My social autoethnography: How one teacher educator used digital communication to help tell his own stories

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Abstract

This paper inhabits the increasingly popular space of autoethnographic study. The piece is designed to critique and contextualise the process and usefulness of autoethnography as a way of making meaning. The study centres on how one highly experienced teacher and newly appointed teacher educator is using narrative writing to unpick and locate their skillset in a period of swift change and marked transition. One of the reasons for this choice is the freedom that autoethnography allows. Autoethnography is frequently dismissed as vague and self-indulgent as a method of social research. This paper will propose that autoethnography is a rigorous and powerful research method. It deploys some innovative methods of data collection, analysis and dissemination. The paper's discussion of the literature will naturally help interrogate debates around where autoethnography sits in the intellectual landscape related to qualitative research. The study found that using grounded theory as a research methodology helped arrive at potentially illuminating theories and self-knowledge. These were limited, however, by the underlying risk of indulgence, subjective autobiographical writing and participant bias. The paper also has potential value as a way of helping early career teachers explore critical incidents.

Key words

Technology; technology enhanced learning, PGCE, edtech; elearning; I.T.E, teaching; Secondary; schools; UK; autoethnography, social media.

Background

My reflexive self and the risk of indulgence

The paragraph that follows is a short summary of the personal story that precipitated this paper. I have been a teacher of English and also media studies and film studies for over 20 years. I will always define myself as an English teacher. Yet, for the past ten years, external circumstances have led me to redefine myself, which has been invigorating at best and distressing at worst. How I define myself is similarly complex and has sometimes changed from one day to the next. I am currently an author, a lecturer, a researcher; a personal tutor, a teacher educator; an edtech expert; a podcaster, a blogger, a vlogger. I have, until very recently been a social media and education consultant, a web designer, an events organiser; a community expert, a manager and a quality officer.

The above paragraph is autobiographical and therefore of limited academic value. One person's stories, though, can be seen to have value when they resonate with the experiences of others. The communication of memories and feelings, therefore, are likely to be given objectivity when they are in harmony with theory and context (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2009).

The next section will interrogate and contextualise the literature that underpins this study.

Literature review

Introduction

Autoethnography occupies a sometimes precarious academic space between the self, the culture and

Citation

analysis. The reasons for this will be debated in this section but a starting point is to examine the word's etymology. Auto= self; -ethno=culture and -graphy=analysis (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographers seek to use reflections on their own experiences to help others understand themselves and, ensuingly, wider social phenomena (Ellis and Bochner, 2010).

Autoethnographic study partly begins to explore the researcher's own experiences in order to begin to provide answers to the questions that are part of their mental landscape. Examples of such questions are: Who am I? Do I matter? Do I exist? (Ellis and Bochner, 2010). A more inclusive version of these questions is suggested by Mitchell, Weber and O'Reilly Scanlon (2005), whose starting point is asking the questions below:

> **Just** who do we think we are?
> Just **who** do we think we are?
> Just who do **we** think we are?
> *Just* who do we **think** we are?

(Mitchell et al. cited in Pourreau, 2014, p. 1).

The purpose of this autoethnography, therefore, is to try to make sense of the researcher's situation - to find a voice - and hope it contributes to others' understanding their own situation in a more measured way (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). This review is by no means an exhaustive delineation of every type of autoethnography. Instead, the review will select and critique the categories that inform this paper.

Why autoethnography?
The overarching question of this paper is how and why autoethnography is a valid method of explaining social and cultural phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Anderson, 2006, Richardson and Adams, 2005: 11). Autoethnography is a qualitative research method, which has gathered momentum in terms of its diversity and appeal. It derives partly from postmodern philosophy, which has an inclination towards iconoclastic attitudes towards a perceived dominance of traditional science, research and ways of knowing (Wall, 2008). Indeed, autoethnography might be more of a philosophy than a well-defined method (Wall, 2008). This philosophy follows the postmodernist inclination to contest the objectivity of social science researchers and instead point to a link between the researcher's methods, which cannot be separated from their own interests and values (Bochner, 2000, cited in Wall, 2008). This perceived iconoclasm can make autoethnography feel 'designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative' as a method of inquiry (Ellis and Bochner, 2006 pp 433). The method, then, treads a fine line between credible creative autonomy and anarchic narcissism.

A common criticism of autoethnography is that it is essentially an exercise in navel-gazing, a form of academic selfie (Campbell, 2017). Indeed, the autoethnographer is wise to acknowledge the potential hostility to their methodology; some academics point to the notion that autoethnography can be perceived as lacking rigour and contributes to a lowering of academic standards (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Anderson, 2006; Campbell, 2017). To challenge this and to give the form more credibility, Nash and Bradley (2011) proposed a defined structure to scholarly personal narratives (abbreviated to SPN). Their four part structure of SPN - presearch, me-search, research and we-search - provides both a starting point and a way of opening up the complexities of this methodology. For example, who is the 'me' (Nash and Bradley, 2011)?

The complexity of definition
Autoethnography can be viewed as a hybrid of autobiography and ethnography; if the ethnographer understands their subject by dwelling amongst them, the autoethnographer uses the self as a

narrative text (Wall, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography invites multiple, primarily qualitative methods. These mixed methods are likely to help the researcher explore ideas, rather than confirm opinions - a method that Gruzd, Paulin and Haythornthwaite (2016) have preferred when researching social media use. Conversely, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) advises that the process of autoethnography should be dialogic, so the researcher can both explore ideas and data and confirm theories and outcomes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Despite the obvious autobiographical elements, the purpose is to have a resonance beyond the self (Anderson, 2006), so it is of use to teachers and teacher educators. Autoethnography may allow significant creative and structural freedom (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) but is not without its flaws and critics. Autoethnography is evolving swiftly, which can make it difficult to define (Wall, 2016). As it necessitates mixed methods, which can invest a little more rigour into the qualitative method but can risk a lack of coherence or be derided as a piece of avant garde indulgence (Wall, 2016; Campbell, 2017).

One of the reasons for criticisms such as these could be the role of the author as intimate, embodied participant (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, Spry, 2000). The author as researcher is representing their story but the use of narrative writing also makes them part of it (Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont, 2003) Furthermore, the idea that autoethnography exists at an intersection between observation, epistemology and objectivity problematises it further.

Aims of narrative writing
This paper reflects on the process of creating a piece of narrative writing to help explore the notion of identity. Despite this personalised and unconventional approach, the intention is essentially to construct a piece of action research around specific critical incidents. By critical incidents, we mean events that have occurred and reflected upon. This act of reflection is intended to allow concepts to emerge, which will inform new incidents (Gibbs, 1988; Tripp, 1993). In doing so, this researcher is using the self and creative writing as data on which to reflect on the critical incidents (Ellis and Bochner, 2010; Denzin and Lincoln, 2012; Denzin, 2017). Education is one of many sectors in which employees can feel a disconnect between sometimes contradictory or selective statistics and their lived experience. One of the aims of narrative writing, therefore, could be a reconstruction of the self (Ellis and Bochner, 2010). Arguably, empirical data reveals fixed, essentialist self (Hebdige, 1979; Struthers, 2014; Ellis and Bochner, 2010). If the self is less fixed this is likely to intensify awareness of overarching forces and subsequently promote social justice (Hylton and Long, 2017). In that respect, one of the objectives of the paper could be to utilise my individual voice to contribute to a philosophically diverse body of social research (Wall, 2016; Wall, 2008; Sparkes, 2000). In a similar vein to a great deal of many autoethnographies, the work will seek to offer a challenge to the empiricist, oppositional and hierarchical agenda of much social research (Ellis and Bochner, 2006). Through narrative writing, memory and experience are inseparable (Coffey, 1999). A positivist stance might view memory as reliable (Ettorre, 2005; Muncy, 2010) but some, for example Fuchs (2017), would challenge this notion.

Types of autoethnography
A further layer of complexity could be observed if we attend to the various taxonomies or categories of autoethnography.

Analytic autoethnography places the researcher at the nucleus of the project and offers a living, breathing account of real experiences (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Anderson, 2006; Struthers, 2014).

Evocative autoethnography
 In a similar manner, *evocative* autoethnography transcends claims of objectivity and instead explores an evolving self on an iterative journey (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Rorty, 1982; Heehs, 2013). Evocative autoethnography can resonate with the reader through the deployment of emotionally-charged

narrative accounts. This expressive, maybe therapeutic method of self-expression does carry with it some potential pitfalls. For example, in recounting my own critical incidents in an evocative style, there is a danger that emotions could take precedence (Anderson, 2006), which could devalue its potential academic merits. Moreover, hindsight bias can refract emotions and warp the truth, either positively or negatively. Moreover, if evocative autoethnography starts to dominate the arena, this may limit the gravitas with which it can be applied as a means of legitimate social inquiry (Anderson, 2006). These limitations will be explored in the Discussion section.

Performative autoethnography
Performative autoethnography uses the researcher's body as evidence, as a three dimensional dataset (Spry, 2000; Spry, 2009). The body itself, therefore, can be viewed as a text (Spry, 2000, 2009). Performative autoethnography has been used to tell the stories of people working in the performing arts, though not exclusively. The above categories help crystallise the problems and opportunities inherent in the method. On one hand, autoethnography strives hard to be deep, open and honest (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013). On the other hand, there is an inherent challenge to be seen as credible (Spry, 2009; Anderson, 2006).

Digital autoethnography
One of the challenges of unearthing my own subject position was through standing back from my social media persona. In this way, an element of this study could be viewed through the refracted lens of digital autoethnography. The notion of digital autoethnography is emerging; a body of work is gathering momentum as educators as researchers seek to understand their place in the digital ecosystem (Atay, 2020; Dunn and Myers, 2020; Atherton, 2018a). Furthermore, as much of my work takes place online and on social media, a further strand that I will be exploring is the notion of the online self. Online, the self can be virtual but complementary to the physical self. It can be a heightened, augmented version of the self (Ellis and Bochner, 2010).

Conclusions from the literature
This review did not select literature related to debates on edtech, for example technological determinism, digital positivism, connectivism and Education 4.0 (Atherton, 2019b; Salmon, 2019). Whilst this study is not a departure from these debates, its purpose was to clarify and contextualise my justification for viewing autoethnography as a valid form of social inquiry. At the same time, the broader context of edtech is reviewed in Atherton, 2018a; 2018b; Atherton 2019a; 2019b), so there is no space to reprise this here. However, this paper does extend elements of the debate on edtech within the frame of social media and digital communication.

In the following section, I will discuss my methodology and dataset. To do this successfully, I will need to convey what it was and is really like so I can focus on some appropriate routes to enlightenment (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). In navigating these waters, I may wish to avoid a free-floating narrative, as it can lack focus (Baudrillard, 1983). Similarly, I may wish to avoid creating a narrative in which the emotions take precedence, or an overly evocative ethnography, (Anderson, 2006). Indeed, there is a risk of the work being viewed as egotistical '*me*-search' (Campbell, 2017). Moreover, hindsight can refract emotions and warp the truth, either positively or negatively. Despite these risks, autoethnography can sometimes be a forum for expressing the refracted, disparate, marginalised, plural self (Spry, 2000; Campbell, 2017).

It is this lens through which to view the self that has informed the concept of the social bricoleur, which will be pursued in the Discussion and Conclusions sections. A bricoleur reconstructs meaning from disparate, sometimes incongruous elements and makes a new reality (Hebdige, 1979; Baker & Nelson, 2005, in Di Domenico et al., 2010; Atherton, 2019a). A social bricoleur, therefore applies this to communication via the mediated virtual space of social media (Atay, 2020).

Research design
One of the enduring challenges for the autoethnographic study is the methodology. Often the data is the creative writing itself. In my case, I have been creating narrative accounts of experiences in the form of prose - a mock novel, entitled, 'Confessions of a portfolio careerist'. This has been an iterative, meandering journey as, 'You can't know what you mean until you hear what you say' (Berthoff 1978:1-13). The mock novel is a subjective, lived experience, which will be authentic and will aim to be transformative, in terms of crystallising the lived experience (McIlveen, 2008). The narrative composition is one in which product and process are reflexive (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2011). Through narrative writing, the lucid presentation of multiple possibilities may bring forth a reframed consciousness. The autoethnographer's reframed consciousness is likely to be 'alive, awake, curious, and often furious." (Greene, 1994:494–507).

Collecting the data and ethical considerations
My initial dataset was derived from a selection of the following:

- Narrative writing of my own experiences as a mock novel, 'Confessions of a portfolio careerist'.
- My Twitter posts over a transformative six month period.

The autoethnographer is prone to continuing the traditions of ethnographers for their data collection. The data, therefore, is frequently derived from writing a research diary, analysing documents and taking field notes to provide 'hard evidence' (Punch, 2014; Duncan, 2004; Wall, 2008). The qualitative, experiential data in autoethnography allows some creative freedom (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). Another liberating element to autoethnography could be in ethics. There are neither interviewees nor named persons who needed to provide informed consent, so the ethical approval process was relatively straightforward (BERA, 2011).

As the reader may have noticed, this paper does not follow all of the conventions of writing in academic journals. The chief reason is that autoethnography problematizes the practice of the collection and presentation of data. For example, conventional empirical research is bound to justify the sample size and selection of participants, to help minimise researcher bias (Punch, 2014; Denscombe, 2007). With purposive sampling, the sample is selected because they are representative of a group, in this case, educators who are attempting to redefine their identities (Denscombe, 2007). When the sample is self-selected and the narrative is personal, it is hard to anonymise the content. I addressed these concerns by changing the names and identities, times and locations of the critical incidents recounted in the narrative writing. The characters were composites of several people and hence the critical incidents were also amalgams (Adams, 2015; Ellis, 2007). In terms of ethical considerations, this is an example of relational ethics. In relational ethics, the autoethnographer vows to maintain dignity and mutual trust and to avoid doing harm to others (Ellis, 2007; Adams, 2015). The tweets were my own creations and any references to other persons was not included in the dataset.

Research questions
The list above developed the initial research questions. Moving forward from the 'Who am I? and 'Do I matter' questions (Pourreau, 2014; Ellis and Bochner, 2010), I could now begin to address why my professional identity felt fractured. I could then analyse my data and test whether my identity would start to feel more coherent. In collecting my data, I began to critique the ways in which the nature of chronicling my professional journey is changing in the digital age. I started to examine the notion that the creation and development of the digital and social self can actually be a driver for how we understand our own journey. In that sense, the digital and social self becomes our perception of ourselves. In my case, I make every effort to separate my personal life from my digital self, though they are likely to overlap in essence.

The mock novel… 'Confessions of a portfolio careerist' - has provided narrative accounts of transformative incidents, hence a potentially rich source of critical incidents. This offers a narrow scope of self-observation (Anderson, 2006; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). One of the benefits of this approach is that it represents a challenge to potential tyranny of big data; this qualitative study is more interested in the micro not the macro, in a culture dominated by numbers (Atherton, 2018a; 2019; Fuchs, 2017; Denzin, 2017).

The next section will address the challenges in terms of coding the dataset, which will be divided into two categories. To code the data, I eschewed positivist notions of scientific methods to explain the social world (Denscombe, 2007). The reason for this was that my data was sprawling and personal and I felt this necessitated a more reflexive approach, which explores the relationship between the researcher and the social world (Denscombe, 2007).

Narrative writing
Once I collected the narrative writing, I then embraced the freedom that autoethnography allows and used a word cloud generator to indicate the most frequently used words. As word clouds display most commonly used words in the form of various shapes, they are primarily used as an exploratory online tool (Tessem et al, 2015).

Twitter Analytics data
I have selected the findings from my tweets. I achieved a visualisation of the data by using Twitter Analytics, to reveal some quantitative metrics. Examples of these were the number of page impressions, clicks on links that I posted, retweets, likes and replies. Page impressions are the number of times a tweet has been viewed. These quantitative metrics could be viewed as crude and incidental but they helped me search for patterns that may have emerged and then identify emerging themes.

Coding the Twitter Analytics data
The potentially unwieldy dataset represented an initial challenge in terms of becoming familiar with the data (Denscombe, 2007). The first stage of this process was to scrutinise appointments in my work diary over the past two years. This would help me make links between my Twitter activity and my work situation. I then made a mind map of all the work that I have been doing, both paid and unpaid. I then used Canva – an online graphic design tool to add the phrase 'some days I am….' over an image of myself. I used these images as part of a presentation, which I delivered at two conferences and an accompanying Twitter campaign, which received significant attention and interaction online.

This dataset would intensify the need for rigorous and realist coding, through grounded theory (Denscombe, 2007; Belgrave and Seide, 2019). Grounded theory is a methodology in which the researcher conducts an inductive analysis of their qualitative data and generates a theory from it (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). This theory can be drawing on existing research paradigms or could be the researcher's own (Babbie, 2014).

This way, the researcher is likely to arrive at theories from inductive analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Chen, 2016). As the literature explored was potentially disparate, a deeper, more focused but flexible research design was needed (Charmaz, 2014; Chen, 2016; Chong and Reinders, 2018). Grounded theory is a way of discovering theory arising from the inductive analysis of the qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006). In some ways this means applying appropriate theoretical models to the data and in others it can help the researcher generate their own theory. Constructivist grounded theory has been selected as the most apt for this study. As there are no firm generalisations, constructivism seeks an 'interpretive understanding' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:366).

My response to the challenge of coding this data was thematic coding, that is, connecting narrative

threads, names, locations, times and so on. The purpose of using thematic coding is to identify and connect subtexts (Gibbs, 2007; Rolfe, 2011). The narrative that emerged through this method fed into the narrative writing in the mock novel, 'Confessions of a portfolio careerist', which is discussed under, *Coding the narrative writing*.

In addition to this, thematic coding helped me move a little closer to Denzin's (2017) developing goals of autoethnographic study. One of these goals was to reflect the following tension:

> The age of social media has erased traditional understandings of the public sphere, private life, personal troubles, and civil society

(Denzin, 2017:16).

Though there is potentially less need for coding of qualitative data, coding is still a crucial issue in achieving clarity and coherence (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The success of how this was addressed is discussed in the Conclusion.

Coding the narrative writing
The mock novel began as a series of musings. These musings were designed to allow me to connect with and make meaning from my emotional responses to a series of critical incidents (Gibbs, 1995; Tripp, 1994). Continuing with thematic coding, the first stage of coding the incidents was to categorise what were essentially field notes (Denscombe, 2007). I categorised them into 'Day X' and 'Day Y'. In 'Day X', my experiences of being a portfolio careerist were exhilarating and rich in hope and possibility. During 'Day Y', my experiences left me anxious, alienated and disempowered. I then used Canva to create a series of mock posters that would function as chapters in my story.

Research Findings
Narrative writing
The thematic coding and display of key words on Wordcloud.com revealed some unexpected themes and relationships. For example, the negative experiences recounted as 'Day Y' contained no intensifying adjectives, that is, describing words intended to intensify emotion. Instead, the adjectives tended to be bland and descriptive. Furthermore, though the mock novel is autobiographical and truthful, I rarely used the first person singular 'I' when I was recounting negative experiences. This thematic coding helped me begin the process of transcending the personal, which is unpicked in the Discussion section. I am unable to present the details of the word cloud, as some of its contents are confidential

By contrast, the positive experiences recounted as 'Day X', revealed another factor in my autoethnographic journey. Positive experiences were recounted using emotive, personal verbs like 'feel' and 'felt' and 'belong'. There was a pattern of nouns that were specific to the work that I was doing, which were absent from the negative experiences. Moreover, there were words of more than one word class that openly conveyed very positive emotional states. This was in stark contrast to the emotional numbness in the negative days, or 'Day Y'. While I used the first person singular 'I' a great deal when recounting positive experiences, the negative experiences were conveyed using the first person plural 'we' and the third person plural, 'they', This began to reveal a sense of detachment from my own emotions. I either subsumed my negative emotions in the collective experiences of colleagues or used the third person plural to indicate my separation from people on different work contracts. The most prominent words used in the narrative writing in 'Day Y' were overwhelmingly, 'sessional' 'sessionals' and 'pay'. These adjectives and nouns respectively were clearly revealing the role of working conditions and job status as contributors to a series of negative critical incidents. It was these incidents that were being written about in an emotionally detached style. The potential flaws in this

interpretation will be explored in the Discussion section.

Twitter Analytics data

I used Twitter Analytics to display my Twitter activity over a six month period. I chose this period as a protracted critical incident, as it represented a transitional stage in my working patterns, where I was essentially a portfolio careerist with multiple revenue streams and diverse skillset. The initial quantitative metrics are displayed in Fig A. To understand the reasons for the ebbs and flows in my Twitter activity, I then created the following categories: images, video, emojis, tagging, mentioning in pics and links. These findings are displayed in Fig. B.

Month	Total page impressions	Total tweets	Top tweets by page impressions
Jan 2020	43000	173	4526
Dec 2019	19000	70	4192
Nov	22000	66	7739
Oct	20000	57	4006
Sept	6600	25	272
Aug	6200	26	1054
July	32000	71	9412

Figure A. Twitter Analytics – quantitative.

In Fig. A., the disparities between the volume of my Twitter activity is reflected through metrics such as total page impressions for each month, number of tweets and top tweets by page impressions (or number of people who view each tweet). The next stage of categorising the Twitter Analytics was to link the numbers to the conventions of tweets, for example: images, video, emojis used, tagging, mentioning in pics and links. This could help me triangulate the data from both Twitter and the narrative writing and also the literature.

The findings are summarised in Fig B below:

Month	Total page impressions	Top tweets by page impressions	Conventions of tweets
Jan 2020	43400	4588	High volume of tweets (157). Tagging of influencers (that is, people who are influential on Twitter). Counterintuitive, playful images 3 hashtags: **#education #edutwitter #teaching**
Dec 2019	18300	4192	Provocative, autobiographical images from my PPT. Tagging of influencer.
Nov	26900	7739	Counterintuitive, playful image **#TuesdayThoughts** #puns
Oct	19600	4006	Tagging of a conference I was speaking at. 3 emojis. Informal tone. **#conference #edtech #mondaythoughts**
Sept	5910	272	Message about lying low. 1 emoji. **#mondaythoughts #unplug #Focus**
Aug	6524	1054	Photo of me and the person I had met. Tagging of a large organisation and the person I had met. 3 emojis. **#edtech #teaching**
July	31600	9412	Video of me, tagging the organisation that I was visiting. 3 emojis. **#getintoteaching #NQT**

Figure B. Twitter Analytics plus conventions.

These categories not only helped me understand why certain tweets were more engaging than others but also how this social media activity was a representation of my emotions and social situation. The details in the right hand column of Fig. B denote some self-evident details about the conventions of the more successful of my tweets, notably that the use of thoughtful hashtags helps improve visibility and engagement. What the number of tweets in Fig A and all of the data in Fig B reflect, is the level of confidence and belonging that I was feeling at the date of my Twitter activity. My narrative writing effectively provides field notes that match the confidence and optimism that I felt through a sense of belonging in January 2020 and July 2019. That confidence empowered me to reach out to influencers and be playful with visual and verbal language. When my work situation was making me feel vulnerable and isolated, my Twitter activity writing reflected this but my social media profile was significantly lower.

Both sets of data allowed me to develop some generalisations and hypotheses. These will be discussed and triangulated with the literature in the next section.

Discussion
The thematic coding of the mock novel enabled the researcher to identify themes and subtexts (Rolfe et al, 2011). An analysis of the qualitative data helps give meaning to real feelings and emotions. Analysis helps locate the data within a 'three dimensional narrative inquiry space' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, pp131). The need to answer the 'so what?' question was also a crucial factor in analysing the data (Rolfe, et al., 2011; Brookfield, 1995). One of the answers to these 'so what?' questions emerged through the thematic coding (Rolfe, et al, 2011). In essence the narrative writing and outward facing content (that is, tweets) started to merge and form a coherent piece of performative autoethnography (Spy, 2000; 2009).

Performative elements of my autoethnography
This study proposes that an essentially performative autoethnography has enabled the researcher to engage in a kind of online cartography, which is a virtual narrative mapping. Though this notion is problematised by the increasing diversity and freedom adopted by autoethnographers in telling their stories (Wall, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), the importance of representation can also be viewed as crucial here. Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) propose that nothing exists beyond representation. This representation through mapping out personal experiences creates a central tension between the physical self and the virtual self. Data from the physical self may arise from recounting experiences of delivering at conferences, lecturing and supporting students. It is the data from the online self that may become further problematised, as it is necessarily performative, mediated by the means of communication and potentially refracted by users and interactants (Gatson, 2011, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This mediation, of course, can risk subjectivity and dilution.

Early career teachers may embrace the notion of teaching as performance. They may also view the self and the body as valid data in evaluating their journey. At this stage, it feels appropriate to switch from the impersonal, generic third person to the subjective first person, 'I'. Though performative autoethnography may be problematised by the challenge to define it, I propose that this epistemological shapeshifting offers opportunities for the researcher to be creative and embrace a fluid sense of the self (Spry, 2009; De Vries, 2006). One element of this fluid self could be explained through the idea of the social bricoleur (Hebdige, 1979), which is a theory emerging from analysis of the data and the literature on digital communication.

The social bricoleur and evocative autoethnography?
This section references the earlier content on using social media interactions as a dataset for autoethnographic study. This dataset forms critical incidents which are analysed using grounded theory as a methodology. I am motivated here to pursue some problematical notions, all of which will necessitate incorporating elements of evocative autoethnography. One of these elements that lends itself to evocative autoethnography is the desire to identify and reflect on emotions that I have been experiencing while occupying a fragmented occupational space.

As a by-product to this, I would like to explore how my public face on social media is both a narrative construction and an imaginative reconstruction. It is necessary to view this through the lens of the broader issues of digital autoethnography. In this way, the research may better reflect the changing ways in which educators are conducting themselves as they are immersed in digital culture (Dunn and Myers, 2020; Atay, 2020). In that sense, my social media interactions create a sense of a social *bricoleur* (Hebdige, 1979). If a bricoleur reforms meaning from disparate, sometimes incongruous elements, I propose that the social bricoleur takes this a step further. By chronicling their working lives partly as a performative autoethnography, the social bricoleur resists categorisation and imposes

order (Baker & Nelson, 2005, in Di Domenico et al, 2010). Subsequently, I am driven to explore the extent to which these narrative constructions and reconstructions exist in a political and ideological space. Is it possible to debate these political issues objectively? In addition to this, how can an exposition of one lived experience help the excluded find a voice and understand the meaning and context of my experiences (McIlveen, 2008)?

Conclusions and further work

This paper was designed to critique and contextualise the process of autoethnography as a way of making meaning from the diverse and complex skills and roles of one teacher educator.

In terms of the research questions, analysis of the data helped the researcher address one of Mitchell, Weber and O'Reilly Scanlon's (2005), questions:

Just who do we *think* we are? (Mitchell et al. cited in Pourreau, 2014. P.1). The ways in which analysis of the data revealed hitherto uncovered truths, added validity to the study (Denscombe, 2007). With that in mind, the research could help other educators in a variety of ways:

- Performative
- Therapy
- Using self study to clarify the subject's position as a researcher (DeVries, 2006).
- Self efficacy
- Empowerment through finding a voice

Strengths of the research

Before making a judgement on the findings, it should be emphasised that part of the value and validity of this autoethnographic study has been in the iterative journey, not the destination. The journey has been in providing a space to explore and validate aspects of the researcher's work and social persona. The narrative writing and idea of the social bricoleur helped achieve the purpose of bricolage originally proposed by Hebdige (1979). That is, it helped the researcher understand and develop their identity through potentially disparate and mediated cultural artefacts. This helped fuse the autobiographical with the cultural, social and political (Denzin, 2017). Grounded theory succeeded in helping me sharpen the focus of the *mesearch* and give it more legitimacy through theory (Nash and Badley, 2011; Campbell, 2017). The thematic coding helped reveal unexpected results, which helped to explain my own experiences and feelings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Rolfe at al., 2011). When the quantitative metrics of Twitter Analytics were analysed, they only became truly meaningful when I re-examined my own autobiographical truths. This may suggest that narrative writing and creative freedom could help form a more powerful representation of the social world than the more conventional analysis of empirical data (Denzin, 2017; Spry, 2009; Denscombe, 2007).

In terms of achieving the goals of autoethnographic study, the study helped confirm Denzin's (2017) argument, about the need to explore and interrogate new ways of critical qualitative inquiry. The use of autoethnography and thematic coding helped the researcher interrogate the micro of one person's experiences, rather than skirting over the macro of big data (Fuchs, 2017; Atherton, 2019a).

Limitations of the research

The creative freedom that autoethnography allows raised several questions. For example, should there be any additional data at all when narrative writing could constitute the data? If the data collection starts with narrative writing, is there a danger of subjectivity running through the entire piece? The use of thematic coding of data on Twitter Analytics may have helped identify some patterns but perhaps a longitudinal study might reveal more meaningful trends amid the data. Autoethnography, therefore, will always be grappling with the tension between how reflexivity attempts to explain the social world and the risk of subjectivity or even researcher bias (Denscombe, 2007).

Usefulness of the research for educators and further work
A supplementary question that the paper has raised is the potential for trainee teachers, even N.Q.Ts (newly qualified teachers) to deploy autoethnography as a way of making sense of their potentially dizzying new role. Future work could examine autoethnography as a way of helping N.Q.T.s and R.Q.T.s (recently qualified teachers) make their support more personalised. As the DfE (Department for Education) rolls out their Early Career Framework in 2021, early career teachers will be given a structured programme of support, underpinned by the Teachers' Standards (DFE, 2013). After the 2020 lockdown, teachers will have made significant strides in their digital capabilities but will have also experienced emotions that they will need to unpack. Articulating how the increase in remote communication and supervision made them feel could provide much needed succour in a time of crisis. Moreover, the concept of teacher wellbeing is likely to be given greater prominence as the 2020s progress, in an attempt to address the volume of teachers leaving the profession and the emotional fallout from Covid-19. Given the inevitable convergence of so many aspects of technology enhanced learning and mediated digital culture (Atay, 2020), the post-Covid world of education may be ripe for exploration through the *mesearch* of self study, the rigour of qualitative research and the transparency and relatability of *wesearch* (Nash and Bradley, 2011; Campbell, 2017).

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Appendix A: Narrative writing

The following extract from a mock novel. Names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity. No incidents relate to my current employer

Day X

I've been headhunted to do some consultancy work, based on my book and my social media presence. The work will be very well-paid. The gleaming skyscrapers of the City of London soar up around me. For the first time, I am going to attempt to belong in this rarefied milieu. I have a meeting booked at 8.30, then a day's planning for the work that I have been commissioned to do. I usually feel imposter syndrome when asked to raise my game - we all do. But this is different. Whatever I'm asked to do, I feel I can do it, with skill, grace and autonomy.

I sign in and wait at reception and try to act natural. All I can see are impossibly cool people doing impossibly cool jobs. It looks like I always imagined the inside of Google to look. There is colour, design and laughter. Staff prance and bounce into open-plan spaces. It smells like vibrancy and freshness. I'm given a tour of the company. I feel like I'm hovering, propelled by strong, warm air that makes. I'm centred and super confident.

This is me!

If I close my eyes and think of this day now, I see bright colours, I feel energy. My spine straightens and softens and it feels like there's more air in the room.

Fashion-forward staff give me warm handshakes and engaging eye contact. "Hey, I've heard a lot about you!" "Really excited to finally meet you". Generous laughter is never far away. The day's work is unremittingly joyous:

I'm in charge of this, leading that; I've written this great book, I'm coordinating that.

I can, I will, I am. I'm good at this, I belong, where is this going? There are so many possibilities, like a sunrise over a delicious metropolis.

Free coffee, free flavoured water and smoothies. Free delicious lunch from an organic food emporium, the inside of which gave every sense a tickle, a crackle, a hum, a stroke, a tingle. Everyone is generous with their time and builds rapport with alacrity. At the end of the day, a colleague asks me if I'd like a beer, which is freely available on tap.

I say no.

I don't want to take it too far.

On the train home, I responded to emails from my lovely job as a teacher educator.

I saw a tweet from one of my dear contacts and Twitter friends. She said this:

> *I just had a flashback to when I was a kid, dreaming about being in my own office surrounded by books - writing, reading and making plans to meet interesting people :) For many reasons I didn't expect much so that's why it felt so lovely. Later, I will try and dig out one of those diagnostic tests that is designed to generate potential careers based on a person's skills and interests.*

I bet I'm doing the perfect job too and yes - today it feels lovely.

Day Y

I had a coffee and a put-the-world-to-rights meetup/rant with one of my sessional fellow travellers. A trenches coffee, if you will.

A zero hours latte is unpaid leisure. In the gig economy, you get paid for your teaching duties. Lunch, breaks, holidays are all unpaid. Once we had the pleasantries and banter filed in the correct mental folder, we got down to how we are making progress (or not).

How many steps forward and how many back.

* Me*

I've been appointed as a Teaching Fellow so....

Sessional A. contorted her face to invoke a well-rehearsed ritual of congratulation, masking ponderous

pain. Her eyelashes started fluttering and her pupils darted - so many questions, so many ways to feel.
Sessional A
Great! You must be so pleased.
Me (smiling and nodding)
I am, yeah..
Sessional A
(mocking my near falsetto)
I am, yeah!!
I smile the crooked half-smile of the middle-aged British underachiever.
Sessional A
Do you get a contract for it?
Me
Well, no, it's… a voluntary post.
Sessional A exhaled with relief, then narrowed her eyes. Friends again.
Sessional A
Voluntary? Oh..so what do you have to do?
Me
Deliver CPD sessions, help create research projects, attend meetings and the like.
Sessional A
But you're still being paid, right?
Me
Not being paid, no, well I'm getting paid for the teaching stuff but not this.
Sessional A
Are the other Fellows being paid?
My upbeat mood was quashed by the elephant in the room. No, I wouldn't be paid for my work. Not a lowly teacher's salary, not a zero hours contract, not minimum wage. Not a penny. Nada.
Me
Yes, the others are full time so..yeah, they are being paid.
Sessional A
Why do they get paid but you are doing it for nothing?
This wasn't helpful. I had survived so long by not asking why, by believing that this would all lead somewhere. She moved closer to me and I felt her inner warmth. It was now we sessionals against the world.
Me
They get paid because they have full time contracts and I have a temporary and zero hours contract.
Sessional A
Is that even legal?
I shrugged the gig economy shrug, borne of hope, exploitation, shame and disbelief.
Me
It will help raise my profile...you never know what might come of it -
Sessional A
Okaaaayyyyy…
We slunk back into our chairs and gazed into our lattes.
The thousand millimetre stare.