio within digital agoras during our doctorate. Ellis et al. (2011) suggested that CAE researchers "retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (p. 4). As open doctoral researchers, we analyzed, compared, and contrasted our personal experiences considering existing research and others' lived experiences. As CAE researchers, we attempt to aesthetically and evocatively describe our personal and interconnected experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Trustworthiness of this CAE is achieved through self-reflexivity in our individual stories and our shared conversations, rich description of our lived experiences, contrasting the data sources such as the conversations and open dissertation work, and member checking through shared conversations about our open dissertating processes, products, and presentations.

We do not suggest that the findings of this CAE research are generalizable; however, it offers situated understanding that reveals how broader social forces are felt, negotiated, and made meaningful in real lives. We submit that the individual and combined stories and experiences shared here may bring believable possibilities within an open academic and scholarly writing practice (Ellis et al., 2011). As open scholars, we gain greater understanding as we disclose the benefits, issues, and processes we apply to our academic experiences. This is echoed in research whereby CAE researchers "create community, advance scholarship, and become empowered within [their] social context" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 36) in an interactive and critically dialogic manner.

Our Stories: Alone

Archer (2007) described reflexivity as the "regular exercise of the mental ability … to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa… Reflexivity is the means by which we make our way through the world" (p. 4-5). Here, we reflexively illuminate our individual digital agoras; the spaces and platforms where we share our doctoral knowledge through the stories, writings, and lived experiences. These echo the experiences of other doctoral explorers who have agitated and ruptured doctoral knowledge building within the academy (Salmon, 2020; Sousanis, 2015; Stewart, 2021). We describe how our academic endeavours shifted into the open and explore some of the ethical considerations, values, risks, and challenges we experienced while opening our dissertations.

Helen

When I began the doctorate program, my idea was to follow examples of others who had openly blogged and shared their PhD experiences and productions (Belshaw, 2011; Stewart, 2015; Salmon, 2020). Academic writing by Mewburn and Thomson (2018) influenced my thinking, as I reflected on the concept of *hypomnemata*, defined as a curated collection of a "material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation" (Foucault, 1983, para. 5). I had blogged since 2015 for academic purposes, so it was natural to openly blog for my PhD process. Through my blog, I explored and critically reflected on ideas and wonderings. For my own accountability, I integrated a calendar to track my writing. Blogging became part of my routine, thus crafting my academic self as I wrote openly. My decisions of when and how to openly share and engage in discourse throughout the learning journey were instrumental in shaping my doctoral experiences.

At the midpoint of the process, I formally defended my comprehensive portfolio and the research proposal. I stored and linked my openly shared outputs using my digital domain with Reclaim Hosting, which I strategically connected to my PhD blog site (DeWaard, 2023). This domain of my own afforded me a digital space that was recognizable, original, agentic, and readily implemented. After much deliberation, as I weighed the pros and cons of garnering feedback, the ease of access and navigational mechanisms of the software, privacy of responses, or how responses might be integrated, I decided to openly invite critical readers to provide feedback using a closed, private, group annotation space using Hypothes.is, which is a social annotation tool. In this way, through this open invitation into a controlled space, I engaged in disputatio with critical friends and network connections who might be interested in reading and providing strategic feedback on my work.

For privacy and security reasons, elements of the design of my doctoral research were private, as I paid attention to issues of access and intentionality in sharing my research work (e.g., password-protecting certain reflective blog posts). As I coded/analyzed and prepared the dissertation, I erred on the side of caution when sharing my digital productions (Seko & Lewis, 2017) while I struggled with the tension of ensuring participant's anonymity in the research. After strategic consideration of the affordances of digital self-publication platforms such as Scalar, Wordpress, or Pressbooks, I opted for a Scalar instance for the production and presentation of my dissertation document, as it offered unique search and engagement opportunities. This dissertation site was shared strategically and intentionally with critical readers, garnering much needed encouragement and feedback. As I moved toward the end of the doctoral process, I looked for additional opportunities to open dialogue and discourse about the research I had conducted and where I could discuss the findings. While this is typically done through peer reviewed publications and conference presentations, I did this through blogging. In this way, arguments and defence of my research were open and ongoing.

Verena

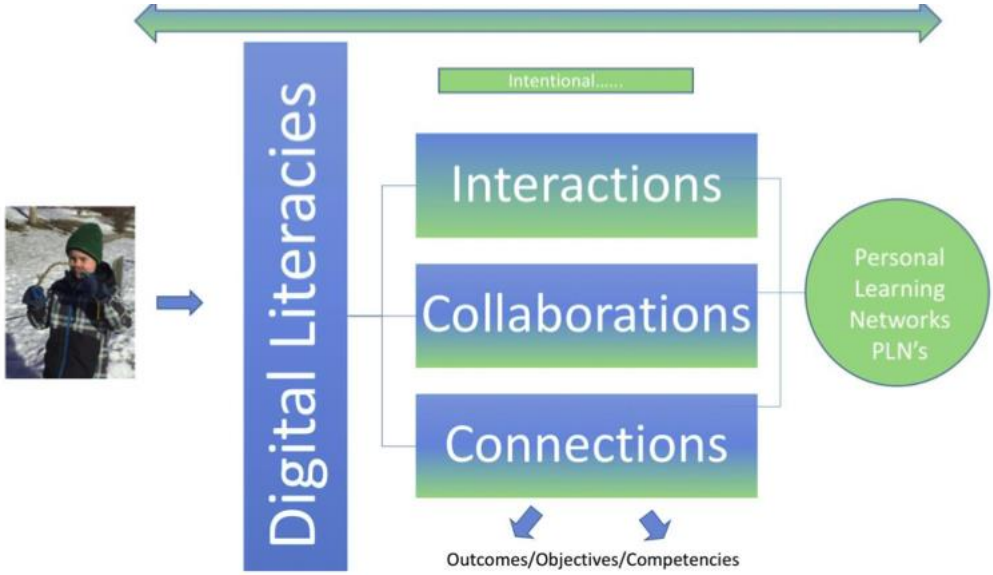
Upon reflection, I am amazed at how quickly I forgot how much I shared during the dissertation process, how I shared and built upon my learning openly and with whom. I do remember describing the importance of being as open as possible in my learning process. I remember the strong hesitancy I felt from my university for me to share anything without publishing first. As a Creative Commons license advocate, I did not fully understand the intricacies and politics of academic writing. As part of my contribution to this disputatio, I have considered my open practices throughout my dissertation process and realised that they did not change but rather expanded. My open-sharing experiences focused on three distinct areas:

1. My personal reflective blogging and my microblogging (using Twitter).
2. Encouraging my secondary school colleagues in my Alberta school district and participants in my research to share their learning as part of my dissertation project.
3. Sharing my learning through presentations at the district, local, provincial, national and international levels.

My dissertation research examined the perspectives of open educational practices (OEP) in K-12 learning contexts. Part of the process included modeling and developing an awareness of OEP in K-12 contexts.

Figure 1

Open Learning Design



Note. The image is from my initial research presentation to participants (Roberts, 2019, p. 72), which I subsequently used in multiple presentations to develop awareness about the potential of OEP.

My personal blogging and microblogging helped develop my professional learning network and enhanced the theoretical and research-based aspects of my dissertation work. I was able to share my thoughts and ideas and get valuable feedback from authors and researchers in the open community in a timely and thoughtful manner. This directly supported the writing of my literature review and findings, as well as the development of visual representations for my research. Although I stopped blogging at the end of my dissertation data collection phase, I continued to communicate through microblogging to foster and develop these professional relationships beyond my dissertation research. I also transitioned into becoming an alumni mentor for organizations that supported me in deep and meaningful ways (such as GOGN).

I spent a lot of time developing an awareness about open educational practices across my school district. This meant creating graphics to facilitate presentations in webinars and conference sessions to share in K-12 learning contexts. I modeled how to learn openly so participating teachers and students could consider open learning for themselves. As a result, I spent more time encouraging others to share, while also sharing my own practices when appropriate. The opportunity to present with others gave me insights into understanding how my colleagues and participants were able to perceive the potential of open learning for themselves. Overall, sharing my dissertation research provided me with invaluable support in theoretical relevance, practice and research that could not have been achieved without sharing and co-sharing with my research participants.

Gabi

I wrote my thesis, *Refugees' Online Learning Engagement in Higher Education: A Capabilitarian Analysis* (Witthaus, 2023) between July 2019 and March 2023. The decision to write an open

thesis emerged out of my practice as an advocate of open education. I hoped to make my work accessible to people who did not have access to paywalled databases, I wanted to share my work-in-progress and receive feedback from people outside of the academy, and I hoped that my experience might inspire other researchers to do the same.

My mechanisms for dissertating in the open included:

- Blogging under an open licence about my research;
- Publishing a collated series of blog posts on my theoretical framework, the capabilities approach, as a booklet on Zenodo;
- Drafting each chapter in Google Docs, which I pulled together in an open website on Google Sites;
- Sharing updates via Twitter (now called X, subsequently replaced with other microblogging platforms);
- Presenting at conferences, webinars and workshops; and
- Writing papers for open-access journals

There were some aspects of writing my thesis in the open that did not work so well. Firstly, sharing (openly or not) is time consuming. I sometimes became overwhelmed by a stream of social media and needed to *switch off*. Secondly, I struggled with the tension between my role as a PhD student who was expected to make an individual contribution to knowledge and my more collaborative identity as an open education practitioner. I was frequently warned by others in the academy about the dangers of sharing my work-in-progress openly. Intellectual property theft is a common theme in academic publishing and should be prevented by the judicious use of open licences (Witthaus, 2021), and so I applied a somewhat restrictive CC license (CC BY NC SA) to all my openly shared work, which helped to dispel those anxieties. I was also concerned that my final submission might be challenged by the university on the grounds that large parts of it had already been publicly disseminated, and I was relieved when my supervisor advised me not to worry about this.

I think the aspect of dissertating in the open that worked best for me was that it provided helpful touchpoints for discussion of my emerging understanding, and for receiving feedback from other scholars. My main interlocutors were people known to me, including my peers in GOGN, my peers in an online study group at Lancaster University, academics in the Higher Education for Human Development group at the University of the Free State in South Africa whose work was profoundly influencing mine, and authors of the open-access paper outlining an online engagement framework (Redmond et al., 2018), whose framework I built on. I had a few additional serendipitous connections with other scholars via social media. Just as important as the feedback I received, was the sense of accountability I felt through sharing my work-in-progress in public. Even though I was not always sure who was reading my work, the notion that my research was *out there*, helped me to keep moving towards completion.

Leo

My doctoral story, in contrast with those of my co-authors, was a work in progress at the time of writing this paper. I started the doctorate with good intentions of opening my research process, imagining I would perhaps be blogging each step of the journey. But the reality of a part-time

PhD alongside full-time work soon dawned, and just as I passed the *upgrade* milestone, a global pandemic occurred. As my job became all about the *pivot* to online, I felt like I wasn't doing much research, let alone blogging about it. So, when this paper was proposed, I wondered whether I had been *open enough*. I reflected that much of my writing *around the doctorate* explores the values, assumptions and boundaries embedded in discussions of what *counts* as open, and whether it is meaningful to apply binary *open* and *closed* labels to practices, or instead to understand who opens what, to whom, and why (Havemann, 2020). Consequently, there are many approaches and levels of openness, and no formula to be followed when dissertating in the open. My approach had been to open my thinking and process through regularly presenting and publishing various aspects of and angles on my research area (Atenas et al., 2022; Havemann et al., 2023), from the very beginning when my topic was still evolving, even during the most frantic periods of the pandemic.

My memory of the pandemic period is the pervasive sense of never having enough hours in the day for my day job, which involved supporting academics to pivot online. Needing someone to talk to about the strange and overwhelming combination of supporting others with the pivot and trying to read and think through what was being written and said about it, I began a side project with Verena, reflecting on our pandemic experiences and considering the rumoured but not always visible role of openness within pandemic pedagogy. In the article we wrote (Havemann & Roberts, 2021), I noted that we met on Zoom on Saturdays when I should have been working on my PhD; thus, opening the *negative space* of not-doing-the-PhD. This side project meaningfully transformed my PhD; the pandemic had become an inflection point in the global higher education landscape that couldn't simply be left neatly outside of the research I was doing. This backstory reveals and speaks to the essential messiness of the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which is so often tidied and sanitised in the official telling.

There is a danger of taking on too much during a PhD, particularly when opening discourses and dialogues, but there are also benefits, motivations, and opportunities for feedback. For example, a GOGN seminar proved a fruitful space in which to pilot my survey with critical friends. I also strategically deployed openness, presenting work in progress at conferences to attract survey participants, which helped me to gain significantly more responses than anticipated. Through these openings and collaborations, my doctoral work has already had some reach and impact.

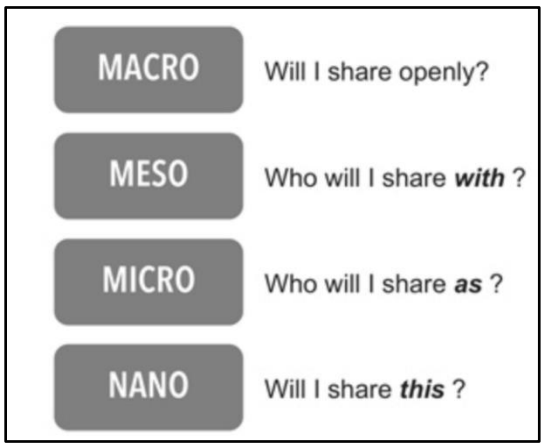
Our Stories: Together

In addition to writing our individual stories, we engaged in three collaborative and recorded conversations in Zoom where we shared individual experiences and reflected on our disputatio in digital agoras. We considered how an open and supportive graduate network such as GOGN provided opportunities for *debate* within research endeavours. In these interactive introspective conversations (Chang et al., 2013) we responded to each other's nuanced questions and intentional decisions as we shared our experiences with opening our work through macro, meso, micro, and nano levels of dissertation work (Figure 2).

As we sought to balance privacy with openness, the layers described by Cronin (2017) revealed the types of questions we asked ourselves at key points during our dissertating experiences and asked each other during our recorded conversations. From the individual stories we wrote and with the transcripted recordings from our conversations, we constructed four themes germane to our actions and experiences of dissertating in digital agoras: opening and sharing, connections, feedback, and tensions. In the next section, we apply a sequential CAE methodology (Chang et

Figure 2

Considering Openness at Four Levels



Note. This figure is authored by Cronin (2017), and copyright licensed CC-BY.

al., 2013) to explore where, when, and with whom we sought and received feedback, navigated through tensions, built connections, and opened our dissertating through discourse.

Theme 1: Opening and Sharing

This CAE research focuses on our lived experiences of opening spaces and places for discourse as we moved through our doctorates. We recognize that opening any scholarly work to discourse in digital spaces is contextual, conducted on a continuum from fully open to completely closed, and driven by factors and risks unique to each individual. Our intention is to open dialogue about disputatio in digital agoras as an alternative, supportive, and equitable means of engagement for doctoral students and researchers.

The theme of opening was at the heart of the journey through our open dissertation production and presentations. Each of us spent substantial time and effort developing our approaches to opening our doctoral outputs, ensuring congruence with our perception of how much openness was appropriate at any given point. We recognise that being open is not a binary option, but rather a rich spectrum of decisions, from fully closed to partially or completely open, and we observed different degrees of readiness within ourselves to being open in scholarly productions or presentations (Roberts, 2022; Tur et al., 2020).

Our starting point was the recognition that opening requires trust—trust in ourselves and those with whom we were sharing our research—as well as a commitment to honour the trust that our research participants had placed in us. We acknowledge that learning at the doctoral level is not a comfortable experience and may not feel safe for many, especially those from marginalized communities. We argue that conducting disputatio in open digital spaces requires a readiness to create accountable spaces, described by Ahenkorah (2023) as spaces where you are accountable and "responsible for yourself, your intentions, words, and actions. ... aligning your intent with action" (paragraph 28). For disputatio with other researchers and practitioners, this means you bring into digital spaces a "willingness to step outside one's comfort zone, to be challenged, and ultimately change the way we see the world" (Ahenkorah, 2023, paragraph 16). This speaks about the risk involved, but also the impetus for dissertating in the open; knowing

that people are going to know who's producing it, so “I'm going to do a better job” (Helen). We all felt immensely inspired and motivated by colleagues in GOGN to confront the risks demanded by openness with care and with attention to ethically sound processes as exemplified in work by Bali (2016), Cronin (2017), Farrow (2016), and Stewart (2013). We also made an effort to gather supporters and advisors around us who understood open practices, by seeking supervisors or members of our PhD advisory committees who advocate for openness.

There were occasions when writing done by someone else, on a blog or in a conference presentation, helped open up ideas for another: “You did a blog post that just kind of cracked the practice window open for me and I thought, wow! That’s what it means to be open as a PhD scholar!” (Helen). There was often a sense of joy for us when writing for a wider audience: “I think because I wrote that blog post for the GOGN blog, rather than my own blog,…it got a much wider readership” (Gabi).

Sometimes, we experience ambivalence when making micro decisions about dissertating openly. We recognize that being open involves making intentional and nuanced decisions about when to share our dissertation writing. This was an emotional task as well as an intellectual one as “there was this constant sense of pressure, self-imposed pressure, but pressure, nevertheless, that it had to be okay enough to share” (Gabi). We also experienced, paradoxically, an underlying anxiety that, although our writing was public, there were times when no-one was reading it, resulting in a mixture of relief and disappointment for us as authors. Gabi observed: “At times it was difficult to disentangle my personal versus academic and professional personae, but with each act of open sharing, I felt like I was shaping the kind of identity that I wanted to project into open digital spaces. Still today, post-PhD, I want that identity to be congruent with the core of who I am.”

Theme 2: Connections and Networks

Opening and sharing includes building connections and networks, particularly ones relevant to doctoral learning and research. Although connections to physical places can result in feelings of inclusion and purposeful learning offered by the university (Carvalho & Freeman, 2022), and such places might be considered as sites of open discourse (Havemann, 2020), our experiences and reflections reveal that it is increasingly the *digital* spaces and places that have enabled and shaped our experiences of open scholarship. We reflect on how the affordances of specific technologies are factors in where, when, and how connections were made in open and intentional ways. Our CAE reveals how the affordances of digital spaces such as X (formerly Twitter), Mastodon, Wordpress, LinkedIn, Google, Hypothes.is, Scalar, and other platforms, influenced our discourse when openly sharing academic writing yet also constrained open and equitable access.

Throughout the dissertating process, each of us created intentional connections and joined networks to further our scholarship, for example the GOGN network, or Helen’s connections with the Creative Commons network. These connections happened through online conversations, video chats, conference participation, and strategic network collaborations such as shared writing for academic publication. It was in the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) that our open disputatio garnered serendipitous results, for example Helen and Verena’s connections to the *Open for a Better World* network. It is through these loosely connected global networks that our doctoral learning gained value, carried risks, and posed challenges (Wenger et al., 2011). Stewart (2021) suggests that academics become “engaged in curating and contributing resources to a broader conversation in their field or area of interest, rather than

merely promoting themselves or their work". Stewart's (2021) experience of having a digital network reflect her work back as worthy, not with platitudes and praise but with meaningful feedback and a commitment to improvement, mirrored Helen's experience receiving feedback from critical friends on her comprehensive portfolio production using Hypothes.is annotations.

Conferences, online and in-person, created essential opportunities to connect with other open-oriented colleagues, which helped us build our learning ecosystems. Verena highlighted attending her first open education conference in Vancouver without knowing what Open Educational Resources (OER) were but knowing that she wanted to build upon what she was coming to understand as open educational practices. Meeting leading open educators at the conference inspired her to learn more about open theoretical approaches and research possibilities. Then, she was able to intentionally work with her dissertation supervisor to gain additional support for opening her research to the wider community of open researchers. She experienced her dissertation process very positively; being supported in multiple ways allowed her to be vulnerable and more open than she would have been with only a dissertation committee for support. The combination of the committee and the open research network helped support through times of trauma or when we needed to pull back and be vulnerable, recognize when we could not be as open as others, and put our energy where we feel supported. This scaffolded open research ecosystem helps to balance open practice, open beliefs, and open theoretical approaches. Later in Verena's open research journey, she shared: "I think the biggest gift for me, or that 'aha moment' was when the students who were my participants presented about the research" (Verena).

We each participate in GOGN community activities and events, benefiting from GOGN funding to attend and present at conferences. For example, Helen and Gabi engaged in a GOGN Wikipedia edit-a-thon where they created, expanded and updated articles on aspects of open education and research. We pursue opportunities created by GOGN, building on the connections made through the network, as we co-present at conferences or co-write papers.

Our networks expose us to current, timely, and globally focused research in our field where networking events provide valuable knowledge exchange opportunities for each of us, and which sometimes result in serendipitous connection, publication, and presentation opportunities. These open events result in an expanding circle of connections through hubs of action and participation where educators are actively creating resources for local and global use/reuse (DeWaard & Chavhan, 2020, 2022). For each of us, building connections and engaging in networks adds to our open discourse, as modeled in this paper about our stories of disputatio in digital agoras.

Theme 3: Feedback

Feedback and reflection are central to doctoral studies, whereby the development of identity and agency as a researcher occurs through iterative writing, reflecting, and feedback (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019). Essential to the development of a scholarly persona in doctoral studies, seeking and getting feedback develops knowledge and understanding, supports critical judgements, and shapes communication with larger scholarly communities (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019). For open doctoral work, feedback-seeking beliefs, capabilities, systems, and behaviours (Dawson et al., 2024) are negotiated and networked, stretching beyond traditional university and academic supervisory structures.

As part of our open dissertating, feedback involved dynamic and iterative relationships with our research topics through reflective writing. Each of us selectively and differentially used a variety of digital mechanisms to obtain feedback that included social media, shared documents for suggesting edits or adding comments, as well as social annotation tools such as Hypothes.is. As outlined by Dawson et al. (2024), our *feedback seeking behaviours* included sending out messages on Twitter (now called X), posting blog reflections on research-related questions to gain comments from others, and specifically asking others through our networks to respond. Verena posted a picture of books from her literature review asking others to suggest alternative titles she should consider for her thesis. Helen asked critical friends to respond using a group Hypothes.is space to annotate the research proposal on her blog site. Gabi sent out tweets for others to add comments to her Google Docs where she shared chapters of her dissertation as she was writing. In lieu of giving a *work-in-progress* presentation, Leo used his presentation at a GOGN seminar to ask the gathered network members to pilot the survey instrument for his research. Being specific about what type of feedback we were looking to receive was helpful, but sometimes the most consequential feedback resulted serendipitously through a tweet-stream or a conference presentation. We each sought and received feedback not only from our formal academic support and committee members, but from others through our digital agoras.

We each invited comments or sought feedback at different stages in the doctoral journey. We believe that feedback is relational work. Often through direct connections to critical friends or significant others, this feedback felt highly meaningful to our research work. Conference audiences, particularly GOGN related workshop and webinar sessions, provide feedback in safe spaces with familiar faces. This feedback comes from feelings of safety with knowing others and trusting in their good intentions to further your research endeavours rather than feelings of insecurity and potential of being sabotaged in your efforts. As mentioned by Helen, “I was feeling very vulnerable with what I had come up with…it was nice to have some positive feedback from the people who did respond. Now I'm less reluctant because I've had that initial sharing.”

Key ways we gained feedback included conference presentations, poster sessions, and webinars. For each of us, conference participation, whether in person or online, has provided the “ultimate kind of audience that actually interacts, engages and gives you really helpful feedback” (Leo). Participating in alternative presentation modes such as roundtable and poster sessions provided us with alternative ways to not only consider how to communicate about our research (e.g., using more media and visuals such as using QR codes on in-person posters, or posting our sessions to a blog and tweeting out the URL) but to carefully consider what information is essential for audience understanding. For Verena, this triggered a shift in thinking, because “when you see it, you're like, no one is going to come to my poster, because it's all text. I had to think about my audience and then those visuals were used in my final.” For Gabi, it meant taking “every opportunity leading up to the viva to just keep presenting to anyone who will listen and usually you might get one or two interesting comments afterwards or in the tea break” to get critical feedback.

Theme 4: Tensions

Doctoral work focused on dissertating in digital agoras can result in tensions relating to ethical considerations such as privacy, data security, integrity, independence, and informed consent (Farrow, 2016). We believe that anyone who navigates into discourse in public internet spaces takes risks to manage personal safety and security. In the doctoral journey, scholars are frequently advised to keep research private and warned against posting openly on the internet.

We acknowledge that many of these online public spaces can often be sites for corporate extraction and mined by artificial intelligence tools (Tlili et al, 2026). We recognize that scholars from equity-deserving communities face many fears, particularly in digital agoras, and that explicitly adopting guidelines for accountable spaces as suggested by Ahenkorah (2023) can support how others should engage with our work. Our dissertating experiences illustrate how open dissertations can be accountable, authentic, and responsive research/storytelling processes, while also raising ethical and practical challenges for the researcher.

Tensions are revealed in the dilemma of where and how to share doctoral work in open and online platforms. While observing an increasingly dystopian social media landscape, we continually reflect on whether we should be endorsing the use of surveillance technologies for academic purposes (Mewburn, 2023). Decisions about software applications through which opening could occur created tensions in areas such as personal risk assessments, academic privacy, and scholarly security. Helen's decision to openly blog about her doctoral journey can be seen as a form of academic openness (Mewburn & Thomson, 2018), yet she strategically kept some blog posts closed to wider public unless there was an intention to start a conversation or seek feedback.

Added tension emerged when keeping research data secure and private. Verena's research data was integrated with the school district learning management software. The balance between advocating and choosing to share openly was a constant ethical and practical dilemma in Verena's K-12 research contexts. Gabi chose a pragmatic response when cautioned about the risks of intellectual property theft, choosing a license that disallowed commercial reuse, and recognising that her openly licensed outputs provided time-stamped verification of the authorship of her original work.

Each of us felt tension when making decisions on when and how to open our data and analysis to discourse. Within the boundaries established in each of our doctoral research ethics board approvals, we were mindful of considering participants as co-producers of our research, allowing for maintaining confidentiality, and critically considering how to credit participants for their contributions. This would impact the research if participants might feel pressure to censor or moderate their answers; with this in mind, both Leo and Helen ultimately decided to anonymise all participants responses despite a conflicting desire to openly credit their contributions. Our desire to be open can therefore be in tension with other research and ethical imperatives, which might include a requirement for, or right to choose, confidential and anonymous participation. Gabi invited participants to choose whether to be named or pseudonymised, with the agreement that if they chose attribution, they would read the draft sections of the thesis in which they were named; one participant did this. Gabi noted that "the name really is powerful … I felt it wasn't right to name them without their absolute confirmation that they were happy with what I was saying."

For Verena, tensions emerged when students did presentations about the research. Although students were all included in every part of the research intervention including the option to participate in research presentations, not all their data/info was included in the dissertation results, depending on permissions granted. Also, the lead teacher wanted to be an open participant in the research, but if named, then the students could also be identified. Verena experienced constant tension over which participants could be identified when and why, as she negotiated multiple identities and expanded her research. These tensions reveal issues when deciding how open to be with the participants about the research, such as framing interviews in

open ways, sharing or sending the protocol/prompts to participants ahead of the interviews, or using anonymity for participants' names.

Reflective of Stewart (2021), we noted these feelings of tension as we lived and researched in open social networks. Tensions are inevitable when discourse is open to public viewing. We were continually aware, mindful, and careful in navigating through these tensions, knowing that some feelings of discomfort would arise in some spaces and at some times. Leo noted that this can also be tiring, but open researchers are not obliged to make everything they do open at all times, and that "you are entitled to have times when you retreat into your shell". We intentionally balance open or closed disputatio to manage our exposure to tension. For each of us, these tensions were mitigated by the caring attention of others in our open and closed networks as we shared our research ideas and outputs.

Discussion and Conclusion

In our individual stories and our interwoven reflections, we have considered how openness introduced both challenges and opportunities into our doctoral journeys. In this paper, we wish to recognise the challenges and tensions inherent in opening one's work to discussion and scrutiny, and call upon doctoral researchers, supervisors and communities to foster appropriate, supportive spaces for ethical, authentic and uplifting open research practices.

Below we provide our key insights in response to our two research questions.

Q1. How have our experiences with doctoral programs and research resulted in productive discourse in open/digital spaces—disputatio in the digital agora?

The following aspects of our experiences were critical to engendering productive discourse in open/digital spaces for us:

- Looking strategically and intentionally for platforms and networks that build connections, reduce tensions, and provide opportunities for feedback and conversation; recognising that disputatio could happen in meaningful ways using a variety of digital technologies;
- Understanding open access publishing by becoming more familiar with Creative Commons licensing and considering carefully how we licensed and shared our ideas and materials;
- Seeing feedback as a critical part of the disputatio process, treating it as a reciprocal act involving both seeking and engaging with constructive critical responses to our work; and
- Viewing disputatio as a form of *research for good* (i.e., giving back to the global funds of knowledge we had benefitted from, for the good of wider society.)

Q2. How might disputatio in the digital agora shape doctoral work?

Based on the analysis of our lived experiences of disputatio, we argue that embedding open practices in the doctoral journey can shape the learning for both the candidate and the scholarly community. The following practices by doctoral candidates dissertating in the open are powerful enablers of such mutual learning:

- Looking beyond traditional doctoral learning processes and engaging openly with individuals and organizations aligned with one's research goals;

- Intentionally building and contributing to a connected community, and reflecting on how these other learners, educators and researchers are engaging and communicating their research and ideas;
- Being approachable: explicitly establishing, and inviting others to abide by the guidelines of accountable spaces (Ahenkorah, 2023);
- Considering reciprocity as a foundational component to open learning; giving back in a similar way when taking, adapting, or using academic works; being aware of how participating in knowledge networks can not only support one's own research, but the research of others;
- Understanding that there are many issues of intellectual property particularly in the age of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) which continues to iterate and add tensions with open knowledge.

From a perspective of community and care, in our scholarly networks, we have more to gain and give by being open and inclusive. We can be advocates of learning by building knowledge collaboratively and collectively. Opening our scholarly practices helped us balance our need for participatory learning with the more formal educational processes and requirements of traditional doctoral work.

We recognize that GenAI has become part of the research landscape since we began our doctoral work. Rapid changes in GenAI require additional critical perspectives on surveillance and commodification, balanced with the stewardship and transparency of creating open scholarly content for the public good (Tlili et al., 2026). We would caution against viewing the openness to peers and networks we've advocated as being replaceable by the use of GenAI, despite perceptions of the readiness of this technology to act as a constant research companion.

In summary, disputatio in the digital agora is a method through which we may learn wisdom throughout our doctoral journey. There isn't one correct way, nor one person or group to connect to, or one time to connect. Especially when we expand the focus from open products to take in open practices, the idea of open perhaps becomes more verb than noun, a process engaged in, rather than an achievable state. For the doctoral researcher, often working in isolation, disputatio in the open and digital agora creates a much-needed opportunity to reach and engage fellow travelers and interested parties. To doctoral researchers and supervisors, we would suggest being open to such open options while iteratively seeking a place of balance within the tensions of openings and closures.

Author's Contributions

Helen was lead instigator and collaborator, keeping this project moving forward by scheduling writing times and completing major edits. All authors contributed to this paper with individual stories, collaborative writing and editing, and shared conversations.

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier (ORCID)

Dr. Helen J. DeWaard https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8894-2259
Dr. Verena Roberts https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3336-7805
Dr. Leo Havemann https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1843-4483
Dr. Gabi Witthaus https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3608-1266

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Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Inquiries regarding access to the data used in this study can be directed to the corresponding author.

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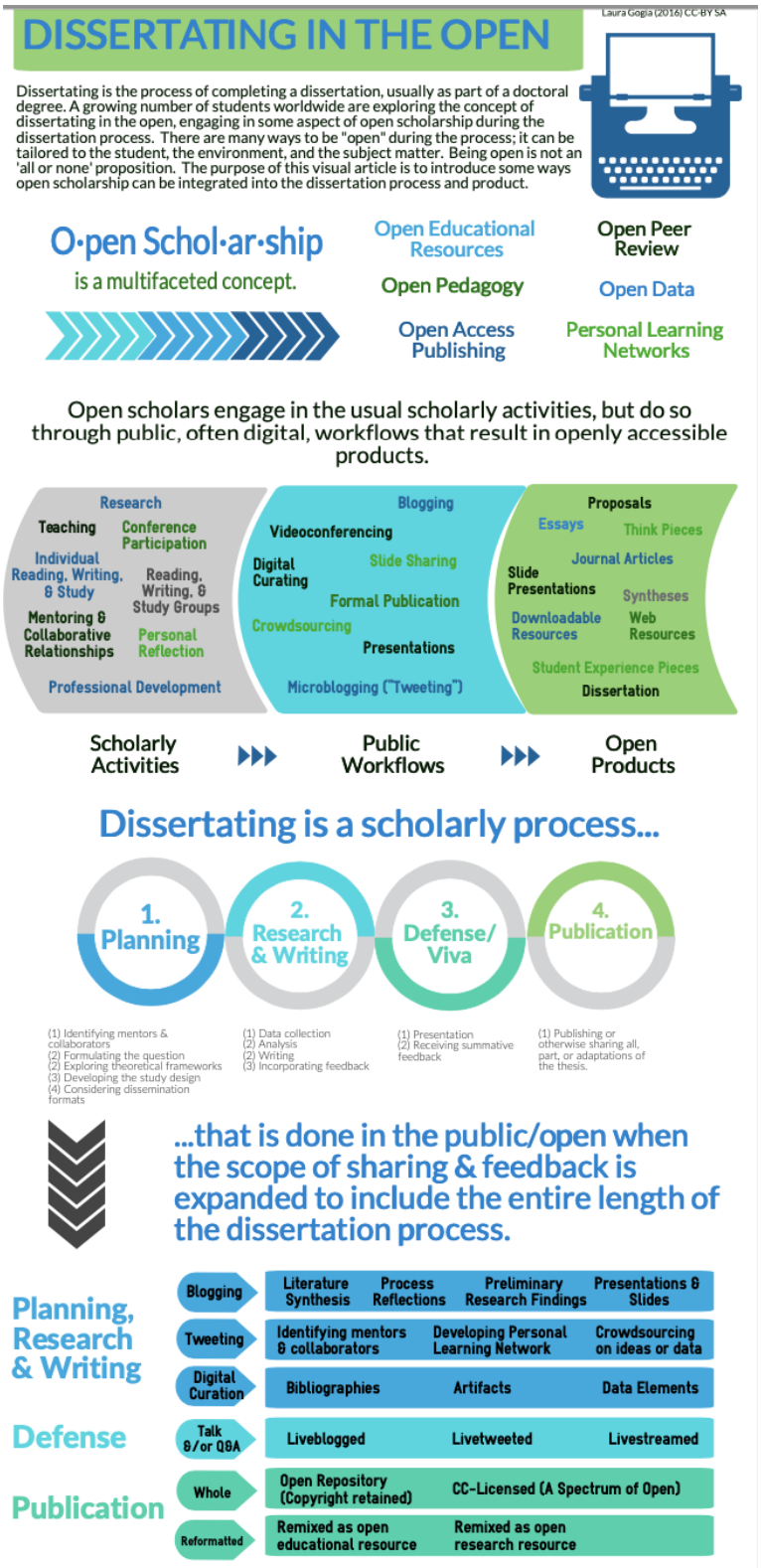
Appendix A

Dissertating in the Open



Dissertating in the Open: Descriptive Text

The title is “Dissertating in the Open.” The top right corner has the author’s name (Laura Gogia), year (2016), and Creative Commons license (CC-BY-SA) above an icon of a typewriter. Below the title is an informational paragraph that reads “Dissertating is the process of completing a dissertation, usually as part of a doctoral degree. A growing number of students worldwide are exploring the concept of dissertating in the open, engaging in some aspect of open scholarship during the dissertating process. There are many ways to be “open” during the process; it can be tailored to the student, the environment, and the subject matter. Being open is not an ‘all or none’ proposition. The purpose of this visual article is to introduce some ways open scholarship can be integrated into the dissertation process and product.” The heading open scholarship as a multifaceted concept is above a variegated blue coloured arrow pointing to information in blue and green text - open educational resources, open pedagogy, open access publishing, open peer review, open data, and personal learning networks. Below this is black text stating “Open scholars engage in the usual scholarly activities, but do so through public, often digital, workflows that result in openly accessible products.”

Variously coloured sections (grey on the left; peacock blue in the middle, and grass green on the right) include text and words relating to:

- Research (grey/left); teaching; conference participation; individual reading, writing & study; reading, writing, & study groups; mentoring & collaborative relationships; personal reflection; and professional development);
- Blogging (blue/middle); videoconferencing; digital curation; slide sharing; formal publication; crowdsourcing; presentations; microblogging (“Tweeting”);
- And proposals (green, right); essays; think pieces; journal articles; slide presentations; syntheses; downloadable resources; web resources; student experience pieces; dissertation.

This is followed by black text below each section: ‘scholarly activities’ (left side); public workflows (middle), and open products (right side); each phrase is separated by three small overlapping black arrows pointing right.

Below this text is a large text (in blue colour) stating “Dissertating is a scholarly process…”

Below this title are four variegated blue, green and grey circles holding numbered text for:

1. Planning – identifying mentors & collaborators, formulating the question, exploring theoretical frameworks, developing the study design, considering dissemination formats;
2. Research & Writing – data collection, analysis, writing, incorporating feedback;
3. Defense/Viva – presentation, receiving summative feedback;
4. Publication – publishing or otherwise sharing all, part, or adaptations of the thesis.

The final section of the infographic shows a black striped arrow on the left side, beside the text “…that is done in the public/open when the scope of sharing & feedback is expanded to include the entire length of the dissertation process.” This is followed by lines of text highlights in blue and green colours in a table format as described here:

Planning, Research & Writing	Blogging	Literature synthesis; process reflections; preliminary research findings; presentations & slides
	Tweeting	Identifying mentors & collaborators; developing personal learning network; crowdsourcing on ideas or data
	Digital curation	Bibliographies; artifacts; data elements
Defense	Talk & /or Q&A	Liveblogging; live-tweeting; livestreaming
Publication	Whole	Open repository (copyright retained); CC-licensed (a spectrum of open)
	Reformatted	Remixed as open educational resource; remixed as open research resource