

*Doctoral Side Effects: Damage Limitation Versus Unexpected Benefits to
PhD Research in a Pandemic*

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European Conference on Arts, Design & Education 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In May 2021, following up on a publication by PhD Design students of the University of Porto on the topic of the various kinds of impact of the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in doctoral research, the authors organised an informal online meeting for Arts and Humanities PhD students and recent graduates. The goal was to share insights, strategies, methodologies and other concerns that have been emerging empirically and intuitively in individual contexts. The present article therefore reports on these shared concerns, and subsequently analyses them. The session was held informally via Zoom, with an international presence; two virtual rooms were created for the purpose of accommodating linguistic diversity; conversation was spontaneous while moderated. Moderators provided a synthesis of discussed topics at a final joint segment of the session. Various students and graduates recognised the potential for the session to become a template for an extended support network; this is an additional motivation for the present article. Furthermore, the session provided a recurrence of experiences and adaptive measures, and the possibility of incorporating certain adaptations as permanent. Lastly, the present article ends with an inventory of identified adaptations, and their critical analysis as potentially permanent, positive changes in doctoral research procedures.

Keywords: Phd During Pandemic, Online Research, Emerging Methodologies, Online Forum, Support Networks

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Introduction

Held on the 21st of May, 2021, the one-hour, online meeting “Doctoral Side Effects: Let’s talk about doing a PhD during a pandemic” (DSE) promoted a discussion on the impact of the Covid pandemic on doctoral research.

The present article identifies and analyses methodological strategies employed in the Doctoral Program in Design of the Fine Art Faculty of the University of Porto, in the period between March 2020, when a State of Emergency was ordered in Portugal, and May 2021, when DSE was held. The pandemic imposed a lockdown at an almost global level, forcing students in different contexts and at different stages of research to revise their research plans.

The successive lockdowns that occurred in this period altered the class dynamics of the Design Doctoral Program at U.Porto (Figure 1), with classes being held remotely through audiovisual interfaces. Students have had the opportunity to experience and reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of these restrictions on their doctoral research projects. The search for alternative solutions and adaptations, as well as new methodological approaches, has in itself become an object of research to some, given the absence of prior guidelines on how to act in face of such an unforeseen scenario. Research procedures thus tended to unfold mostly intuitively and empirically.



Figure 1: Dynamics of classes of the aforementioned doctoral program before COVID-19

The ineditude of the experience was felt by the PhD students at U.Porto as an opportunity to assess and share a range of experiences with the scientific community. The first output of this assessment was the publication *Tigers in Zoom Cages: tips and testimonies on advancing doctoral research in a pandemic* (Figure 2). A fourth volume of an ongoing series (<https://doctortiger.wordpress.com>), it brings together contributions from ID+, the doctoral program’s host research center (<http://idmais.org>).



Figure 2: Cover of the publication Doctor Tiger vol 4: *Tigers in Zoom Cages*
tips and testimonies on advancing doctoral research in a pandemic

Throughout this period, a diversity of communication and discussion channels emerged: many of them have approached the difficulties and the unexpected perks generated by the migration of research methodologies, traditionally employed in a face-to-face context, towards remote situations - particularly the methodologies employed in the Arts and Humanities. These communications and discussions took the form of conferences, meetings, forums and readers, organized by academic communities, reported experiences and pedagogical solutions; however, first-hand testimonies by doctoral students on the challenges of the pandemic proved to be practically non-existent.

For the above reasons and considering the uniqueness of this period in regards to research activity, this article concerns the testimonies of the doctoral students that participated in DSE. The main objective was to converge on ways of overcoming the pandemic/confinement circumstances within research, but conversation ended up including a range of further considerations. The article concludes with an analysis of the replicability and longevity of the identified methodological approaches.

Doctoral Side Effects: decisions and planning

Following the *Tigers in Zoom Cages* publication, an event was organized in order to broaden the scope of the debate to doctoral students from other national and foreign universities. Different formats were considered for the event: a conference, a forum, a round table, a workshop, a hackathon, or an informal meeting. The advantages and disadvantages of a formal event, which would imply inviting reviewers or evaluators, were analyzed: we concluded that this process would hinder logistics and introduce an excessively formal narrative. Given the circumstances, an informal event between doctoral students was therefore the chosen format. Although initially a rather more ambitious event with specific objectives was considered, the final proposal was to hold an informal meeting for doctoral students without predetermined expectations, while keeping an eye on potential conclusions.

The possibility of holding a hybrid event was discussed, but an entirely remote format was chosen in the end: this would enable increased participation from students in confinement and/or remote locations. Because of the aforementioned methodological specificities, it was decided that the event would welcome Arts and Humanities students.

Doctoral Side Effects: Let's talk about doing a PhD during a pandemic was thus held. The event took advantage of a flexible, largely spontaneous, and informal structure. The underlying mottos for debate were: what methodological adaptations were made in your research as a consequence of the pandemic? Are these methodological adaptations emerging models, or temporary remediations? What have been the unexpected advantages of the pandemic context in your situation?

To communicate this event, an e-flyer was created with access information (Figure 3). As for its dissemination, emails were sent to national and international research centers, and each organizer reinforced the dissemination on social networks.

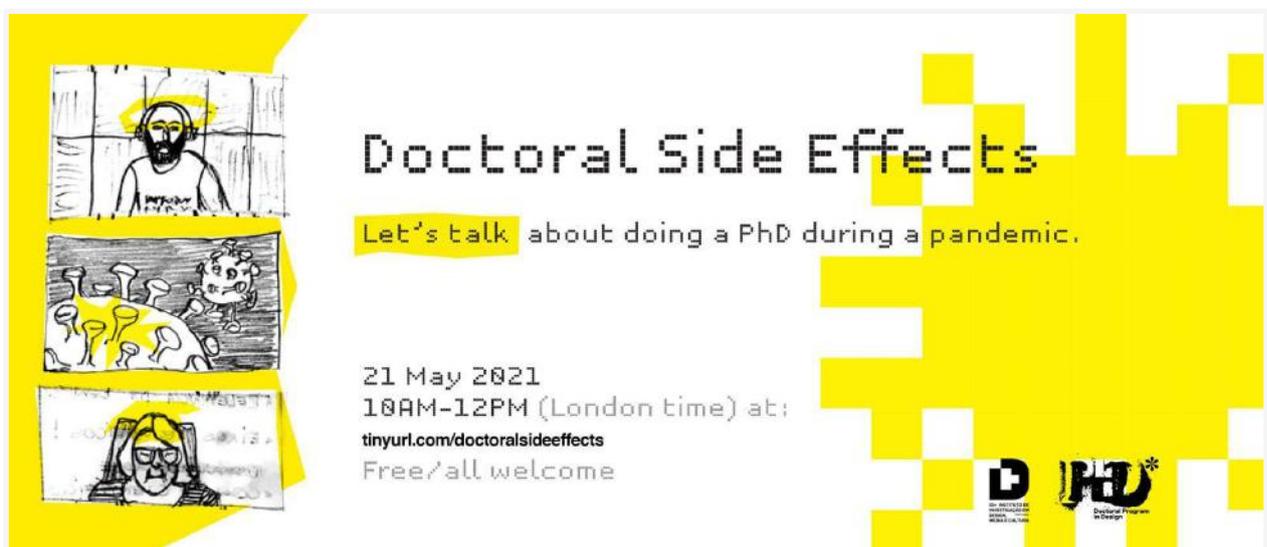


Figure 3: Doctoral Side Effects advertisement banner

The meeting

The Doctoral Side Effects meeting took place in videoconference format (Zoom), with the participation of 22 doctoral students and researchers from national and foreign universities (Figure 4). Two simultaneous rooms were organized, in order to accommodate Portuguese and English speakers (Figure 5). The sessions occurred informally, with testimonies according to the flow of the conversation. The Portuguese room was moderated by a student from the organizing team and the English room by the course director. Additionally, the organisers took written notes for subsequent summary and analysis.



Figure 4: Doctoral Side Effects online meeting

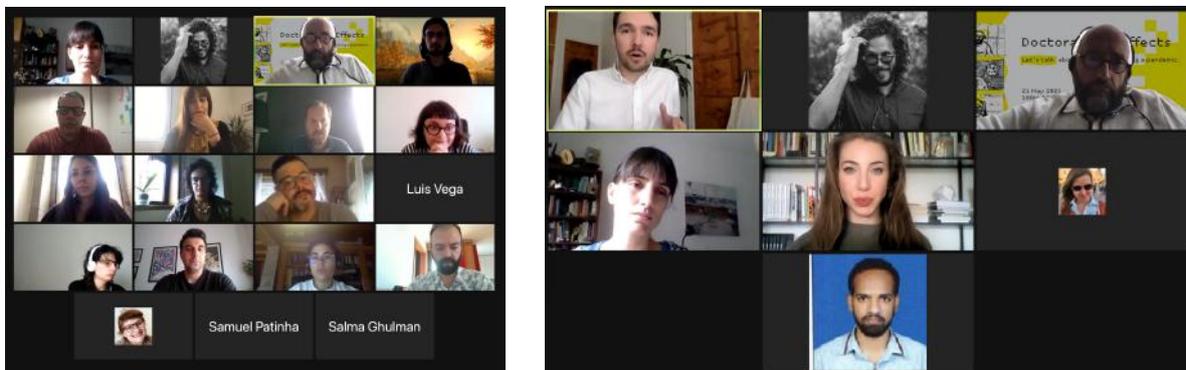


Figure 5: Portuguese-speaking room and English-speaking room

The addressed topics included:

I) Research/Researcher adaptability to the ubiquity of the digital

The following changes were reported: the need to migrate to new platforms and systems not specific to Arts and Humanities, over which researchers had little mastery; changes in work schedules in the interest of productivity; avoiding excessive access to disturbing social media and news reports; an adaptation of workstations to other environments; audio recording for later transcription and referencing; changes to methodologies - various of them later perceived as unexpected advantages; pragmatism; reconsidering the scale and scope of the research; accepting what was *possible* under the circumstances; approaching remote work without bias: empathy, bonding and mutual support emerged somewhat unexpectedly. Additionally, various participants reported that they came to casually accept and embrace the use of digital tools and environments, as online work facilitated and advanced theoretical components of their research.

II) Access, exclusion, or refusal to respond through digital media by participants in case studies

Adaptations were reported which hindered the development of the research, having intensified and even become permanent in the pandemic period. One researcher witnessed a

lack of dialogue due to the harshness of the area of her investigation; others reported discontinued collaborations due to the impossibility to establish remote communication with important partners, who either did not have access to the digital environment or avoid the use of online platforms, or do not feel comfortable in carrying out remote conversations.

III) An absence of conviviality

The impact of the lack of in-person interaction was addressed. There were cases in which the pandemic intrinsically altered the universe of study itself, where the conviviality between people ceased, and the premises of the research environment were drastically transformed. In several cases people sought new ways of interacting, and conviviality has moved from physical to digital environment: new digital contacts and permanent digital environments have emerged, forming hybrid environments in various instances.

Further issues discussed included difficulties in engaging people in online environments, and the use of gamification strategies; the need to verify data in future developments; concerns and hopes about being able to hold face-to-face events; questions about how to test and validate models to be replicated in a face-to-face format, when the tests were carried out strictly via virtual and digital models; and a debate about the loss of unexpected instances related to in-person dynamics: some participants argued that this was not lost, but rather migrated towards online environments.

IV) Expectations

The importance of managing expectations was a highlight: one researcher shared their mantra, after a remark they had once heard during an academic presentation, that "everything that happens [during research] is a finding. In addition, various participants argued for the inevitability, even the advantage, of incorporating the pandemic/confinement experiences as legitimised factors in the research, rather than regarding them strictly as antagonistic occurrences.

V) Minimising the constraints of virtual environments

Virtual environment constraints perceived as counter-productive were registered: excessive use of online platforms as a replacement for in-person classes, with equivalent structure and length; the fact that a constant image of the self via webcam can become tiresome; fatigue and memory issues due to the overflow of information and unfolding circumstances; a mandatory use of digital devices without prior check on accessibility conditions by students; a lack of adequate digital infrastructure at home in some cases; a loss of spontaneity in the research process; Lastly, there was a reflection on the need to consider insecurities, lack of skills and motivation, and a difficulty in evaluating methods and outcomes.

VI) Opportunities and benefits paradoxically arising from the pandemic

For various investigations, the pandemic brought specific and unexpected benefits to their research. The impossibility of in-person field work contributed to the discovery of new means to carry it out in digital environments. An internationalization of research became easier, as direct access to researchers in distant locations was made substantially easier. Similarly, the migration of international scientific initiatives such as conferences to online platforms benefited the progress of several investigations.

One researcher was confined together with her object of study: this facilitated and accelerated participant observation and interviews with other collaborators. The lack of human contact during confinement fostered voluntary participation in interviews: a clear expression for the desire for human contact during this period. It was acknowledged that online events, live broadcasts and meetings facilitated access to people; however, while attending online events was seen as an advantage, oversupply became an occasional problem.

A group of researchers reported that personal interconnection was surprisingly increased by the pandemic, when group work took place on a weekly basis in benefit of each researcher's individual project: empirical proof that it is possible to maintain, and even enhance, collaboration, sympathy and empathy in online work environments.

Tacit information obtained via videoconference, such as access to the personal environment of others, could itself become a subject of investigation.

VII) Research difficulties arising from the pandemic

When most academic activities were disrupted by the pandemic, various students had the sudden impression of having more free time, and consequently created expectations that this would speed up investigative work. However, much-mentioned issues during the meeting were a difficulty in maintaining focus, concentration and discipline without a structured schedule and defined commitments. A difficulty in writing the thesis amid a high degree of uncertainty about the future, being stuck at home, added up to the need to ensure daily housework and concerns with family members who needed support. A significant increase in anxiety about not reaching goals was reported, as well as insecurities and uncertainties emotionally affecting the researchers and their writing.

Participants addressed self-discipline tools such as to-do lists with daily goals, the importance of balancing work and rest, taking regular breaks between online meetings, and paying special attention to health, nutrition, and exercise.

Difficulties in adapting field work methods to online contexts, especially in collaborative contexts, were mentioned; however, a firm belief emerged in an imperative to avoid letting the investigation (and the researcher) become hostage to the situation, as well as the pertinence of being transparent in reporting changes and shortcomings due to the pandemic situation. Additionally, the fear of research becoming dated or invalidated was overcome by the realisation that research during a pandemic is in fact a unique opportunity to report on extraordinary circumstances.

In the English-speaking group, the most mentioned challenge by participants studying outside their country of origin arose from the fact that they were mostly alone in a host country they did not have the time to familiarise themselves with. This greatly impacted the search for a circle of contacts and connections and hindered a long-awaited exchange of ideas and inspirations, giving rise to feelings of alienation and self-doubt regarding the purpose of doing a PhD abroad. All of this implied inevitable adaptations and demanded the search for different forms of contact. One of these adaptations was to attend classes in other disciplines, as well as events from other research groups, thus broadening the circle of potential acquaintances/contributors, and creating opportunities to identify and pursue contributing research topics.

The use of social media platforms was also taken into account. According to researchers, online communication made it a lot easier to gain insights into their field research with peers from around the world.

Financial difficulties resulting from the pandemic were also mentioned, particularly in regards to job closures, - although for various participants the migration to online environments has presented advantages, with the reduction of transportation expenses.

Conclusions and future perspectives

According to DSE participants, during the pandemic, doctoral research experiences were similar regarding the need to adapt ongoing research methods. These adaptations may become innovative templates if replicable to an advantage and new confinements are necessary in the future.

While not all projects benefited from the lockdown and confinement, there were those which presented considerable added value; for example, those in the data collection phase, which in view of the requirements of confinement, were able to acquire information remotely - and in various cases, with a greater scope due to increased access and reduced expenses. On this subject, the shortening of distances and the ease of communication with research subjects/participants has become something tangible and feasible. This is an example of a practice that will probably become more frequent in the future; it is expected that, if this is the case, the quality of the information obtained, as well as the asymmetries of online access, will be largely safeguarded: what will happen to investigations that depend on data collection from populations with less access to digital media?

The various scenarios reported above indicate a distinction to be kept in mind: common forms of impact of the confinement on doctoral research, versus forms of impact specifically derived from the research context and discipline, as well as physical, material and psychological conditions of the researcher.

It is important to note that even though communication was made easier between respondents, the absence of physical and visual contact caused a considerable amount of subjective, non-verbal communication to be lost.

Many participants reported feelings of loneliness during the investigation; the contact and the exchange of experiences with other researchers enabled some form of relief from these feelings. We therefore propose that holding regular online events similar to DSE could be highly beneficial for the motivation, work capacity and well-being of PhD students, even beyond the constraints of confinement.

The fact that digital tools highly flexible enable work and socialization dynamics both structurally and geographically, allows us to foresee the possibility of creating self-regulated collaboration, support and mobilization networks that transcend circumstances, disciplines and doctoral work stages.

Strictly speaking, this possibility already existed as a technological resource before the pandemic and the successive confinements. Nevertheless, it was this global crisis that, perversely, transformed the availability of a technological resource into a model of global network communication among doctoral students. This networked communication,

paradoxically revealed in adverse circumstances, would not only be an opportunity for emotional support, but equally an opportunity for expansion and consolidation of contacts and complementarities at the level of the doctoral work itself.

The discussed topics ended up raising a new set of questions that are registered here as possible themes for future meetings and phenomenological analyses:

- In the transition from face-to-face to digital context, how is research validated? Do the approaches employed online as a result of the pandemic serve as validation for proposed methodologies for face-to-face contexts?
- How to overcome the undesired potential for exclusion that exists in particular forms of field work and among peers?
- What is the impact of a relative lack of synergy with colleagues and peers in an exclusively online context of communication? Did these synergies decrease with the employment of remote communication, or did it remain in new forms and possibilities?
- How to maintain healthy routines of engagement with digital devices in times of necessary overuse?
- Can researchers' motivation, as well as their work discipline, be improved through the formation of mutual support networks?
- In what future scientific contexts might these theses, developed in pre/during/post-pandemic times (and addressing them), become particularly relevant?
- What adaptations made during confinement appear to be permanent? Which of these transformations could have an advantage for doctoral research on an ongoing basis?

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Elisa Caetano, Erika Ribeiro, José Raimundo, Luis Vega, Nina Costa, Olha Tikhonova, Paulo Carmo, Rui Monteiro and Susana Barreto for their insights throughout the session, as well as its preparation and aftermath.

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