

Shifting Ground: Reflections on Research Relationships in the Time of Covid-19

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Abstract

The Graduate Student Conference held at York University's Graduate Faculty of Education in April of 2022 afforded all four authors occasion to share the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on our doctoral research. Each of our projects involved face-to-face research and required significant methodological adjustments and changes to research design in order to continue amidst a worldwide pandemic. Through the application of social adaptation theory and the practice of auto-ethnography, our discussion panel examined the significance of requisite reconfiguring of our projects on our research relationships. This paper offers post-panel reflective thoughts on how the discussion that took place during the panel has inspired further thinking about our research with drama students, international students, Rohingya refugee families, and refugee children, as well as our development as researchers.

Keywords *Reflexive ethnography, social adaptation theory, autoethnography, pandemic disruption of research, research relationships*

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Introduction

As colleagues who began their PhDs in 2018, our collective dissertation research has been disrupted in different ways by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on social adaptation theory (Kahle, 1984) our panel discussion explored how each of us were forced to regroup, adapt, and modify our research methodologies and processes—sometimes more than once—to navigate the ever-shifting landscape of life and research during pandemic restrictions imposed by governments, universities, and school boards. Social adaptation becomes increasingly significant when changes in government regulations and societal norms affect important aspects of life over comparatively short periods of time (Kahle et al., 1986). With its emphasis on the process of socialization and the aid of mechanisms of social control, such as social pressure and state regulation, social adaptation theory provides a useful frame through which to consider our changing perspectives while adapting our research practices to accommodate the disruptions that we faced (Kahle et al., 1986). In analyzing our various disrupted journeys, we each engaged with the practice of autoethnography - retroactively and selectively writing about past experiences from our current vantage point (Bochner et al., 2000; Chang, 2007; Ellis, 2004). Reflexive autoethnographies document the ways a researcher changes as a result of doing fieldwork. The auto-ethnographer describes a personal epiphany which sheds light on the experiences of others (Ellis et al., 2011).

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have led us to re-envision our relationships with the diverse communities that we work with, including drama students, international students, Rohingya refugee families, and refugee children. We continue to examine and explore the impact of the disruption on our projects and on our identities as researchers, for whom a sense of community with our subjects is central (Chang, 2007; Maanen, 2006). Our panel discussion has

prompted further thinking about the opportunities and unanticipated outcomes that arose from the restrictions that we faced in our research. The following paper offers some reflective thoughts on the impact that conducting research in the era of COVID-19 has had on our understanding of our research participants and ourselves as researchers, as well as the challenges and rewards that accompany embracing the unexpected.

What's Happening Here? Disruption, Adaptation and (the Quest for) Community

Nancy Bell

The goal of the ethnographer is to answer the question: what's happening here? (Erickson, 1985). Ethnography is descriptive, interpretive, and sheds light on microscopic details that comprise the “wall sized culturescapes” of organizations or societies (Gaertz, 1973, p. 19)). The ethnographer must have an emic (insider) perspective that is so in tune with the culture of the participants that they are able to discern between a gesture so seemingly similar, but significantly different, as a wink from a twitch (Gaertz, 1973). One cannot be so immersed that one does not notice what is unique about the context. The ethnographer's goal is “to make the familiar strange” (Erickson, 1985).

My role as a teacher and curriculum leader in a diverse urban secondary school provided me with an emic perspective on the context in which I was working, as well as access to a large cohort of international students and their teachers to recruit as research participants. My proposed research methodology was classic ethnography (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, Gaertz, 1973), which centred on onsite observation and in-person interviews with former colleagues and students purposefully chosen to reflect a representative range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and years of study in the school. My position would enable me to negotiate entry into the day-to-day

activities of the school and, because I was so familiar with the context, to “throw light on the issues” that emerged from my enquiry (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p. 3).

Of course, the pandemic delayed my research and rendered in-person school visits and interviews impossible. I adapted by shifting my methodological focus to interviews rather than onsite observation. This adaptation required a rebalancing of what Teddlie and Tashakorri (2009) describe as the inevitable tension between the emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspective. My research participants were teaching and learning in a shifting context that was unfamiliar to them, and to me, and which I could no longer access as an insider. There was a new quadmester system, and course delivery methods included both partially in-person and fully online models. In the partially in-person delivery method, half of the students met with the teacher in class during the morning every other day, and the full class met online in the afternoon. In addition, classes were all moved online after the winter break and remained so until February. In-person classroom visits were not permitted. Although I attended some online classes, my ability to observe, describe, and interpret what was happening was compromised. In both scenarios absenteeism was high, and students largely had their cameras off online. My focus necessarily switched to in-depth interviews. I conducted twelve interviews with six teachers and six students that yielded rich data, but my relationship with my research participants was not what I had intended. Rather than making the familiar strange, I was trying to make the strange familiar.

During the panel discussion, I realized that my adapted research plan required a significant realignment of my professional identity. While I could empathize with the experiences of my former colleagues and students, I did not share them. As teachers and students became accustomed to the new reality, there was a transformed, albeit fragile, school community, to which I no longer felt I belonged. This realization initially filled me with a sense of loss. The positive outcome is

that my loss of identity as a member of the school community created space for me to finally, and fully, embrace my new identity as a scholar and researcher. A pleasant moment of surprise also occurred when I recognized that I had developed a new community with my colleagues from this panel as we met regularly online throughout the pandemic.

Landscapes of Uncertainty: Navigating Research in Drama Classrooms During COVID-19

Jessie Kennedy

As mentioned previously by my colleague, the attendees' question about what surprised us in our dissertation work during the discussion panel framed the unexpected in a positive light. Thinking about what surprised us invited a productive reconsideration of the setbacks and barriers we had experienced in our dissertation work because of COVID-19 restrictions. Our responses revealed that there were instances of constructive discoveries amidst the challenges, as well as detours that yielded new areas of inquiry. My dissertation project is about students' experiences of connection as they learn about local human and ecological history outdoors with the help of community experts and residents. I had developed the study by confidently building on successful past practices which relied heavily on site-specific experiential learning, considerable face-to-face communication, and the lived experience of sensory perception in outdoor settings (Payne & Wattachow, 2008). Adjusting my research design to accommodate COVID-19 health and safety protocols became an exercise in problem solving, in an effort to continue as best I could with my work, while simultaneously trying to preserve the integrity of elements that were crucial to the inquiry. Additionally, I was acting as both teacher and researcher, which meant that constant changes in learning models and protocols impacted not only the study, but also the nature of the learning environment and the students themselves. These continuous shifts and the accommodations they required made deficit thinking a challenge to overcome at many points.

The process of adaptation in my project entailed accepting things that I could not change, while preserving the aims of the study and maintaining as ‘normal’ a drama classroom experience as possible. Accommodating plans and pedagogy to account for the many impacts of COVID-19 meant working to establish balance or equilibrium between former plans and current ones (Kahle & Beatty, 1987; Piaget, 1954). This process of acceptance and adaptation provided the opportunity for me to deconstruct the most essential elements of the work that I wanted to do. It also forced me to think about why and in what ways these components were so critical to learning and opened possibilities for the development of creative work in a manner that I may not have done otherwise. In the end, there remained key aspects of the project that could not be realized during COVID-19, such as the experience of performing in front of a live audience. The knowledge that there is no substitute for the particular kind of human interaction that happens in live performance was a huge loss. That sense of loss, however, fostered deeper appreciation for the dynamic between audience and performer in the recognition that it is irreplaceable and not something to be taken for granted. In addition, performing virtually using a fusion of digital technology and live performance made space for new discoveries of how those mediums impacted performance and reception. Letting go of carefully crafted plans and aspirations caused me to “hold in tension” my preferences for what I wanted to happen with the circumstances that existed, and in doing so, “see that a working distinction between belief and knowledge opens one to accept the losses that compose the force of learning” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 766). In this case, the process of loss, acceptance, and problem solving to salvage what I could of my project has foregrounded that disruption can be productive by causing us to question, notice, and consider new directions.

Creating Spaces: A Community Engagement Strategy

Zaitun Hnin Pwint Phyu

My research focuses on the role of academic achievement and language socialization for Rohingya youth in Ontario. The Rohingyas have been under a slow-burning genocide in Myanmar for more than two decades, culminating in 2017 when hundreds of villages were burned down. The majority of the Rohingyas who have escaped to North America are illiterate, as they have been denied access to education for many decades. These refugees do not have literacy skills in any languages, and many of them cannot identify basic English alphabets. As a Rohingya who has survived similar horrifying journeys and harsh experiences, I am interested in how Rohingya youth navigate their past and present experiences as they negotiate the culture of mainstream schooling in Canada.

Through an ethnographic research design, I had planned to conduct participant observations and interviews to elicit their beliefs and attitudes about schooling and document their educational practices for the purpose of rendering an emic account of the phenomenon under study (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). As the study aims to benefit a marginalized group, it employs a transformative perspective in which I apply values guided by the community, and I also address social justice and power structures (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009). In this regard, Bourdieu's (1977, 2013) perspective on habitus and cultural capital allows me to explore how people's varied social positions and resources in relation to risk or privilege constrain and shape the options and 'choices' that are both possible and imaginable to them. Additionally, language and cultural socialization (Schechter & Bayley, 2002; 2004) enable me to consider how individuals acquire the knowledge and practices they need to negotiate societal or situational contexts effectively.

Communicating with the families during the pandemic has been challenging due to frustration, financial instability, and community members' lack of knowledge about modern technology. Also, complying with pandemic restrictions imposed by the Ontario government limited participant gatherings and made data collection insufficient. To address this issue, I had to make multiple adaptations to my data collection methods so that I could get reliable information and make my participants and their families feel comfortable so that they could share their perspectives with me. The first adaptation that I made to my data collection process was organizing outdoor activities, such as community feasts where community members could meet and share their current experiences about Ontario schooling. Since all the family members, including their children, usually participate in these kinds of events in the community, I expected that I would engage in more informal communication with the families, and with youth in particular. I also expected to have opportunities to explore the realities of their schooling experiences and language socialization. Through these feasts, I learned that the mothers—especially those who arrived in Canada during the pandemic—had no literacy skills to communicate with the outside world at all, which led to some tragic incidents in their lives, such as instances where they could not access emergency medical care. Creating an online English class for mothers became necessary so that they could learn basic communicative English. During these weekly online classes, which was later developed into a separate project funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the women shared how their lack of communication with the outside world hindered their progress in Canada and impacted parental support for their children's education. To address this, we decided to organize field trips to an apple orchard, a museum, and the Gift of Lights exhibition. These trips gave the mothers opportunities to apply their newly learned skills to communicate in English through a variety of situations, such as making purchases and accessing

services. Following these field trips, I taught them useful vocabulary and expressions that they could use in their interactions with school personnel. During the trips, I gained deeper insights into the mothers' and children's language socialization processes, as well as the ways in which they were negotiating the culture of mainstream schooling in Canada as they became more comfortable sharing their experiences.

At the YGSE conference, we were asked two basic questions. The first question centred on surprises that we experienced as we navigated restrictions during the pandemic. In this regard, the motivation and high participation of the families, including the women, amazed me. This was the first time that the mothers' voices were heard, and their needs were being prioritized to make time for their own learning and their children's education. The second question focused on our thoughts regarding the ethics application process. As a candidate who went through the ethics process for almost ten months to obtain permission to collect the data, I believe that individuals involved in the decision-making process for ethics applications need to be more aware of the nature of different communities. In the case of the Rohingya community, which is extremely marginalized, the majority are excluded from Canadian society due to linguistic and cultural barriers. As a result, government facilities for newcomers in Ontario are not reachable for the Rohingya refugees. This situation highlights, as Bourdieu (1977a) suggested, that the social positions of and resources available to Rohingya newcomers are limiting possible choices for upward mobility. Therefore, different forms of social interaction, especially with the researcher who comes from the same background as the community members, become therapeutic rather than traumatic.

Digital Storytelling Research in a Pandemic: What had to be Changed

Safra Najeemudeen

An increasing number of refugee children are resettling in Ontario. Yet, for the most part, very few educators are prepared to respond to the needs of this unique population. Ladson-Billings (1995; 2000) states that stories of lived realities need to be constructed, shared, and heard so that much of the ‘knowledge’ constructed through a taken for granted dominant voice is decentred, brought into question, and destabilized. Refugee children’s narratives can be valuable in providing insight for educators into children’s complex and challenging resettlement experiences (Gagne et al., 2018; Pappamihiel et al., 2017). These narratives can reveal that the children have expertise and insight that adults lack (Grieshaber, 2007), as well as show how resettlement can be experienced in multiple ways depending on the individual (Chen, 2015; Delgado, 1995).

With these considerations in mind, the purpose of my doctoral research is to address the gap that exists in meeting the needs of refugee children by gaining insight into their resettlement experiences through digital storytelling (Lambert, 2010). Digital stories are short, two to three minutes personal video clips combining images, voice-over narration, and other multimedia that help us understand an issue from the storyteller’s perspective. Digital Storytelling (DST) has been described as a knowledge producing tool that can represent previously unattended experiences, so as to build understanding and guide culturally responsive pedagogy and practices that support social inclusion and justice (Bissell & Kortewag, 2016; de Jager et al., 2017).

Conducting a research project during a global pandemic presents various challenges, and therefore such a project takes unpredictable trajectories. From recruiting participants to building relationships and community, restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic has created multiple challenges for me, particularly in regard to data collection. In my initial project design, I

had planned to facilitate an in-person DST workshop and a semi-structured focus group with refugee children. However, social gathering restrictions put into effect due to the pandemic prevented me from conducting this research in person. Therefore, to meet Ontario public health guidelines, I adapted the project design to collect data remotely. I initially planned to recruit ten refugee children as participants for an in-person, two-day DST workshop and focus group. I ultimately ended up recruiting five refugee children as participants in an online five-day DST workshop and focus group.

The process of my own learning with online DST has been a significant part of my methodological adaptation. Prior to the pandemic, my experience with DST was limited to supporting students in person to create their own digital stories. However, in shifting to collecting data remotely, I had to relearn how to facilitate DST in a virtual context. I completed virtual DST courses in hopes of gaining the confidence to design and facilitate a DST workshop online. Even with this additional learning, I still did not feel confident creating a completely virtual DST workshop, especially for young children. Subsequently, I reached out to professional DST facilitators to help support the design of my workshop. The initial project design to run the workshop as two full day sessions on a weekend no longer felt possible due to Zoom fatigue, (i.e. the tiredness associated with being on video calls for long periods of time). So, the workshop plan was adapted to consist of five, two-hour long sessions to run over the period of one week. In reality, expecting participants to be available for five consecutive days was unrealistic. Scheduling the workshop sessions proved to be extremely challenging, which required making further adaptations to the DST workshop. Due to scheduling and technology challenges, the workshop was ultimately facilitated across a three-week period. Instead of conducting focus groups with participants, I

interviewed them individually. In addition to these challenges, I also experienced feelings of guilt due to requesting participants to commit to so many hours and days.

Throughout my own virtual DST learning and the design adaptation process, I have been hopeful that even a virtual DST workshop has the potential to bring the in-person interaction benefits of building intimate learning communities, trust, and emotional ties into the online environment. During the initial workshop sessions, I thought that this would not be possible. Establishing a rapport with participants to create a DST community is paramount, but technological limitations and external distractions proved to be a significant barrier. Conducting the DST workshop online means the children were at home, without a private space, and had limited access to technology. This did partially limit their participation and engagement in the workshop. Conducting data collection online also narrowed the human interaction and nonverbal communication necessary for understanding the emotions connected to the children's experiences. This was compounded by various ethical concerns I grappled with related to sharing personal and vulnerable stories in a virtual environment where I cannot ensure confidentiality. However, despite these challenges, as the sessions progressed, it became evident that the children and facilitators were able to create a meaningful DST workshop community where they were able to build trust and emotional ties with each other. It was beautiful!

Conducting research during the pandemic has been filled with challenges and disheartening moments that I never expected to face as a doctoral student. However, because of my colleagues from this panel and my research supervisor, I have learnt a lot about reflexivity and flexibility in research, as well as the importance of compassion.

Concluding Thoughts

Our presentations and panel discussions provided us with the distance to reflect on our adapted methodologies, our response to new challenges as researchers, and our shifting relationships with our participants. Through our individual auto-ethnographic reflections, we each realized that our methodological adaptations resulted in a new sociality, both among our participants and with each other as colleagues. An unanticipated consequence of the collective presentation and discussion at the conference was noticing and articulating the connection that had developed between us over two years of working together in a writing group. We were able to consciously reflect on our relationships as researchers and academic colleagues, as well as friends who have supported each other through the pandemic.

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