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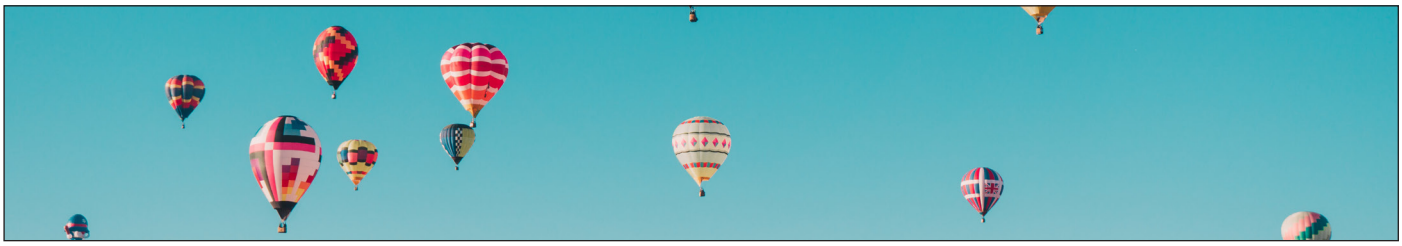

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Introducing 16 doctoral autoethnographers in an online PhD programme

Kyungmee Lee

Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

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1. Situating the autoethnographies in context

This special issue consists of 16 autoethnographies and a collective reflection written by doctoral students while participating in the first module of an online PhD programme, *e-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning* (TEL), at the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University in the UK. The programme, each year, welcomes an international cohort of about 25-30 new doctoral students who are working professionals in different educational and cultural contexts. These students, who are also performing multiple social roles in their personal lives, choose to enrol in this particular online programme as it offers greater accessibility and flexibility than other campus-based programmes. For many, online education is almost the only feasible option to obtain a PhD degree without disrupting their established professional and personal lives *too much*. However, it is crucial to develop a realistic sense of the accessibility of online doctoral education. Whether online or not, doing a PhD is a massive challenge for all doctoral students who are likely to experience some degree of disruption and destabilisation in their everyday routines, habits, and relationships (Lee, 2020a). Although the physical flexibility of the online PhD programme allows them to embark on their studies without leaving their living and working contexts, completing the academic requirements of the programme as a part-time student alongside all other responsibilities can be extremely challenging.

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The first module, *Research Methods in Education and Social Science Settings*, is designed to help these new doctoral students develop the philosophical and methodological foundations required to successfully plan and conduct TEL research. More importantly, the module aims to support students in becoming doctoral researchers who can effectively and critically engage with academic conversations and debates in a personally and socially meaningful way. As the diversity among the topics of the 16 articles in this issue effectively demonstrates, each doctoral student (a mature adult in their 30s to 60s) joins the module with unique life (hi-)stories and diverse cultural and educational experiences. Nevertheless, most doctoral students, at least in my own experiences teaching this module for the past seven years, have somewhat similar research ideas (or *a priori* goals) that are well-aligned with mainstream TEL discourses and propositional knowledge embedded in such discourses—enhancing *others'* educational experiences by utilising a range of technologies and technological affordances (Bligh & Lee, 2020b). Many also want to learn and use research methods commonly used by established TEL researchers. Although the more specific research topics each student plans to explore are primarily drawn from their professional contexts and practices, doctoral researchers themselves are always seen as distant from their research subjects. In other words, their planned research projects are always about helping others, most frequently other students and other teachers.

2. Tracing the beginning of the autoethnographies

Personally, my PhD was a transformative learning journey through which I grew into a different person, although not totally new but a significantly different person with new knowledge and beliefs that are not necessarily commensurable with my old ones. That journey involved many moments of self-doubts and confusion. As an international student in a new academic and cultural space (relocated from South Korea to Canada), the journey was about struggling to make sense of who I was and who I wanted to become. I chose to deal with disorienting dilemmas (Lee, 2020b) in my everyday life by actively investigating those moments through academic reading, discussion, and writing, that is, through research activities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, connecting the two dots—personal struggles and academic engagement—was not fully encouraged in my postgraduate programmes (I believe it was not different from most of the TEL programmes worldwide). It was, at best, allowed in a rather limited sense such that adding a brief "personal motivation" section in the introduction of the thesis was recommended. I was fortunate to have supportive academic advisors and close colleagues who experienced similar struggles and were willing to work with me. Through those interactions, I could integrate my subjective perspectives, emotions, and experiences more directly into my research. Nevertheless, the process was neither natural nor guided.

Eventually, I became a TEL researcher who believes that meaningful research endeavours should depart from the researcher herself, and the effective integration of the researcher's self into the research activities creates both personally and socially beneficial outcomes. I also developed critical perspectives on the mainstream TEL discourses and research, which I found conflicting with my everyday experiences. Luckily, upon the immediate completion of my PhD, I became a doctoral advisor working with a large group of doctoral researchers from around the world. Despite the academic privilege of being on a permanent contract with one of the respected UK universities, as a new PhD myself, advising doctoral students in an unfamiliar cultural and educational context was not straightforward. Expectations and experiences of my part-time students online are significantly different from what I had as a funded full-time PhD student on campus (free from financial and social obligations). Especially during the first two or three years, the learning curve was steep, and there were countless moments of self-doubt and confusion, which during this time, naturally and directly became the focus of my research (Lee, 2019; 2021; in press). Utilising key methodological principles informed by autoethnography, a qualitative research approach that puts the researcher at the centre of the scholarly inquiry to explore specific social relationships and cultural practices, I have investigated the struggles and discomforts I experienced while teaching on the online PhD programme.

3. Doing the autoethnographies for research and teaching

I incorporated autoethnography not only in my research but also in my teaching as a means to create an organic but deliberate connection between my research and teaching endeavours and further help my students do the same. I have conducted and taught autoethnography in my research methods module for the past five years (it was for my third year when I decided to entirely scrap and rewrite the first module to bring autoethnography as the main research methodology that every student learns and performs). Although the full explanations can be found in my previous publications (see Lee, 2019, 2021), simply put, understanding my students and my struggling relationship with them (or some of them) became my primary research agenda. Student autoethnographies turned out to be extremely

useful research resources for that purpose. In guiding and supporting their autoethnographic journey as a module tutor, I continuously deepened my understanding of *our struggles* (not only mine but students') inside and outside our relationships. Such understandings (i.e., my autoethnographic research outcomes) have dramatically transformed my perspectives on online doctoral students and their learning (and living) experiences, leading to better and more mutually respectful relationships. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that I still meet new and unexpected challenges in that process even after the five years of doing so. Thus, I do not want to overclaim or fantasise about the effectiveness of doing autoethnography, but it has undoubtedly helped me to be a better tutor.

On the teaching side of my endeavours, I hoped to offer structured and guided support (as I wished to have) for doctoral students to establish a meaningful connection between their personal struggles and academic engagement. There was a strong pedagogical conviction about the value of autoethnography as a useful tool for novice TEL researchers to explore their own past to make sense of the present and envision a better future—ultimately, to become a more ethical TEL researcher. The most valuable lesson that I have learned so far is how unique each doctoral researcher is as an authentic being in their own historical and cultural contexts. Their learning motivations, attitudes, and experiences in the module are shaped by the complex dynamics of their unique personal histories (including professional career trajectories) and cultural, educational and professional backgrounds. On the surface, these doctoral students come across as confident professionals with an extensive level of experience, knowledge and expertise. However, by learning and doing autoethnography in the module, they develop a shared sense of unfamiliarity and discomfort with this new research approach, focusing on themselves (i.e., their struggles, weaknesses, problems) as a subject of their scholarly inquiry. The unfamiliarity and discomfort further enable them to realise and reveal the underlying social and cultural problems that they were not necessarily aware of before carefully researching them. Thus, personal struggles caused by unjust social structures and relationships are among the shared themes in many autoethnographers in the module.

4. Preparing the special issue: What can this special issue offer?

As demonstrated by the 16 autoethnographies in this special issue, whether conscious or not (and obvious or not), there are always different forms of injustice in any given society. These doctoral autoethnographers, as social beings, have also been subjected to and influenced by such injustice in their participating society. However, they realise that while they have never been entirely free from the damages of the particular injustice, they have also contributed to the injustice leading to damaging others in their lives without intending to do so. Nevertheless, their autoethnographic narratives are not simply pessimistic as they also speak about how they have successfully navigated and overcome such problems and minimised the subsequent damages throughout their lives. Doing a PhD, in some cases, is also a means to address those problems. Therefore, autoethnography in this online doctoral programme is a deliberate attempt to move *ourselves* from marginal and peripheral positions to central and core positions in our TEL research, creating more critical and ethical academic discourses and practices (Lee, in press). By investigating their own experiences of social injustice and associated struggles, doctoral students learn how to critically engage with (and refute or refuse) dominant TEL discourses that often dismiss the unjust social conditions in which a particular technology is developed and used. Also, the doctoral autoethnographers develop a balanced perspective on TEL and technology, which is not a neutral tool, but a political force that can both address and exacerbate the existing social and educational problems.

This special issue, *Autoethnography in Online Doctoral Education*, is intended to show other TEL researchers what it looks like for us to connect our personal struggles and academic engagement, reflecting on more ethical TEL research methods and practices. The special issue, a collection of online doctoral students' authentic voices, can also be a unique and beneficial add-on to the previous literature on (online) doctoral education, helping readers to genuinely appreciate the great diversity of the group. Furthermore, researchers interested in autoethnography as a research method and educators intrigued by utilizing autoethnography as a pedagogical method may find this collection of autoethnographies useful—in particular, they may find *A collective reflection on writing an autoethnography* at the end of the issue interesting. Each autoethnography with a distinctive topic can also attract different groups of audiences.

In Summer 2021, as an editor of the special issue, I circulated a call for papers to be included in this special issue to about 100 doctoral researchers who wrote autoethnographies in my module between 2018 and 2021. The call suggested revising their autoethnography assignments based on the module tutor's final feedback before submitting them to the journal. Among 26 autoethnographies that were initially submitted, five were considered incomplete and thus, excluded from the peer-review process. Another five

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were rejected based on the peer-review outcomes. Among the 16 autoethnographers, seven authors and I have co-written and edited the collective reflection. Before readers dive into this special issue, I would like to briefly introduce the 16 doctoral autoethnographers.

5. Introducing 16 doctoral autoethnographers

5.1 Five teachers

Five autoethnographies in this special issue are written by teachers in different educational contexts. These teacher autoethnographers will be introduced below in alphabetical order according to their surnames.

The first author, Salwa Al Sulaimi, is an English lecturer at a university in Oman. Her contribution to the issue, *Teacher-student rapport in emergency remote teaching: Autoethnography* (Al Sulaimi, 2022), explores her emergency remote teaching experiences during the first part of the Covid-19 pandemic. Among different aspects of the educational disruption caused by the complete absence of face-to-face communication, Salwa focuses on teachers' difficulty establishing rapport with their students. Her clever use of a theoretical framework called "categories of teacher-student rapport antecedents" to systematically analyse her experiences and coherently present her findings stands out. Salwa also includes the voices of three other teachers to validate and deepen her understanding. The autoethnography, thus, provides a clear overview of different rapport-building strategies teachers adopted for face-to-face versus remote teaching and a range of challenges teachers found difficult to overcome during the pandemic.

Next, we have Thomas Leach, an English teacher currently working for the Ministry of Education of the United Arab Emirates as an English editor and proofreader. Leach's (2022) autoethnography, *The hammer and the scalpel: A teacher's experience of workplace bullying*, deals with a frequently happening but less frequently discussed and researched social problem. Victims of workplace bullying often find it challenging to report and prove such incidents due to their subtle and subjective nature. Despite the challenge, Thomas powerfully illustrates and reflects on his past experiences of being bullied at two different institutions by adopting an evocative writing approach. Thomas also effectively interweaves his personal voices with other victims' voices represented in academic literature, which makes his autoethnographic narratives more persuasive. Readers may feel relieved to learn that Thomas has grown out of the negative experiences, becoming resilient.

Another powerful evocative autoethnography, *Thirty-one and counting in the shadow: A teacher's autoethnography*, is written by Konstantinos Petsiotis. Petsiotis (2022) has long held a dual teacher identity as a Greek state school English teacher and a private English tutor. Given that such involvement in private tutoring is complex under Greek policies, his somewhat confessional piece of autoethnography feels dangerously engaging and strangely therapeutic. Konstantinos, based on careful recollections of life events and documents, has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics between the two identities and their impact on his professional and personal life. Konstantinos has also effectively used literature to draw deeper insights from his autobiographic narratives, through which he has successfully revealed some of the underlying mechanism that enables the dual teacher identity in the Greek social and educational context.

Panagiota Tzanni is an English as Academic Purpose (EAP) Lecturer at a transnational higher education institution in China. Tzanni (2022), in *Discrimination and native-speakerism in English for Academic Purposes*, critically reflects on her and her colleagues' experiences of being and feeling discriminated against in favour of other EAP teachers who are native English speakers. Although native-speakerism is a well-acknowledged phenomenon (often considered inevitable) across English teaching and learning contexts, how it influences non-native teachers' professional and personal development has not been fully unpacked and discussed. In that sense, reading through Panagiota's emotional accounts of disappointments and discouragements is upsetting but helpful. Readers can also learn that a lack of transparency in employment practices makes it even more difficult and distressing for non-native teachers to prove and fight against such native-speakerism and subsequent discrimination.

Our last teacher autoethnographer is Karen Villalba, an English Lecturer at a university in Colombia who teaches both face-to-face and online. Villalba's (2022) autoethnography, *Learning to "see" again: Overcoming challenges while teaching English to visually-impaired students*, deals with one of the critical issues in TEL—increasing the accessibility of educational provisions for students with different disabilities. Karen's research context is uniquely interesting from two perspectives; firstly, it is about face-to-face education required to supplement online education, which is often the opposite. Secondly, it directly refutes the common assumption of the accessibility of online education by vividly illustrating both students' and teachers' emotional frustrations in inaccessible online learning environments. The graphics also play an ironically interesting role; firstly, it makes online learning inaccessible to the students in the autoethnography,

but secondly, Karen's attempt to visualise her findings makes the autoethnography more accessible to its readers.

5.2 Five TEL practitioners

Next, we have five doctoral autoethnographers whose everyday responsibilities lie in supporting and managing other people's TEL practice and educational development. Readers can meet each of them below in alphabetical order of their surnames.

The first TEL practitioner here is Kristo Ceko. Kristo is a Principal of a language school in Albania, where he is responsible for the effective integration of technology across the institution. In his autoethnography, *Barriers to utilizing technological tools and the role of a principal: Autoethnography*, Ceko (2022) focuses on the long-existing tension between himself and English teachers who resist using technology in their classrooms. His critical self-reflection and semi-structured interviews with teachers suggested that he had an autocratic (not democratic) approach to working with the teachers, failing to fully understand and appreciate different issues and problems experienced by the teachers when using technology. TEL practitioners' frustration with teacher resistance is almost cliché now, but it is rare for us to be self-critical about our beliefs and attitudes. In that sense, Kristo's honest sharing is unique and much appreciated, making readers hopeful about the future of the field.

Mary L McDowell Lefaiver is a Learning and Development Manager in a private education sector in the United States. Lefaiver (2022), in her autoethnography, *An invisible fork in the road: The autoethnography of a female social scientist*, critically reflects on her upbringing and educational trajectory that has led her to move away from mathematics and science, where she had a great passion and curiosity as a young girl, to social sciences, where she was more accepted and welcomed as an educated girl. The reconciliation with her parents, who unconsciously carved the move, and the irony that she has eventually chosen to be a social "scientist" may make readers feel both pleased and bitter. The autoethnography is her first attempt to engage with feminist theory to make sense of her own becoming, which has become a core part of her scholarly identity.

Next, we have Sophia Mavridi, a Digital Learning Specialist and Lecturer in English language teaching from the UK. Her autoethnography, *Emergency remote teaching and me: An autoethnography by a digital learning specialist during Covid-19* (Mavridi, 2022), vividly describes her experiences of becoming a recognised voice through her active interactions with other teachers on social media platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic. Sophia honestly shares the complex feelings of excitement, disappointment, and frustration she experienced while striving to support teachers' online transition. However, working with teachers with diverse pedagogical beliefs and perspectives different from hers, Sophia reconsidered and transformed her beliefs and developed more nuanced and balanced perspectives. It is interesting to follow her narratives, helpful to understand how TEL practitioners learn and develop.

The fourth doctoral autoethnographer, Regina Obexer, is a Senior Lecturer and Head at the Center for Responsible Management & Social Impact at the Entrepreneurial School in Austria. Her autoethnography (Obexer, 2022) in *Lost in third space: Identity work of a higher education "blended professional"* deals with the difficulty of constructing a coherent professional identity, which is one of the everyday struggles experienced by many TEL practitioners. Regina employs the notions of "blended professional" and "hybrid space" to unpack such difficulty. As her job titles suggest, having a fluid professional identity has required her to consistently move between academic and professional spaces, often without her own will. Her autobiographic narratives offer valuable insights into how TEL practitioners might be positioned in the hybrid space in the first place and how they would navigate hybridity afterwords.

Puiyin Wong is the last to be introduced in this section. Puiyin is a Learning Technologist at a university located in the UK. Her autoethnography entitled *Surviving institutional racism as a Chinese female in UK higher education* (Wong, 2022) directly tackles one kind of injustice prevailing across higher education contexts. Puiyin reflects on a series of critical incidents she has experienced throughout her university life, both as a student and a staff member from a minority background. Puiyin does not reduce those upsetting incidents to interpersonal problems but conceptualises them as representations of institutional racism—the failure of university systems to tackle racism. While readers can hear her anger and frustration facing the glass ceiling, seemingly unbreakable, her story does not end there. As the title suggests, Puiyin sees herself as a survivor who has fought against injustice and pushed the glass ceiling one step up.

5.3 Two networked learners

Next are two doctoral autoethnographers, Oma Eguara and Lenandlar Singh, who have studied their professional development experiences in networked learning contexts.

Oma Eguara is a Primary School Teacher in the UK with a research interest in facilitating children's engagement

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in online learning networks. To Eguara (2022), one of the ultimate barriers to such educational practices is that most teachers are not networked learners themselves simply because they have never been educated in such democratic learning paradigms. Thus, in her autoethnography, *Becoming a networked learner: Unpacking identity development in networked learning communities*, Oma explores her experiences participating in three networked learning communities of different natures, including one developed in the TEL doctoral programme. Utilising analytic lenses drawn from Bourdieu's social theory and networked learning theory, Oma has systematically recorded and analysed her identity development as a networked learner. This piece offers useful insights into how to effectively design and nurture networked learning communities.

The next networked learner who contributed to the special issue is Lenandlar Singh, a Lecturer in Computer Science at a university in Guyana. Singh's (2020) piece, *An autoethnographic account of the use of Twitter for professional development by novice academic*, explores his use of Twitter as a medium of communication and networking with other educators and researchers around the globe. The autoethnography is well-grounded in a series of Twitter data analysis methods whose outcomes vividly demonstrate the interesting mixture of intentional, serendipitous, and spontaneous elements of Lenandlar's networked learning experiences. What is particularly valuable about this autoethnography is that it provides a balanced perspective on both the benefits and challenges associated with networked learning, followed by potentially practical strategies to address those challenges.

5.4 Four students

We can also hear some specifically *students'* voices in this special issue. Three doctoral autoethnographers look back on their educational experiences in the past, and one investigates current university students' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic from the staff perspective.

Mohanad Alani, an English Lecturer at a vocational training institute in the United Arab Emirates, is the first to be introduced. Alani (2022), in his autoethnography *Identity and academic performance in higher education: The effects of racial profiling on the motivation and psychological needs of foreign students in Europe*, attempts to make sense of his previous academic experiences being subjected to racial bias and discriminative treatments as an international student from the Middle East in the UK. These incidents, often mistaken as insignificant, can have significant (and potentially very negative) impacts on the self-perceptions and learning motivation of minority students like Mohanad. Although it is a relief to learn that Mohanad has successfully turned those negative incidents to grow his inner strengths and autonomous learning abilities, the narrative urgently calls for more inclusive and sensitive pedagogical attitudes among students, teachers, and staff in higher education.

Next, we have Franci DaLuz, an Associate Director of Admission at a public higher education institution in the United States. *Finding "your" people: The impact of mentoring relationships in overcoming barriers to academic achievement in underrepresented student populations* (DaLuz, 2022) describes her academic experiences as a first-generation college student with a minority background. Franci's autoethnography focuses on one of the common struggles shared by this group, the so-called "Imposter Syndrome", and explores how it impacted her academic choices and experiences. Franci gradually overcame her imposter feelings by meeting and interacting with three mentors who genuinely cared—found and encouraged her academic potential and commitment. The beauty of her autoethnography is that it includes both her and her mentors' voices together, constructing a coherent and complete narrative.

Thirdly, Jean-Baptiste Maurice is a Director in a Business school in France, managing the digital transformation & innovations department. Maurice's (2022) contribution, *The student experience in higher education reshaped by the pandemic: The autoethnographic perspective of a business school staff member*, approaches the investigation of university students' well-being issues during the Covid-19 pandemic in a unique and powerful manner. Jean-Baptiste has developed a close and trusting relationship with his students by showing his genuine interest and care for their well-being and determination to help them. Readers will be surprised by the honesty of students' sharing and the depth of Jean-Baptiste's emotional and intellectual response to students' difficulties, which makes the post-pandemic restoration hopeful. The piece certainly makes a strong call for holistic and authentic pedagogical approaches in higher education.

Last but not least to be included in this editorial is Fayola St. Bernard, who is currently working as a Lecturer in Computer Science at a university located on the Caribbean Island of Trinidad and Tobago. St. Bernard's (2022) piece, *Embracing humanities in computer science: An autoethnography*, describes her interdisciplinary learning journey moving from Humanities to Computer Science, through which she has successfully integrated knowledge from both disciplines with distinctive methodological perspectives. According to Fayola, the knowledge and skills from Humanities have enriched and accelerated her academic and professional

development in Computer Sciences. In the current society, where particular disciplines gain more popularity based on their instrumental measures such as practicality and employability, her autoethnography helps us revalue the often neglected disciplines and rethink the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to higher education.

6. Closing remarks

From Salwa Al Sulaimi to Fayola St. Bernard, it has been a privilege to work with these 16 doctoral autoethnographers and support their first step of scholarly development, as the first tutor in their doctoral journey. The best thing about teaching and more like doing an autoethnography with students is that I genuinely get to know them and deeply understand each of them as a person, not just as one of many online doctoral students. This has been a humbling and transformative learning experience, having a full impact on my personal and professional growth. I want to thank these 16 and all my other doctoral students who were willing to take a risk to engage with this autoethnography assignment and reveal and share their vulnerability with their cohort community and me. I know that even today, they are furiously and fully living their academic, professional, and personal lives all at once, navigating and juggling many responsibilities. As I always tell them, I cannot imagine myself doing a PhD as they do, but I do believe that their efforts will bear great fruits. Some of these thoughts will be further unpacked in the last piece of the special issue, *A collective reflection on writing an autoethnography*.

It is worth emphasising that all 16 autoethnographers introduced in this editorial are still on the programme working on subsequent modules or their thesis projects, considerably novice TEL researchers. To most authors, it has also been their first experience of publishing in an academic journal, which must be celebrated. However, on the other hand, there is tremendous pressure on them to share their honest stories and emotions (and private selves in some works) at the beginning of their scholarly journey. The journal, *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning*, is the voluntary initiative of a small group of committed TEL researchers, currently being operated without any financial or institutional support. It aims to foster new and critical conversations in the TEL field and create a safe space for novice researchers and practitioners—whose voices are often neglected and disregarded by exclusively focusing on a single path (out of many possible ones) to pursue scholarly rigour in the field—to voice out (Bligh and Lee, 2020a). Therefore, it is not our intention to showcase the perfectly finished and polished academic writings but to share our collaborative work-in-progress with the hope that it will trigger more meaningful conversations, methodological reflections, and mutual respect among those who care for online doctoral education and TEL. In this sense, the great sensitivity of readers may be required when reading and judging these efforts.

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About the author

Kyungmee Lee is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, co-Director of the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning, and co-Editor of Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning. Her research targets the intersection of online education, adult education, and international education concerning issues of accessibility and inclusivity. Using a range of qualitative research methodologies and evocative academic writings, her current projects investigate the academic experiences of diverse non-traditional student groups in distance education settings. Kyungmee's scholarship emphasises concepts of discourse, knowledge and power, understood through a broadly Foucauldian lens.

Email: **k.lee23@lancaster.ac.uk** ORCID: **0000-0002-9580-9026**

Twitter: **@hi_klee**

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