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Juggling Academic Practice and Care: Collaborative Autoethnography within a Basque University Research Group

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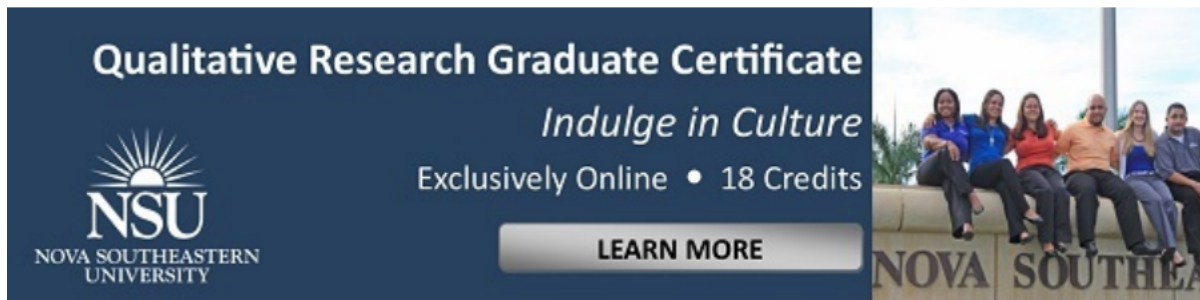


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Abstract

Many university scholars, including the authors of this article, acknowledge that they feel like they are riding an emotional roller coaster with academic success, as well as many project failures. Except for our PhD thesis, many of us complete our research tasks in relatively established research groups. However, little research has examined the potential these groups might have to mitigate feelings of academic isolation. To fill in this gap, we designed two methodological steps. First, we adopted the Woolfian metaphor of a room of our own, where we composed individual vignettes regarding our feelings of isolation. We read each other's texts and then, in a second step, moved to a "living room" to negotiate our emerging ideas, echoing a Collaborative Autoethnography. Two full professors and two early-career researchers reflected on and talked about their feelings of academic isolation, from their personal and professional standpoints. Despite the differences in job stability, the four participants acknowledged having felt isolated and abandoned. We argue that viewing research groups not as a community of practice, but a community of care is a more humane and desirable framework to model university research groups in these current times of exacerbating neoliberalism.

Keywords

academic practice, communities of practice, collaborative autoethnography, ethics of care

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Juggling Academic Practice and Care: Collaborative Autoethnography within a Basque University Research Group

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Many university scholars, including the authors of this article, acknowledge that they feel like they are riding an emotional roller coaster with academic success, as well as many project failures. Except for our PhD thesis, many of us complete our research tasks in relatively established research groups. However, little research has examined the potential these groups might have to mitigate feelings of academic isolation. To fill in this gap, we designed two methodological steps. First, we adopted the Woolfian metaphor of a room of our own, where we composed individual vignettes regarding our feelings of isolation. We read each other's texts and then, in a second step, moved to a “living room” to negotiate our emerging ideas, echoing a Collaborative Autoethnography. Two full professors and two early-career researchers reflected on and talked about their feelings of academic isolation, from their personal and professional standpoints. Despite the differences in job stability, the four participants acknowledged having felt isolated and abandoned. We argue that viewing research groups not as a community of practice, but a community of care is a more humane and desirable framework to model university research groups in these current times of exacerbating neoliberalism.

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Introduction

Isolation, loneliness, solitude. Pop singer Rigoberta Bandini's song, “In Spain we call it *Soledad*,” reminds us that this may be a universal feeling with a local flavor. To our Spanish ear, the noun *soledad* has a negative connotation. For an outgoing and gregarious society like ours, being alone is perceived as a flaw more than as an advantage. In English, however, the three terms have very distinct nuances. The literature on education and management uses the term isolation, defined as a state of feeling disconnected and apart from other human beings (Belkhir et al., 2019). We believe there is a fine line between a useful, necessary, and pleasant feeling of being without other human beings to write, concentrate or just read and an uncomfortable and paralyzing sense of being disconnected from the academic world. The right balance between being a part of a group and enjoying moments of solitude (but not of *soledad*!) is a very personal and probably, a culturally mediated endeavor.

In the privacy of their solitude, university professors think, initiate projects, compose preliminary drafts of their reflections and develop them usually without unwelcome interruptions (Jandrić, 2022). Nevertheless, according to Braidotti (2014, p. 177) “untenured, part-time, sub-standard, underpaid work has become the norm in most advanced liberal economies”. This means that not everyone enjoys the financial and personal conditions to have a private research space, whatever physical form this space may take. Echoing our previous

research invoking Virginia Woolf (Aberasturi-Apraiz et al., 2020), we researchers can profit from a room of our own. However, even those of us privileged enough to go to a university office every morning acknowledge the need to share the ideas hatched in solitude. If the silence and peace of our private rooms are a fertile ground for ideas to emerge, it is in shared moving arenas where we can negotiate our proposals. This initially conceived individual knowledge must be discussed, modified, adapted and eventually adopted by a given academic community.

Two years ago, during the pandemic, we published a paper where we unveiled the difficulties and feelings of vulnerability that we experienced as members of a research group when we started to revise and change our methodological choices (Aberasturi-Apraiz et al., 2020). At that time, we could not describe our research methodology in detail because we could not conceptualize it clearly, it was work definitely in progress. Now, thanks to the passage of time and our own discussions on methodology, we can express our ideas regarding our research options in a more articulate way. When reflecting on what it meant to us to change to a post-qualitative approach to research (St. Pierre, 2021), we adopted and developed the metaphor of our private room. It is not the first time that the Woolfian metaphor is ascribed new meanings in qualitative research methodology. For three Australian PhD students and a professor, the productive metaphor of the room is the articulating piece in a performative article that addresses their academic and personal lives (Mackinlay et al., 2022). Taking the metaphor a step further, they write:

We have won rooms of our own, attained leadership positions within our professions. But this freedom is only a beginning—the rooms are our own, but they are still bare. They have to be furnished; they have to be decorated; they have to be shared. How are you going to furnish your room, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? These, I think, are questions of the utmost importance and interest. [emphasis in the original] (Mackinlay et al., 2022, p. 340)

These questions added not only a challenge but also an opportunity to reflect upon our goals, research methods, trajectories, impact and the future of our research group. Following Mackinlay et al. (2022), we discussed how we may furnish and decorate our own private rooms. However, the exercise of decorating our own rooms was not enough and it was when we left the solitude of our rooms and moved to the living room when our collaboration flourished. It is in this metaphorical shared space where we could discuss our past, present and future as a research group. Autoethnography was our initial methodological choice, but then we added to our toolbox the crucial and useful metaphor of the living room, as a way to address the need for dialogue and the negotiation of meaning. The purpose of our meetings in the living room was to discuss our individual texts on academic isolation and to reflect on the future choices and development of our research group.

In sum, given that the literature so far has addressed the issue of solitude from the point of view of early-career researchers or scholars exclusively, we believe that there is a need to see how both novice and old-timers in academia interact with each other. Do both age-group scholars feel isolated? And if so, how do they cope with the uneasiness of being alienated? In order to answer these questions, we developed an innovative methodology akin to Collaborative Autoethnography that suited the spirit of our research group and emerged organically from simple metaphors of rooms and living rooms.

This article is organized as follows. First, we review the few articles that discuss academic isolation in the context of the growing commodification of higher education. Then we describe the context, the history, the people, and the main goals of our research group. Then, we discuss the possibility of understanding our university-based research group as a

Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998). Against this theoretical backdrop, in section 4 we introduce our choice of methodology, Collaborative Autoethnography. Four members of the group—two full-time professors and two assistant professors—engaged in autoethnographic work and wrote an individual vignette in the solitude of their private rooms, as summarized in section 5. Then, we all met in the living room and enjoyed a couple of collaborative autoethnographic sessions to distill the main points that came out of considering not only the original prompt of academic isolation but the many related topics that emerged regarding our positioning in the research group. Finally, in section 6, we reimagine our research group as a “Community of Care” by incorporating the features and views developed in our living room.

Restlessness and isolation at neoliberal universities

The places where we conceive and perform research are not neutral and have considerable impact on our lives. Nordbäck et al. (2022) adopted collaborative autoethnography to investigate the work and life changes they experienced when the Aalto University merger took place. This research illuminates the challenges pushing contemporary academia toward a more business-oriented university, ending up in the commodification (Wilmott, 1995) or McDonaldisation of higher education (Parker & Jary, 1995). By neoliberalism and its direct consequence, namely, commodification, we understand that academic knowledge is conceived as a commodity and the field of higher education as a factor of economic growth. In this sense, we echo the warning that Chomsky (2017) issued about the assault of neoliberalism on universities, modifying the regulatory frameworks and culture of their teaching staff, the privatization of public knowledge and the advance towards academic capitalism. A business model where what matters seems to become the baseline, where the true owners are the fiduciaries who seek to keep costs low and a permanently evaluated workforce redirected towards the search for productivity and which ends up becoming docile, obedient, and atomized, thanks in part to chronicling their condition as workers without stability.

Given the merge and campus relocation experienced by the three Finnish academics, they note that “[o]ur identities (including identifying with social groups) are related to spaces and places, as we work remotely from home or commute to the university, enter its buildings, work in a dedicated (or not) office space, teach in lecture halls, and encounter people in open spaces, rooms, and hallways” (Nordbäck et al., p. 335). They convincingly show that physical places can enhance or hinder social interaction, an observation that is directly related to the initial topic of this article, namely, academic isolation. Through collaborative autoethnography, they show how researchers’ mutual engagement can help locate and make sense of their restlessness amidst the changes that their particular neoliberal university is experiencing. The Finnish university, like any other university, has not been able to escape the effects of the neoliberal logic and has experienced some building and location merging that has changed the lives of the three academics with campus relocation. Nordbäck et al. (2022) recommend that other scholars try to engage in dialogue with each other particularly in shared spaces, such as departments and universities, because “[i]t has helped us to learn about ourselves and others and to support each other in dealing with the atrocities of neoliberalism” (pp. 345-346). In this context of neo liberalization, these authors recommend supporting each other and engaging in collaboration and dialogue to make universities meaningful places after difficult times, such as the ones described in Aalto University.

Belkhir et al. (2019) also address the feeling of isolation that arises among researchers in social sciences. By adopting the same methodology, namely, collaborative autoethnography as their methodological stance, they focus on how interdisciplinary research teams can be the appropriate frame for helping early-career researchers mitigate feelings of isolation as they traverse the path of becoming established academics. Belkhir et al. (2019) define isolation as

“an involuntary perceived separation from the academic field to which one aspires to belong, associated with a perceived lack of agency in terms of one’s engagement with the field” (p. 263). They posit that isolation manifests along four dimensions—geographical, cultural, relational, and technical—and conclude that “isolation is of increasing importance as contemporary academic careers have globalized” (p. 283). Paradoxically, the more global our academic activities become in terms of collaborations with colleagues all over the world, the more isolated these academics feel. In addition, they point to three areas that can combat isolation: mentoring, networking, and communities of practice.

In Belkhir et al.’s (2019) article, however, we perceived a lack of attention to established academics. By established academics we mean tenured professors whose offices and workplaces crucially will not change the next future. In fact, Belkhir et al.’s 2019 publication is signed by four assistant professors, three lecturers, a PhD candidate, a post-doctoral researcher and a single recently tenured professor, from ten different European, Australian, African and American universities. We understand that focusing on early-career researchers is probably a natural choice adopted by many researchers (Jandrić, 2022), but it leaves out of scrutiny a large part of academia. The original characterization of a Community of Practice in Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) contends that the constant interaction and engagement among novices and old-timers is a necessary ingredient for any community to flourish and thus, be sustainable. In other words, the interaction of individuals from both situations (tenured and stable and untenured and in their initial stages of their careers) is required to build a healthy and enduring community of practice. Old-timers, the established, seasoned university researchers in our case, can generate new knowledge, but we also note the need for novices to engage in active negotiation with established scholars. These interactions, both formal and informal, give rise to new knowledge through meetings, abstract and research project writing, participation in conferences and article and book chapter writing (Hyland, 2000). These activities may expand the shared repertoire of the research group and crucially can become cement for its members. Like Peele-Eady and Moje (2020), we argue for “a view of a community that centers diverse groups of people working together for a common goal—even when perceptions of that goal differ—and making the most of difference in the process” (p. 230). In the next section we describe the nature of our research group against the backdrop of the theory of communities of practice.

What is Elkarrikertuz? A research group as a community of practice?

We have gone from questioning disciplinary limits and our own professional isolation, professors who work alone in universities without any referent, horizon, or support, to formally and informally questioning other dimensions related to race, language and gender, and trying to unveil many of the prejudices that were apparently very distant from what happens in our classrooms and should be part of our curriculum. (Correa et al., 2010, p. 127; translation by the authors)

This quote comes from an article we published more than ten years ago, where we provided a description of the different phases the research group went through. In the conclusion of our article, we made it clear that the team was a motor for moving forward and overcoming our own professional isolation, as the above quote illustrates. Even though this article was written in Spanish, it surpasses the limits of language and adopts a multimodal perspective by narrating the research team’s inception and history through a comic strip. The text underlined the research group’s openness toward new forms of experimental and experiential research; ways of working that are at the margins and limits of knowledge legitimized by academia. Since its

inception Elkarrikertuz has paid attention to marginal, minority, subaltern, non-normative, and decolonial issues, becoming a political project linked to critical, and dissident pedagogies.

It is pertinent to clarify that our research group, Elkarrikertuz, based in the School of Education, Philosophy and Anthropology at the University of the Basque Country, UPV/EHU, chose a name that underscores the idea of “togetherness.” The name Elkarrikertuz comes from the combination of the two Basque words, *elkarrekin* “together” and *ikertuz* “by doing research.” Despite our apparent group’s resemblance to a community, the term Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) has not been previously applied to it. Analyzing the nature of our group against the backdrop of the theory of Communities of Practice can be a fruitful journey to set our research goals and to find the means to achieve them. In this sense, we cannot apriori presuppose that a group of professors and graduate students that self-identify as researchers constitutes a Community of Practice (CoP from now on). There are some fundamental features that the literature (Leave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) has identified as conducive to the formation of a CoP. As King (2014) convincingly argues, “[o]ne cannot safely presume, however, that a random group of people constitutes a community of practice (with its own set of highly localised practices) merely because they are participating in an activity together on a regular basis or because they share a social identity” (p. 62). In our particular context, just because the members of our research group attend regular meetings, present in professional conferences, author or co-author conference presentations and publish papers in collaboration, we cannot assume that these individuals constitute a CoP.

What are, thus, the necessary ingredients to call an aggregate of people a CoP? According to Wenger (1998, p. 184), three main elements must co-occur for a community to emerge. The first is that there must be mutual engagement, that is, the members must get together to engage in their shared practices. Crucially, this engagement must be time and place bound. Mutual engagement in our case can take the form of a meeting, which in turn can be harmonious or contentious. It can also be the writing of a grant proposal or an abstract for a conference, the attending and presentation at a conference, or the writing of articles and book chapters. The second ingredient of a CoP is the jointly negotiated enterprise. What seems clear is that the enterprise must be negotiated with by the members. It is interesting to note that Wenger leaves some room for agency, since the joint enterprise belongs to the members despite all the aspects that may be beyond their control. This is because it is a response that the members negotiate together, and it is based on their own understanding of their situation, even in cases where practice is profoundly shaped by external forces. Finally, the most tangible ingredient of the CoP theory is the development of a shared repertoire, defined as “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). The question is whether our university research group fits the definition of a CoP. Does it exhibit these three crucial elements? Let us analyze them one by one.

Our research group and mutual engagement

Some of the defining features of a CoP relate to sustained mutual relationships. It is important to point out that these relations are sometimes harmonious but also conflictual. As we mentioned above, this has been the case in our own experience. Relations become more conflictual and stressful particularly when adopting new forms of doing research and abandoning old and familiar ones. This was the case in our transition from doing narrative inquiry to doing post-qualitative inquiry during our learning trajectory as a community. Our vulnerabilities and internal difficulties were amply reported in Aberasturi-Apraiz et al. (2020). In this sense, Peely-Eady and Moje (2020) remind us that “communities are not always

agreeable; they can be (and should be) contentious spaces” (p. 234). These group-internal differences in our understanding of research methodological choices and goals manifest themselves during our research group meetings. Nevertheless, whether we were engaged in planning and preparing conference presentations or collectively writing, minimal agreement is required and eventually reached, for our own survival as a group. The group’s tasks and goals have to be accomplished despite its members’ differences and misalignments.

Since we are more or less connected through social media where information can flow rapidly, in our group meetings there are usually very few preambles, and we go directly to the main point, with few formalities, which facilitates the needed engagement.

Our research group and jointly negotiated enterprise

Our website, designed by some of the members of the research group, states that the goal of the research group is the analysis of innovation and the improvement of education quality and learning contexts, prompted by the transformations in society. This is a very broad goal, and we agree with Peele-Eady and Moje (2020) when they propose that “communities are both real and imagined” (p. 233). In fact, the four members that contributed to this paper, and probably the remaining seventeen researchers in the group, have very different ideas of what constitutes the improvement of education quality in our community. These differences may simply be due to the heterogeneity of our academic backgrounds and related identities: some members come from the fine arts, others from education or from linguistics. In addition, it is clear that each member of the group interprets the group itself and its intended goals in his or her way. Far from being a problem, the diversity within our research group is an asset and we all know each other’s areas of expertise. The individual and collective goal is the advancement of the professional career of the group and the individual members. If one member gets tenure, then the whole group benefits from that person’s job stability.

Our research group and shared repertoire

The members in fine arts developed a distinct logo (see Figure 1) for our research group. This logo was a clear index of our identity as members of the research group and sits at the center of our website (see Figure 2), where all members’ pictures and CVs can be found.

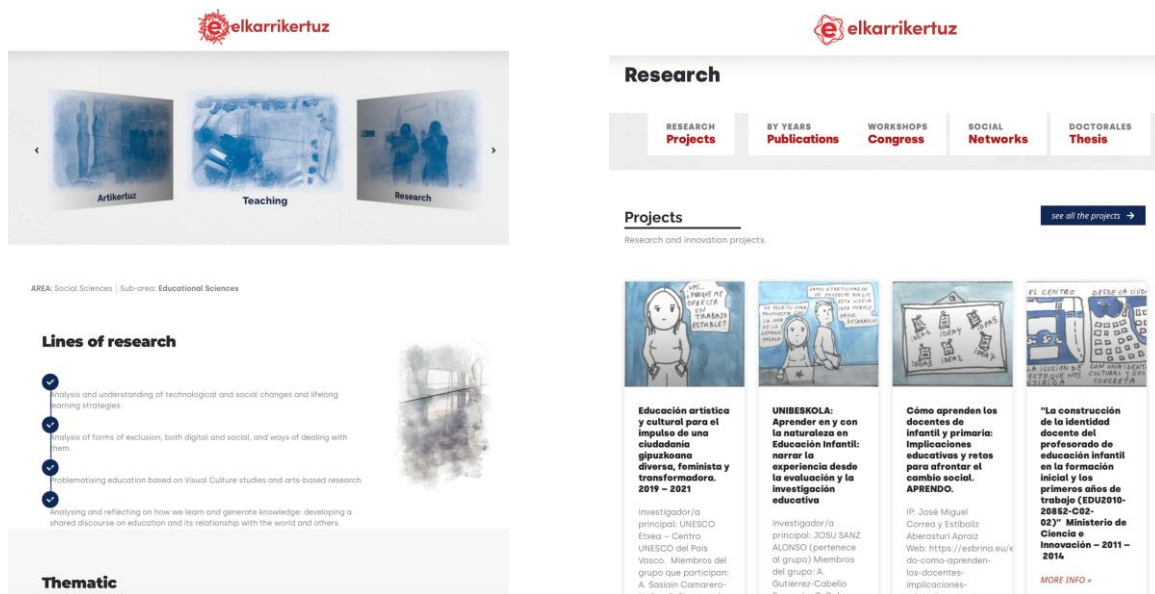
Figure 1

Research Group’s Logo



The website and the pictures have a casual and dynamic style that reflects our perspective on education. During our group meetings and during our unofficial lunches, we have coined and used jargon. This jargon is not understandable to anyone who has not been part of the research group for a while, and it is usually embedded in inside jokes. For example, only group members know what we mean by *the Catalans*, *the post*, *the cuali*, etc. In line with King (2014) ’s research framed in linguistic ethnography, we have developed a shared linguistic repertoire which mixes English, Spanish and Basque in seamless ways.

Figure 2
Research Group Web screenshots



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In sum, by tracing the three features of a CoP, namely, mutual engagement, jointly negotiated enterprise and shared repertoire, we have shown that our research group can be conceived as a CoP. Nevertheless, this model does not leave any room for the potential role that this community may have in mitigating feelings of isolation. To delve into this aspect of the CoP, four members of the research group engaged in collaborative autoethnography to further investigate this issue. The larger question we want to tackle in this article is the extent to which a research team such as ours, conceptualized as a CoP, can provide support in mitigating the feelings of academic isolation of its members, both novices and old-timers. To answer this question, we describe our methodological stance in the following section.

CAE as a research method: On rooms and living rooms

We turned to collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016; Hernandez et al., 2017; Lapadat, 2017) to delve into our potential feelings of isolation and to discuss our awareness of the shape of our research team in times of neoliberalism. Collaborative Autoethnography (henceforth CAE) is a postmodern form of research (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) that blurs the boundaries between researchers and subjects. Lapadat (2017, pp. 597-598) defined CAE as an "autobiographical, autoethnographic, polyphonic approach to writing, telling, interrogating, analyzing, and collaboratively performing and writing up research on personal life challenges and on negotiating personal and professional identities". We chose CAE as our methodological stance for the following reasons. First, it allows us the freedom to describe our job and related endeavors with transparency; CAE is in line with our mentioned and published commitment to the post-qualitative forms of doing research (Aberasturi-Apraiz

et al., 2020), intended to dismantle the search of objectivity and applying intuition and artistic methods in educational research. The post-qualitative option, in fact, encourages us to review our ethical positions in research as well as the power relations and scientific biases that dichotomise knowledge and access to it. It develops more inclusive research procedures that accommodate not only the voices, views, and concerns of all research participants, but also our own vulnerabilities as researchers in an ever-changing reality. For all this, CAE can be a valuable tool for our required professional development; and finally, it can become a safe way to open up and share uncomfortable or sensitive ideas (Pillow, 2003).

The participants of this study are four members of the same research group, Elkarrikertuz, spanning a range of career stages. Two are full professors, the third one is a researcher in his early career and the fourth person is a researcher with a long trajectory outside the traditional university path. José Miguel is considered “the founder” of the research group and has many years of research under his belt. The second full professor, Estibaliz, has a long university teaching trajectory linked to the arts and her dissertation was directed by the first full professor. The third participant, Aingeru, is an assistant professor who finished his dissertation a few years ago, also under the supervision of José Miguel. Finally, the fourth participant, Asunción, has recently become affiliated to the same university, although prior to that she had been conducting research as a pracademic (Owens, 2016; Shaw, 2022), working both inside and outside the university. Table 1 summarizes the profiles of the four participants with the features that each member freely chose. It is a balanced group of two established researchers and two assistant professors with two very different itineraries. In terms of gender, there is a female and a male in each of the two categories, although this was not an intended feature of our emerging research design.

Table 1

Research team members.

Participants' Self-Descriptions
José Miguel is 60 + years old. Ph.D. in education. Co-founder of the research group Elkarrikertuz in 2000. He has worked for more than 30 years teaching and doing research at the University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU. He is interested in the relation with nature, posthumanism and spiritual learning.
Aingeru is an assistant professor in the School of Education of the University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, where he has worked for the last ten years. His relationship with the community of Elkarrikertuz started in 2012, where he has matured his positioning regarding education and the education of future educators. He loves getting to know Europe, its mountains and nature traveling in his van.
Asunción is an assistant professor in the School of Education of the University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU. After working for 20 years at a US-based study abroad provider, the pandemic led her to change jobs. She loves gardening and swimming in the ocean. She formally joined the group in 2005, when it focused on technology in education.
Estibaliz is a professor and researcher at the School of Education of the University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU. She paints and has taken part in artist residencies, where she has researched the visual arts. Her research and teaching career are mainly associated with teacher education, pedagogical innovation, and the learning of the visual arts in educational contexts.

The four academics felt that they needed both solitude and common ground, metaphorically expressed by the dual notion of room plus living room. The introspection in our own rooms and the messy but necessarily shared performance text generated in our living room. In our own experience, this was a satisfactory sequence for getting the best of the two situations and working in isolation as well as in collaboration, as we concluded in our previous article (Aberasturi-Apraiz et al., 2020). The final revisions of that article were made during lockdown, and we could not physically meet to discuss potential answers to the reviewers' suggestions. The pandemic turned our lives upside down, modifying our personal and academic routines in unprecedented ways. For international students and academics, it foregrounded "a shift in attention from mobility to immobility" (Phan, 2022, p. 67). For university researchers, it was a time to exert other forms of personal autonomy and agency. In a sense, the pandemic can be understood as a time for staying in our own rooms and engaging in those activities that can be done in relative isolation. As Vietnamese doctoral student Ann Phan vividly expressed through poetry, it is time to connect to the local networks and to move to online platforms to counteract the potential immobility that our COVID times impose on us (Phan, 2022).

Doing research in pandemic times enhanced feelings of isolation that existed prior to the year 2020. In the present article, we revisit and clarify our room plus living room metaphors to offer insights regarding the role of the research group as a potential mitigator of feelings of isolation. Before answering our initial question regarding the potential of a research group to counteract academic isolation during the different stages of our academic lives, we describe the nature of our research group against the model of communities of practice.

Following CAE procedures (Chang et al., 2016; Hernandez et al., 2017), each of the four participants wrote an individual text addressing their feelings about belonging to the research group. These texts were originally written in Spanish and translated by us into English and lightly edited for clarity. There was no limit in terms of the number of pages or words. After composing our individual vignettes, we shared them with each other, each reading the other's text. Then we held a meeting to discuss our texts, addressing our feelings of isolation against the backdrop of the research team. This meeting, which was audio-recorded and lasted a couple of hours, is what we considered the living room. The sharing of ideas in the living room gave us the freedom to explore tangential topics regarding our belonging to the community and the negotiated meanings within each vignette. In section 5 we reproduce the four narratives verbatim. They were composed in the solitude of our own individual offices. We have bolded those ideas that address the topic of isolation, since there are a lot of necessary tangents in our texts. However, the bolded ideas will constitute the germ of our new community. In terms of our ethical procedures, the text authors were cognizant of the purpose of our meetings and revised and agreed with every single version of the printed material.

Our rooms: Vignettes by each research community member

The people who wrote the following vignettes have different itineraries but have also spent a lot of time jointly entangled in the always complex relationship of accompaniment, development, frustration, joy, and satisfaction. Our common experience leads us to ask ourselves different questions, such as: Is the framework of the research group a care space? Is a research group a CoP that alleviates the loneliness of the researcher/professor? Can we understand this feeling of belonging to a research group as care? How are research groups affected by neoliberal university policies? How does the academic context of capitalist production affect the care of the members of a community of research practice?

We use the concept of the care footprint (Herrero, 2012) to think about the complex relationship that exists between our need for care and the care we provide in our community. In this way, we intend to explore the role that care plays in the field of academic life, how it

affects us and what it allows us to think. Aware that it is a wide, diversified territory and that we have not yet explored it enough, we address some of the many conflicts and the precariousness that threaten our profession. For this reason, we have decided to share four brief vignettes to narrate some of the fissures or cracks, as well as dilemmas and personal conflicts, that arise with respect to care within the framework of CoP Elkarrikertuz.

José Miguel's room: The research group as a strategy for caring for our job

Linking care and research practice is to think about the relationships, tensions, and grooves that sustain the generation of knowledge. The importance, both productive and emotional, of belonging to a research group or a CoP is fundamental and almost inevitable for teaching development in current university life. Teacher training and innovation, as well as research practice, are distributed, situated and relational tasks, and impossible to sustain individually. In fact, belonging to research groups is, more and more, a central element in the life of university academics. The research group is a place of welcome and torment, stress and calm or recognition. Much of our life at university revolves around the “group.”

For more than twenty years I have organized, coordinated and participated in a research group. I thought the group could help us tackle collaborative projects and respond to job demands and demand levels. We have improved our productivity but without developing a critical position or ideological analysis about the meaning of academic production and where we were going, which in turn affects the research tasks themselves, falling into academic subalternity due to our own self-exploitation.

Belonging to the community of practice has allowed us to respond to work demands, but at the cost of giving up a philosophy of life and care that respects oneself. Furthermore, the level of work demands has intensified so much that the university academic world, that is, our professional environment, has become a context of exclusion, which has distanced us from caring for our health, our body and others. **that are with you. Attention and listening to other emotional, relational, or affective needs have been suppressed. In addition, the level of job demands has intensified so much that the university academic world, namely, our professional atmosphere, has become a context of exclusion, which has distanced us from caring for our health, our body, and for the others who are with you.**

Now, after twenty years linked to research groups, I yearn for and demand a different kind of care, **one that attends to those who are with you, to what is vital on a day-to-day basis.** Research groups have become another scenario of collective self-exploitation, coinciding with Han's confusion (Geli, 2018, §4) when he states that “now one exploits oneself and believes that one is fulfilling oneself; it is the perfidious logic of neoliberalism that culminates in the **burned-out worker syndrome.**” Paying attention to care provides an opportunity to make visible the different axes of oppression (or privilege) that influence each teacher/researcher based on the various edges that make up our identities.

Aingeru's room: We need time to think (Schilling & König, 2020)

When I talk to colleagues at my university, the idea always comes up that there is **never enough time.** I am disturbed by the relationship we have with time. Feeling that we are always short of time seems to me something disastrous in any aspect of our reality. That anguished relationship that we live with over time contains, I think, part of the truth. The very dynamics and regimen of university schedules lead us to establish a relationship of anxiety with the way we perceive time. The maxim regarding the impact and profitability in the short term that governs any action in the academic field may be behind all this kind of affection that allows it to emerge. It seems that we need to always renew our commitment to the institution, linking

ourselves to new projects, although our involvement with them ends up being superficial. Starting over every so often because of a precarious reality. Something like being at full speed on that train imagined by Benjamin (2002), where we do not stop moving, although we do not know very well where we are going.

However, I believe that the perception we have about time also contains something subjective and at the same time constructed. I wonder with author Gell (2021) to what extent our awareness of time is not culturally conditioned, and whether the motivation to consider it a resource for consumption has not ended up monetising it, turning it into an exchange value, made available for actions that generate a supposed profit under the logic of contemporary academic knowledge production. It is possible to find another form of relationship with time. We need to develop long-term processes that allow us to free ourselves from that distressing relationship that we maintain over time. Processes, as Herrero (2012) calls them, where we can imagine another class of projects opposed to the urgent, **where veiled passions are activated and shared ties are strengthened, without the urgency of an immediate result. A time to nurture commitment and friendship, in which we take care of ourselves and take care of ourselves.** A position that implies a dissent against the neoliberal processes promoted by university research aimed at putting our time at the service of performance, individualism and the reproduction of academic inequality.

In this reinterpretation of these times at the university, I recognize my debt to the community with which I was able to connect in my beginnings in the profession. Although far from carrying out a celebratory interpretation of what this association entails, I prefer to focus on the possibilities it offers me to live my teaching and research task at different times, diverting that kind of imposition to achieve an immediate achievement. To allow times to emerge in which links are built or become sediment, times that stop, in which there is silence and discontinuity occurs, **times to produce and others that simply fall into indifference.** In any case, an opportunity to become involved in a long-term process that remains, in the time of the urgency that does not stop imposing itself.

Asunción's room: The blank page syndrome

The moment of facing the blank page is, for most of us, something we fear. It causes us anxiety and we procrastinate until the deadlines cannot be postponed. When authorship is shared within the framework of a research group, how are these emotions managed so that ideas flow, are shared, negotiated, and end up being reflected in a written text? It is not my intention to make a manual of best practices to help other researchers, but to share my experience within the Elkarrikertuz research community.

At the university, we are constantly being preached to about sharing, about collaboration, about interdisciplinarity. But really, how many people can we collaborate with? Is it possible to create a polyphonic dialogue or conversation between researchers from different disciplines? Lave and Wenger's CoP theory has shared repertoire as one of the pillars of a community. In our case, the shared repertoire are the journals with an impact on education, with their abstracts and keywords, and the academic discourse so well described by Hyland (2000), whose management makes us members of the community. **In our linguistic repertoire, words that are incomprehensible outside our CoP come to life and the foundation of our shared body of knowledge.**

What nobody tells us when we join a research team is that the writing process tends to be an individual and solitary act. In my experience, there are moments of not only loneliness, but also isolation and frustration, in which the community becomes blurred. Fortunately, there are other times when individual writing resonates with community members and that makes it worth the effort. **Likewise, what is written individually is subjected to renegotiation and**

assignment of new meanings when it is embraced by the community. This is the cycle of academic writing, moving from the individual to the community in unpredictable and exciting cycles.

Estibaliz's room: Managing bureaucracies

Many researchers have felt the intensification of bureaucratic management processes, supposedly technologized in favor of people. However, many of us who coordinate projects or the research group itself find it difficult to find the balance between being part of a community and making it work institutionally. Keeping a community alive goes beyond finding spaces to share research experiences; it also entails assuming the management of expenses, the coordination of events, the writing of final reports, and the search for calls. All this is integrated into a network of digitized materials to which you have to spend more time than expected, with endless pdfs with multiple explanations and instructions that are usually difficult to decipher. When people are very systematic, organized and decisive, I would dare to say that they can feel a high level of satisfaction when all this bureaucratic process runs at a good pace (I will not deny that it is something that I have also felt). However, **when the research group becomes a community where affections, relationships, listening, and meeting regain value, things change. They change because other aspects come into play, such as uncertainty, change or improvisation, aspects that are especially valuable for establishing relationships with others, but that do not fit in with the production system.**

Some years ago, we attended a conference in Barcelona organized by research colleagues from the Esbrina research net. **The motto of the conference was *Listening, attention, recognition and reciprocity*, which are the foundational characteristics of care, but which are not the agendas of university presidents.** The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that what mattered was the administrative machinery and that classes continued to function, without paying attention to the lives of the people being caught in the machinery. Professors are constantly evaluated according to their research excellence, their teaching evaluations and salary increases accordingly, which requires a sophisticated process of documentation and paperwork management. **Crucially, this evaluation punishes being the last author to sign a paper and enhances competitiveness among colleagues. Bureaucratization processes are distancing us from relationships with people, a necessary relationship for care, change and development.** This distancing makes us efficient, but it turns off our ability to feel, listen, perceive, contrast, etc. This is something that we have already experienced with the pandemic, and it seems that we are forgetting. I am not talking about an enriching loneliness; I am talking about a loneliness full of frustration and emptiness, a loneliness in which you find yourself immersed, almost without realizing it, in front of a computer screen and an Excel expense management program almost daily. This is nothing new: Akira Kurosawa (1952) addressed the issue in his film *To live* (Ikiru). On that occasion, the protagonist only comes out of his loneliness and emptiness when he is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Through the Elkarrikertuz community, we try to resist. However, we are aware of the institutional framework in which we live and the pressure from the university and state governments that offer funding for intense and highly competitive production. The researcher Durán (2018), a leading thinker in issues of care and work, warns us that **care consumes time that is incompatible with the accelerated times in which we live.** Caring means stopping and taking time with others. A research community can be a form of resistance.

The living room as a space to care

Each one of us left the solitude of our room and gathered in the living room to discuss our individual contributions to the topic of academic isolation. Our concept of the living room is as an immaterial but casual meeting space that acted as a trigger for ideas to evolve and to explore in our present and future publications. In a sense, some members conceptualized this living room as a place to close an idea that emerged in a private room. According to our recordings, the living room was a milestone in our research group. In essence, the living room *was* the research group.

As one of the two principal investigators of our research group, José Miguel, felt great responsibility for newcomers. In his words, inviting young researchers to join the group could offer a path toward self-exploitation. To them, it may look like a way to enter academia with the protection of a group, but he was afraid that this choice could lead to a life of precariousness. In other words, he thought that belonging to a research group gave young researchers a false sense of economic and emotional security. José Miguel pointed out the idea that in his years of research, he has seen many young scholars suffering from job uncertainty. In a sense, in addition to suffering from isolation, José Miguel has suffered from feeling responsible for the lives of PhD students.

The other principal investigator, Estibaliz, has endured the isolation that originates from the increasing demands of a bureaucratic university where every single movement must be documented. Estibaliz has felt abandoned when applying for funding under short deadlines. It was clear in our living room discussion that the four of us had experienced intense feelings of time pressure: pressure to finish the paperwork, to finish a research project and to write in general. One of the two assistant professors pointed to the accelerated working rhythms imposed by the corporatization of higher education. This issue has been addressed in several publications, more recently by Dionne (2020), drawing from the philosophy of new materialism. The four of us, regardless of academic rank, pointed to damage to our bodies in the form of frustration, stress and even anxiety. In this scenario of negativity, what are the advantages of engaging in CAE? The first idea that emerged from our discussion in the living room is that we could express similar feelings despite our differences in academic trajectories. We may not eradicate those feelings of isolation and we cannot change the growing demands of the neoliberal university, but at least we can share them and talk about them in a caring environment. It is true that certain tasks, such as writing and bureaucratic work, must be done by a single individual, but by talking about the feelings that arise while doing it, we are taking care of our emotional balance (Hardy et al., 2020).

The second benefit of doing CAE is that ideas previously conceived in isolation are developed and take on a life of their own when shared with the group. The present article is living proof that this can be achieved. The metaphors of the private room and the living room have been very practical research tools and part of our localized shared repertoire. Within our CoP, we constantly negotiate the meaning of these two modes of research, as in Aberasturi-Apraiz et al. (2020). Nevertheless, in this race towards job security in higher education, we must pay close attention to our journey companions. Hernández-Soto et al. (2020) point to the concept of trust in building a CoP, but as we have seen in our vignettes and in the results of our living room, trusting each other is not enough.

Using the ideas developed in section 5, we have designed an imagined community which affords a caring environment that places the actual researchers at the center. Since the features we add to our community derive from our own recordings, we are not sketching a romanticized or essentialized notion of care deprived of evidence. In line with Bozalek et al. (2020), we have pointed to the precise entangled connections of the material, linguistic, and social aspects of our community and our own lives and feelings. In an exercise of diplomacy

(Young et al., 2022), we extend our previous conceptualization of a CoP and add some fundamental ingredients, so that the construct of a CoP can be conceptualized as a Community of Care. The additional features and actions that are required are detailed in Table 2, to extend the focus of care to our institutional context. The actual actions that constitute the Community of Care have been distilled from the text bolded in the actual vignettes in section 5. The initial of the researcher that has pointed to this particular action has been added next to it.

Table 2

Main features and actions defining a Community of Care (CoC) and how they extend from the ones of a CoP

Features	Community of Practice actions	Community of Care actions
Mutual engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Holding meetings ● Writing abstracts ● Writing conference presentations, articles and book chapters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Similar involvement in all the tasks (E) ● Equal sharing of workload (E) ● Awareness and respect for family care (JM) ● Sharing papers and ideas (As) ● Sharing and discussing relevant research (As) ● Gathering socially (Ain/E) ● Encouraging leisure time (E)
Jointly negotiated enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Paying attention to education at all levels ● Developing a career in academia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Paying attention to all members' physical and mental wellbeing, including project leaders when under deadline (JM/E) ● Writing collaboratively (As) ● Avoiding competition (E) ● Setting reasonable deadlines (Ain)
Shared repertoire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group website ● Academic and in-group jargon ● Inside (in-group) jokes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating a common body of knowledge (proposals, theories, methodologies, data, references, relevant readings) (As) ● Using CAE as a research method (The four of us)

In sum, the initial question of whether our research group can mitigate feelings of isolation, which prompted our reflections in the privacy of our individual rooms, has made us move beyond an emphasis on human relationships and pay attention to higher education politics and more-than-human relationships with time and spaces. In our CAE journey, we have sketched an imagined community in the form of a community of care that suits our research, professional, and personal goals, namely, a community that nurtures each one of its members through their academic lives. Even if we acknowledge that an invitation by established academics to join a research group can be a poisoned chalice that is difficult to resist (see José

Miguel's vignette), once newcomers join the research group, their taking part in the routines outlined in Table 2 can function as the cement that coheres the group. Research members should be cognizant of the importance of building and nurturing personal relations in the process of completing research projects. Caring for these relations should be not only a goal but a defining feature of our research team. Much has been written on the ethics of research in autoethnography, at times focusing on the context where research is being produced (Dahal & Luitel, 2022). Developing caring relationships in the research group also should be part of this ethical behavior. In Spanish, we call these relationships "cuidado," which is etymologically related to Latin "cogitatus" or "thought" and directly links to action. We believe that thinking about the other members of the research group and their personal and emotional needs is the first movement toward building an enduring and healthy and long-lasting community of care.

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