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Embracing authenticity and vulnerability in online PhD studies: The self and a community

Kyungmee Lee

There are a growing number of online PhD programmes across the globe. Many online doctoral students are working professionals with multiple social responsibilities. Although they often choose to study online due to the flexibility and accessibility it offers, these part-time distance students can suffer from a lack of social interactions and a subsequent sense of isolation and loneliness during their study. To address these issues, some online tutors in these programmes have strived to build a learning community among distance students by encouraging learner-to-learner interactions. However, it can be hugely challenging to develop a genuine sense of community among this group of students, especially when they make a continuous effort to present the best possible version of themselves to each other. This chapter presents an online tutor's autoethnography on her teaching experiences in a research methodology module in an online PhD programme. The author's honest and critical reflection on her pedagogical practice provides an invaluable insight into the complexity of online teaching and learning at postgraduate level. The story vividly captures important moments of how a group of online doctoral students overcame their initial sense of insecurity and uncertainty and successfully grew into a genuine community that embraced mutual vulnerability. The chapter concludes by stressing its contextual specificity, which readers must approach holistically and critically.

Keywords: Online Doctoral Education, Doctoral Students, Autoethnography, Research Methodology, Impression Management, Imposter Syndrome

Introduction

This chapter presents an online tutor's autoethnography, a qualitative research methodology using autobiographic writing as a medium of inquiry, offering useful insights into how postgraduate students learn and interact with each other in a specific online learning environment. Autoethnography serves this chapter both as a research methodology and as a pedagogical methodology. Firstly, my autoethnography investigates the challenging nature of building open and honest relationships in online postgraduate courses. Drawn *from* my autobiographic story, this chapter illustrates how a sense of insecurity and uncertainty among online doctoral students may lead them to interact with each other in particular ways that hinder authentic learning experiences. Secondly, *within* my autobiographic story, I show how

online doctoral students engaged with carefully designed social learning activities, and were guided to conduct their own autoethnographic inquiries. In the process of understanding and doing autoethnography, my doctoral students overcame their sense of insecurity and uncertainty and successfully grew into a safe online learning community that embraced vulnerability.

My story is set in the first module of an online PhD programme in education. Each year, the programme welcomes an international cohort of thirty doctoral students who are working educational professionals from different cultural contexts. I am a lead tutor teaching the module on qualitative research methodology, which runs through the first six months of the programme. It is a challenging period for online doctoral students who encounter new knowledge, practices, and relationships in an unfamiliar learning environment. These part-time students often struggle to adjust to the distance learning environment and relationships and (re-)establish a work-life-study balance (Lee 2020b). In this context, the tutor's effort to develop a supportive online learning community among the distance cohort can be particularly important. However, the tutor's effort to build an authentic sense of community often faces each doctoral student's (perhaps unintentional) counter-efforts and impression management, consequently presenting a less authentic self to their peers and tutor.

In my story, to address these conflicts, I utilise autoethnography as a pedagogical tool to engage doctoral students in an authentic learning and researching process (Lee 2020a). In addition, to make sense of the challenging nature of building a supportive online learning community in an online PhD programme, I carry out my own autoethnography as a research project on my teaching experiences. This chapter can be read alongside the other chapters included in the present book: Marley's writing with three students (past and present), also provides rich illustrations of the lived experiences of online postgraduate students (Marley et al. 2021). The pedagogical approach proposed by this chapter is in line with the disruptive attempt introduced by Jones (2021). Two chapters regarding the growing diversity in online postgraduate programmes (staff in Bussey 2021; students in Stone, Dyment, Downing 2021) also offer another critical layer to the complexity of student experiences described in this chapter. In the following section, I will briefly introduce autoethnography, further clarifying its roles in the chapter.

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Introducing Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that foregrounds a researcher's personal experiences and emotions and investigates the researcher's sense-making process of these experiences and emotions (Chang 2008). Autoethnographers offer insider knowledge of a particular cultural phenomenon of their interest by researching and writing lived moments of the self. They employ reflexivity as a tool to increase their critical awareness of the influence of their social identities and relationships on their sense-making processes. In doing so, they reveal and critique taken-for-granted cultural assumptions and norms with an intention to liberate themselves and others in similar situations. Thus, autoethnographers are critical, not only about the outside world, but also about their insider knowledge.

The autobiographic story in this chapter is my own—written from an online tutor's perspective on online doctoral students' social learning and research experiences. Autoethnography is not an easy and straightforward research approach, and it needs careful planning and execution. Autoethnographers are often criticised for 'being narcissists'. Campbell (2017) effectively captures such criticism in her autoethnographic writing of her experience of Twitter trolling:

> One Twitter user noted that autoethnography was the 'selfie' of academia. Along the same lines another—and my personal favorite—said that autoethnography was akin to 'diddling your pet hamster.' These tweets neatly sum up the principal criticism of autoethnography: self-indulgence. (p. 10)

Therefore, it is essential to have multiple perspectives and voices in autobiographic writing—even though it is a subjective format of reflection of autoethnographers. By utilising different data sources, autoethnographers continue to be critical about their own understandings and assumptions as well. I utilise four sets of qualitative data including i) my teaching records and observational notes on student learning in my module, ii) students' learning artefacts created by their engagement with learning activities in my module (i.e., discussion threads, reflective posts), iii) 13 semi-structured interview transcripts with online doctoral students in the programme, and iv) colleagues' observations and evaluations of my teaching. Ethical approval for collecting and using the data has been obtained by Lancaster University's Research Ethic Committee.

At times, I directly present student voices collected from the module's learning environment and the semi-structured interviews. Other student voices are represented within my own voice. I have also invited three students and two colleagues to read the draft of this chapter and give their critical thoughts, which have been integrated into the present version. Thus, despite the personal tone, my narrative is not monologic but dialogic and intertextual, since it is interwoven together with multiple different voices of online doctoral students, tutors, and researchers.

Autoethnographers seek reciprocal responses from audiences by sharing their autobiographic story and its connections to broader society in an accessible and aesthetic format, seeing research as a political and dialogical endeavour (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015). To some readers, this chapter my may come across as rather casual and unconventional and, therefore, less reliable and convincing; however, the intention behind my choice of writing style is not to construct a single, valid and generalisable story, but to:

> transform lived experiences into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experiences. (Van Manen 2016: 36)

I hope that my story can re-live with readers, helping them not only to cognitively understand (knowing) but emotionally experience (feeling) the lived moments of online doctoral studies, in line with a fundamental principle of autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2006). Here, I employ Bakhtin's notion of dialogue as 'ideological becoming', which is an authentic process of being through experiencing the world with others (Rule 2011). Bakhtin (1981: 293) believes that 'a person enters into dialogues as an integral voice' and develops a unique ideological understanding of the self, the others, and the world through the process of selecting, assimilating, and agreeing or disagreeing with other's words, which exist in 'other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions' (294). Through the dialogue, people develop their 'internally persuasive discourses' (345). For me, my autoethnography is that dialogue—a process of developing my internally persuasive discourses of my students and their learning experiences in my module, by interacting with others' discourses.

The ultimate purpose of writing this chapter is, therefore, to invite readers into the dialogue. In this sense, my autoethnography may be read as a mixture of personal reflections,

research findings, and academic discussions, which all contribute to readers' re-living of the complexity of being an online PhD student—embracing authenticity and vulnerability in online PhD studies. I will next briefly introduce some of the related literature to the subject of my autoethnography.

Situating the Autoethnography in Published Literature

A relatively small number of researchers have investigated online doctoral students' learning experiences. Doctoral students who choose to pursue their doctorate online, as part-time students, tend to have multiple professional and social responsibilities (Kung 2017). Thus, they value the accessible and convenient nature of online doctoral studies (Lee 2020b). Nevertheless, it is often challenging for distance students to maintain their motivation and positive emotions throughout their learning process (Ames, Berman and Casteel 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding and Spaulding 2016). Many online doctoral students experience a sense of isolation caused by a lack of face-to-face interactions, which may further lead to drop-outs (Terrell, Snyder, Dringus and Maddrey 2012). Bolliger and Halupa (2021) report that online doctoral students experience a high level of anxiety for similar reasons—some students retain the anxiety and negative emotions throughout the programme. Kennedy and Gray (2016) also suggest community interactions as one of the key success factors in online doctoral study.

The relevant notion of social presence has been used to discuss the quality of learner experiences in online learning environments (Richardson, Maeda, Lv and Caskurlu 2017). Social presence is the ability to project oneself and perceive others as a real person in a telecommunication situation through adequate uses of social cues, affective expressions, and open conversations (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2000; Garrison 2009). A lack of social presence among online learners is one of the significant factors that can impede meaningful social interactions in online learning environments (Rovai 2002; Richardson and Swan 2003). Therefore, researchers have focused on increasing a sense of social presence using different pedagogical approaches and tools, such as small group discussions (Akcaoglu and Lee 2016), asynchronous video (Borup, West and Graham 2012), social networking sites (Brady, Holcomb and Smith 2010), and ice-breaking activities (Salmon 2013).

There has also been a growing attempt to develop effective pedagogical strategies that foster a sense of social presence among online doctoral students (Denman, Corrales, Smyth

and Craven 2018; Effken 2008; Gibbons-Kunka 2017). Many online doctoral programmes adopt the cohort system (i.e., a group of students enter and progress through the programme together in the same order) with paced learning activities. Doctoral students also appreciate the social aspect of such structured online learning opportunities (Lee 2018). Kozar and Lum (2015) demonstrate the effectiveness of online writing groups for doctoral students' retention and motivation. Berry (2017) highlights the usefulness of building small communities within a large online doctoral programme to help online doctoral students feel safe and close to each other. Nevertheless, offering social learning opportunities does not automatically create a sense of community among online students. On the contrary, some learner behaviours in online discussions have been reported as contributing to a weakening of students' sense of community (Phirangee 2016). Some topics of online discussion, involving different perspectives and conflicting ideas, can also cause negative emotions among learners in an online context (Lee and Brett 2015).

Koole's (2014) observation on how Master's students interact with each other in an online learning environment is particularly relevant to this present autoethnographic writing. Informed by Goffman's (1959/1978) dramaturgical theory from his well-recognised book *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Koole theorises students' online interactions as theatrical performances and impression management activities. In online learning space, students present themselves in a particular way that, they believe, is appropriated and appreciated by others, rather than presenting the true self (see also Ross 2011, 2014). When they face cognitive dissonance, due to their strategies of performing specific identities inducing unexpected reactions from the audience, they employ different strategies in order to re-establish cognitive consonance (Koole 2014). All in all, previous studies suggest both the importance and the challenge of developing a strong community among online learners. It is necessary for online tutors, therefore, to help students to be able to share and express honest emotions and authentic selves.

Situating the Autoethnography in Pedagogical Context

I have received my PhD from the University of Toronto in Canada and joined Lancaster University in the UK in September 2015. Since then, I have taught the first module of an online doctoral programme in Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) for the past five years. The module supports first-year doctoral students' social learning and independent research experiences. Students in small groups first explore different research methodologies. They

each plan and conduct an empirical study on the topic of their choice and write a research report as a module assignment. Before sharing the autobiographic story of my current teaching practice in 2020, it may be useful to briefly describe how the module was taught in 2016 (my first association with it) to provide readers with some comparison points.

In 2016, I taught the module in the way I inherited from the previous tutors. Two tutors co-led the module before me, and anecdotally, it was said that teaching the first module could be quite challenging and demanding since tutors needed to offer a significant amount of pastoral care and additional, often emotional, support to brand-new students. The module covered five different research methodologies commonly used in TEL: i) case study, ii) ethnography, iii) grounded-theory, iv) action research, and v) design-based research. Each was taught by a different tutor from the programme team who has expertise in the particular research approach, while I, as a lead tutor, coordinated the co-teaching process and provided a general methodological overview at the beginning. In the first part of the module, students chose one methodology of interest (on a first-come-first-served basis) and learned about it with the expert tutor in a small group of six.

In the second part, students individually developed and carried out their research project with support from myself as lead-tutor (who was perceived as a generalist). I provided personalised feedback on each student's proposal, draft assignment, and final assignment. Despite the learning arrangements in the first part of the module, there was no particular expectation set about students' methodological choice for their assignment project. Many students employed a methodology other than the ones introduced and discussed in the module. There was no clear sense of connection between their learning and research in the module. Thirty doctoral students used more than ten different methodologies with varying degree of quality for their assignments. As the methodological specialists were no longer involved, much of the interaction in the second part was one-on-one (between myself and individual students).

The module design, with its structured division of learning content and tutor labour, made it particularly challenging to develop a strong sense of community. Although there was an apparent sense of being in the same cohort, I observed several critical issues, such as misleading impressions about each other and an exaggerated sense of social presence, which caused a heightened feeling of consistent competition and comparison. These issues prevented the cohort from developing open and honest relationships with one another (this

will be illustrated in greater detail in the next section). Subsequently, at the end of the module, the cohort seemed to be split into several small groups of 'like-minded' people—often those with some physical and cultural proximity—and a few lone learners. From the lead tutor's perception as well, it was challenging to supervise thirty very different projects without being able to utilise effective peer-to-peer support mechanisms. The following autobiographic excerpt illustrates my lived experience of the challenges leading up to the development of the current version of the module.

In January 2016, it all started well. I felt confident and enthusiastic. As a brand-new PhD, I thought I knew exactly what it is like to be a doctoral student, and I was also excited to share what I had learned from my PhD experience with others. However, it did not go well. Following several incidents, I gradually lost my initial confidence and realised that students saw and treated me as a novice with a lack of experience and expertise. Two incidents particularly shook me. Firstly, when I gave feedback on students' research proposals, a couple of students sent me somewhat defensive (and aggressive) emails and claimed that my comments were contradictory to the expert tutors' comments who taught them their chosen methodology. One student said that he/she wished for me to change my 'negative opinions' on his/her plan since it had already been discussed and approved by the other tutor earlier in the module. Secondly, I also found out that some students 'double-checked' my feedback with the expert tutors just 'to make sure' that they fully understood what I meant (or to seek out alternative opinions). I remember thinking 'isn't it ME who knows best what I meant?'. However, as a new member of the team, I decided to let it go, since I did not want to create any trouble with the students (or the other tutors).

I felt extremely embarrassed and hoped no one noticed that I failed to earn respect from my students. Some of the other incidents were rather subtle or meant to be supportive. After giving a feedback session, where I faced a couple of confrontational (rather rude) students, one student kindly wrote to me: 'Kyungmee, be confident! You are the one with a PhD. You are far ahead of us!' I thanked the student; however, the message did not make me feel confident. Instead, I realised that everyone had noticed my failure! Despite the great enthusiasm and passion I had for this new role, feelings of insecurity and self-doubt continuously crept into my interactions with students and made me hesitant and nervous. Everyone else (all students and tutors except for me) in the module seemed to be highly confident and full of experiences and expertise. I was totally intimidated! Without figuring out how to deal with these issues, I just worked extremely hard and put lots of hours into

giving feedback and supporting students' work. I was totally exhausted. Beyond the heavy workload and physical fatigue, I also struggled with all sorts of negative emotions. At least, most students appreciated my effort and mentioned that I was helpful in the module evaluation.

In the following year, in 2017, I was desperate to gain more respect from students. I took a different approach to interact with students: I tried not to be hesitant or compromising but more firm (and authoritarian, which did not work well, in retrospect). I also decided to 'teach' one of the five methodologies to become an expert tutor rather than a coordinator. I gave loads of feedback and support to students (especially those who chose my methodology). Despite the increased workload, I felt more respected and connected to students and their learning. Nevertheless, I could not avoid those difficult situations where students challenged and questioned the legitimacy of my comments in the latter part of the module. Some students still sought other tutors' advice and confirmation on the validity of my comments. I felt that I was in the never-ending competition with other tutors for student respect. I did not back down this time—they had to revise their draft, following my advice no matter whether they trusted it or not. Well… it all seemed to be working fine. However, the module evaluation results included a few fiercely and painfully negative comments: 'If you are not interested in what the tutor is forcing you to do, this module is completely a waste of your time!' I was disappointed and confused again.

In 2018, I felt compelled to scrap the module and re-write it. I decided to teach the entire module alone. Given that students need a lot more pastoral support and guidance during the first module, which is also one of the two longer modules in the programme, giving up the tutor team support was a difficult decision. However, I could not continue the lone battles against the other expert tutors (without them even noticed) all the time. I also decided to introduce a single methodology, autoethnography, with the hope that this radically subjective research approach would pose a shared pedagogical challenge that the cohort could equally experience and collaboratively address. I also believed that the reflective and open nature of autoethnography would help students (and myself) to learn about each other. I will now jump into 2020 and present my autobiographic story about the third attempt to employ autoethnography in my module (read Lee 2019, for a detailed description of the first attempt in 2018).

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Autoethnography in Online Doctoral Studies

This section presents my autobiographic story of observing, supporting, and making sense of online doctoral students' social learning experiences in my module, in which I have employed autoethnography as a pedagogical subject and tool. In order to support readers' engagement with the dialogue, I divide each section into two parts: one, reflective narratives illustrating the phenomenon as a tutor and two, academic discussions making sense of the narratives and drawing conclusions relevant to online doctoral education. When empirically untested assumptions and opinions are presented as part of my autoethnographic narratives, I *italicise* the statements to signpost that those are subjective insights rather than objective facts.

Managing Impressions

Tutor's autobiography: Each January, I meet thirty new students all excited about their new journey on the PhD programme. The students are all professionals working across diverse educational settings in different countries, and most of them have family and other social responsibilities. In December 2019, I am busy updating the module handbook and reading list and setting up a new Moodle site reflecting feedback from the previous cohort. With that all set, just before starting the big run of six months, I also do feel excited and nervous. And then, it goes like this…

The first week's activity: 'post a visual self-introduction that briefly introduces yourself, your professional background, and research interest with a couple of images representing yourself'. Here, I see a lot of confident-looking professionals in posh suits (some photos are obviously too polished, looking like stock photos from a marketing agency). The intended message seems like: '*I am a successful professional. I am good at what I am doing*'. Other photos feature advanced technology (usually, hardware such as a virtual reality headset), exotic buildings (representative images of their institutions or home countries), or smiling students (or clients when they work in corporate settings). Some photos of travellers, dog-walkers, book-readers, and parents also appear, somehow telling me that *'Despite my professional success, I also enjoy my personal life as well'*. This seems like another important message in their introductory posts—I think *'So far, so good. We are all confident professionals with a perfect work-life balance!'* To me, even though they are obviously very different from each other, *these introductory posts sound all the same.*

When it comes to the research interest pitch, it is often even more sophisticated and refined. I can see each of them trying hard to tell each other *'I know enough'*: frequently, by deploying research jargon and listing specific theories and methodologies that they have previously used or are planning to use. These carefully drafted sentences are usually embellished with their great passion for the chosen topics for their PhD study (e.g., technological tools, teaching methods, learner groups). All research interests are tightly related to their professional practices. *I can hear the rather technology-deterministic narratives of problem-fixers or trouble-shooters*—their intended PhDs will figure out how to better use technology to enhance different aspects of educational practice. These kinds of narratives also tell me that *their research belief is fundamentally bounded by a positivist epistemology, which will create real tension later when they are asked to embrace autoethnography as a legitimate form of research* (as discussed in the section on 'Encountering Discomfort', below).

At the end of the post, many add *relatively plain statements: 'I want to learn more and develop my understanding further' and friendly collegial remarks such as 'I look forward to learning from and with all of you.'* These posts quickly establish a welcoming atmosphere as they meet and greet each other, expressing their mutual excitement to be part of this international cohort of successful professionals. I genuinely feel it is such a privilege to meet all these experienced professionals, enthusiastic researchers, and motivated students from all around the world, just at my desk (more precisely, in my Moodle site). However, underneath it all, *I smell a nervous, heavy but fast-spreading air of competition and intimidation.* How do I sense this? Well… how can I not?… That was exactly how I felt in January 2016 (see above). At that time, reading those posts, even as a tutor (with a PhD), I felt I was the least experienced educator in my own module. I was secretly worried about what would happen if I was not good enough to teach these confident students and what if they noticed I did not know this and that, etc. I was busy hiding those worries.

I do not feel the same way in January 2020; however, I believe many of my students do feel that way. Interview data validated my understanding (read more in Lee 2020b). For example, Joseph, a doctoral student said he felt insecure:

> 'I think we all had this sense of insecurity about whether we'd be able to get to grips with what… you know, I'm a lawyer so this is an entirely new discipline, and whether we'd be able to reach the standard. And so I think really the main feeling, the negative

> feeling was the feeling of insecurity… that's the major question on our mind: "would I be able to complete the assignment to a satisfactory standard?"'

Making sense of the story: As noted, online doctoral students' long-established professional identities become a strong foundation for how they enter the new, unfamiliar, learning space and interact with each other. Through their selected photos and well-formed narratives, doctoral students tend to present themselves as confident and experienced professionals rather than new students and novice researchers. By reading those polished posts, students tend to create a somewhat misleading impression of others as all being confident and knowledgeable, and in turn, a sense of intimidation and insecurity in self grows. Thus, I would argue that the function of social presence (or perceived sense of others as real people) is multifaceted and complex in my module. While online courses are often accused of lacking social presence, the problem in my module is, ironically, an overwhelming sense of the presence of others and their carefully managed impressions (Goffman 1978). The more serious issue here is the negative impact of the misleading impression on the cohort as a community (e.g., a sense of competition). It may be more challenging to break the misleading impression than breaking the ice.

Encountering Discomfort

Tutor's autobiography: Students move onto the main part of the module. Here they come up against a set of difficult readings about research philosophy and methodology. Sarah, a student from the 2019 cohort, reflected, 'I was a little "freaked out" at the start with all the readings and the feeling that I was alone in all of this.' To break the misleading impressions about each other in the cohort, I ask them to discuss what they do not know, instead of what they know. Each student, in a smaller group of ten, selects the most difficult paragraph from the assigned readings and discusses what they cannot understand. Usually, a few paragraphs repeatedly appear as the most challenging ones, and so students become emboldened to confess their lack of philosophical foundation and research knowledge.

After this initial 'freaking out' experience, *they gradually realise that it is completely acceptable to say 'I don't know' in this module and it is not necessary to pretend to know something they do not know.* The titles of student posts effectively reflect that: 'Hang on, let me read that again!', 'Terminology Overload!', 'Postmodern Vertigo?'. Of course, some know more and some less. I can see this from the ways that they write their posts about difficult paragraphs. *In addition, there are still several students who put effort into crafting*

the posts in such a way as to highlight what they know. The knowledge gap among thirty students clearly exists; however, the nature of activity makes that gap stand out less. The fact that the chosen readings are not necessarily accessible, in terms of content and style of writing, helps *the heavy air of competition blow over a little.*

And then, here comes autoethnography! Unlike other, more commonly used, methodologies, autoethnography is usually unknown to all students (two students in the 2020 cohort said that they had heard about it before, but none of them had learned about it or used it before). I first share my own autoethnographic writing (Lee 2019) on teaching the present module in 2017, which is discussed earlier in the chapter. The reading includes a detailed description of my emotional reactions to students' disrespectful and aggressive comments—surprise and disappointment to start with, sadness and anger in a later stage, lasting a year or so, and subsequently, a lost sense of confidence and security. The article further explains how I decided to adopt autoethnography as a pedagogical approach to enable both students and tutor to learn about each other.

Students then read a few chapters from the book *Autoethnography* by Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015). From the tutor's perspective, it is almost touching to see *their effort to grip the idea of autoethnography, which at this point is seemingly incomprehensible and further unlikable to many, as the following quotations from forum posts illustrate:*

> 'I am also struggling to see how auto-ethnographic research is empirical. I've searched the [research methodology] book several times and while empiricism does pivot around experience and the senses rather than reasoning [autoethnography] doesn't seem to conform to the verifiable/repeatable requirement. Auto-ethnography does seem to be highly subjective which is in contrast to what I understand empirical research to be—the reduction of subjectivity.' (Christina)

> 'The authors alluded to the idea that the final product is a form of art. This turned "upside-down" my notion of what research is. In my post-positivist mind if research is on one end of the spectrum (objective), art (subjective) is on the other. I teach genre-based writing and I felt that research writing especially should be clear and be written to inform the audience of results in a way that does not leave much opportunity to interpret.' (John)

Despite their hesitation to say they are 'positivist' after the first readings with clear qualitative orientation, *many seem to feel rather uncomfortable and sceptical about 'radically' subjectivist research approach like autoethnography.*

Making sense of the story: Through engaging with a set of difficult readings, complex ideas, and new perspectives, online doctoral students are guided to break their misleading impressions of each other and nurture a culture of openness. Students are encouraged to articulate their feelings of uncertainty and insecurity and share their honest opinions on autoethnography—a radically subjectivist research methodology, which frequently provokes intensive debates among academics as well (see Campbell 2017). Although there has been a growing popularity of qualitative methodologies in educational research (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Merriam 1988), most of my students seem to be inclined to positivist ideas. Even those students with some qualitative research experiences find radical ideas in autoethnography rather overwhelming. Of course, their previous choice of doing a qualitative study may have been made by their 'statistics anxiety' (Onwuegbuzie 2004) or 'mathematics anxiety' (Zeidner 1991) rather than a genuine appreciation of interpretivism.

This tension in doctoral students is more likely grounded in the general disposition of academia and the dominant social value of 'fact' (Moore 2004). The locus of 'the self' in a long tradition of scientific research, underpinned by the positivist paradigm, has been rigidly placed in the third space outside the research context, process, and findings (Smith 1983). Researchers' own perceptions, insights, and emotions are perceived as a source of harmful bias that pollutes research outcomes, and must be removed from one's inquiry (Hara 1995). Consequently, as the above excerpts demonstrate, students tend to draw a clear separation between the researcher and the researched—feeling particularly nervous about using 'I' words in their academic writing. Thus, reading autoethnography in a personal and informal writing style (like this present chapter) makes many of them confused and uncomfortable. Such a shared sense of confusion and discomfort, however, turns the regular online discussion into an open dialogue with lots of emotions and opinions expressed—one critical step to create a community.

Discussing Vulnerability

Tutor's autobiography: Now we are in March 2020. It took a full month for students to make sense of autoethnography as a legitimate research methodology. Whether they agree or not with the fundamental principles promoted by autoethnographers, they now know that

there are people called autoethnographers in academia. While most students, such as Christina and John above, express their appreciation of my openness to share the personal and emotional journey of bringing autoethnography into this module, *they now worry and feel nervous about the idea of doing the same themselves. At the beginning of the module, no one seemed to be shy about sharing their professional self and research interests in their visual self-introduction post. However, interestingly enough, as soon as they are asked to think and share about difficult aspects of their own professional and educational experiences, many suddenly recall that they are 'a very private person'.* The discussion topic for the week is:

> 'Let's start brainstorming now! What are we going to do about this module's autoethnography project?... We can start by thinking about your own personal experiences and emotions. Tell us one of your stories (related to your professional or educational experiences in a very broad sense) that currently make you feel uncomfortable, difficult… Please briefly describe your personal experiences that you want to understand more fully, deeply, and meaningfully by researching them and yourself.'

Here, the notion of 'vulnerability' emerges. For example, Joe starts his post by saying:

> 'As a naturally shy and private person, I suddenly got the fear of having to write personal information about myself for others to read?… if I write about my job and something that I don't like, or that I want to improve, am I leaving [myself] vulnerable, will the reader think that I can't do it, or I am doing it wrong?… when [autoethnographers] put on paper what they are thinking and feeling about a person or a situation, it could affect the relationships or their jobs!'

Margaret also has mixed feelings:

> 'On the one hand, I love learning more about myself, why I do things and how I react to certain situations. This is right up my street, so I am fascinated to see what I can come up with! On the other hand, I am an intensely private person. My work life and my home life are often completely separate, and I like to keep it this way… I am an introvert by nature so I expect [to] find the process very daunting and uncomfortable. I guess it'll be about finding the balance!'

Even though these part-time students originally entered the module as full-time professionals, as Joe and Margaret's reflections hint, *they suddenly want to separate their study from their*

work. It is clear to me that students have a very selective sense of how to construct, manage, and present their professional identity in the online learning space: *it should be not too personal, nor breaking into their 'home life'*. Even when their research interests are closely linked to their professional practice, if I take a close look at their chosen research subject, it is always about others. *That is, students are rather eager to study something problematic and unsatisfactory about 'others'*—most frequently students or other stakeholders of their practice. For example, 'why are students not using technology?' Even when they want to study their own teaching practice, they create an impersonalised teacher group and ask 'how can teachers use technology more effectively?'

When they (are asked to) discuss the potential topic for their autoethnography assignment, there is a strong urge to set up the right balance between being personal and being objective in their posts. I can hear *some students shout out at me, 'FINE…! I will share just a little but not too much', but I can also see they subsequently are unsure about how much is 'not too much'.* When facing the vulnerability of autoethnography, *some students are desperate to find somewhere safe. Unfortunately, the cohort is not yet perceived as a safe space to bring much of their honest (or unmanaged presentation of) self at this moment.* The positive side of this is, however, that I can now see the initial ambience of competition among students has almost gone away as they have a common enemy and worry. They mingle better, chatting about the new challenge they face. They openly and honestly share their concerns and discomfort over the vulnerability of the self in autoethnography.

To relieve the increasing tension, I write an announcement post: 'I know some of the autoethnographies shared in the module have scared you. However, your autoethnography does not have to be that dramatic.' I add: 'ordinary people's common stories and everyday experiences can be a great source of autoethnographic inquiry to establish a greater understanding of society and social relationships'. It is important to reassure students that they can share as much as they feel comfortable and appropriate. I also stress that no one will have access to their autoethnographies other than us (and a module moderator)—'What happens in Module 1, stays in Module 1!'

Making sense of the story: online doctoral students tend to choose to conduct their thesis study on the topic closely connected to their professional practice; often within an institution that they are working at as an insider researcher (Unluer 2012). Thus, there seems no clear disconnection between the self, as a researcher, and the researched in this context.

Nevertheless, striving for the perceived imperative of 'scientific' research and 'objective' researcher (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2018), students tend to put significant effort into separating themselves from the researched. In this context, when embarking their autoethnography, in which the self becomes a subject of their research, doctoral students face a huge dilemma—they are intrigued by the idea of researching their own experiences, on the one hand, being nervous about revealing their own emotions, on the other. It is primarily the 'emotion' part that bothers students. Ironically, however, such a dilemma becomes a useful ground for students to open up themselves to each other. As the above excerpts demonstrate, doctoral students already start to write about 'fear' of writing autoethnography and 'worries' about being judged—another critical step to developing a trusting relationship. Therefore, the ethical issues posed by adopting autoethnography, not only on research practice but on teaching practice, are not minimal (see Doloriert and Sambrook 2009). It is important to stress the tutor's role in helping students to overcome their fears and engender a feeling of security, by setting up the principle of confidentiality of the 'cohort' conversation.

Embracing Vulnerability

Tutor's autobiography: In the midst of the vulnerability and privacy panic, here they come! Several students have quickly adjusted to this radical subjectivism, enjoying the newly found freedom of projecting their voices in their research thinking and writing. These students become key helpers in creating a vulnerability-tolerant culture in the module. They take a big risk and 'bravely' open up themselves. These student-autoethnographers, who are genuinely interested in autobiographic writing (or writing about their personal experiences and deeper emotions) re-direct the flow of conversation by laying down their deep frustrations with professional and personal life. Their stories include being laid-off or bullied at work, having disabilities or difficult childhoods, experiencing challenges in parenthood, and so on. Some of them are born to be storytellers, naturally good at personalised and emotional writing. Their stories, and their voices, come across very powerfully—enough to enable others to have a break from the conversations on the danger of autoethnography.

The central theme running through most of those stories is, ironically, a lack of confidence and a sense of being undervalued. There is a strong feeling of dissatisfaction with their current professional life (more precisely, their institutional position and status). Many learning designers or educational technologists, for example, experience their voices and contributions being undervalued by their colleagues or academics. Academics and tutors,

employed at a university on a casual contract, keep failing to get a permanent position. This is often attributed to not having a PhD, so it is hoped that becoming a doctor will bring them to a desired but currently unreachable place. These stories provide a very different narrative about their motivation to pursue a PhD from the ones in their earlier introductions (i.e., the improvement of their practice and a genuine interest in research). *Those stories powerfully reveal secrets about online PhD students: their true feelings of insecurity that were initially hidden underneath the polished images and crafted sentences in their self-introduction posts.* That is a moment of realisation that triggers strong emotional reactions, not only from writers but also readers.

The more surprising part, therefore, comes slightly later when others start to reply to these stories and interact with the authors. There is an enormous sense of acknowledgement, agreement, and appreciation in the whole cohort now. Those shy and private peers also begin to share similar emotions and stories. As in 2018 and 2019, the term 'imposter syndrome' creeps into the discussion forum, and suddenly, almost everyone admits that they suffer from it and several want to look into that in their autoethnography assignment. It is an epiphany that disrupts and transforms their long-established perceptions and understanding about the self, and their social relationships with others. I can, metaphorically, see my students walking into dialogue in a Bakhtinian sense—a process of ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981)—as an authentic self.

The epiphany is quickly shared across the cohort and there is a shared sense of relief. I remember my own such moments, too! In 2018, the year that I first introduced this methodology in this module, I had two epiphanies that have permanently changed my pedagogical beliefs about teaching PhD students on the programme. It was when I read a couple of students' brave posts of the kinds described above. The first realisation was that many students, who intimidated me with their posh professional images, were suffering from imposter syndrome. The second was that so was I! I was deeply hurt by those harsh comments from the previous cohort; and then, underneath all of the emotions, there was always a strong sense of self-doubt: 'I have just finished my PhD. Students must have noticed that I am not good enough to teach them'. It was a big relief to know that students felt the same way about themselves. I still have moments of self-doubt here and there in my teaching, but I do not try to hide it anymore. Instead, I share those moments with students to create a culture of acknowledging and supporting each other's vulnerability.

Making sense of the story: As soon as some members of the cohort abandon their carefully constructed images and share their genuine feelings and thoughts, the cohort quickly develops into a supportive community with a better sense of each other (i.e., a balanced level of social presence). The great pedagogical potential that autoethnography has for facilitating online students' authentic learning is realised when the individual members of the cohort community decide to embrace vulnerability in their learning and research. By engaging with autoethnography, the cohort experiences shared epiphanies—the realisation of weaknesses, both in the self and in others—and this opens up possibilities for individuals to become authentic beings in their online learning space. A task of facilitating authentic learning in adult education contexts is often approached as a cognitive matter such that learning tasks are designed to resemble real-life problems, and learning outcomes (new knowledge) is intended to be applicable to adult learners' everyday practice (Lee, 2020a). However, authentic learning is also ontological and social, which involves a dynamic process of experiencing disorienting dilemmas, engaging with open-ended dialogue, and transforming perspectives. As illustrated above, the process does not automatically occur. In particular, when it comes to online doctoral study, students' strong professional identities and effective presentations of the self make it even more challenging to become authentic. Thus, radical pedagogical interventions such as autoethnography, supported by well-designed learning activities, have the potential to facilitate authenticity in online learning communities.

Becoming a Community

Tutor's autobiography: It is now June. I am again surprised how fast time goes! Despite the initial struggle to engage with ideas of researching and revealing the self, each student has successfully conducted their autoethnography. For the past six months, the cohort has experienced multiple epiphanies together and grown into a strong community. I now enjoy reading their final assignments—I feel privileged to read such open and in-depth accounts of their experiences and emotions. Fred, a colleague who has moderated my module also comments:

> 'Thanks for the chance to read these assignments—I became so fascinated by them…! You have drawn out some really good work from these students and they have shared experiences so very openly with you through this medium, which is both excellent and inspiring. Many of them have done really well for a first assignment, by integrating different data collection and analysis techniques into their studies. Well done!'

At the end of the module, students briefly reflect on their experiences of conducting autoethnography. Students' experiences with, and views on, autoethnography are varied. To some, 'autoethnography is a stroke of genius!' (Linda). They have genuinely enjoyed the process of becoming an authentic self in their own research and sharing their findings with others. Robert reflects:

> 'A whole new world has been opened to me… the fact that we had to write an autoethnography was really smart on Kyungmee´s side as she showed us that everyone has something to say. I think a lot or most of us doubted that we have anything to say at this point, but by writing an autoethnography we learned that our voices do count too and that we have indeed something to say even if it is "only" about our own experience. Also, using qualitative data helped to validate that feeling.'

Of course, however, doing autoethnography is not a happy story for everyone (some more happy stories are featured in my earlier writings in Lee, 2019; 2020a). Not all students have been fully convinced about the legitimacy of autoethnography and the idea of researching the self. Here are Chloe and Peter reflecting on their learning at the end of the module:

> 'Coming from a quantitative background… I like the idea of the mixed methods approach. I think autoethnography is an interesting method, one which I may not use again, but I can see the value of having it on the first module.' (Chloe)

> 'I haven't really enjoyed it; autoethnography is too self-indulgent for me… I can't imagine why anyone would be interested in what I have to say about myself and my experiences, and I'm not sure that I really want to tell people either… I've found it difficult to marry serious research with a personal subject and my research has felt superficial.' (Peter)

Nevertheless, to me, the more important parts of their reflections are where they speak about their cohort community and each other, rather than about their perspectives on autoethnography:

> 'I was quite intimidated initially due to the skills and expertise of everyone else in the cohort. But as I moved through the module this became an excellent help and resource for me to tap into. I am happy to move forward with such a helpful and engaging bunch!' (Chloe)

> '[The module has been] enjoyable on the whole, especially in forming a supportive network of peers. Thank you everyone! [it has been] pleasing because I feel that we are part of the university community, that we can have our say, and that, as a cohort, we can influence the experience that we have.' (Peter)

Regardless of the personal disposition toward autoethnography as a research methodology and the satisfaction with their module experiences, it is clear that there is now a strong sense of togetherness and emotional connection among the cohort community. It is surprising to see how open and honest students are in their final reflection posts. For example, Mina wrote about the disruptive changes in her perceptions during the module period as 'writing the autoethnography has not been easy and has forced me to come to the conclusion that I don't actually like my job very much'. Tom also reflected that 'writing the research paper made me unbearably sad for many days though. As I chose the topic, I suppose that is my own fault.' Given the lack of anonymity in their posts on the Moodle site, such level of emotional honesty was rare to see before I employed autoethnography. I was feeling a little unsure what and how to respond to these posts, and then other cohort members quickly started to reply with heartfelt sympathy, warm encouragement, and emotional support.

Making sense of the narratives

The quality of individual students' autoethnographies as learning and research outcomes varies across the cohort. Nevertheless, the pedagogical merit of employing autoethnography as a tool to support students' authentic learning experiences is clearly demonstrated in the openness of their autoethnographic narratives in the module assignments. Students have deeply engaged with their inner thoughts and emotions and social identities and relationships, which are often obscure and hidden, by doing autoethnography. The autoethnographic inquiry has helped them to construct a much more sophisticated understanding of who they are as a human, teacher, student, partner, parent, and researcher. Such an ontological understanding of the self may become a firm base for them to become independent and competent doctoral researchers. Furthermore, the cohort has walked through the module and the 'first' doctoral challenge together as a community. Since the initial shock about the incomprehensibility of the first reading assignment and the subsequent discomfort caused by the radically subjective ideals of autoethnography, the cohort has been given multiple opportunities to encounter and overcome the fear of being real and vulnerable to each other.

The meaningfulness of their social learning experiences is well-recorded in how the cohort share and discuss their module experiences with each other.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a unique account of how doctoral students learn and interact with each other in a specific online learning environment. Each learner comes into an online learning environment with their long-held perspectives, professional identities and social relationships shaped and influenced by their daily practices and habits. Who they are in their everyday life strongly influences how they participate in learning activities and interact with others in their online space (Fawns, Aitken and Jones 2019; Lee 2018). In this particular group of doctoral students who are working professionals, pursuing their doctorates part-time, the interconnection between their daily practice and doctoral study tends to be stronger.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to see a genuine connection between their early online presentation of the self, which is often too professional and polished, and their actual self in everyday life. In turn, I have argued, the impression management behaviours initially enacted by my online doctoral students prevent them from having meaningful dialogues with each other and developing into a community. That is, an unsophisticated and blind pursuit of peer-to-peer interactions in online doctoral studies can be rather harmful to the community—although participants may feel others as ‘real’ people and think that they, themselves are seen as ‘real’ people to others. Acting like a human, rather than a machine, by using appropriate social cues, expressions, and skills, does not mean that he or she is being authentic. A large volume of conversation records and discussion threads created by peer-to-peer interactions does not mean that they are a genuine community, which embraces mutual vulnerability.

I have developed and utilised a set of pedagogical strategies to foster a genuine sense of social presence, achieved by a deeper understanding of each other as authentic beings with unique struggles and weaknesses. As described earlier in this chapter, my students open up in my modules when they are challenged and guided to admit and share their intellectual, professional, and personal difficulties with other cohort members. An autoethnography project that begins with sharing a story of everyday struggles and an emotional moment of negativity enables each student to face and overcome a fear of being vulnerable. Reciprocal openness and mutual support subsequently strengthen their bond and deepen their appreciation of each other. Consequently, the cohort develops into a safe community that

embraces vulnerability of its members who, in turn, remain authentic to the self and the community.

It is important to stress that the story introduced in this chapter is just one of many possible scenarios for how online doctoral studies can be facilitated and supported. As suggested, even within the same programme or module, students' learning experiences can be varied according to their personalities and tutors' pedagogical approaches. Given that online doctoral education is not a single, homogeneous, practice, any of the arguments made by this chapter need to be taken up with full consideration of contextual surroundings. I hope that my narrative provides enough details for readers to make sense of authentic aspects of the pedagogical situations that I have been striving to nurture.

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