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Doctoral student reflections of blended learning before and during covid-19

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Abstract

Purpose: Our study aimed to address the central research question: how were our experiences as graduate students in a blended learning professional doctoral program changed by the COVID-19 crisis? The study adds to a growing body of literature on blended learning graduate programs.

Methods: We employed action research as our central methodology and leveraged narrative inquiry to elevate our (students') voices. The two participant-researchers responded to a series of questions supported by narrative reflections from their common academic supervisor. Emergent themes were identified in the data using narrative analysis techniques for coding qualitative data into themes. This was followed by a second phase of data collection and analysis after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results: The researchers identified four themes within the data: 1. balancing doctoral work with professional and personal responsibilities; 2. cohort provides formal and informal support; 3. individuality of the experience; and 4. supervisory group support.

Implications: Our study offers a number of key learnings that may benefit researchers studying blended learning programs. The key learnings suggest benefits to cohort-based, blended learning programs, as well as difficulties that may emerge in the individuality of the experience, when encountering crises, as well as more generally.

Keywords: blended learning, COVID-19, graduate education, online education, student experience

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1   INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education (HE) is ever-changing due in part to increasing competition aided by processes of globalization and privatization. An important driver of change within universities is technology. Increased access to HE coupled with technological platforms that extends the reach of universities, has prompted stronger interest, particularly from students, in online and blended learning. A given university's level of adaptability and to what degree they have embraced online education was tested by the emergence of the COVID-19. The pandemic has exposed deficiencies in institutions' capacity both pedagogical and technological, when they were forced to suddenly move to remote course delivery. The purpose of our study was to document and analyze our individual and shared experiences, as two working professionals enrolled in a blended learning, cohort-based doctorate of education program, through collaborative narrative action research. Our self-reflections further highlighted the influence of COVID-19 on our studies

and how a number of facets—program flexibility, cohort support, increased pressure, and degree of completion—allowed or impeded our progress.

Despite growing demand for more flexible program delivery options (Maclachlan et al., 2014) and the increasing prevalence of online components within HE programs (Bakia et al., 2012), literature on the subject of blended learning in doctoral programs is relatively scant. Our study initially aimed to address this shortage by examining our own experiences within such a program. The program is somewhat unique in that it is blended and cohort-based, and we aspired to unpack how these two unique but complimentary components influenced our experiences within the program, and ultimately aided or mitigated our success. Beyond addressing a dearth in literature on blended learning doctoral programs, we had also identified a lack of student-centered insight.

COVID-19 emerged in the midst of our initial phase of data collection and it was impossible to ignore the ramifications the pandemic had for our own progress within our doctoral program. This prompted us to reexamine our findings and redirect our research; we subsequently endeavoured to not only assess the implications of being embedded within a cohort-based, blended doctoral program model, but also how the pandemic had complicated our studies and the benefits of being in a cohort or supervisory-based model in the face of such a challenge.

We, the participant-researchers, are two students in a blended professional Doctor of Education program, supported by our graduate supervisor. Both of us balance our studies with work obligations and one has family obligations that further strain her time and resources. This provided a means for comparing how different individual factors further affected our ability to proceed under the shadow of COVID. We have documented our experiences before and during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to the call for submissions for this special issue presented an opportunity to fulfill a collaborative research project at a distance, supported by our advisor.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

A trend in HE is the availability of online or blended programs. Looking beyond traditional face-to-face formats allows institutions to respond to growing and diverse student population demands for flexible programming while cutting costs (Maclachlan et al., 2014), and to generate revenue in the face of shrinking public funding (Webber & Scott, 2008) and increasing competition from online, private, and international universities (Buller, 2015). Although specific data about enrollments in online and blended programs in Canada is difficult to locate (Carpenter, 2010), online enrolments have been growing faster than overall enrollment in HE in the U.S. since 2003 and that trend is expected to continue (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Blended learning is the "thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008: 5) that can be "learning-centered, with emphasis on active learning through collaboration and social construction of understanding" (Rovai & Jordan, 2004: 11). The flexibility within blended programs allows for innovative supports including collaborative cohorts (Burnett, 1999; Holmes, Robinson, & Seay, 2010). Our blended professional doctoral program included a two-week summer residency at the start of both year one and year two. These intensive annual summer residencies were supplemented with online courses during the fall and winter semesters.

Although blended programs are generally viewed positively, Drake and Heath (2011) note incongruencies between the expectations of prospective professional graduate students and the realities they face once in the program. They suggest three main reasons why individuals are drawn to professional graduate programs: (1) the perceived benefits of working within a cohort and the connections with other students; (2) the structure of the program that supports success; and (3) the desire to do meaningful research that impacts practice. However, differences in individual student progression; challenges with students connecting with each other; and the inability to implement outcomes of their research in their professional practice may lead to student dissatisfaction. In our study, we identify initial expectations, reflecting upon individual experiences before and during the coronavirus crisis.

The pandemic precipitated a shift in HE towards conducting classes entirely online and as institutions scrambled to deliver meaningful programs to students, a debate on the long-term implications of this move was already underway. While one view bemoaned the change and its potential to further commodify education (Walcott, 2020), another saw the crisis as an opportunity to examine deficiencies in the existing HE degree model and integrate digital technology to create a more engaging learning experience (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). The situation presented immediate challenges too, stifling faculty and student productivity and forcing a refocus of faculty priorities (Pettit, 2020), as educators and administrators consider how to best meet the needs of students during a crisis. The situation has necessitated using digital tools and could accelerate blended learning practices, making this topic even more relevant.

Research question:

The main question guiding our study was: How were our experiences as graduate students in a blended professional doctoral program changed by the COVID-19 crisis?

3   METHODOLOGY

We chose action research for the overarching research design in our study (McNiff, 2010, 2013, 2016), an approach used regularly in our field: education. We drew from McNiff's (2016) notion of action research being both 'in here', in one's own mental world, as well as 'out there', in the social world, where we interact with one another, with others enrolled in the larger student cohort, those working in the faculty of education, and beyond. We acknowledge that action research is "always done in interaction with other people" and the knowledge we have created through this project is "a knowledge of practices" (McNiff, 2016: 9).

3.1 Methods

We used narrative inquiry to support our action research design. We subscribe to Clandinin's (2006, 2007) notion that one's narratives themselves are pragmatic, ontological artefacts that enact Dewey's (1897) theory of inquiry. We espouse Dewey's view that individuals learn by participating within a social consciousness and that the individual is situated within a group to which one belongs. In our case, our experiences working with our graduate supervisor are nested within a larger cohort of students who began their doctoral journey together in 2017.

We designed our qualitative study as an auto-narrative in which the doctoral students led the data generation, collection and analysis, supported by their common supervisor. We drew from Fraser's (2004) and Clandinin's (2006) approaches to narrative inquiry which assumes deep value in individual experiences, expressed through narratives and stories.

We initially prompted our data collection with a series of questions, answered individually by both of us, supplemented by narrative reflections from our supervisor. Our coding process entails reflecting our personal narratives back to one another, using Saldaña's (2016) technique of analyzing our narratives first to identify codes (Step 1) and then further refining the codes into themes (Step 2), drawn from commonalities in our experiences. We also noted individual outlier experiences, highlighting particular points of interest in the narratives.

A second phase of data collection commenced in early 2020 shortly after the emergence of COVID-19. We reflected on data collected during the first phase of this project, which took place in 2019. We then revisited our initial research questions and explored the influence the crisis had on our experiences. Keeping with our action research design, we looped back on our experiences, engaging in an additional round of reflection and data collection. We then employed Saldaña's (2016) coding process a second time, and refined our codes.

The works of Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014) and Saldaña (2016) informed the methods of analysis in the present study. We used several digital tools to facilitate the analysis independently from different parts of the world. Google Docs and Google Sheets were used for reflection and analysis, while the usage of Zoom allowed for the group to collaborate from three locales (Calgary and Winnipeg, Canada, and Osaka, Japan).

3.2 Data sources

Rich individual narratives served as the ontological artefacts documenting our experiences, perspectives, and reflections. Our supervisor drafted initial guiding questions, which we approved as participant-researchers, before undertaking an individual reflective process, culminating in writing out narrative responses to each question. We decided to write our narratives individually first, so as to capture the essence of our personal experience. We then came together as a collaborative research team to reflect upon and analyze our narrative reflections.

We—a professor (supervisor) and two of her doctoral students embedded within a blended, cohort-based doctorate of education (EdD) program at the University of Calgary—

initiated the present study. The cohort was centered around postsecondary leadership and consisted of teachers, leaders, and administrators, and those working in the private sector. Both participant-researchers are working professionals: one an administrator in the Canadian HE context and the other an instructor at a private university in Japan. Our program was divided into one year and two months of course work, including two, two-week residencies at the university, followed by one to two years of collaboratories and dissertation seminars. We were in our second year when the study commenced and in our third year when the COVID-19 disaster struck.

4 FINDINGS

The findings reveal shared experiences, while simultaneously highlighting the individual nature of the doctoral journey, lived out alongside others. Our respective reflections highlight the common elements of our experience, such as course demands, benefits of the cohort model, and support from a shared supervisor, and our differences due to profession, locale and the circumstances and characteristics of our personal lives. Through our analysis, we identified emergent themes which we used to code our reflections pre COVID-19 and then later revisited and further refined. They are:

1. Balancing doctoral work with professional and personal responsibilities.
2. Cohort provides formal and informal support.
3. Individuality of the experience.
4. Supervisory group support.

We elaborate on these four themes in the following sections by identifying our reflections before and during COVID-19. Each section is divided into two parts—one for each student—in which we use our first names and refer to ourselves in the first-person, and we draw quotes from our personal reflections to highlight each theme.

4.1 Balancing doctoral work with professional and personal responsibilities

A common characteristic we both cited as central to our decision to pursue doctoral work in a blended program was flexibility. Throughout our studies, we have been balancing our professional and personal responsibilities. Ultimately, during COVID-19, the demands from Author 1's job were too great which forced her to take a short leave from the program, while Author 2 was able to manage his competing obligations after an initial period of uncertainty.

Author 1's reflection before and during covid-19

The decision to enter a doctoral program was not one I took lightly and there were many elements to consider. Personal factors meant the impact on my family—"I have been reminded too by my former MEd advisor that pursuing doctoral work must be a family decision. I am fortunate that my family (husband and school age son) are supportive of me pursuing my program"—as well as finances, because "as a mid-career professional and the primary income earner in my family, I decided early on that any doctoral program I would

pursue would have to be flexible and allow me to stay employed".

The flexibility in the program has been an important component to my progression thus far, however, the global pandemic has been deeply disruptive to all facets of my life. Throughout my degree I have been able to find ways to meet my work, academic and personal commitments, but the demands from my professional role in response to the crisis has been too much to keep from spilling into the time that I ordinarily reserve for family and school. Unfortunately, "COVID-19 has required me to prioritize my work completely...I have had to press pause on my research out of necessity...to give myself the space I need to devote myself to my paid work." While far from ideal, being in a service-oriented career means such sacrifices are not unexpected. "During a crisis, it is an 'all hands-on deck' approach to help ensure continuity of supports, services, and programs and that good decisions are being made when it comes to policy changes and scheduling."

Author 2's reflection before and during covid-19
I identified flexibility as the primary reason for choosing a blended program. I often attend conferences and other professional development workshops domestically and internationally, and being in a blended learning program helped me balance my work, travel, and study demands. Living in Japan, it was also beneficial being able to take my work with me wherever I go; this allowed me to work from home, in Canada during the residency component, or while traveling for work. In my initial reflection, I noted, "in terms of learning, I prefer face-to-face classes, but in terms of practicality, online is not only more convenient but perhaps necessary". While completing my master's degree entirely online, I yearned for a traditional learning experience in a classroom, but was limited by my professional obligations. In this sense, a blended learning program satisfied both needs: the benefit of the in-person class experience and the ability to be mobile.

The emergence of COVID-19 put a strain on my time and shifted my focus away from my doctoral work towards addressing the challenges posed by online teaching. The situation was particularly difficult because the virus affected me in two waves: first, as a student in a Canadian institution and second, as an educator in a Japanese institution. I was conducting the second phase of data collection when the scope of the pandemic became clear. The challenge of recruiting participants for interviews was exacerbated by time constraints on my and potential participants' schedules. In my work context, we had to deal with indecision among many layers of leadership that impact HE, mitigating my ability to prepare to teach, which was further complicated by a career transition. However, a silver lining emerged from the crisis, as it provided nuance for my respondents on the focus of my study (educational leadership) and eliminated any time required for overseas business travel.

4.2 Cohort provides formal and informal support
A salient benefit identified in the data was the cohesiveness of the cohort under study. The support we received from one another and our greater program cohort has been instrumental to our success and helped to allay some of the pressure associated with the short, intensive residencies connected to the program. It was difficult for us to pin-point whether the cohesiveness of our cohort was due to chance or some other unknown factor(s), but the strong in-group bonds were praised by both student participant-researchers. The health crisis underscored the need for students to have various support systems in place, as our cohort engaged via social media to offer one another assistance and encouragement.

Author 1's reflection before and during covid-19
Throughout my years of supporting graduate students, it is clear that graduate work can be challenging and that support networks are vital to success. "I understand how isolating pursuing graduate work can be, particularly at the doctoral level and during the research phase." Thus, "I knew before starting the EdD that being in a cohort would benefit me." Moreover, "in conversations with doctoral students in non-cohort programs, it is clear they miss out on the support of classmates, particularly once course work is completed."

Strengthening the cohort model were the mandatory in-person residencies during the first two years of the program. "Online learning can create a sense of community, the intense and immersive nature of the residencies" provided a quick cohesiveness. This face-to-face component was a key factor in my decision to select this particular doctoral program. It is likely "without that experience, we would not have had the opportunity to develop relationships, in some cases, friendships, with other members of the cohort. The two-week residency was an intense learning environment that challenged each of us cognitively and helped to bring us together." My experience is not unique as I have heard other "members of the cohort have expressed to each other (in person and online) the importance of the cohort and the support they receive collectively and individually from members".

Within a blended program, "technology mediated communications is an important component of our blended program" and "has helped to enhance our ability to learn as well as stay connected." While institutional software such as the learning management system played an important role in creating a sense of community during our courses, it was social media that kept us meaningfully connected between our residencies and after. "We have a Facebook group that is viewable only by members of the group. Questions are asked and information is shared about course and program requirements and expectations. The forum also allows for members to commiserate as well as share updates on our personal and professional lives." These informal communication tools have been an important source of personal support. "For me personally, social media has helped to strengthen my relationships with some key members and has been an important factor in helping me to handle some of the stress that is inherent in pursuing doctoral work."

When the health crisis hit, it was helpful to connect with peers to understand that the challenges I was facing were not unique to me. It was through these check-ins that I understood that where one may have been in the data collection stage likely determines how big of an impact COVID-19 has/will play on progression. For example, for those who are recruiting participants, the pandemic and

resultant social distancing mandate has meant for some students holding off on actively recruiting and/or holding interviews or focus groups or fielding surveys.

Because we are spread out across the country and the world, it was interesting to hear how our local governments and the institutions within which we work were responding to COVID-19.

Author 2's reflection before and during covid-19
I believe that structuring a blended learning program in a cohorted model provided us with a sense of working collaboratively, therein mitigating the isolation that may emerge from online learning, though we were each pursuing our own research. I also espoused the benefits of having proofreaders and others to share ideas with, as well as the emotional support that emerges from the realization that I am "not in any worse of a situation than those around you" when facing stress induced by our studies.

The disruption caused by COVID-19 again amplified the importance of the support the cohort model provides. We could elicit advice from other cohort members and use one another as a progress barometer, while managing all the difficulties presented by studying during the pandemic. The issue of stress relief was particularly salient, as COVID-19 presented the entire cohort with numerous challenges. The pandemic acted as a catalyst for us to re-engage on social media to offer one another support and practical advice on how to maneuver through the program.

4.3 Individuality of the experience
With regard to the individuality of the experience, each student's responses reflected the differences in their personal and professional lives. Both participant-researchers found the flexibility of a blended program beneficial, as it allowed us to work around busy work schedules. Differing views on the experience of engaging in a blended learning program may reflect the diverging motivations that prompted us to undertake doctoral studies, as well as our unique personal and professional situations. The crisis magnified these differences and determined our ability to respond to challenges associated with working under such circumstances.

Author 1's reflection before and during covid-19
I had spent considerable time determining when and how I would complete my doctoral studies. "As a student affairs practitioner, I was interested in programs that would allow me to explore my own lived experiences working within a university." However, I was keen to pursue a degree outside of my own institution "because I wished to connect and work meaningfully with a diverse group of individuals engaged in post-secondary education in a variety of contexts." Another consideration was the decision to select an EdD over PhD; however, I felt it was important that the requirements "mirrored a traditional Ph.D. program (e.g., course work, candidacy, and dissertation)".

I carefully identified a time that would be appropriate for me to start my program. However, as cautioned by a faculty member in the program, once "it is known you are completing a doctoral degree, there will be more doors opening up and that there may be choices to make about career trajectories

earlier than you may expect" And this was certainly the case for me, "opportunities [did] not wait for convenient times to emerge and I took a new leadership role at the start of my second year."

Given the structured nature of our program, we have been in lock step since year one however, as we moved closer to candidacy and we seemed to "branch off into many directions with each of us needing to move forward at our own pace determined by our individual circumstances". Through check-ins with my cohort, I gleaned that where one may be within their data collection process has been a determining factor of the severity of impact COVID-19 may have on the research. "For example, for those who are recruiting participants, the pandemic and resultant social distancing mandate has meant some students holding off on actively recruiting and/or holding interviews or focus groups or fielding surveys." Unfortunately, the impact of the global health crisis has significantly impacted my progression, "due to increased work commitments in my professional position and the challenges of recruiting data during this time." Additionally, attempting to support my school age son from home as he adjusted to online instruction added further pressure.

Author 2's reflection before and during covid-19
Initially, my interest in pursuing a doctorate was fueled more by a sense of urgency than a genuine desire to further engage with academia. "I realized that if I did not have a doctoral degree, my work options were limited. I also knew that a doctorate would be necessary if I ever hoped to return home to Canada". Having an established career in Japan and being at a point in life where I did not feel pursuing doctoral studies full-time was a realistic option, I opted instead to enter a blended learning program. In consulting professionals within North American HE, I determined that a program that included a residency and thesis would be necessary for me to achieve my career goals. Addititionally, at the urging of a colleague I chose to gravitate away from my background in English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy towards a field that provided me opportunities beyond ESL. These three criteria made this blended program a perfect fit.

Pushing myself out of my comfort zone was a common theme I discovered in reflecting on my individual journey. I had come to Japan immediately after graduating from my undergraduate program and had then discovered my passion for teaching. I made the decision to pursue education as a serious career-path six years after arriving in Japan, but my scope and experience was limited to the Japanese education context. Thus, I appreciated "being able to interact with a group of people from educational contexts and the private sector who work in positions so different from my own".

Dealing with COVID-19 further underscored the individuality of the experience, as very different personal and professional realities impacted our ability to move forward in our studies. As I was drawing closer to the end of my data collection, my progress was not stopped completely by a lack of access to participants. Thus once the aforementioned time constraints posed by moving to online teaching dissipated, I was able to transition back to working on my research. However, for some other students in my cohort, based on their professional or personal situations as well as where they

were situated in their doctoral journeys, the pandemic was a much greater impediment. In particular, as a single individual without children, I did not have to maintain the same precarious balancing act that many of my classmates did. This experience underscored the need for flexibility and adaptability in a blended program.

4.4 Supervisory group support

A supervisory group provided us with the opportunity to regularly share our progress, which served as both a source of support and motivation. We both offered positive responses when reflecting on our experiences in the supervisory group. We were forced to rally behind one another after the COVID-19 crisis hit and this emphasized the importance of having an additional support mechanism.

Author 1's reflection before and during covid-19

Within a cohort-based doctoral program, I had the added benefit of working with a supervisor who created a supervisory group, so that we, her "existing graduate students may learn from and support each other". The group is made up of students who span two cohort years and "having students at different phases has been helpful…in addition to sharing progress on the course requirements, we are encouraged to share updates on professional development, other research projects and work-related challenges or accomplishments". A supervisory group is a valuable support network and helps mediate feelings of isolation, but unfortunately it is not a common experience of graduate students in social sciences.

I feel that I have been successful in part because of the strong mentorship from my supervisor. I was supported while I struggled with demands of a new job, when I made the decision to change my research topic, and now when I am facing the challenges of COVID-19 and having to temporarily suspend my research project.

Author 2's reflection before and during covid-19

The smaller supervisory group has functioned as an additional layer of support beyond that of the cohort, our instructors, and our institution. The interactions with a student a year ahead of me have offered a road map for where I might expect to be in the coming year. I identified the professional development opportunities that have arisen from working in a small supervisory group as one of its key benefits. These have allowed me to simultaneously develop as a student-researcher and professional, improving my research record and opening the potential for work advancements before I even complete my degree.

Functioning within a supervisory group during the pandemic further highlights the individuality of the experience for a professional in a blended postgraduate program. Working with such a small group serves as a lens for gauging how different each individual's work and personal contexts are, and how they were impacted by the pandemic. However, having a supervisor and close supervisory group to support me reduced any feeling of isolation I might have encountered from a program that did not include this facet.

5 DISCUSSION

Although the perspectives and experiences of distance education graduate students have begun to emerge in the Canadian higher education landscape (Jacobsen, Eaton, Brown, & Simmons, 2018; Gauvreau, Hurst, Cleveland-Innes, & Hawranik, 2016), we argue that the voices of graduate students, particularly those of working professionals enrolled in blended and online cohorted programs, have yet to be elevated in the research literature. Through reflection on individual narratives, this project helped to identify the unique experiences and challenges of individuals in such contemporary doctoral programs. This article was largely written before the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. The decision was made to take the opportunity to again individually reflect on a set of questions and prepare responses. The opportunity to review the data we generated together and to ask questions helped to identify both similarities and differences in our experiences as they related to the impact of the pandemic. Recommendations for graduate students and supervisors in cohorted professional programs are shared below with an aim to help create positive and productive learning and supervisory experiences, and to offer insight into how programs should integrate adaptability to deal with unforeseen challenges, such as the pandemic. The present section thus aims to expound on two salient areas: the key learnings that emerged from the study regarding blended-learning doctoral programs both pre and during COVID-19, and what was gained by us as participant researchers by engaging in this process.

5.1 Key learnings pre-covid

We extrapolated three key learnings from the data that may benefit students pursuing graduate education through online or blended learning programs, scholars engaged in research on these programs, or educators and others responsible for designing or coordinating such programs. These key learnings are: (1) students have a myriad of reasons for pursuing their doctorate online, as opposed to traditional residency programs; (2) the on-campus residency allowed for greater in-group bonding and cohesiveness; and (3) the cohort and supervisory group provided additional support external to formal institutional mechanisms.

The data suggested students have a variety of reasons for pursuing their doctoral work online. While Author 1's motivation was largely intrinsic—to engage in HE studies from the perspective of a practitioner-scholar—Author 2 cited his primary motivation as being extrinsic: the increasingly competitive environment he works in. In all cases, the flexibility of online and blended learning programs affords mid-term professionals like us the ability to balance our busy work and personal lives, with the demands of a doctoral program. This might explain why previous research has found a greater preference for online learning at the postgraduate level (Scott & Scott, 2011). This suggests institutions will need to increase their capacity to deliver such programs effectively, as some instructors lack experience with online teaching platforms and delivery (Scott & Scott, 2011), a point which was highlighted as HE institutions scrambled to deliver programs remotely during the pandemic.

One advantage of a blended learning program over a purely online one materialized in the findings: on-campus residency requirements affords students more opportunities for in-group bonding. Given the intense pressure placed on graduate students—particularly those balancing their studies with full-time jobs—additional informal support systems, such as those which emerge in a cohort, can boost the success of online programs. This is consistent with recommendations within the literature related to effective online or blended course delivery (Burnett, 1999; Holmes, Robinson, & Seay, 2010). It also substantiates the findings of a previous study that demonstrate higher satisfaction rates among students in blended programs over those who complete their studies entirely online due to greater interaction, relationship development, and support (Erichsen et al., 2014). The relationships fostered during the intense residency component would bear fruit later during the pandemic, as cohort members were comfortable reaching out to one another to share ideas on how to cope with challenges that emerged alongside the crisis and offer one another support.

Our supervisory group acted as another outlet to elevate our support system during our doctoral studies. While the program cohort provided a readily accessible group with whom we could share ideas or ask questions, the closer-knit supervisory group allowed us to share our progress more regularly and to motivate one another. Semi-regular (usually monthly) meetings provided an opportunity to maintain consistent contact with each other and our supervisor, and collaborate on professional development projects (such as presentations and the present paper). This small group mentorship at regular intervals was noted as being a key component for success among students in a similar learning context (Kumar & Coe, 2017) and may explain the relatively positive perspectives elicited from the data. By contrast, lack of connection to or distance from one's supervisor, little interaction with peers, and few opportunities for professional development have been cited as some of the primary reasons for students' dissatisfaction with online or blended programs (Erichsen et al., 2014). Our regular interactions within the supervisory cohort, also afforded us the chance to interact with a doctoral candidate further along in his studies, and helped to prepare us for challenges we would face later as we progressed towards completing the program.

5.2 Key learnings during covid

The global health crisis is having far reaching impacts that touch on all facets of our lives. There are four key learnings drawn from the findings that focus on our experiences during COVID-19. The first is that flexibility within doctoral programs is paramount for doctoral students during crisis situations. Author 2 was initially drawn to the program for its flexible delivery and this was appreciated when he needed to temporarily shift his focus to moving his courses online at the start of the pandemic. For Author 1, flexibility was an important aspect as to why she selected the program given her professional and personal circumstances. The flexible nature of the program was beneficial when she had to make the decision to temporarily pause her program without academic and financial consequence by the university.

The second key learning is that being a member of a cohort helps doctoral students to feel supported and to alleviate feelings of isolation. Author 1 and Author 2 both underscored the importance of the cohort which created a sense of community and helped to bring students together regardless of geographical location. Leaning on relationships is an important strategy to weather the negative impacts of COVID-19 (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, in press). Within their cohort, the participant researchers were able to discuss how the pandemic has impacted professional, personal, and academic lives, as well as to help by providing practical advice.

As a third learning, COVID-19 has made it difficult for doctoral students to balance competing demands and maintain scholarly activities. Emerging in news publications devoted to higher education, articles have highlighted the unequal impacts of the health crisis on women versus men within academia. Although both may have multiple demands on time, it is women who "already juggled more domestic and affective, or emotional, labor with their actual work prior to the pandemic" (Flaherty, 2020, para. 1). Additionally, women are more likely to prioritize other responsibilities ahead of their research (Flaherty, 2020) a reality that Author 1 herself faced. Work commitments coupled with increased caregiving needs meant having to sacrifice progression in her program, a challenge Author 2 did not face as a single individual without children.

As a final key learning, the findings revealed that where one is at within their research will determine to what degree the pandemic may have affected progress. Author 2 experienced little impact and in fact, carrying out interviews with recruited participants during the pandemic provided the opportunity to explore how leaders within higher education respond to a global crisis in real time. Author 1's progress on the other hand was impacted to the degree that the data collection had to be put on hold. Such experiences are being felt worldwide within academia. In a recent article that gathered autoethnographic texts from doctoral students enrolled within a Chinese university, one doctoral students asked "how does one cope with research in the time of Covid-19, which has caused many, like myself, to take an unwanted hiatus and has presented an unprecedented barrier for many Ph.D. students" (Peters, et al., 2020, Research in the Time of COVID-19).

5.3 Limitations

Our findings are limited to our respective individual perspectives and our specific lived realities. Additionally, we collected data at two time points within our program. As this study was highly contextual, situated within a large, public Canadian university, in the faculty of education with data collected from only the two participant researchers, its applicability to other contexts should be considered carefully. Rather than being viewed as a prescriptive set of solutions for improving blended learning programs, it should instead be perceived as providing a set of suggestions for good practice in blended and online program design, and as a contribution to an understudied aspect of education.

6   CONCLUSION

We have attempted to provide insight into our experiences as candidates in a blended doctoral program before and during the COVID-19 crisis. We studied in a cohort-based program and were supported by our supervisor via distance. The COVID-19 pandemic placed greater pressure on us as students, and the degree to which the crisis impacted each of us varied, depending on our individual circumstances. Our findings contribute to an emerging body of evidence about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on students studying during this time. We conclude this paper knowing that the long-term impacts of the crisis remain unknown. We have yet to conclude our individual research projects, defend our dissertations, and graduate, however, we remain confident that with the support of our cohort, our supervisor, and the university, we will be able to complete our programs and then turn our attention to supporting the next generation of students.

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