The work of completing a PhD is complex, requiring a student to make sense of many uncertain processes in multiple contexts as they move toward independent scholarship. A setting that provides support in learning the tasks of PhD-related work is the informal learning environment of the Internet. Social media sites, such as blogs and wikis, supply a vast number of resources related to PhD work. Of particular interest to this study, are blog sites maintained by students who are sharing practices related to PhD work. It is possible to use a qualitative method to explore what blogs show us about PhD-related work in the informal learning context of the blogosphere. The purpose of this qualitative content analysis is to explore the context of the blogosphere as an informal learning space, specifically looking at the content of various PhD student's blogs, and what that content reveals about PhD-related work practices. The theoretical framework of this study
acknowledges the changing patterns, contexts, and content of 21st-century PhD-related work by drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems’ theory. Moreover, the practices of PhD-related work are represented using the work of Cumming’s (2010) integrative model of doctoral enterprise, and Milligan, Littlejohn, and Margaryan’s (2014) workplace learning in informal networks and the associated four informal learning behaviors. An exploration of the blog content from a sample of 14 blogs reveals that the blogs are not confined to any country, discipline, or gender. Data in this study shows that the bloggers represent both full-time and part-time PhD students and do not fall into a particular category based on age. The content of each blog is recorded as a separate narrative in this study. In reading through the narratives, patterns, similarities, and themes emerged that provide a platform for thematic analysis, interpretation, and discussion.

The content of this study reveals that PhD-related work takes place in a variety of settings and is impacted directly and indirectly by multiple relationships across many differing environments. Themes emerged that echo those in the literature: supervision, validation, and professional participation; the important role of the Internet and social media; widening participation and access; and informal workplace learning in relationship to PhD-related work. While these themes are extensively explored by others working in the field, two emergent themes are underscored through this study’s data, not because there is abundant evidence, but rather because there is little evidence. That is to say, in the research, I expected to find content related to coursework and mentorship, however, the opposite was true, leading to new questions for future studies. The study also resulted in several recommendations for policy and practice in higher education related to PhD level work.