Chapter 15. Why don't I feel empowered? Autoethnography and inclusive critical pedagogy in online doctoral education

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

Autoethnography is an effective methodological approach that enables researchers to increase their critical awareness of different forms of inequalities and injustices deeply embedded in today's digitalized and internationalized higher education contexts. This chapter presents the author's autobiographic writing of teaching autoethnography in an online doctoral programme and theoretical reflection on the social meanings of her experiences. Her reflection builds on Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1989) influential critique of the empowerment principle of critical pedagogy and adds a more nuanced account that reflects the growing diversity in online higher education. The author, an online tutor with underprivileged cultural identities, inclusively enacts critical pedagogy in her research methodology module by embracing the autoethnographic principles of vulnerability, emotional dialogues, and unknowability. The pedagogical values of autoethnography for training doctoral researchers have immediate bearings on improving research culture and practice among researchers in digital higher education.

INTRODUCTION: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN ONLINE DOCTORAL EDUCATION

Each year, I teach autoethnography to a cohort of thirty doctoral students in my research methodology module in an online doctoral programme that concerns one particular area of educational practice: technology-enhanced learning (TEL).

Autoethnography is a research approach that combines personal stories and ethnographic research, aiming to develop the social, cultural, and political meanings of a researcher's personal experiences through "autobiographical writing" (Chang, 2008). In this form of research, autoethnographers investigate and articulate their inner (often subconscious) thoughts and emotions and use them to further explore and interpret focused aspects of social problems and cultural practices (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnographers are research participants whose stories, memories, and emotions directly serve the research process as a primary data source, and simultaneously, authors who are writing and sharing their stories (and interpretations of those stories) with others.

Therefore, a researcher in autoethnography, as a full and visible member in both the research process and outcome (Anderson, 2006), 1) foregrounds their personal experiences and emotions in research and writing; 2) illustrates the sense-making processes of their experiences and emotions; 3) uses and shows reflexivity to turn back to their social identities and relationships in order to consider how they influence their sense-making processes; 4) offers insider knowledge of the cultural phenomenon by researching and writing from the lived, inside moments of their experiences; 5) describes and critiques cultural norms and practices; and 6) seeks reciprocal responses from audiences (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnography is also considered a form of art due to the evocative nature of autobiographical writing that foregrounds researchers' emotions and captures the details of researchers' lived moments (Adams & Holman Jones, 2018; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Online doctoral students, who are also working practitioners in higher education (e.g. lecturers, academic developers, learning designers, educational technologists), walk into my module with a good level of educational and research experiences (Lee, 2020a). Many already have strong ideas about what and whom to research: student research interests vary according to their professional roles and contexts – from improving online course design, student learning performance, or teacher pedagogical practice to understanding the impact

of educational policies, initiatives or technologies. Thus, they want to learn 'practical' and 'readily applicable' knowledge for their pre-fixed research agendas. For example, one of the first things they ask is which referencing tool is the best among several, often followed by how to use different coding software.

From Week 1, doctoral students are all eager to commence research projects that are strategically (conveniently) situated in their own workplace. Nevertheless, none of these students is the centre of their research—instead, they are 'partial' and 'invisible' members of the planned research process and outcome. Most even believe that they are not allowed to use 'I' in their academic writing—they were indeed explicitly taught to remain objective in their research from their previous training (whether it is possible or not is a separate matter though, see Carter, 2002). They want to observe and investigate neighbouring others' behaviours at a proximal distance, but somewhat (magically) objectively. Unsurprisingly and understandably, when these objective doctoral researchers first realize that they are doing (or writing) autoethnography as a module assignment, many do not feel particularly comfortable about employing this radically subjectivist and critical research approach that positions themselves at the centre of their inquiry. After covering some of the philosophical foundations (i.e., epistemological and ontological grounds for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research), I begin to initiate and facilitate students' autoethnography conversations:

> Let's start brainstorming now! What are we going to do about this module's autoethnography project?... We can then start by thinking about your own personal experiences and emotions. Tell us one of your stories that currently make you feel uncomfortable, uneasy, difficult, unclear, etc... so you feel like it is worth spending time and effort on to better understand or ultimately to make yourself feel better about it.

A couple of students each year actually say something like: "having to do autoethnography is what currently makes me feel uncomfortable, uneasy, difficult, unclear…", although they do not choose it as an assignment topic (as a tutor, I would be absolutely delighted to read their autoethnography about 'having to do autoethnography' though, it may be too risky from students' perspective). In addition to these students, many others find this new research approach confusing. Guiding students through this initial stage of confusion (and subsequent resistance in some cases) and helping them experience the pleasure (and consequent value) of doing autoethnography requires tremendous pedagogical effort. Extended hours go into giving each student clear and practical guidance while maintaining gentle and encouraging relationships with them throughout the module period of six months.

<A> AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The question is, then, why I insist on this problematic and labour-intensive teaching and research methodology in my module, where I can easily do more widely and commonly used (and so, acceptable) research methodology in the TEL field. To give readers a sense of the weight of this question, I can start by admitting that it is not only students who find doing autoethnography uncomfortable but also some of my colleagues teaching on the same programme. For the past four years, since I first introduced autoethnography in my methodology module as the main assignment, I have continuously received criticism from my colleagues. Some criticisms result from genuine misunderstanding (or a lack of understanding) of what autoethnography is and the others more directly arise from their dissatisfaction with my pedagogical approach.

The former includes concerns about poor learning outcomes caused by i) a lack of exposure to diverse research methods *since students only do autoethnography*, which is not

true—autoethnography is an overarching approach, and students employ a range of different research methods (i.e. data collection strategies and analysis techniques) and subsequently, the outcomes represent a greater level of diversity and creativity; and ii) a lack of conversations on research ethics *since students just collect self-data*, which is also not *true*—most students collect data from their closest others (more diverse groups of 'others' including friends, families, colleagues, students, and themselves). Subsequently, students think about relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) and self-ethics more seriously and exercise ethics in their research process and the outcome more carefully. In fact, telling detailed stories about personal struggles deeply rooted in social relationships—while maintaining the anonymity of others in their stories, avoiding misrepresenting unknown intentions in others' behaviours, and protecting the future relationships with others—is indeed a challenging task from which students learn a lot about research ethics. Thus, I respond to the concerns accordingly.

However, some other, more fundamental, criticisms of my pedagogy (teaching philosophy) shut me up, often creating uncomfortable silence in a meeting room (or email traffic). Although such criticisms are multi-focal and grounded in complex power relationships among the teaching team, some repeated ones are well-captured in points raised by Colleague A in their recent email to the teaching team:

- I would prefer to allow students to use a methodology that is commensurate with their own epistemological and ontological stance having just discussed such things in module 1.
- I do prefer a student-centred approach to teaching that supports students to develop in the direction that they choose.
- I also believe in the provision of alternative forms of assessment for disabled students who may feel uncomfortable with an auto-ethnographic study such as those on the autistic spectrum.

The shared theme in these criticisms is a breach of inclusive teaching practice. In Colleague A's eyes, my teaching must be authoritarian, teacher-centred, or even exclusive (of those who are not 'able'). At face value, their arguments are all sound and politically correct. However, the essence of these criticisms is incredibly frustrating and interesting at the same time since 'inclusively' enacting critical pedagogy in my module is the point of departure of my journey of teaching autoethnography. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) aims to empower students to engage with rational dialogue, through which students develop a critical consciousness of social oppressions that produce struggles in their lives and liberate themselves. Critical pedagogues conceptualize the classroom as a political site of liberation and students as active agents and "cultural producers who can rewrite their experiences and perceptions" (Giroux, 1997, p. 263). Ultimately, I teach autoethnography to enact 'inclusive' critical pedagogy to help everyone in the module, including myself, focus on their unique life struggles and engage with the critical sense-making process of the struggles (this will be unpacked more in the rest of the chapter).

Nevertheless, I feel it is too much work (or too many words) to explain and prove the inclusivity of my pedagogy. I am not even sure where to start, so I remain silent, thinking: 'maybe one day, I can write about it', and today is that day. Let me first situate my story in a broader higher education context.

DIVERSITY IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

Online learning and teaching have become core aspects of higher education practice. Online higher education—especially distance programmes in which learning and teaching activities are mediated by communication technology without regular face-to-face meetings—has contributed to a growing diversity among university students outside the campus. Given the

increased accessibility of online higher education (as often argued by anyone, anytime, and anywhere claims, see Lee, 2017) and the growing diversity of online students (not only in their nationality but in their socio-cultural backgrounds), researchers' criticality and sensitivity are more important than ever (Lee & Bligh, 2019). Simply or uncritically celebrating the increased accessibility and diversity in online higher education can overlook and dismiss the significant differences and inequalities among students in their social positions and circumstances.

Diversity in online higher education is not only manifested in student populations but reflected in a growing number of academic staff with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The diversity that penetrates both parties of online classrooms (i.e., teachers and students) has created a unique pedagogical space with unexpected power struggles and tensions. The simplistic conceptualization of power relationships between teachers and students is also not applicable in such a space. It cannot be assumed that teachers have authority over their classrooms and their students; instead, they have their own power struggles with or against their students. Beyond the classroom boundaries, many teachers are also subjected to unequal power relationships with their colleagues, senior managers, and university—often being oppressed within those relationships (the same can be said about other professions involved in higher education, including researchers).

Especially in the current accountability regime of higher education in the UK, which functions through various evaluative mechanisms (e.g. the National Student Survey and Teaching Excellence Framework), teachers are also under ongoing surveillance and regulation (or self-regulation, see Beetham's chapter in this volume). Furthermore, there are diverse forms of student resistance toward teacher authority evident across the higher education sector. Many teachers do not feel autonomous nor empowered in this context, and those from less dominant backgrounds feel even less so. Thus, online courses can be conceptualized as a microcosm of society into which all participants come in with their unequal positionality in the outside world. Such conceptualization enables online educators and researchers to see complex power relationships and struggles among members of online higher education—beyond what surfaces on their screen.

The next section will conceptually unpack the limitations of critical pedagogy, building upon Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1989) well-known critique, "Why doesn't this feel empowering?" and Maha Bali's (2014) subsequent attempt to answer the question within the online higher education context.

<A> ILLUSIONS OF EMPOWERMENT IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Ellsworth's (1989) critically reflected on her experiences of teaching an antiracist course as a White middle-class woman and professor engaged with a diverse group of students. Its relevance to this chapter lies in her critique of the Freirean notion of "emancipatory authority" (1970), which implies that a teacher knows racism 'better' than his/her students. This critique fundamentally comes from the awareness of her privileged positionality in society, particularly compared to the students of colour in her classroom—initially set as a target group of her liberating effort. Ellsworth (1989) states, despite her lived struggles with sexism: "My understanding and experience of racism will always be constrained by my white skin and middle-class privilege" (p. 308).

As discussed above, the assumption that teachers have systematized authority over their students is arguably problematic in today's diversified and internationalized higher education context. Even though we assume (or pretend) that teachers somehow possess authoritarian power, it is still problematic to believe that this power can be simply redistributed to students (when teachers attempt to do so). Ellsworth criticizes the illusionary nature of the empowerment rhetoric in critical pedagogy in three different aspects: firstly, given the "essentially paternalistic project of education itself", the idealistic notion of empowerment obscures the "negative effects of power imbalances within the classroom" (p.

306) and craftily turns the negative into the positive—something sounds better and more democratic. In turn, it deprives critical pedagogues of opportunities to critically reflect upon the systematic injustice created by their educational practices.

Secondly, the empowerment tactic proposed in critical pedagogy is based on a particular perspective on what is (in-)justice and what is (un-)desirable by members of society. Although teachers are often positioned as learners who re-learn about students' realities and knowledge, the ultimate purpose of teacher learning is to successfully mediate students' learning in the teachers' direction. That is, the idea of empowerment in critical pedagogy is still directed and restricted by the authority of teachers who know 'better' than students.

Thirdly, and subsequently, teacher authority becomes one of the necessary conditions for enacting critical pedagogy. Teachers liberate students by effectively and 'rightly' guiding them to realize and address the oppressions and restrictions in their lives. Thus, regardless of how empowered students are, their guided destination is set and fixed according to teachers' political agendas and interests. Therefore, the empowerment rhetoric is somewhat circular in its logic, and then, one can ask, 'is it really empowerment?' At the same time, the view about teachers being not one of them (i.e., the oppressed) raises a critical question about the legitimacy of teachers' political understandings in the first place. Ellsworth concludes that such vague rhetoric neither accurately reflects the oppressive formations of educational interactions nor adequately provides the practical guidance for critical pedagogues who wish to create a safe and democratic space in their classrooms.

Ellsworth further argues that the fundamental assumption, which constitutes the empowerment rhetoric, is the possibility of 'rational dialogue' among students. In other words, critical pedagogy promotes student voices as both means and outcome of the empowerment, through which each student brings their own experiences of oppression and self-realization into the classroom dialogue. Voices of students from disadvantaged and subordinated social groups, which are previously silenced and distorted by "oppressive cultural and educational formations" (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 309), are expected to be spoken and shared during the dialogue. However, such expectation is also constructed based on a limited understanding of the unequal power relationships existing among students. Contrary to the hopes of critical pedagogues, underrepresented students tend to find it challenging to participate in classroom discussions (and often choose to remain silent).

Bali (2014), in response to Ellsworth (1989), effectively captures the unequal power relationships between students from dominant cultural backgrounds (US/Western) and underprivileged cultural backgrounds (Muslim/Arab world), which is manifested in their unequal contributions to a web-based video-conferencing dialogue. There are at least three different challenges experienced by the underprivileged student group, which constrain their active participation in the intercultural dialogue. Firstly, Bali notices huge variations in Arab students' access to technical infrastructure and support, whereas most Western students are well-equipped:

> Despite equal numbers of Arab/Muslim and US/Western students in each group, the voices of the Arab/Muslim side were unevenly represented, because technology unequally privileged the voices of the already-privileged Arabs/Muslims in the group (Burbules, 2006), while also increasing the overall privilege of the US/Western students in relation to the Arab/Muslim students, creating at least two levels of complexity. (p. 211)

Secondly, the pedagogical emphasis on dialogue further privileges Western students who are more familiar with discussion-based learning approaches, while many Arab students are accustomed to learning from teacher-centred lectures. Some Arab students with lower English language proficiency face additional challenges to express their opinions during the dialogue (even to understand what is being expressed by other students). Social and personal disposition towards silence among a particular group of Arab students (e.g. female

Muslims) adds another layer of complexity since their silence can be understood differently as disempowerment, active listening/agreement, or passive resistance/disagreement.

Within the unequal power relationships—and subsequently, unequal contributions to the dialogue—between Western and Arab students, Bali (2014) argues that Western 'socially just' views are often exclusively spoken and accepted at the end of the dialogues. For example, the discussion on homosexuality silences some Arab students who somehow know that their genuine opinions on the topic would not be considered politically correct by their counterparts. On the other hand, when those "politically incorrect" opinions are spoken, Western students are also hesitant to engage with further dialogues to challenge those opinions—the "extreme tolerance of differences among cultures" (p. 213) tends to prevent students from having rational dialogues and forming solidarity against social injustices.

Unequal power relationships (and radical perspective differences) exist not only between Western and Arab students but among Arab students themselves, who are also divided into multiple gender and class groups. Lee (2018) reports similar outcomes from observing student behaviours in a computer-assisted multiliteracies programme, where South Korean students participate in a series of intercultural dialogues with Iranian students. The inequalities among Korean students are evident throughout the programme—those who joined the programme with more social capital (e.g., access to private English lessons, previous international experiences) were more active, taking the lead in their group projects (while others without similar levels of social capital remained passive and silent). Consequently, those active students gain more positive learning experiences and outcomes from the programme, which further increases the inequalities among the group.

In conclusion, multiple forms of social injustices and power struggles exist in online classrooms. The set of assumptions, which constitute critical pedagogy—such that the teacher has power over students, the power can be handed over to students, students have equal voices, students can engage with rational dialogue, and students can form solidarity to fight against the oppressed—may not be valid in such contexts. The following section presents my autobiographic narrative, illustrating some challenges I have faced as a tutor from an underprivileged (or less privileged) social background. In this evocative writing, I use the second person to help readers better relate themselves to the story.

POWER TO EMPOWER: WHY DON'T I FEEL EMPOWERED?

If you are an online higher educator (and researcher) interested in issues of social inequalities (e.g., classism, racism, sexism, ageism), you may find critical pedagogy informative and powerful. You may enthusiastically read, accept, and grow faith in Paulo Freire's (1970) vision of education as a means to liberate the oppressed. You may feel enlightened to see how the oppressive power structures in society are reinforced and strengthened by the unequal university system. You may subsequently concur with the necessity of—cry-out for—critical pedagogy. Once you cross the line, you may find it impossible to unsee everyday injustice in your society and university. You may become committed (or obligated) to 'act', inspired by Freire's idea of praxis.

Up to here, it is a slick story of the birth of a critical pedagogue. Now, you walk into your classroom with the noble determination of liberating and humanizing your students, and you remind yourself that 'it is the pedagogy of THE OPPRESSED'. Thus, you need to empower your students by avoiding teacher-centred instruction and encouraging student-centred dialogues—you feel ready for it. But something starts getting a little off here. You look at your students. They are confident-looking educational professionals pursuing a doctorate at one of the most highly-rated educational departments in the UK. Many of them are more experienced educators than yourself, and some are academics or teachers in higher education just like yourself. It is evident that they possess social and educational privileges that have allowed them to enter your classroom in the first place.

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They are not like illiterate, silenced Chilean peasants (or urban workers), as portrayed by Freire (1970), who would build solidarity towards liberating themselves from a shared oppressor. At this point, you may be reminded of Foucault's (1995) refutation against the dichotomous conceptualization of power, which categorizes human beings into two groups: oppressors and the oppressed (Lee, 2020b). Yes, no one is free from the institutionalized forms of disciplinary power, which govern and regulate their thoughts and behaviours. Everyone is subjected to the oppressive power effects in their society: in the grand scheme of argumentation, all of your students (and you) may be oppressed under the competitive neoliberal regime of higher education. However, injustice certainly exists in every society, small or large, manifested in diverse forms of social inequalities and power struggles between different groups of people, even in your classroom. The socio-economic conditions and educational opportunities that people have are not the same.

You feel now rather desperate, looking around your classroom more carefully. It is indeed a very diverse group. You have a large number of international students—almost half of your class are from outside the UK. They may have experienced terrible racism and discrimination. You then realize that you are teaching them ONLINE! Most of your international students live in their home country, where they may be the ones with privileges and power. Does this mean that they experience racism only in your classroom? Online? You also have a large number of female students—relatively common in most courses offered by education departments across the globe. You somehow know that they may have faced forms of sexism throughout their upbringing and career. They may want to bring those experiences into dialogues within the cohort.

Feeling hopeful, but only briefly, your thoughts move to more practical 'how' questions. You look at the title of your module handbook: *Research Methods in Education and Social Science Settings*. Yes… you teach online doctoral students how to plan and conduct educational research (not critical race theories nor feminist theories). They are in TEL (not in educational sociology). How are you going to engage your students in critical dialogues in this context? How can you convincingly and naturally bring the issues of racism, sexism, and classism into your module without facing student resistance? Your doctoral students tend to be honest about their dissatisfaction with (or disappointment in) your teaching. Their frowning faces, even at a distance, make you nervous.

'Why am I so nervous?' You pause and think. You then realize that you are a coloured immigrant woman and an early-career academic. While your middle-class privileges have been left back in your home country, your non-native speaker status continues to threaten your pedagogical legitimacy. Does this matter? You know that you need to empower your students. However, do you have the power to empower them? You now feel puzzled even more. Does this mean that your words as a critical pedagogue turn into an alienated and alienating 'blah', as Freire (1970) warns? So, you ask a question: 'Why don't I feel empowered?' instead of 'Why doesn't this feel empowering?' Although Ellsworth (1989) also hinted at her relational disadvantages compared to her White male students, the challenges raised by your relational positionality to your doctoral students are uniquely different from Ellsworth's.

Upon the realization that your students, at least on the surface, appear to be more privileged than you, enacting the empowerment principle becomes even more challenging. Your genuine feeling of disempowerment may further harm your self-perception and self-confidence. It seems intuitive to want to hide your lack of authority (and subsequently, a lack of confidence) by striving to gain more respect from students by emphasizing your intellectual superiority (or taking more authoritarian attitudes). However, such efforts alienate you even more from the empowerment principle in critical pedagogy. Without sorting your own 'inner' struggles and dilemmas as a disempowered critical pedagogue, you have no room to live up to your pedagogical expectation, unfortunately. Any breakthrough?

BREAKTHROUGH: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND INCLUSIVE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

I am, of course, (one of) 'you' in the above story, and here, I will make myself 'visible' again by switching to the first person (Anderson, 2006) to share my breakthrough, found from autoethnography. Autoethnography uses a researcher's lived moments of struggles and epiphanies and reflexivity to explore deeper meanings of those moments (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnographers strive for social justice to make their (and others') life better by engaging with "the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). There is a strong parallel between autoethnography and critical pedagogy. I have moved away from the three principles of critical pedagogy (i.e., empowerment, rational dialogue, and solidarity) and instead embraced the autoethnographic principles of vulnerability, emotional dialogues, and unknowability in my enactment of inclusive critical pedagogy, which will be discussed in turn.

Vulnerability

The first step to utilizing autoethnography as a tool to enact inclusive critical pedagogy in an online doctoral programme is to reveal and embrace vulnerability (instead of the empowerment ideal). I put careful efforts at the beginning of the module to weaken the representation of guarded professionalism among doctoral students. This group of doctoral students who are experienced professionals in different educational settings are exceptionally well-equipped with impression management skills (Lee, 2021). On the other hand, they are particularly unsure about displaying their weaknesses (e.g. a lack of knowledge and expertise). They are willing to learn new knowledge and 'practical' skills but unwilling to be challenged in their fundamental beliefs and political views.

Thus, in the beginning, it feels impossible to elicit honest stories and emotions of being oppressed and victimized within the unequal social structure from these students. Furthermore, in the research methodology module, which is nothing to do with social justice on the surface, sharing those stories would be perceived as awkwardly irrelevant by students. To break the 'ice', I open up myself—my experiences of being a racial minority at a UK university and being continuously challenged by my students and colleagues to prove my legitimacy to teach, research, and exert leadership. During the first Zoom session, I even openly ask the question, 'Is there anyone who expected to be taught by someone like me (I pointed myself using my two index fingers with a little smirk) when they applied to this UK programme?'

There is no noble pedagogical intention to empower students. I just open my own vulnerability as an insecure tutor to start off dialogues about social injustices and educational inequalities. With that sharing (it works, by the way!), I gently invite students to do the same in the form of planning an autoethnography project. To a tutor who suffers from a perceived absence of power, it is a rather brave action to choose autoethnography (a methodology that students are neither familiar nor comfortable with) as a module assignment. Ironically, this is a strong form of exercising teacher authority, which often draws stronger reactions from some students (and colleagues) in multiple forms of resistance (e.g. written and oral complaints, negative module feedback, pointed and probing questions). I just need to bear the consequences of exercising power, in this case.

There is an explicit assumption underlying this decision: all students are human beings subject to diverse forms of social oppression in their own cultural and institutional settings. What 'bothers' them (i.e., their personal experiences that provoke negative emotions in their everyday lives), therefore, is likely related to the issues of social injustices. However, unlike critical pedagogy, the tutor does not assume the existence of shared oppressors among students but believes that each student has their own fight against their oppressor (which may not necessarily be other human beings). However, as argued in critical pedagogy, students may not be fully aware of what causes their oppressed experiences—raising critical

awareness of the oppressive forces that bother them should be the ultimate focus of their autoethnography project.

It is now students' turn to deal with the dilemmas of being (or not being) vulnerable. Talking about their personal experiences causing negative emotions, by default, is an act of revealing their vulnerability by weakening the positive image of the self as a confident and competent professional. As Fox (2019) calls his autoethnographic recalling and writing about child sex abuse "dirty work", autoethnographers often walk into the realm of their hidden dirt, which they would otherwise never reveal in any 'professional' situation. Some students are exceptionally resilient, enjoying the newly earned freedom to be the centre of their research. Others still find it extremely nervous to talk about their emotions in their research, wanting to do a 'normal' research project where they can sit outside the researched scene, talking about others' experiences (see Lee, 2021 for more detailed illustrations about student responses to the autoethnographic research).

Emotional dialogues

Despite the varying degree of each student's openness in their autoethnographic research, there is a radical shift from the empowerment principle in critical pedagogy to the vulnerability principle in autoethnography. The second shift concerns the nature of required dialogues—from rational dialogues in critical pedagogy to 'emotional' dialogues in autoethnography. Autoethnographers not only share their lived moments of struggles and epiphanies with others but also consider ways in which others may experience similar events. They see research as a political and dialogical endeavour, thus, use accessible and aesthetic writing to seek reciprocal responses from the audience. Such a methodological emphasis both on investigating 'the self' and communicating with 'the others' in autoethnography is particularly relevant to rational dialogues in critical pedagogy.

However, these autoethnographic dialogues do not seek to reach a form of consensus or sameness between the self and the others. Instead, autoethnographers accept 'partial' voices as legitimate research outcomes—while they strive to make sense of their oppressed experiences and compare them with others' experiences, they admit that their understandings will always be incomplete and ever-changing. Although the outcomes of such sharing can be something relevant to the goal of rational dialogues in critical pedagogy, the emotional dialogues that autoethnographers have do not guarantee consensus and collective actions among participants. Thus, while doctoral students exchange emotional recognition and support with each other, they fundamentally remain as independent inquirers in their own power struggles in their research projects.

Unknowability

Autoethnography, as a solitary act rather than an act of solidarity, accepts unknowability in its outcome. During the module, each doctoral student identifies their own oppressors and explores possible ways to liberate themselves from the revealed oppressors. Solidarity is arguably expected to emerge among student groups who share particular underprivileged identities (e.g., women, ethnic and sexual minorities, working-class). However, autoethnographic research in the online doctoral programme reveals and highlights the ever-increasing diversity among online students. Thirty students have thirty very different stories: being bullied at work, going through an extensive legal process against national health service, experiencing racial discrimination in employment processes, failing to obtain a permanent lectureship, and navigating the university system as a first-generation college student with a working-class background

Adding the tutor's, each of these thirty-one stories is unique and complex on their own, pointing out various social injustices in their specific societal context. Oppressors are coming into the stories from multiple different directions—some are living, and the others are not. Therefore, autoethnographers both embark and complete their inquiry by accepting the

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unknowability of others' experiences. They can only access each other's struggles partially through each other's autoethnographic writing. They also admit the partiality of their own stories in which many 'Others' come into play and interact with them directly and indirectly, shaping their lived experiences (those neighbouring others' self-interests will never be fully known to autoethnographers). Nevertheless, when the partial voices meet and interact with each other through emotional dialogues in the online doctoral programme, it creates a strong sense of community among the cohort.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The ability to discern diverse forms of injustice in a society is essential for researchers whose concern is to make positive changes in digitalized and internationalized higher education.

Researchers, especially those doctoral students developing their research agendas and skills, need adequate research training to gain such ability. This chapter offers a useful scenario of how a diverse group of online doctoral students effectively engage with autoethnography to investigate their own lived moments of struggles, developing their critical consciousness (via the inclusive enactment of critical pedagogy described earlier). Given that doctoral training is an important vehicle for developing future researchers, subsequently transforming the research culture in an academic community, this scenario can be of interest to many higher education researchers and educators. We are yet at the early stage of exploring and reporting the value of autoethnography both as a research and teaching approach—more collective efforts can be made to fully realize and utilize it.

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