When It Absolutely, Positively Has to Be Learning Online: Emic Reflections of Teacher - Student Resilience within an Australian Tertiary Pathways Landscape

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The Asian Conference on Education 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
COVID-19 signalled an end to the free movement of international students to Australian tertiary institutions necessitating a paradigm shift away from conventional face to face teaching and the benefits of cultural and linguistic immersion for online learning. This paper draws on auto-ethnography to explore and evaluate the impact of this transformation upon the affective and teaching and learning domains of a teaching staff member and student at an Australian university college. By virtue of the global and multi-sited field, the discussants have assumed an emic perspective and positioned the research orientation across a hybrid of confessional and impressionist writing to enable an authentic personal style inclusive of emotive responses, the contingent, and unforeseen in concert with making visible the cultural locus, the researcher's insights, and ways of knowing their cultures. The purpose of the study is to inform audiences what happened in the field, share their respective teacher-student experiences and to identify events and discoveries that were interesting and worthy of further research in areas of new forms of resilience encountered and expected within the field of international student online environments.

Keywords: Online Education, International Students, Resilience

Introduction

This paper could be considered somewhat idiosyncratic as autoethnography in the sense that the paper has two authors. This implies an overt contradiction to the approach of research and writing that grounds research upon a combination of self-focussed autobiography and ethnography that is context specific and situated in the analysis of existential personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. However, it is not a journey without maps. The approach of melding narrative ethnography and personal narratives in multiple authorships has been aptly demonstrated; one of the more erudite examples is Averett & Soper (2011) which *inter alia*, purged the researchers' burdens, questioned canonical stories, encouraged agency and promulgated cultural change in negotiating the culture of fear and specificity of its meaning for women.

The paper emanates from specific social science assessment events undertaken for a subject by a student, mediated by her lecturer, during a thirteen-week university trimester for a tertiary pathways program at a Sydney university. Although the project was conceived, experienced, and documented retroactively as individuals, the animation of interest and ongoing dialogue inherent to the faculty-student relationship led to the co-creation and development of the following collaborative paper based on the logic of discovery and *curiositas*. The intent was to enable an audience and ourselves to discover, learn about and understand within our affective domains the shared experience of how we responded to the technical-rational cultural challenges of moving from face-to-face teaching to online teaching within the context of understanding the nature of resilience. The collaborative co-constructed account incorporated the narrative stories of a lecturer and a student and the encounters between them. We would like to position the paper within the post-experimental inquiry paradigm of autoethnography with its inherent focus on autobiographical, confessional, and co-constructed representations. The aim for using autoethnography as methodology was to enable an understanding - for cultural members and strangers alike - of the lived experiences of the effects of online teaching upon teaching staff and their students. The intent is to explore the teacher-student relationship and to draw the writers and audience into the inner workings of the social context of their intersecting layered journeys as products of their culture of resilience as international students and their lecturers negotiated the collaborative and individual challenges associated with online teaching.

The 21st century has seen an academic revolution take place in higher education marked by transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity. An identified issue within contemporary global higher education is the high rates of international student mobility. More students move to more universities around the world today than ever before in human history. In the Australian context, previous Australian involvement with international students based on the Columbo Plan had been on an aid basis. Launched in 1951 it is regularly invoked in Australia as a pioneering project through which closer understanding and engagement with Asia was achieved and remembered mostly for the Asian students sponsored in Australian degree programs. (Lowe, 2011) By 1985, for example, 20,000 international students had been sponsored by the Australian government. However, from 1986, influenced by new right economic rationalist thinking in which market forces prevailed, a rethinking of Australia's overseas aid programs, and the economic reforms leading to Australia's closer integration with the world economy led to the introduction of full fees for overseas students in Australian tertiary institutions. In the 1990s, cuts and lack of indexation impacted further on tertiary budgets, so the story of international students changed from humanitarian engagement to one seen through financial lenses, from aid to trade.

Robert: I remember the moment when COVID-19 changed our face-to-face model of teaching. On my first teaching day in the first trimester of 2020 there were staffroom rumours that we would be moving to online teaching. By 3 pm these rumours were confirmed. I felt a mixture of relief and apprehension. Relief at not having to endure the daily 4-hour commute which had worn me down physically for a decade. And apprehension about online teaching and feelings of disquiet as we cleared our workspaces and lockers, packed our bags and decamped into an uncertain future. My apprehension was based on the awareness that the main source of difficulties for international students is often understood to be language difficulties and deficiencies in 'academic skills'. Language difficulties are problematic for many international students initially, and 'mismatches' in academic expectations and experiences are likely to be the source of on-going problems for students, as well as certain aspects of teaching and learning practices. Difficulties with language are also likely to arise as a result of the types of language used by lecturers including the use of unfamiliar concepts, acronyms and anecdotes, especially in some discipline areas where certain types of prior knowledge are assumed. The Australian Commonwealth government acted swiftly to close national borders so that international students could not enter Australia. Australians endured arguably the harshest lockdown restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly of any nation in their daily lives. There were also international students in Australia who were in an interstitial position as they were unable to return to their home nation and subject to isolating draconian lockdown restrictions.

Although we easily crossed the technical Rubicon of modifying and incorporating our teaching subject materials into a CANVAS CMS, and teaching staff adapted quickly to this new domain, it quickly became obvious that the university teaching and learning model based on a blended learning approach and method and practice of andragogy was severely tested. I often felt inadequate as a teacher. I felt enormous guilt that the experience of students during their formative years would be dominated by an online learning environment. The students were missing out on the immersive and social experiences of being on campus and enduring a greater burden placed on their cognitive load because of time-zone differences especially for morning classes.

I also felt ill-equipped and unprepared to deal with some students many of whom were experiencing the stigmatization of a global media fixated on determining the origins of COVID-19. A large population of our international cohort were Chinese. This use of global media networks as an institutionalised agent of fear and its effect on my inner self talk and interaction with students was not made easier by the highly visible role taken by the Australian Prime Minister Morrison and his cabinet who continued to call for an investigation into the origins of coronavirus adding Australia's voice to a global chorus critical of how the Chinese government and the World Health Organisation had handled the outbreak openly referred to by the former American President Trump as the "Wuhan Virus". For Chinese students, being assailed with this unremitting strident campaign and focus on China was the daily elephant in the room. It opened a Pandora's Box and fuelled a further discourse in legacy and social media outlets on multiple issues that had been simmering in the Australian Press for years about perceptions of the negative influence of international students upon academic standards and freedoms, (Hamilton, 2018) access of Australian domestic student places to degrees and how universities should negotiate the grey zone warfare of dealing with matters of nomenclature in teaching materials; the geo-political imbroglio of Taiwan is a case in point. Over a period of months, the international political fallout escalated, and bi-lateral sensitivities were heightened resulting in what appeared to be punitive tit for tat trade sanctions added to the elephant in the room as the diplomatic and trade relationship between Australia and China reached its nadir. It was *annus horribilis* as the horror of the growing mortality and morbidity reported in the daily

news-cycle compounded the burden of our Chinese students affected by other existential events within their lifeworlds.

I felt guilt for my colleagues. In Australia, which shared 12% of the global cohort of international students at that time, international students represented a significant percent of the university student population. International education was the 3rd largest export earner valued at AUD $33 billion dollars per annum. Prior to COVID, there were a total of 956,773 international students in Australia enrolled across five education sectors of which 442,219 were higher education students. (Jackson, 2019) Literally tens of thousands of teaching positions and ancillary jobs were underwritten by this influx. When the borders closed, a vital artery to funding was severed. In late March, the Federal government announced JobKeeper, an AUD $89 billion dollar-wage program of wage subsidies for 3.8 million Australian employees to limit the economic damage. Employers were eligible for the fortnightly payment to staff if the business' revenue had fallen over a specified period by 30-50% depending on size. However, the conditions imposed by Federal government made it impossible for universities to avail themselves of this aid. JobKeeper was excluded to all but four Australian private universities and one Sydney based campus of NYU. Help was provided to public universities in guaranteeing funding for domestic students already budgeted for, but it did not include the gap in revenue lost due to international student losses. The effect was predictable and swift. I watched as all-faculty emails diminished and each teaching session allocation became a "Don't ask, don't tell" exercise as I was re-employed and others not. Communication became awkward and sometimes non-existent with colleagues who did not survive the cull. As a 60-year-old nearing the end of his teaching career, my greatest angst was for my colleagues with young families and mortgages to service due to my relatively established financial position in contradistinction to younger colleagues whose working and family lives suffered financial detriment and psychological distress.

At an organisational and personal level, the university provided first-rate support to teaching staff via a combination of technical rational support with IT augmented by ongoing formal and informal teaching staff meetings to monitor our cerebral hygiene and mental health. There was also an Employee Assistance Program for teachers and others struggling with their new situation and diminished circumstances. What was noticeable however, was that while teaching and ancillary staff were well-supported, the same could not be said for their students. Students also had institutionally provided recourse to counselling, other support services, and deferred fees on a case-by-case basis. However, in contradistinction to the media-fuelled stereotypes of international students coming from wealthy backgrounds or belonging to the uber rich club of the 1%ers, many international students do not come from wealthy families. Many students worked part-time jobs especially in the service sector industries hardest hit by lockdowns. As arts, entertainment and hospitality businesses closed, students found themselves joining unemployed Australians. However, unemployed Australian nationals received welfare support. Our students did not. They experienced financial duress as parental funding was inconsistent and their casual jobs disappeared. Although the Council of International Students Australia sought financial relief for international students' universities were simply unable to provide it. The lack of government support for international students was taken up by mainstream media outlets as Australian and global audiences witnessed the pathos of students relying on the goodwill of restaurants, individual benefactors, and charity groups as they lined up for free meals and other essentials of life. I found myself scanning student faces on Zoom and the evening news and current affairs programs wondering if any of our students were among their ranks aghast at my government abandoning universities and being prepared to accept the fate of international students as collateral damage.

Despite the exceptional ongoing professional organisational and personal support colleagues provided, I also experienced the shared loneliness and guilt of my colleagues that we were dealing with a "wicked problem" as described by Ramaley (2014). These problems permeate our lives at local community and global level in response to unprecedented challenges with social complexities harder to manage than the technical obstacles. Problems cannot always be defined, continue to change and there was never any clear-cut response. I felt that I was not performing well as an instructor and unable to draw upon my full range and repertoire of teaching approaches and techniques to enable the blended learning experience inimical to the program subject. Most online teaching sessions were preceded by the dread of having to look at scores of black rectangles in Zoom and the ordeal of attempting to establish a rapport with empty spaces with names on them. As the months went by and with lockdown restrictions maintained, despite the unstinting institutional support of the university to keep us personally connected the distance between colleagues became more pronounced and with only several exceptions, personal relationships foundered. I also regressed back to the loneliness and anxiety of my early years as an academic at this university. The transformation in public sector provision from a Keynesian Welfare State to Schumpeterian Workfare State extends further than the technical-rational and instrumentalities of new mechanisms of resource allocation. For the last two decades, as federal funding has stagnated, universities have relied on international student fees on the revenue side, and casual workers on the expense side. University administrations have invested heavily into the international student market as the sole source of revenue growth while simultaneously increasing precarious employment as risk mitigation and cost minimisation strategies.

The tenure held in previous positions at other universities during the 1980s and 1990s had all but disappeared by the early 2000s. Universities had casualized work, introduced and shifted labor-intensive and time-consuming administrivia to academic workloads, and the composition of faculties changed so that they were clotted with an increasing number of administrative workers with permanent full-time or part-time employment status while the academic side languished. The uneasy dynamic of insecure work and power imbalance between teaching staff and their managers opened the path to exploitation. In some universities continuity of employment in sessional or contract positions became contingent on the expectation that teaching staff would do underpaid or unpaid work as was recently confirmed recently in successful class action proceedings in the Federal Court by the National Tertiary Education Union. At least 10 Australian higher education providers were found *inter alia* to have engaged in widespread systematic wage theft by engaging its lecturers as independent contractors in order to avoid their obligations under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, and re-classifying tutorials as 'practicals', or 'laboratories' in order to avoid paying casual academics at the tutorial rate and have been ordered to pay back tens of millions. Others are under investigation. It's against this backdrop that my loneliness of a decade of teaching in sessional positions was brought into sharp relief now that we really were challenged by forces completely outside of our control.

Aye: I am a 21-year-old who has faced two military conflicts in Myanmar: the 2007 Saffron Revolution and 2021 coup. My parents, who are in their forties have experienced three military conflicts in their lifetime if I add the 1988 uprising. My grandparents in their seventies have lived through four military conflicts, if I include the 1962 Ne Win era. The repeated pattern of protests, conflicts, civil wars, and loss of life in Myanmar has been an omnipresent feature of life across two centuries for my people. However, the 2021 coup came as a shock to many civilians, as we believed in the power of human rights and democracy in the 21st century.

On 1st February 2021, our basic human rights were robbed from us. I could no longer contact my family members as the internet was cut off, and Myanmar passed into darkness. People took to the streets to protest, with the hope to win our democratic nation back, but many of them were shot and the rule of law disappeared. My parents had to go into a hiding as our home location was no longer safe. They could hear the gunshots, explosion of bombs, and the cries of innocent civilians. Armed soldiers patrolled the streets and killed any civilians that disobeyed their orders. They checked civilians' phones, they tracked the IP addresses of the people who posted about them on social media, and innocent children were murdered daily on the streets.

I was in my second semester of Life Sciences in Australia. Every day, I witnessed video footage of people getting shot, pictures of bodies and the misery of families who were mourning for the deaths of family members and friends. Perversely, I was safe in a peaceful country and had the chance to continue my education. I detested myself for being in a safe place, while people in my country feared for their lives. I detested myself for having a chance to continue my education, while students, as young as seven years old were killed in their homes; collateral as bullets passed through house windows.

According to Tilghman-Osborne (2010), guilt is an emotion that is hard to define, but it is mostly associated with clinical depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety, somatization, and psychosis. During this period, I noticed a deliberating sense of guilt that I was experiencing for not doing enough to help people in Myanmar and for being safe, while the others were undergoing psychological and physical pain fleeing their homes, and witnessing their loved ones being killed mercilessly. I was privileged to be studying abroad and being away, but this did not make me feel better. The paradox of privilege left me with an insuperable guilt burden for being away from Myanmar, while the others were suffering, and being aware of this, adversely affected my mental health. I would sleep for days without having any desire to eat, sleep or interact with people. If my family members did not pick up my phone calls, I would descend into dark thoughts about their fate. I was paranoid. I was guilty. I was helpless.

As an international student during the pandemic, I received very little support emotionally, and financially in a foreign nation. During this crisis, Myanmar's economy was predicted to contract by 10 per cent, and an estimated (and under-represented number) 600,000 people lost their jobs (Kurian, 2021). My father received half of his salary, while the living costs including medicine and food rose exponentially. The bank systems were destabilized, and cash flow was stopped abruptly. It took days to queue up at an ATM to withdraw cash. While my parents were struggling to meet the necessities, I struggled in Australia with very little cash in hand, and nowhere to ask for support.

Two weeks after the coup, I remember calling my college to request the deferral of my tuition fees as my parents could not transfer any money to me since the bank system had ceased to fucntion. I was greeted with a cold voice that said "I'm sorry, there's nothing we can do to help. If you do not pay on time, your visa will be affected, and you will not be able to enrol into the classes". Unempathetic conversation was the last thing I needed to hear.

Being helplessly stranded in a foreign land, I had no close relatives to ask for help. My mental health deteriorated further as I was on the verge of being deported back to Myanmar, while my parents on the other hand, were constantly telling me not to come back. I did not know what to do, so I contacted the head of administration to explain the situation and was fortunate to

receive a fee exemption. I was able to breathe a little. However, at the time of writing, my parents are still struggling to transfer money to me due to the inflation of money and volatile banking system.

During this period, Myanmar students received very limited mental health support. One phone call was made by the college as a welfare check on my mental health. There was no second call. We were not made aware of counselling sessions or consultations. Since I was in a safe place, I worked as a Peer Mentor for Myanmar students studying in Australian Universities, to ventilate their concerns and help with the difficulties they faced like access to internet and utilities such as electricity. I was an advocate to express their concerns to professors, lecturers, and tutors. Since I was also experiencing psychological distress and material shortages, I doubt that I was able to give full support to my peers. I believed that the college support system could have assisted further both financially and mentally but only later realised that the universities themselves were in no position to provide for us as they'd been abandoned by the Australian Federal government.

Even though I was advised to socialise with friends, I found it much harder to make friends with online learning. We were forced to interreact with each other in breakout rooms but all I could see mostly was blank rectangular screens. It was hard to make a conversation. No one responded to me whenever I started the conversation. After two hours of class, I found myself curled up in bed disillusioned and dispirited because I was tired of being alone in a tiny room for the entire day. I wanted to talk to people or socialise, but I did not have a chance. There was no one to hear my voice, and I had nothing to look forward to each day.

This left me with one choice, to study and work hard so that I could distract myself from the trauma of Myanmar and my own feelings of helplessness. I studied for up to 12-14 hours each day and it eventually burnt me out. I also took extra shifts at work, where work was possible at all, to surround myself with people, but I was still lonely. It was a different kind of loneliness. I felt that no one could relate to me even though I was in a sea of people. They talked about their stress with school assignments, while no one understood me when I talked about my country in terms of flying bullets.

After looking through the testimony of my co-author, I realised that extent to which online teaching had adverse impacts upon instructors. The lack of interaction with students would have been extremely stressful, as many are not willing to switch on cameras and participate in class when it is 4 am in the morning in their country, or when they are unable to communicate in English fluently. Among the common themes of guilt, lack of support, and loneliness that we shared, I found that my educators also encountered *alienation* and *anomie*, just like the students and the uncertainty associated with the unanswerable question of when we would be going back to the campus. This opened my eyes to another realm and the existential difficulties unknown to me that my co-author and lecturer faced as an educator, during this shared critical period.

Within seven months of the coup, I decided to start a forum - when a connection could be made - and set up consultations with people in my country to hear their voices and about their experiences so that I might play a small part in making a difference. I wanted to hear what they had to say. After conversations with twenty-two people, I heard various anecdotes; from parents worrying for their children's future to students being scammed for wanting to come abroad to study. It was interesting to find that my depression came from being separated with my family during this difficult time, while their depression came from being enmeshed too

closely with their family members. Since early 2020, people in Myanmar have been in lockdown and it has been almost two years since they last went to school or regular work. Being in proximity with their family members every day for two years with little respite for personal space exacerbated their distress as there was simply no privacy.

I also encountered many young, lost souls entering the formative years of their adulthood, who had to leave school to enter the workforce often for unskilled work. Government schools were closed, and they could not afford to attend international schools. This was when I realised the vicissitudes associated with the emergence of a new structural inequality and education gap between the privileged and under-privileged. Poor people were likely to move from relative to absolute poverty as they simply had no access to quality education, while the upper middle-class and elite were inured to the situation and increased their wealth with the effect that their children had unfettered access to a quality international education while others languished in an education vacuum. They witnessed education scams. Some 'educators' took advantage of this period and turned the situation into a business opportunity. Many education centres were created seemingly overnight. They guaranteed entry into the medical stream in prestigious Universities, *without* preliminary exams. They mislead parents by claiming their tertiary enabling programs would receive equivalence to the IGCSE O Levels (UK 10^{th} Grade). This played on the parents' desperate desire to remove their children from the chaos and educational stasis around them and enable their children to live in a foreign country with Human Rights and the rule of law. These businesses bloomed overnight and prospered by giving false hopes and information to the students and parents.

Conclusion

My reading of our combined vignettes, strategies for coping and concluding comments revealed that although our relationship changed over time, I really knew little about student lives and their feelings. I was aware of the student's working experiences and conditions of course. However, much of that information was mediated via the filters of Chomsky's Mohawk Valley directed towards controlling thoughts, opinions and attitudes. Establishing trust helped to lead to knowledge production and the realisation that I needed to become more aware of student needs and of my own lack of knowledge. I also developed a critical awareness of how our shared existential crises shifted my thinking on regaining confidence with my approaches and teaching repertoire and compensate with changing my assumptions and expectations on what worked and what did not in an online environment. I was also enabled to make the transformation away from a long-held fear and anxiety of never knowing if I would be re-employed and of feeling like flotsam jetsam in precarious work to acceptance of that situation. Further, despite having contributed to the university's corporate culture over the years with publication and service to the community, although frequently approached to contribute to professional development I had always harboured reservations about being actively involved in these activities. During the period mentioned in the presentation, the awareness of teacher feelings of growing marginalisation and isolation presented an opportunity to counter what was arguably an aversion to this aspect of my teaching practice. I worked with the Head of Teaching and Learning and was a panel discussant on the theme of "How to encourage an engaging learning environment" for an all-day Professional Development session. The all-staff discussion was very well received and generated continued valuable dialogues for long afterwards about the impact of our own histories and challenges, their understanding and effect upon our students, and include and recognise the utility of an honest examination of our own anxieties and perceptions of inadequacy as an essential strategy of develop strategies to

transform future practices and interactions into more comfortable and productive experiences for instructor and student alike.

Our paper documents an initiative that began at the University of Technology College Sydney within a social science subject taught as part of a Tertiary Pathways course. We have shared and promoted research which documented experiences and liminal moments of learning from the affective domain of teachers and students as processes of resilience which locate our anecdotes within a broader framework in response to the context of the wicked problems encountered during this time. The contextual shared experiences cannot possibly sit within the ambit of all academics and their students. We make no claims to universalise knowledge and experience. However, we believe that we have moved beyond introspective indulgence and although our epiphanies are self-claimed phenomena which one person may consider an experience transformative or restorative while others may not, our moments lay bare how we negotiated our intense existential situations and their sequalae after the incident has passed. We submit that reliability and validity turn on the credibility and verisimilitude of the stories recognising that when applied to autoethnography, the context, meaning and utility of terms such as reliability, validity and generalisation are altered. What we intended was to universalise at least individual experience being recognised as distinct to the individual as we are all different and acknowledge the notion that we share outsider status in different ways of what it feels like to operate outside the norm. For all of us, the power of nostalgia for face-to-face teaching was futile. That stage was empty with the actors gone. All around us the intellectual lightships of academy had broken free of their moorings. The future generation will never know what it was to find the lights drifting, the compasses awry, and very little to steer by.

Acknowledgments

The late Cathy Leone Hamilton
John Grey Hamilton Final Cut Pro Editing

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