



Challenges and Opportunities in Applying Transformative Learning Theory: A Critical Reflection through Collaborative Autoethnography

Khanssa Mohammed Elam

Physician and Endocrinologis, Sudan

ABSTRACT

This article presents insights gained from utilizing Collaborative Autoethnography (CA), a qualitative research method, by two international faculty members who documented their experiences from a year-long participation in a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at a midwestern university in the US. The FLC aimed to create a supportive environment where international faculty and graduate students could discuss their challenges, struggles, and joys related to their 'internationalness'. Through autoethnographic reflection, the study highlights how FLC participation helped mediate initial anxieties and dilemmas for one faculty member (Galina) and facilitated a productive reconceptualization of teaching for the other (Henny). The findings demonstrate the value of reflecting on personal experiences through autoethnography, allowing the participants to draw practical lessons that connect their FLC involvement to their individual teaching contexts and personal struggles in establishing a viable teacher identity. The article concludes with pedagogical recommendations on structuring future FLCs to better address the needs of international faculty.

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Introduction:

Autoethnography is a research method where researchers use their own lived experiences to "gain an understanding of society through the unique lens of the self" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 18). Unlike other qualitative methods, autoethnography foregrounds the researcher's self, which is often concealed in positivist research, as an "important source of knowledge ... and insight into cultural experience" (Ellis & Adams, 2014, p. 254). Leading scholars in autoethnography, such as Ellis and Bochner (2000), assert that autoethnography goes beyond merely retelling stories; it involves "carefully organized research designs, process-oriented questions, and the intentional engagement of the self" (Blalock & Akehi, 2018, p. 93). Reflexivity is crucial in autoethnographic research, providing access to researchers' "innermost thoughts," vulnerabilities, and struggles, which often "lie beyond the reach of other research methods" (Chang, 2016, p. 18).

Collaborative autoethnography (CA) builds on the principles of autoethnography, with a duo or team of researchers collectively and cooperatively examining their experiences (Chang, 2016). According to Blalock and Akehi (2018), CA can begin from two entry points: processing and understanding a traumatic and/or racial event, or understanding diverse ways of making meaning from a similar experience. For us, our shared participation in a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) focused on our international status led us to explore lessons learned through autoethnography. Our research question is: How does autoethnography mediate the learning of two international faculty members through their participation in a year-long FLC?

Theoretical Framework

Teacher Professional Development and Learning (TPDL)

Teacher professional development and learning (TPDL) is essential for enhancing the quality of student learning, the ultimate goal of education. Farrell (2013) emphasized that TPDL is particularly crucial for experienced teachers because their approach to teaching differs from that of novice teachers. Novice teachers, with limited practical classroom experience, tend to rely on theories and then apply these theories in their classrooms. In contrast, experienced teachers draw on years of practical experience, aligning with Dewey's (1916) assertion that "an ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and veritable significance" (p. 169). While Dewey's perspective highlights the value of experience, it is important to note that not all experiences gain "vital and veritable significance" without systematic reflection, a process facilitated by TPDL programs.

TPDL programs vary in focus and form. In higher education, Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) are a common form of TPDL. Many TPDL programs expose teachers to the latest theories and teaching approaches (Poehner, 2011) without considering individual teaching contexts. In contrast, FLCs create an academic learning community where individual teaching circumstances are central to learning and reflection. Faculty in FLCs meet over an extended period to discuss and share pedagogical ideas with the goal of enhancing student learning experiences (Flores & Olivas, 2017, p. 107). The sustained nature of FLCs often leads to innovative and attitudinal changes that faculty might not achieve individually or through one-time workshops (Beach & Cox, 2009).

While the effects of FLCs are well-documented from the perspectives of facilitators (Flores & Olivas, 2017; Ortquist-Ahrens & Torosyan, 2009; Rubadeau & Mumford, 2018), there are relatively few studies exploring the personal and professional experiences of FLC members. Given that TPDL can be a "complicated, prolonged, highly situated, and deeply personal process" (Johnson & Golombek, 2011, p. xi), it is essential to understand how FLCs contribute to the professional development and learning of participants. This understanding can better inform future FLC facilitators about the possibilities and challenges members face in their teaching contexts.

Faculty Learning Communities as a Medium for TPDL

Since its inception in 1979, Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) have evolved in various ways, differing in duration (ranging from six months to a year), member recruitment (e.g., cross-disciplinary, multidisciplinary), and participant numbers (Cox, 2004; Cox, 2019). Despite these variations, FLCs consistently aim to enhance teaching and learning, build community, engage in scholarly practice, and develop the scholarship of teaching and learning (Cox, 2019, p. 76). In essence, FLCs offer a safe and collaborative academic environment for faculty to discuss and address their pedagogical concerns, ultimately improving the academic culture at both societal and institutional levels.

Research indicates that FLCs are particularly effective in addressing TPDL. Beach and Cox (2009) demonstrated that FLC members from six universities adopted new pedagogical approaches, such as active, student-centered, and collaborative learning, leading to positive changes in teachers' attitudes and improved student learning outcomes. O'Meara (2005) documented increased teaching confidence and faculty willingness to experiment with new teaching techniques, such as active learning and assessment tools, particularly in STEM fields. Daly (2011) highlighted how FLCs foster both individual and community faculty learning, enhancing instructors' motivation and competence.

Furthermore, FLCs boost faculty scholarly productivity and sociability (Searby et al., 2009) and promote the development of the teacher-scholar model (Sweet et al., 2019). They encourage innovative pedagogical practices, such as integrating composition and math (Day & Frost, 2009), and address diversity and multiculturalism by fostering culturally responsive teaching practices, creating a welcoming classroom climate, leading topical conversations, and providing open spaces for discussions (Flores & Olivas, 2017). Additionally, FLCs enhance both individual and collective learning among instructors

(Carter et al., 2010), leading to overall improvements in teaching effectiveness, as evidenced by course evaluations (Vandermolen et al., 2018), professional growth in reflective and dialogic practices (Dees et al., 2009), and the fulfillment of faculty professional needs (Cox, 2002).

Methodology

Research Context

Henny and Galina participated in a year-long Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at a midwestern university in the US, facilitated by two senior international faculty members. The FLC, titled "Enriching Teaching Experiences of International Faculty, International Teaching Assistants (ITAs), and Graduate Students," was designed to address the unique needs and challenges faced by international faculty and graduate students. The group met ten times, with each meeting lasting two hours. Most meetings focused on discussing peer-reviewed journal articles about how international faculty and nonnative English-speaking teachers navigate their roles in the US academic context. Additionally, guest speakers, who were also international faculty members at the university, shared their teaching experiences and pedagogical strategies to enhance teaching effectiveness. Speakers from the university administration and the student body also provided insights into their experiences and expectations of international instructors. Other activities included open discussions, collaborative presentations, peer reviews of teaching statements, and role-plays on topics related to international instructors' teaching.

Participants/Researchers

Below is a brief description of the researchers and participants.

Henny participated in the FLC during her fourth year as a Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP) at the university, where she taught three first-year composition classes to international students. For Henny, teaching, which should be "an ongoing process of change" (Buchanan et al., 2018, p. 67), had become routine due to the extensive hours spent on teaching and grading. After approximately three years of teaching, she felt the need to re-evaluate her familiar practices. Participating in the year-long FLC, where faculty could learn from each other, provided an effective medium for this change.

Galina joined the FLC during her third year at the university, also as a VAP, teaching international composition, TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language), and linguistics courses. Her status as an international instructor and her academic expertise in TESOL and linguistics motivated her to join the

FLC. She was curious whether the FLC could help her view her international status more positively. Galina understood that being a role model is a crucial aspect of a language teacher's job (McGrath, 2013; Medgyes, 2001), but she was concerned that her international status and nonnative speech might hinder her effectiveness in this role.

Data Collection and Analysis

According to Chang (2016), personal memories form the foundation of autoethnography. In our study, the primary data consists of personal memories, conversations with others, and self-reflections. We employed Ngunjiri et al.'s (2010) "concurrent model" (p. 6), wherein each of us independently selected a topic for data collection and wrote autoethnographic narratives based on our FLC participation. We started by agreeing on the general research direction and formulating a tentative research question: "How does autoethnography mediate the learning of two international faculty members through their participation in a year-long FLC?"

In the next step, we individually documented our experiences. This process of independently recording our personal stories allowed for self-reflection without influence from each other. We then met regularly to discuss our individual narratives, providing feedback and taking notes, which were added to our data pool. In the final stage, we convened to share, review, and critically analyze each other's stories, deriving final interpretations and conclusions from our combined narratives.

Implementation of Autoethnographic Reflection

Below, we share our reflections on the lessons learned through using autoethnography as a tool in our roles and responsibilities as Visiting Assistant Professors.

Henny's Story: Teaching as a Relationship

One benefit of Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) cited by many teachers in Buchanan et al.'s study (2018) is the opportunity to focus collaboratively on specific aspects of teaching. My perspective on knowledge transmission began to shift when "student-centered learning" became a recurring topic in our FLC meetings. I realized that I came from a teaching context described by Western academics as predominantly teacher-centered. In Indonesia, my home country, student evaluations were not a significant part of teaching. While evaluations were occasionally conducted, they had no direct impact on teacher promotion. In 15 years of teaching in Indonesia, I never heard of a teacher being denied promotion due to poor student evaluations.

Because student evaluations were not integral to teaching in Indonesia, I did not seriously consider the comments students wrote. Common feedback included "I think the class needs to be more fun!" and "Perhaps, play games once in a while." I dismissed these comments because I viewed learning as a serious endeavor, especially given the disciplinary content courses I taught, such as "Research Methods," "Introduction to Linguistics," and "Discourse Analysis." These courses, often co-taught and textbook-centered, required uniformity in teaching pace and methods. Individual innovation was difficult, if not impossible, as all teachers needed to cover the same material, with tests and quizzes administered simultaneously. Consequently, I saw student suggestions for making lessons "more fun" as distractions from achieving serious learning outcomes through tests and quizzes.

When I immigrated to the US, I learned the significance of student evaluations in teaching effectiveness, which changed how I structured and valued my teaching. One useful activity in the FLC meetings was listening to guest speakers who were also international faculty at the university. From them, I learned that "how to teach" is as important, if not more so, than "what to teach." This awareness shifted my view of teaching and students, leading me to see teaching as a relationship. This concept aligns with Palmer's (1998) idea of connectedness, where teachers can "weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students" (p. 11). Viewing teaching as a relationship (TR) emphasizes the significance of each component—the teacher, students, and communication. Unlike an individual-based view of teaching, such as teacher- or student-centered approaches, TR focuses on the interaction of all components, highlighting the dialogical and effective relationship between them.

Seeing teaching as a relationship includes viewing students as collaborators in pedagogy. Besides administering mid-semester reflections and seeking student feedback on class activities, I regularly used writing samples from former students as learning materials. Students worked in groups to grade these samples with the available rubric. Class discussions following this activity were fruitful for both students and me. While we generally agreed on grades for F and A essays, B and C essays were less straightforward. Several times, the majority of students assigned a B grade to an essay I had graded as an A. This discrepancy provided a valuable space for me to understand different definitions of "good writing" from students' previous educational settings. I used this information to align my explanations with what students already knew. This activity was meaningful, as evidenced by students eagerly asking when I would post sample essays before major assignments were due. Many students mentioned in evaluations that discussing sample essays significantly contributed to their writing development.

Additionally, making students collaborators in teaching involves recognizing their role in complementing instruction. For instance, at the end of the Fall 2019 semester, I posted the following announcement on Canvas (the university's learning management system):

"I have posted an example of two paragraphs that use two or more class activities as sources of change. Li of ENGL109CB brought to my attention that many of the sample paragraphs we used for practice on

Wednesday do not have two activities as sources of change. So, I have posted two examples that use TWO or more 'sources of change' to Module > Week 15. Thank you, Li, for critically evaluating the sample paragraph □. See you all tomorrow!"

This announcement was based on a student email (from Li, a pseudonym) questioning why the sample paragraphs I provided differed from what students expected to produce. Initially, I did not intend to mention Li's name but then realized the importance of explaining my awareness. My aim was twofold: first, to show students that teachers are not perfect and should not hesitate to identify teaching inadequacies, and second, to demonstrate how students can help improve teaching materials to better meet their academic needs. In short, viewing teaching as a relationship helps me acknowledge and demonstrate the students' role in improving my teaching and, ultimately, their learning.

Flores and Olivas (2017) noted that FLCs aim to create a space for faculty learning with the goal of enhancing student learning. My autoethnography illustrates how participating in an FLC helped me reconceptualize my teaching to better fit my context. While Vescio et al. (2008) found that FLC participation helps teachers make their practices more student-centered, I see teaching not as an individual endeavor but as a relationship between students and the teacher.

Galina's Story: Teaching as Role-Modeling

My journey with the Faculty Learning Community (FLC) began during my third year as a Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP) teaching composition, ESL (English as a Second Language), and linguistic courses. As an international instructor and non-native English speaker specializing in TESOL and linguistics, I was drawn to the FLC, hopeful that it would help me re-envision my international identity and support me through peer communication.

Entering American academia as a graduate student and international teaching assistant (ITA), my greatest fear was my non-native speech: "Will American students understand me? What if they don't? What should I do then?" I had heard troubling stories from my ITA peers about students' complaints, such as "my instructor cannot speak good English," "my instructor speaks in broken English," or "has a very heavy accent," highlighting poor learning experiences. These stories did not bother me until a critical incident occurred. At the end of my third year as an ITA, I read a critical comment from an international student in my ESL Oral Skills class in the anonymous semester-end course evaluations. The student negatively evaluated the course because it was taught by a "foreign" instructor with a "foreign" accent, stating that "non-native speakers of English" should not teach English courses since their language skills and pronunciation were not "perfect."

This comment shocked me for several reasons. First, it did not explain what "perfect" pronunciation, "native" and "non-native" speech meant or what the student expected from the instructor in terms of pronunciation or accent. The comment suggested that non-native speakers of English could not be good

teachers due to their foreign accents, revealing an unawareness of global English usage and a preference for an ideal (and unrealistic) native speaker. Secondly, the comment came from an international student, surprising me since international students generally show solidarity towards other international peers. Lastly, and most importantly, the comment discouraged me personally as someone with a foreign accent, contributing to my initial insecurity and worries about whether I could be a successful role model for my students and inspire them.

Adding to this incident, academic research literature indicates that international instructors are often viewed as less credible, clear, and intelligible, and are considered “poor teachers” because of their foreignness (Rubin, 1992), accented speech, and negative accent stereotyping (Lippi-Green, 1997; Subtirelu, 2015). Despite increasing studies on international faculty in recent years in the US (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017) and growing awareness, the linguistic and professional competence of an instructor speaking “English with an accent” (Lippi-Green, 1997) is still commonly questioned.

In this context of inner insecurity about representing a role model, I pondered my professional legitimacy and the influence of my accent and foreignness on students’ learning and my teaching. I sought a place to mediate my fears and insecurities, entering the FLC with hopes of finding support and answers to whether I could be seen as a successful role model for students despite my non-nativeness. The FLC meetings revealed the prevalence and complexity of this issue. I heard many stories from peer instructors about non-native speech and foreign accents as challenges or sources of anxiety in the classroom (Resources for International Faculty and Teaching Assistants, n.d.). Our discussions highlighted how ‘non-nativeness’ intersects with domestic and international student views, disciplinary conventions, racial and ethnic stereotypes, and attitudes towards English language varieties. Although these meetings often did not provide direct answers, they offered a safe space for us—international instructors—to raise our voices, engage in open-ended discussions, and address and overcome fears and insecurities.

In TESOL and applied linguistics, the issue of “native speakerism,” particularly concerning accent, is well-discussed (Braine, 2010; Dziubalska-Kořaczyk & Przedlacka, 2008). The consensus is to move away from the native speaker model and not necessarily adhere to these norms in teaching (Houghton et al., 2018; McKay, 2002). Given the prevalence of negative stereotypes often expressed in student evaluations or comments, the fear and discomfort many international instructors feel about their accents, and the lack of awareness and misconceptions about accents, I felt compelled to share advances in TESOL and applied linguistics with my FLC peers.

I suggested a simulation activity during our FLC meetings, where participants worked in groups and played specific roles to solve a problem or make a decision. We used “The ITA PROBLEM” (Halleck, 2008), which centers around the debate over ITAs teaching in American universities. This activity provided new insights and approaches to challenging conversations and sometimes uncomfortable topics. The open and live discussion during the simulation quickly dispelled my initial discomfort about

revealing my non-native accent. Conversations with other ITAs and international faculty at FLC meetings and reading relevant research (Reis, 2012) alleviated my fears. More importantly, reflecting on my experience working with international students became a crucial component of my learning (Greene & Park, 2021). The FLC meetings prompted me to realize the importance of discussing our ‘non-nativeness’ in accent. I incorporated short discussions about the role of English as an international language, used examples of accented speech in speaking and writing, introduced code-meshing as a rhetorical tool, added a weekly reflective journal assignment on writer’s identities and expectations, and encouraged open conversations about writing and speaking with an accent. I also shared my own struggles with writing and anxiety, such as choosing the right words and working on clarity and conciseness. Through these activities and personal examples, students could see my ‘non-nativeness’ in the English classroom as a valuable resource, offering firsthand experiences of learning English, explaining English grammar rules, rhetorical tools, and learning strategies. I came to understand that my experiences and stories could significantly shape my students’ skills and attitudes. I began to see myself as a role model for successfully learning a new language.

The students’ positive reactions to my experiences were encouraging. They asked for advice and shared their stories. Emails or questions like the one below became common in my practice:

“Professor Galina! Do you have any recommended books or websites to learn English faster? I heard you are from Russia. The question I most want to ask is how did you learn your English well and how did you learn to speak so fluently with native speakers?”

Such role-modeling helps establish rapport with students and fosters a positive atmosphere in the classroom. International students feel solidarity and compassion from an international instructor who understands the challenges of acculturation and developing a new self in a new culture and language, anticipates difficulties, and is empathetic to language learners (Medgyes, 2001). The comments I received in student evaluations reflect this view: “Being an international, she is good with international students,” “This is a very considerate teacher, as a foreigner, she can understand the problems of international students,” and “very clear and easy to understand.”

The lessons I learned from my teaching experience and the FLC align with my TPDL goals. They include conceptualizing my teaching as role-modeling and viewing my international status and perspective as a benefit and privilege rather than a deficit and limitation (Etchells et al., 2017; Hutchison, 2016; Park, 2012; Song & Del Castillo, 2015). With support from colleagues and peers in a collegial environment, I can share my expertise and experience in teaching, introducing broad perspectives, linguistic and communicative diversity, and broadly, the “pedagogy of cultural wealth” (Yep, 2014, p. 88).

Conclusions

In this article, we demonstrated how critical autoethnography (CA) mediated our learning and supported our professional development through participation in a year-long Faculty Learning Community (FLC). Our stories align with earlier findings on the benefits of FLCs for the Teaching Professional Development and Learning (TPDL) of international faculty (Buchanan et al., 2018; Dorbney et al., 2010; Flores & Olivas, 2017). Through autoethnography, Henny discovered ways to center her teaching on student learning and view teaching as a relationship with students, considering them as pedagogical collaborators. Galina found strength in positioning her teaching as role-modeling for international students, recognizing the benefits of non-nativeness in the classroom. Together, these stories illustrate how sharing and collaborating with like-minded individuals (Cox & McDonald, 2017) can lead to professional transformation in teaching.

The study has several implications. First, it underscores the importance of holding FLCs that focus on international faculty. While theme-based FLCs have existed since 1980 (Dees et al., 2009), to our knowledge, this is the first reported FLC focusing on international and/or non-native faculty in the US. The FLC we participated in helped us address teaching and professional dilemmas and empowered us to find productive ways to tackle these issues in our teaching contexts. Second, our findings highlight the need for diverse activities to mediate members' reflections. Discussions during FLC meetings included reading research articles on professional issues of being a non-native English teacher and faculty of color, inviting guest speakers, collaborative presentations, role-play simulations addressing ITAs' teaching of American undergraduates, and a peer review process on individual reflections and teaching philosophy statements. Despite the variety of tasks, not all activities led to meaningful reflection for all members. It was through CA that we could connect the FLC to our individual classroom and teaching contexts. Future FLCs might consider implementing autoethnographic-based activities to enhance members' reflection.

The purpose of autoethnography is not to provide generalizable findings like quantitative research methods but to offer "rich transferable implications for other higher education teaching contexts" (Rubadeau & Mumford, 2018, p. 58). Additional autoethnographic studies focusing on members' experiences are needed to further illuminate how FLCs contribute to TPDL. Reflecting on members' experiences autoethnographically also provides thick descriptions, allowing FLC facilitators to better accommodate the future needs of their members.

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