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A collective reflection on doing an autoethnography in online doctoral education

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1. Introduction[1]

This last article in this special issue, entitled *Autoethnography in online doctoral education*, concludes with a collective reflection on doing an autoethnography on the online PhD programme in *e-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning* at Lancaster University. On this programme, we, the tutor and students interact and learn together at a distance—rather "physical" than psychological in our experience. The Editor of this special issue, Kyungmee Lee, is Senior Lecturer and Lead Tutor of the first module of the programme where all of these autoethnographies were learned and written, and Kyungmee is the only person (among eight of us) whose life is physically bounded around Lancaster and Lancaster University in the UK. The rest of us are geographically and internationally spread. Karen is from Colombia, Konstantinos from Greece, Mary from the USA, Regina from Austria, Salwa from Oman, Sophia based in the UK (Leicester, 150 miles away from Lancaster), and Thomas based in the UAE. Most of us have never been to Lancaster (some not even to the UK).

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Despite the physical distance and the total absence of face-to-face interactions, we have gone through this first part of the PhD journey together and subsequently produced this beautiful and indeed special issue. We are both privileged to have this exciting but challenging opportunity and proud to make the most of it. While we certainly want to celebrate the production of this shiny new issue as an editor and authors, most importantly, we would like to celebrate the success of our collective (and ongoing) effort, as a tutor and students, to create a sense of "us", a sense of belonging, through learning, doing and writing autoethnographies. No matter how far we live from the University, we still feel we belong, and *when it comes to our research, we know we belong*.

Before closing the special issue and moving on to the next chapter of our academic journey, we want to offer some behind-the-curtain (or behind-the-screen in the digital era) narratives, reflecting on our lived experiences of learning and doing an autoethnography during and after the module. We are not interested in delivering propaganda in aid of autoethnography, uncritically or even naïvely packaged with all our positive comments, to our already problematic research field, exhausted by endless hype of new technology and blind faith in self-directed learning (or a long list of similar pedagogical ideas). In fact, we want to do the opposite. We want to shed light on some of *the intellectual, emotional, and ethical challenges associated with an autoethnographic endeavour*, reflecting on how we have experienced and addressed them despite the incomplete and immature nature of our solutions.

We also want to make a more profound sense of *our learning and researching (and researched) experiences and their impact on our continuous becoming* (as a PhD student, researcher, educator, and ultimately as a person). While we believe and hope that reading through our reflective narratives can still be of interest and use to readers of the special issue, each of us has humbly made *a small number of practical recommendations* (based on our intense but limited first encounters with autoethnography) for readers who are planning to learn and do autoethnography in the near future.

Below, readers can first find a reflective narrative of the tutor introduces the collective reflection and concludes the special issue as a whole. It is followed by seven reflective narratives by seven student autoethnographers, presented in the alphabetical order of their first names. We strongly recommend that readers first read **the editorial**, **Introducing 16 doctoral autoethnographers in an online PhD programme** (Lee, 2022a), which offers a useful overview of the pedagogical and institutional conditions of our experiences, to fully understand and appreciate our concluding thoughts here.

2. Tutor's closing remark: A danger of representation in autoethnography — Kyungmee Lee

Kyungmee Lee is Senior Lecturer in Technology Enhanced Learning in the UK and the Editor of this special issue.

The initial call for papers was sent out to about 100 doctoral students who had completed my module between 2018 and 2021. At the point of circulating the call a year ago, I was just vaguely thinking that it would be beneficial to include a separate article that provides some sort of meta-narratives about doing an autoethnography. The only thing I definitely knew was that I needed input from my students who have actually done (not supervised) an autoethnography. I needed to collect their stories. In the call, therefore, I asked the potential authors to submit a reflection on doing an autoethnography alongside their autoethnography.

From 2018 when I first introduced autoethnography in my module (see **the editorial of this issue**, Lee, 2022a), until the time of writing this article in June 2022, I have done four iterations of the module and supervised about 125 autoethnographic projects—roughly 25 projects for each iteration. I have observed that many students made their doctoral studies more authentic and transformative by engaging with autoethnography as a module assignment, and the outcomes of that engagement were genuinely meaningful and fruitful. Nevertheless, such a learning process is demanding and challenging, and students often struggle not only due to the unfamiliar and unconventional characteristics of autoethnography as a learning subject but due to the personal and professional circumstances of online PhD students outside the programme. Subsequently, *students' emotional and intellectual experiences with autoethnography are as diverse* as their emotions and inner thoughts presented in their autoethnographies. Many have shared what they enjoyed and gained through the experiences (despite their initial doubts and uncertainties), but some have indicated a lasting sense of uneasiness, discomfort, and dissatisfaction with their learning outcomes.

While I have written about my teaching experiences—often as autoethnography (see Lee, 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022b), my students are the primary subjects of my teaching

1 The leading and corresponding author Lee is named first, and all other contributing authors are listed in alphabetical order of their surnames.

and their learning experiences are always a central part of my narrative. Thus, *there is always a danger: I may fail to capture the diversity and complexity of each student's encounter and engagement with autoethnography*; I may include some students' voices and exclude others' (mostly unintentionally, but sometimes intentionally to present coherent narratives); and I may mistakenly draw biased and self-serving conclusions from my observations (instinctively or unconsciously, as I often desperately seek approval of my pedagogy). At least, I am aware of such dangers, and as I ask my student autoethnographers to do so, I put my best effort into validating my arguments and conclusions by comparing and contrasting them with/against others' in literature and different datasets. I also performed a member-checking process where I invited a small number of students to read my draft autoethnography to gather their thoughts and comments. Of course, at this point, someone would question *the biased selection of the small number* of students and the existing power relationship between myself as a supervisor and them as supervisees—would my supervisees dare to disagree with my analysis? There is no safe way out.

In the hope of resolving those ethical dilemmas, therefore, I have collected the authors' reflections on doing an autoethnography. Among 16 authors who contributed to this issue, 14 submitted their reflections; but it was clear that seven had put more significant effort into their writings than others. They wrote distinguishably more genuine and unique narratives, adding nuanced discussions on both the benefits and challenges of doing autoethnography in the context of their own online doctoral studies. Initially, I had thought I would somehow analyse and develop shared themes across those reflections, and use different parts of those reflections in my article as some sort of excerpts. When I read through the submitted reflections (particularly the selected seven in this article), I quickly realised that it would be *unethical to treat these living narratives simply like text data* and my line-by-line analysis and partial representation of them would not do justice to those authors. Most importantly, I felt each of these reflections deserved an independent space in this issue and needed to be read as a whole (not as arbitrarily disaggregated and loosely knitted parts)—there is no way for me to put these elegantly and engagingly written narratives in any better form than they are.

To create the most impact on potential readers of the article within the space constraint, I have selected and invited these seven authors to co-write this collective reflection with me. As I am determined not to promote our story as a definite and straightforward success story about a particular teaching and research methodology, I have asked them to re-visit and ensure that their reflections include realistic (not idealistic) descriptions of doing autoethnography as new PhD students online. I have also provided comments to support each author in increasing the level of criticality in their sense-making outcomes. Each author has also added a couple of practical recommendations for readers (or other PhD students) who want to try out autoethnography at some point in their academic journey. I hope the present article, an outcome of our collective reflection, presents a balanced perspective on our experiences engaging with autoethnography—*making readers feel better informed but still motivated and hopeful*.

Having said that, I want to close my part of writing by offering a couple of brief suggestions for other tutors who want to employ autoethnography as a pedagogical tool as I have been. Firstly, as evident in the articles included in the present issue, students choose to investigate a range of different personal and professional topics in their autoethnographic projects and some delve into deeply sensitive and political areas. Thus, it is imperative to create a safe and supportive learning space that enables students to face, reveal and share their vulnerability with others in the module. *The backbone of such a space is a tutor's presence*—I have noticed that individual students need to feel connected to (cared for by) their tutor, and only then do students seem to move forward to developing their own community. I have also found it difficult to effectively and ethically guide students' autoethnographic journeys without first creating mutually respectful and trusting relationships with individual students. For that purpose, fairly early in the module, *I first open up myself and my own vulnerability to the cohort* (details can be found in Lee, 2021), which is followed by a series of one-on-one conversations (and small-group interactions).

On the other side of the coin, however, I face a real issue: *the increased teaching load*. Despite the self-evident legitimacy of performing such a care-oriented pedagogy, it is demanding and time-consuming. No tutors in the current higher education context have enough time. To worsen this, I have found it awfully easy (or even natural) to invest too much in students' autoethnographic journeys, not only intellectually but emotionally. It is not rare for me to drop tears on students' writings and curse some random strangers in those writings. To keep the balance between being an approachable tutor and managing the dreadful workload (so I can have some time to edit a special issue like this), I have carefully designed and structured all of my interactions with students (including 1:1, small group, large group, and cohort group) throughout the module period. *Almost no single interaction I would do aimlessly*—all my interactions clearly focus on supporting student projects; one interaction

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systematically feeds into the next; all fit logically into a big picture of learning and doing an autoethnography. The finishing stroke is to *explicitly communicate the design (the purpose of the design) to students*. I continuously and repeatedly explain, both in written form (on Moodle site) and oral form (during Zoom sessions), what I do, how I do it, and why I do it (what they do, how they do it, and why they do it)... there is nothing good about being mysterious in teaching, I believe.

3. Look deep within yourself — Karen Villalba

Karen Villalba is English Lecturer in Colombia and the author of **Learning to "see" again: Overcoming challenges while teaching English to visually-impaired students** *in this special issue.*

The first year of PhD studies represents a high level of anxiety and stress since you enter the process of adaptation and do not know what new experiences you will encounter. Doing an autoethnography as the first task for this year was meaningful not only as a student but also as a person. It was facing an opportunity to look inside myself and reflect on my own actions as a teacher and as a human being to *first see and admit what you are not*. An autoethnography entails going inside yourself to assess your strengths and weaknesses, so you can accurately determine a path that might lead you to improve yourself, and *embrace both negative and positive things around you* as the supplies to become more aware of reality.

As an adult with multiple obligations in my personal and professional life who is now doing doctoral studies at a distance, the experience of doing autoethnography taught me to have a broader view of what qualitative research means under the interpretivist paradigm. Since it was an authentic task that included me as the main character of the research, I could separate the positivist perspective from the interpretivist one at a practical level by following the principles of evocative autoethnography from which I had the opportunity to express feelings that I could not have done before. My memories and previous experiences as a teacher are now able to serve as a voice for those who are living the same circumstances without living behind solid inquiry processes and research instruments.

In the field of technology enhanced learning, quantitative (or more recently, mixed-methods) research methodologies have long been the dominant ones and recognising other forms of research may be, to some, like losing power or authority. Even for qualitative researchers, it is often considered self-indulgent and therefore not a legitimate form of qualitative inquiry. I do not blame them.

However, upon the completion of my first autoethnographic project, I almost found it hilarious that other researchers consider autoethnography less accurate than other research methodologies or, even worse, that they see it as an unimportant way to do research. Doing an autoethnography (doing it well) is a demanding task, I would argue, more than conducting other forms of research. What represented a real concern to me was the implications of ethics regarding the amount of personal information revealed and retelling the voices of others. Consequently, *more ethical parameters involving humans* had to be carefully set before writing my autoethnography, which made it a more rigorous and reflective research process than others.

Another factor that may affect the perception of other researchers toward autoethnography is that it is like meditation. It is not easy to focus on yourself since *you have to face what you really are*: your mistakes, emotions, disabilities, limitations, and a long list of variables that show you are not in control. Some people might feel more vulnerable if they look deep into themselves and they prefer to study outside factors and keep their inner selves hidden. So, anyone who wants to try this methodology needs to be aware that it is normal to face dilemmas, multiple dilemmas.

A final reflection I want to expose is that autoethnography is connected to the study of multicultural forms and the field of anthropology. For my Latin-American context, this methodology provides a framework to critically reflect on complex social processes left after colonisation and analyse the implications of living in the Global South, as well as the influence of the Global North in our lives. It is an opportunity to look to a self (or some aspect of one's life) lived in a cultural context that is not free from others' control and domination. In such a complex society, it is also worth reading about how others feel about the same world we share and learning from the epiphanies or reminiscences evoked under crucial circumstances of our shared but differently experienced society. Autoethnographies are an opportunity to systematically expose and explore the subjective truth about yourself and your power within a culture. It demonstrates that *individual identities and perceptions are sufficiently worthy of being shown*.

4. Reflections of a self-obsessed c**k — Konstantinos Petsiotis

Konstantinos Petsiotis, English Teacher in Greece and the author of **Thirty-one and counting in the shadow: A teacher's autoethnography** *in this special issue.*

Illness and death of a partner, blogging in Cancerland, death (by suicide? out of shame?) of same-sex ex-partner, same-sex attraction and coming out, LGBTQ identities, abortion and transnational adoption, stroke-stricken fathers and queer daughters, depression, collaborative witnessing with a Holocaust survivor, racism, power and privilegism, bulimia and anorexia, dysfunctional parent-son/daughter relationships …

All of this was in the very first chapters of Adams et al.'s (2015) *Autoethnography*. I instantly knew back in January 2021 that autoethnography—whatever that was—was going to be interesting. It was, indeed, and I realised the meaning of Bochner's (rhetorical?) question: "Do you want 5 or 5,000 people to read your work?" (cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 41). Art Bochner was referring to "traditional, esoteric academic articles from journals that often sit on people's shelves or are skimmed quickly online" as opposed to writing with the "potential to create change in people's lives".

Autoethnographies "begin with events that turn *us*—our thinking, feelings, sense of self and the world—and *others*—our friends and families, members of our social, political, and cultural communities, and others who are different from us—*inside-out*" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 47). When I first came across this citation, it read more like a warning than guidance on doing autoethnography.

This turning of the selves and others inside-out sounded like exciting introspective soul searching and extrospective observation—but *what happens in the absence of events?* or the inability on my part to sense, detect, identify any such events that would trigger this transformation of self and perception of others? Did I have my share of epiphanies? And who cares? What if I was "not interesting enough to write about" (Delamont, 2007, p. 3)?

Autoethnographers embrace vulnerability and *do it with a purpose*: to ask and answer questions about experiences and the emotions they generate (Adams et al., 2015, p. 39). But how much to expose and how much to hide? How vulnerable can I get?

And anything goes? Behar (1996) points out that:

> vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self, who is also a spectator, has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake. (p. 14)

How much can you disclose and "care for the self" at the same time? What if "the need to share our stories does *not* outweigh our responsibilities to care for ourselves" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 62)? Punning on the title of Campbell's article (2017), *Apparently being a self-obsessed C**t is now academically lauded*, I mused that apparently, being white, able-bodied, straight, male, and middle-class did not seem to qualify me to do an autoethnography?

Over the months following this first encounter with autoethnography, I came to grips with it, and, ultimately, writing about myself, my professional life, and my life in general, came so naturally and easily for me; and even though I probably did not to "improve the lives of others" through autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015, p. 39), I certainly benefitted from what Cote (2017) described as *The healing power of storytelling*.

From a research standpoint, an important change – or rather, realisation occurred to me: doing autoethnography on, seemingly unqualified (not interesting enough), me was an eye-opener in that it made me realise that I want to do qualitative research from now on. June 2021, and six months into the PhD programme, on completion of my autoethnographic project and receiving a distinction for it, I realised that yes, being a self-obsessed c**k does get academically lauded.

On a final note, I do not really feel entitled to give advice to aspiring autoethnographers; instead, I would refer them to a short paper by Ellis et al. (2010), who explain what doing and writing autoethnography is.

5. Autoethnography: A self-guided road trip, destination … you — Mary L McDowell Lefaiver

Mary L McDowell Lefaiver is a Learning and Development Senior Manager in the US and the author of **An invisible fork in the road: The autoethnography of a female social scientist** *in this special issue.*

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My fellow social scientists, in the spirit of telling "the truth of the human experience vis-à-vis knowledge construction of the feminist project," as indicated in my autoethnography, I will not lie to you.

From a strictly personal perspective, taking on this research was the most challenging piece of work I have ever undertaken. My first attempt at this piece was over three years ago as a novice PhD student learning the intricacies and nuances of empirical research. I thought it a brilliant entrée into doctoral research and was glad not to seek out dozens or hundreds of research participants to practise my fledgling skills; I would only need to interview my parents and reflect on myself. That was naïve. Although self-focused, *autoethnography is not immune to relational ethics; you represent yourself as well as others*, and how they are positioned in the research must be considered with care. Fast-forward to this research, and while I am still uncomfortable, I have augmented discomfort with knowledge. I have been able to find a resolution to a question that has plagued me for decades. Closure is important.

From a research perspective, although my topic is not in direct alignment with this journal's focus on Technology Enhanced Learning, I hope you will find it a helpful exemplar, not only of autoethnographic methodology, but also a presentation of epistemology – how we situate ourselves between truth and our beliefs in the quest for knowledge construction. I have also used this opportunity to delve more deeply into feminist theories and inquiry, pillars of my thesis research, and as a way to polish my critical and analytic writing. I encourage other students to *identify frameworks that resonate with you*; engage with the concepts and frameworks across research ventures; peel back the layers to origins and evolution; seek out different perspectives, critiques and rebuttals. Having undertaken these activities with autoethnography, I find that they have allowed me to bridge the gap between theory and practice. My work as a learning practitioner has become more inclusive of individual voice and I have developed more agency in advocating for others. I believe that this deep engagement with theory has made me a better leader of people and teams in my workplace.

From a practical perspective, my advice may seem flippant, but again, I will not lie to you. I will strip away the abstractions of academic writing and offer several points of practical advice. First, prepare mentally and emotionally. Laying bare your soul through this method will take you across a spectrum of emotions you may or may not enjoy. Talk about your exploration with others, of course, being mindful of any ethical matters. If necessary, take a break to allow your mind, body, and spirit to refresh. Remember, you cannot pour from an empty cup. Secondly, acknowledge that the vulnerability you demonstrate is the nature of this methodology; it is not meant to be comfortable, sterilised, or undertaken in a vacuum. Despite the many lows I experienced through my reckonings, I was buoyed knowing that I was working "to bolster the dominion of the feminist method" and contributing to the greater body of knowledge on this vital subject. *Find purpose that is meaningful to you in your work*.

Thirdly, show gratitude for your participants. Gratitude is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It will give back to you manifold in ways that may be invisible or intangible yet will make the journey worth the expense. As you will find in my account, I moved from "sadness and questioning to pride and gratitude". Despite the discomfort, I am grateful for this opportunity that brought me a new, more profound gratitude and appreciation of my parents. Thank your participants, because in the very least and in my estimation, it is bad form as a researcher to "take the data and run".

Finally, I would be remiss as a practising feminist if I did not advise you to *be true to your voice*. I convey this in all the meanings that constitute voice, which I think are best summarised by:

> The concept of voice spans literal, metaphorical, and political terrains: In its literal sense, voice represents the speech and perspectives of the speaker; metaphorically, voice spans inflection, tone, accent, style, and the qualities and feelings conveyed by the speaker's words; and politically, a commitment to voice attests to the right of speaking and being represented. (p. 146)

As I learned so acutely by exploring why "girls don't do math" and "girls don't do science," if you are not speaking and acting on your behalf, what outlandish refrains and hyperbolic tropes are misrepresenting you?

6. Lost and found: Transforming identity through autoethnography — Regina Obexer

Regina Obexer is a Senior Lecturer in Austria and the author of **Lost in third space: Identity work of a higher education "blended professional"** *in this special issue.*

"Autoethnography – what on earth is that?" was my first thought when I read the introduction to the first module in my new PhD programme. I knew what ethnography was, but I was not sure how there could be much value in navel-gazing obsessively about one's own issues in front

of a potentially global audience. Nine months and three iterations of my autoethnography later, I can now say that engaging in the autoethnographic research project as the first task in the PhD programme has been *transformative* for me in several ways.

I chose a topic in my professional context that had been nagging me for a while: my multiple responsibilities at work and the conflicts these competing demands were causing. I traced my feelings about this back to a critical incident that significantly changed how I conceived of my professional identity, and started investigating what the literature had to say about people in similar situations. Having a theoretical framework as a basis for self-observation made me realise that a lot of what I was experiencing was quite typical of professionals in my situation. I also became more analytical of my own actions and behaviours, and learned to better use constructive dialogue to broaden my perspective.

Writing this autoethnography has made me appreciate the value of critical self-reflection, has enabled me to reframe my view of my roles in my workplace, and has helped me make a decision about the future direction I will take professionally. This shift can be traced using the phases of transformative learning theory as defined by Mezirow (2000) and explicitly mentioned by Lee (2020) in the context of autoethnography research in early doctoral education.

I chose a critical incident at work, a *disorienting dilemma*, as my starting point for analysis: a comment from my manager which made me question my professional identity, my place in the team, and my future career trajectory. I engaged in *critical self-reflection*, striving to understand this experience and the issues it has surfaced. This prompted me to develop a habit of reflective writing about significant experiences at work, which resulted in 20 short narratives. I also reflected on the different aspects of my role using visual tools to illustrate them. At the same time, I carried out research and analysis of the literature about the professional group I identify with and the struggles this group is confronted with when determining their role and place in their institutions. Engaging with the literature was hugely beneficial to help me analyse my own muddled feelings of being without direction, having competing priorities, and not living up to the expectations of my colleagues and myself. The process of writing the narrative parts and then using the theoretical framework to analyse them has helped me both recognise and articulate some of the identity issues I was facing by reflecting on my past and my current experiences. By defining these more precisely through writing, I was able to identify and construct different facets of identity related to these roles.

In parallel, I started engaging in a more focused *constructive dialogue* with trusted work colleagues and friends, and I also bounced ideas off my peers in the PhD cohort. In the end, this process led me to *take action* in that I approached management with a proposal to change my work portfolio and focus on responsible management education, giving up some other responsibilities. As a result, I am now in a different team, focusing on work that I am passionate about, and with a workload that is much more manageable. Despite initial reservations about the method, my autobiographical project has resulted in a significant change in my career development. I am not sure this would have happened without engaging in the reflective and communicative process I went through in the course of this work.

As for practical recommendations for other novices doing autoethnography, I would stress the need to *thoroughly consider ethical implications*. When preparing my paper for publication, I was worried about exposing players in my drama without their explicit consent. I changed some passages to make them less confrontational, and I also changed some pronouns to disguise identities. Sometimes you may need to find a compromise between authenticity and protecting your participants, but don't forget that this is your story.

Finally, my main recommendation is to embrace autoethnography as *a real opportunity to engage with an issue in your life* that deserves attention, and to trust yourself that what you produce will be of value – not only to yourself, but also to others.

7. Be comfortable being uncomfortable! — Salwa Al Sulaimi

Salwa Al Sulaimi is English Lecturer in Oman and the author of **Teacher-student rapport in emergency remote teaching: Autoethnography** *in this special issue.*

During the first week of Module 1, *Research Methods in Education and Social Science Settings: Philosophy, methodology, techniques and tools* (part of a Ph.D. programme on *e-Research and Technology-Enhanced Learning*), we read Chapter 1 of *Research Methods in Education* (Cohen et al., 2018). Although I found the text challenging as a novice researcher, I was exposed to new terms, including paradigm, epistemology, ontology, methodology, and qualitative and quantitative research. It took time and careful consideration to respond to the tutor's question regarding whether I consider myself

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a positivist or a subjectivist. Although I inherently favour objectivity, I realised that I am a subjectivist researcher, a likely result of my educational background in social sciences and work as an educator.

During the third week, our group of 30 students from various educational and cultural backgrounds was introduced to autoethnography, the methodology we would be using for our first research paper. At this time, I shared a post that I titled, "I feel uncomfortable". The post was a detailed account of my insecurities, writing about my vulnerabilities and writing a story in my second language. Plus, I am the worst storyteller I know! Although I did not expect this additional challenge, it was not entirely dreadful. It was reassuring to read Lee's 2020 article, "Autoethnography as an authentic learning activity in online doctoral education: An integrated approach to authentic learning". The article features positive student feedback regarding autoethnography and argues that "it would not be possible to expect online doctoral students to engage in a meaningful learning process, simply by providing new knowledge and skills, which are disconnected from their real-life situations" (Lee, 2020, p. 570). The article helped me recognise that *doctoral students learn best through the authenticity of autoethnography*.

We spent three months reading material on autoethnography, reviewing autoethnographic papers, discussing and brainstorming ideas for our proposed projects, and writing. At the end of this educationally rich process, I realised that it had been an illuminating and transformative experience for me. Custer (2014) notes that autoethnography "honours subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits" (p. 1). For instance, teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic was frustrating. However, the act of writing and reflecting on it, exchanging stories with colleagues, and academically analysing the topic revealed an alternative perspective—subjectivity—that enabled me to process these struggles and discover solutions. Unlike most research methodologies, *autoethnography celebrates and values the researcher as an insider and, most importantly, includes the researcher's personal experience*. Reflecting on my experience, I wrote the following in my module reflection post: "The autoethnography paper was both challenging and fun. As a novice researcher, I find the methodology compelling because I am now more open to various ideas and viewpoints. I perceive research differently now, increasing my appreciation for social science research."

In addition to these personal benefits, I hope my paper contributes to the academic literature on teacher–student rapport building. My autoethnographic work argues that classroom rapport building is as essential in online classrooms as it is in physical classes. In the absence of face-to-face communication, teachers must adopt alternative strategies to build interpersonal relationships with students and highlight the challenges and struggles they face while trying to accomplish this goal. Therefore, if you are writing autoethnography, it might be one of *the rare authentic situations where you should be comfortable being uncomfortable!*

8. Autoethnography and me: Juggling my researcher self and my participant self — Sophia Mavridi

Sophia Mavridi is Digital Learning Specialist and English Lecturer in the UK and the author of **Emergency remote teaching and me: An autoethnography by a digital learning specialist during Covid-19** *in this special issue.*

Autoethnography is a research method I had never used or read about before. While going through this experience was not easy, it was empowering and liberating in a way that helped me grow as a researcher. And despite my initial scepticism, I got to appreciate it as a reliable and compelling research method, too. I've been encouraged to distance my own 'self' from my writing in the name of objectivity and reliability. A less personal tone raises trustworthiness, while a more personal one raises eyebrows. Hence, I embarked on this journey with reservations. How can a personal story be called research? Why would people be interested to read my story? *I learned that autoethnography is not just writing your own life story*; it is using your story to understand a social phenomenon you are part of. It is conducting a scientific study and giving outsiders a glimpse into your culture as an insider.

As an autoethnographer, I had to constantly balance and switch back and forth between two roles; my researcher self and my participant self. Anderson (2006) argues that this dual role (of being a member of the social world under study and a researcher of that world) requires increased self-reflexivity, a process which autoethnography enabled me to engage in more deeply. I got to realise that there are so many embedded assumptions in the way I think; identifying them in a rational manner is not an easy task for an insider. For more than two decades, I have worked in language education as a primary and secondary school teacher, university lecturer, examiner, trainer, and researcher. It is a world I am tightly embedded in as an insider, and this comes with deeply rooted beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions. I found that *immersing myself in autoethnography facilitated deeper engagement in reflexivity*, something that is particularly

important to researchers who are insiders in their research context.

It also made me more attuned and empathetic to my participant self. The process of autoethnography sometimes reveals hard truths that might be uncomfortable to process and reflect on. During the process of doing my autoethnography, I felt vulnerable as I realised my flaws, weaknesses, and fears, and this led me on a back-and-forth journey between epiphanies and tensions. There were many things I didn't want to expose in my research. *Experiencing this vulnerability made me think about how research participants might feel when asked to share their own stories and perceptions*. This insight matters because, as a qualitative researcher, I need to understand how my participants may feel and the deliberate or unconscious choices they may make about what information to share with me. I think walking in their shoes gave me a sense of empathy which may prove useful when conducting qualitative research in the future.

From the above, it should be clear that future autoethnographers should not enter the field naively believing that autoethnographic writing is a neat, linear, and coherent process. Having written an autobiography, I have learned that individual experiences and the complex emotions they generate can be messy, disjointed, ugly, and confusingly hidden. There was also a persistent sense of anxiety about juggling my researcher self and my participant self, and striking a balance between the two. I finally realised that, as a researcher, I was never fully able to distance myself emotionally from my participant self; however, *using a strong theoretical framework and a robust methodology to collect and analyse my data* enabled me to assure myself (and the potential readers) that my autoethnography is of good epistemological value. Anderson (2006) eloquently describes this as remaining "committed to an analytic research agenda" (p. 375) aimed at better understanding not only the self but (primarily) social phenomena as well.

9. An Unexpected Journey — Thomas Leach

Thomas Leach is an Education Editor in the UAE and the author of **The hammer and the scalpel: A teacher's experience of workplace bullying** *in this special issue.*

I must confess that when I was first given the task of writing an autoethnography, I hadn't even heard of the style and my first encounter, a paper called *Apparently being a self-obsessed C**t is now academically lauded (Campbell, 2017)* made me wonder if autoethnography was even a valid academic style, if it received so much sneering and criticism from purist academics who consider their way, the only way.

However, I read more autoethnographies as well as papers about writing autoethnographies and something about its purpose resonated with me. I've never been a positivist, I don't believe in universal truth, my whole adult life, I've lived in cultures other than the one I was born in, which has led me to believe that people and their environments are too complex and diverse for a one size fits all answer. However, the kind of shared experience that comes from autoethnography has a different kind of truth, *the sharing of personal truth, which in turn offers its own value*. Even though the outcomes of a paper may not relate to us in every way, they can help us think in a new way or understand an event that is outside of our personal experience.

More importantly, I feel like now more than ever, we live in a society where we are supposed to understand each other's situations, without actually being allowed to ask about them. There are things I don't understand about being non-white, sexualities other than my own, or being the victim of sexual abuse for example, but autoethnography is a way of coming to understand those aspects of human nature and horrible situations.

Often with academic papers, we read facts and statistics, often boiling down large amounts of information into rudimentary numbers, losing the essence of the people those numbers came from. The positivist argument for a universal truth as fact only to be overwritten the following week by the next universal truth to come into vogue is a far cry from the purpose of an autoethnography, which is to share an experience for what it is. In this respect, it can be quite therapeutic to write sometimes as well.

Autoethnography is not an easy academic approach either. As the researched, a lot of the knowledge might come from me, but that doesn't make the work any less rigorously researched or mean that other sources aren't included. When writing about my own experience of working in toxic workplaces, I still researched papers on workplace bullying and situated my experiences in a way which corroborated the known literature. It can be quite harrowing as well to delve back into parts of our lives we would rather leave forgotten. Because of this, an evocative autoethnography *balances on a fine line between academic and creative writing*, and it takes skill to find that balance.

For me, autoethnography ended with some personal growth, by writing about a piece of my past I'd previously

considered an unpleasant waste of time, I learned that my experience had actually helped me grow as a person, that *the struggle was important and became part of the tapestry of who I am*.

For those looking to write an autoethnography, my recommendation is always that to be a good writer you need to read. Find some autoethnographies on subjects that interest you and start from there. Even if it doesn't become your primary style of academic writing, it's still worth trying at least once to understand that just because it's different from the mainstream, doesn't mean it doesn't offer value to the scholarly body of knowledge.

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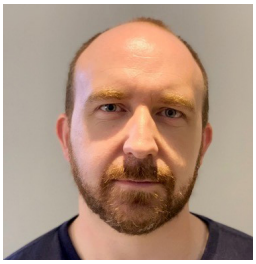

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