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THE INTERPRETIVIST AND THE LEARNER

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	In the time that we study for our dissertation, our learning takes many turns. Sometimes we feel excited, motivated and accomplished, while other times frustrated, tired or unsure. This paper presents a poem to illustrate one student's PhD journey through reflection on those fluctuations, milestones and learning moments experienced along the way.
Background	Central to the journey presented here is learning about the interpretivist paradigm, its approaches, methods and critics. Interpretivism is a qualitative research approach which, in many disciplines, continues to be the positivist's poor cousin.
Methodology	This original paper takes an autoethnographic approach, expressed through poetry. Autoethnography uses self-reflection to connect personal experience to wider social and cultural understandings and has been seldom applied to investigate and uncover the contested and emergent doctoral experience.
Contribution	Little opportunities arise during doctoral studies for the student to pause, reflect and communicate new learnings or knowledge without the boundaries of academic discursive conventions. In this way, the poetic medium of expression offers an original contribution to the field. The poem also illuminates the struggles with finding voice, an ontology that resonates, and the place that marks independence from others in becoming a researcher.
Findings	Poetry affords ideas and feelings intensity through a distinctive style and rhythm of literature. This original poem offers a creative artefact that can be useful for supervisors and students at any stage of their dissertation, to ignite conversation on the challenges of higher education study.
Recommendations for Practitioners	This paper invites others to consider their learning journey and discovery of self, to reflect on and record the milestones, tensions and catalysts of learning.
Recommendation for Researchers	It opens doors particularly for those exploring, or wanting to explore, qualitative research through an interpretivist paradigm where knowledge is socially or experientially co-constructed and the researcher is inseparable to the research.

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Impact on Society	Becoming a researcher as synonymous with being a learner is a crucial discovery that widely connects to being a practitioner in any field. Learning to love the red pen is a metaphor of doctoral studies used to denote acceptance of feedback on written work as well as acceptance more broadly that there is always more to learn.
Future Research	What if we encouraged doctoral students and academics to challenge convention and write/produce/create authentic expressions of learning? Encouragement should be afforded to doctoral students and academics to reflect during and beyond their research journeys, in a medium that personally resonates to empower deeper insights and understandings.
Keywords	autoethnography, interpretivist paradigm, learning, poetry

INTRODUCTION

After one of my first meetings with my supervisors, as a newly inducted doctoral student, I went away and drew what I wanted my PhD journey to look like. On the first page of what would be the first of five note books, I drew a graph. The graph had two axes: the vertical axis was the degree to which this would be an enjoyable experience while the horizontal axis was duration. I drew a straight line, from left to right, high up on the ‘enjoyment’ axis.

I have always loved learning. I’m intrigued by new ideas, discovering patterns, trying new things. It felt natural to continue studying past the bachelor degrees. I wasn’t yet done with formal education. However, it was during my honours year that dissonance started to churn inside. See, I was being taught that ‘how to research’ was analogous with statistical significance, regression analysis, analysis of variance models, and statistical packages, when what I really wanted to know was individual’s thoughts on volunteerism.

I began my PhD several years later in a different field, looking at the learning practices of interns on placement. Having designed and coordinated an internship program for business students, I became interested in what was happening ‘over there’ in the work environment. I needed an approach that enabled access to this ‘other world’, that would allow me to step outside the higher education system and discover alongside the interns. And so began my reading into literature on the *Interpretive Turn*.

In the opening reflections of her book chapter, Yanow (2006) describes the tensions she experienced between prevailing rational-technical theories in her discipline and her own lived experience. For Yanow, like myself, these tensions led to a dissatisfaction with certain methodologies and methods that neglect a researcher’s a priori knowledge and studiedness in context. These personal uncertainties were exacerbated when, early on in my candidature, my interpretive approach was publicly questioned during a PhD faculty seminar by a professor in the finance discipline.

It was here that I turned to poetry. Not on purpose. I thought it would be useful to spend time most mornings free writing, to get these questions, conflicts and ideas recorded on paper and perhaps one day look back to say ‘wow, look how far I’ve come’. Somehow, this free writing emerged poetically, finding rhythm, feeling like I had an audience to write for, feeling like perhaps this struggle with identity was not the first in academic history. I’m an accidental poet. And it has been transformative. Little room is made during the course of writing 80,000 words for doctoral students to practice writing any other way. Poetry however, and free writing, has no boundaries, needn’t have an audience, and I can say, is an incredible beneficial reflective practice.

Perhaps the graph I had drawn those years ago was not realistic. There were low points. But the slow emergence of new knowledge, about the field, about research and about myself, created exceptional high points that make the low points seem brief. Our journeys will be different. The research journey I want to share with you in this paper and through the poem presented, is an amalgamation of the

process and poetry I wrote in grappling with and discovering myself as *The Interpretivist and The Learner*.

INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM

Understanding interpretivism is not as straightforward as understanding what it isn't. Interpretivism is often placed in dichotomy with positivist approaches such as hard sciences versus social sciences, numbers versus discourse, generalisability versus situatedness. Perhaps this understanding emerged during the paradigm wars of the 1980s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), where a move to reject positivist, quantitative research approaches was led by post-positivists/constructivists to promote a more naturalistic yet equally valid scientific inquiry in empirical social sciences. The *Interpretive Turn* was coined to demark research practices that turn away from de-humanised, objective research towards a re-humanized, contextual and reflexive approach, which centralises human meaning making and knowledge claims (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014).

The interpretivist paradigm can often be found conflated with terms such as post-positivism, qualitative inquiry, naturalistic paradigm, qualitative research and constructivism. It has been described as an umbrella term subsuming several different schools of thought, including phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology, as well as featuring ideas that align with late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century pragmatism and later twentieth-century feminist theories (Yanow, 2006). Given this broad categorisation, it can be confusing when positivists and post-positivists alike continue argue over these paradigms commensurability. Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011), for example, argue that at the paradigmatic or philosophical level, positivists and interpretivists (constructivists) hold contrasting worldviews but methodological strategies can overlap, only to later claim in the same paper that the paradigmatic boundaries can be blurred.

So what can we understand to be an interpretivist paradigm? Yanow (2006) suggests this understanding lies at the philosophical level with a researcher's worldview. Ontologically, selecting a paradigmatic camp is replete with underlying assumptions about reality (Hathaway, 1995). Does the researcher believe there is one objective real world, or do they view the world as social constructed? While positivists uphold that there is one reality, interpretivists believe reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Krauss, 2005; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Epistemologically, questions on the 'knowability' of the subject or phenomena of study, positivists look for causes and effects, measuring and quantifying phenomena (Flick, 1998), while interpretivists believe that data cannot be collected or removed from context and as such promote the 'generation', 'discovery' or 'construction' of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yanow, 2014). Methodologically, many positivists adopt quantitative methods to make generalisability claims, whereas interpretivists draw on a range of methods, tools and techniques to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The unique entanglement of the researcher, with their research and the researched, is central to an interpretivist's reflexive research practice (Yanow, 2006).

However, an interpretive worldview has its critics. Critical theorists, for example, have criticised interpretivism for an excessive preoccupation of self – a kind of 'naval-gazing' (Yanow, 2006) that ignores the impacts on individuals and their power. Questions over the quality of the mixed methods approach to gathering data arise given a lack of universal evaluative criteria to judge its merits (Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Not always holding a concrete hypothesis prior to field work, the size of some small 'n' studies, and the lack of generalisability and objectivity are also issues raised against interpretivist research (Yanow, 2014). These critiques and concerns, however, are a matter of philosophical differences. Interpretivists over time have developed trustworthy and quality research practices that counter these arguments (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014).

Such significant questions regarding what we believe about the world, what kind of researcher we want to be, and what philosophical camp that situates us in, can be difficult questions for doctoral

students who may not have the experience or knowledge to adequately understand what this means. It takes time, lived experience, introspection and appropriate role models to make this choice. Expressing our voice and allowing what we are thinking to be documented in some form that we feel comfortable with, is a good place to start for the burgeoning interpretivist.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND POETRY

To the artist, essayist, filmmaker or quilt maker, to the singer, songwriter, journalist or baker, to the scientist, critic, musician or politician, to the first-time poet or those who don't yet know it ... There is no one way to do interpretive inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) relate interpretive work to that of a quilt maker or bricoleur, one who creates a bricolage. The interpretive bricoleur draws on a range of methods, tools or strategies in order to tell stories about the world they have studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Weinstein & Weinstein, 1991). Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.5) contend, "[t]he interpretive bricoleur understands that research is an interactive process shaped by one's personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting". The product of the interpretive bricoleur's labor is not ascribed, pre-determined or structured. It's a complex, reflective montage of interrelated images, stories, representations and interpretations.

The product or medium of expression presented next in this paper is an autoethnographic poem. Autoethnography is well suited to the poetic form, as both are commensurable with expression of personal reflections, which in this paper, centres on developments on and through the doctoral experience and the voyage to understanding self as an interpretivist researcher. Autoethnography refers to "a particular form of writing that seeks to unite ethnographic (looking outward at a world beyond oneself) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one's self) intentions" (Schwandt, 2001, p.13). This rotating outward and inward gazing is used to interpret outward social and cultural issues with inward insights, even vulnerabilities, to make meaning of lived personal experience. Usually written in first person, autoethnography as a genre moves beyond traditional methods of writing to appear in a variety of forms-novels, photographic essays, short stories, poetry, essays and journals. These texts intend not to generalise their findings, but to analyse and disseminate the writer's experience to the reader, in order to open up conversations (Ellis, 2004).

In the area of doctoral studies, autoethnography has been occasionally used by doctoral students to publish on their learnings. It has been seen, for example, to explore the benefits of peer-mentoring (Booth, Merga, & Mat Roni, 2016) and to unpack issues on academic identity (Hamood, 2016). There are also precedents for using autoethnography and poetry for researcher inquiry (Blinne, 2010, Ellis, 2004, Maurino, 2016); however, very few scholarly articles can be found of doctoral students adopting autoethnography and poetry to examine self during studies. Of those few who have, Chan's (2003) poetic verses focus on issues of isolation, impact on personal relationships, stamina required and other topics during the course of PhD studies. Similarly through autoethnographic poetry, Redman-MacLaren (2015) explores fears, relationships, transitions in and out of fieldwork and grapplings with being an academic imposter throughout her dissertation. Redman-MacLaren (2015), like Chan (2003), found the poetry writing process reflective and helpful for examining understandings of research and identity during doctoral studies. It is in Chan's (2003) paper, however, that other students are encouraged to consider poetry writing to relieve stress and promote self-understanding.

Given the effectiveness and therapeutic nature of poetry for self-discovery, sense making and expression, poetic writing in the academy to help doctoral students in their academy journey is worthy of further attention. To contribute to this development, I now offer the following poem.

THE INTERPRETIVIST AND THE LEARNER: A POEM

Led by the hand into a dark corridor
 I ponder the things I don't yet understand
 Enveloped by means of rigor and reliability
 Black or white the statistics demand

The Other is kept at a distance
 With the Other I cannot dance
 A photographer can only capture
 Not seen, nor felt, my guided stance

Feeling the dissonance, not resonating with this approach
 Can there be a more open paradigm?
 Searching stored memories, libraries and advisors
 The possibilities, I begin to encroach

See me, hear me, feel me
 Discovering the Other world
 My eyes opened to a paradigm of possibilities
 The Interpretivist is now becoming unfurled

Using a thread to connect theory and method
 Creating space to dream
 The inquisitive mind, a curiosity, a care
 Celebrating a social and reflective scheme

The knower and the known in an epistemological dance
 My physicality penetrating your space
 Feel it with the senses, the research in comfortable exchanges
 Fluctuating rhythms between slow and apace

Moving through the hallmarks of proposal and presentation,
 Pushing forward to organise data gathering
 When, stalled. Brick walled.
 With ethics awaiting, I feel I'm unravelling...

Waiting, dancing, waiting, dancing
 An idea emerges, conceptual romancing
 Feeling light, like I'm doing it right
 Then plummeting down, wearing a frown

My mental health, take a moment for self
 Experiencing this plateau
 Feeling lack of productivity slowly overcome me
 Blow winds of change, cupid with her arrow and bow

I'm in the field, now what to do?
 The Other is by my side
 Write, observe, write, observe
 Surfing the discursive tide

Unpacking complexities, practices new and sustained
Probing, digging deep
This is my reality and I want to discover yours
Now, I've made the ontological leap

These words are their stories
But I'm inseparable to the formation
Recorded through black and white letterings
Keyboard strokes of emergent distillation

A life-world of meaning is investigated
Unpacked and laid bare
Unearthing patterns, connections or themes
And told, as an Interpretivist, with such care

Finding my voice, having a choice
Syncopation that makes my heart sing
Yet confronted by neighbours who ask with perplexity
"But, what are you measuring?"

My academic apprenticeship is a pendulum that swings
The entwined life and learner
Blending passion and publication, the scaffolding has fallen
What's here now is drive and fervour

No longer hand-in-hand or the corridor completely dark
I ponder the things I've learnt and now know
Another research journey I feel is beckoning
Without testing the waters, off I go...

I am a learner, I accept where I am
I am a learner, I am learning to love the red pen

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The doctoral experience is a transient time, replete with discoveries and questions about others' literature, research methods, implications of findings, contributions to the field. Seldom is the doctoral student encouraged to pause and let it all marinate. Less so are they encouraged to write anything other than annotations, papers and chapters. These two points, however – reflection and authentic expression – have been crucial to my own self-discovery on what it means being a researcher. And for me, as it is for many of have or will trail this path, it's about being comfortable with being a learner.

I am a doctoral graduate now. I have the photographs and email signature as evidence. But I also carry the experience with me into the ways I approach research now as an early-career academic and an interpretivist researcher. Significantly though, I have also recently become a holder of the red pen, having just taken on my first doctoral student. What have I learned that might be translated into this new experience? At this point, my thoughts are twofold: first, to give my doctoral student purposeful opportunities to pause and reflect on the process at various times; and second, for me to start free writing my own feelings about starting this new journey.

Before I close, I start to wonder what research journey you might be on and what points from this paper may have resonated for you. As such, I would like to leave you with the following thoughts ... What if we encouraged doctoral students and academics to challenge convention and write/produce/create authentic expressions of learning? What if we offered space for doctoral stu-

dents and for ourselves to reflect during and beyond research journeys to empower deeper insights and understandings? I now challenge you, the reader, to gaze upon a blank sheet of paper, find your favourite notebook, click on a fresh word document or open the camera app on your phone ... and reflect on the research journey you are travelling.

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BIOGRAPHY



Bonnie Amelia Dean (PhD, SFHEA) has been a university teacher for ten years and is currently an Academic Developer at the University of Wollongong. Her role is centred on the improvement, support and development of teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum for teachers across the university. Bonnie's passion for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) began during her dissertation that adopted a practice-based inquiry into the learning practices of undergraduate students during internship placements. Her research interests include higher education teaching and learning, work-integrated learning, academic development, and student learning. For a full list of publications, see

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