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In Search of an Autoethnographic Method

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Abstract
This paper examines two research situations using the method of autoethnography. This is a contentious yet valid approach to research which can reveal that which is hidden from conventional approaches. The aim is to examine how an autoethnographic account of two unrelated studies elucidates shared issues relating to research practice, and to argue for its legitimacy. This results in a collaborative autoethnography as the authors share their respective experiences to create a shared domain of experience.

The first study relates to a two year collaborative research project which failed to create the conditions for one of the researchers to conduct the study expected. The second relates to the practices of learning and unlearning in organic community spaces such as found in makerspaces. Both accounts are contextually embedded personal critical reflections that provide more than the primarily descriptive accounts that characterise an autobiography. They reveal the tensions and frustrations of research as a personal and messy process, with expectations from stakeholders which can be contentious. The value of this paper is that it firstly supports arguments about the messiness of research. More critically, it presents an argument as to why an autoethnographic approach is a valid method to address this topic. It uses the empirical evidence of experience to examine the scholastic debate and present a contribution to the debate about the appropriateness of personal experience as a research method. It is concluded that an autoethnographic approach is valid within the qualitative toolkit of methods.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Qualitative research, Reflection, Experience, Practitioner, Research Methods

1. Introduction

Can one's own experiences be construed as good research material? One of the challenges of conducting research into social phenomena is to understand the meaning and emotions that underpin them. Researchers can observe and ask others, which has its inherent flaws in terms of how well this complex reality can be captured; or they can reflect upon their own experience, observing self in participation and reflecting upon both thoughts and emotions. However, the attraction of being able to draw on one's own rich experiences to give an account of research practice (an autoethnography) raises the question of whether this constitutes research or is merely self-gratification manifesting in what is essentially an autobiographic narrative. This is not a new argument with numerous papers appearing over the last few decades. However, the debate appears to remain unresolved as evidenced by recent papers by Guyotte and Sochacka (2016) and Le Roux (2016).

This paper examines some of the arguments for and against an autoethnographic method. This is then used to evaluate two reflective accounts. The first is a two year multi-disciplinary research study drafted by the author soon after the end of the project. The second relates to the practices of learning and unlearning in organic community spaces such as found in makerspaces. The date of these cases is immaterial. This leads to a discussion of whether an autoethnographic method can be authentically defined.

2. Literatures

The growing interest in autoethnography raises questions about its definition and composition, how it has emerged, what methods are within scope, whether is it justified as a valid methodology (i.e. critiques and responses) and what ethical issues may be raised. The following section provides an exploratory examination of the literatures on these issues.

2.1 What is autoethnography?

'Autoethnography' is not a term found in the Oxford English Dictionary. Nevertheless, it is a term which denotes a particular approach to research that has a relatively long pedigree, notably in anthropology (Hayano, 1979; Tedlock, 2000). Moreover, it is a term that has found increasing use in the research of a growing number of areas (e.g. health (Chang, 2016), popular culture (Manning and Adams, 2015), family (Adams and Manning, 2015), education (Stanley, 2015). It provides an opportunity for new forms of inquiry as revealed by Bartleet (2013) who examines how artists from a range of domains (e.g. film, drama, music, dance) have embraced autoethnography, using improvised embodied methods to provide deep reflective, emergent and generative insights into artistic experiences.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011: 273) describe autoethnography as:

> Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)… This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others… and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act… A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product.

However, there is a distinction between the telling of a personal story (autobiography) and a story that is both reflective relative about the situation and also positioned within discussions about that situation:

> not all personal writing is autoethnographic; there are additional characteristics that distinguish authethnography from other kinds of personal work. These include (1) *purposefully commenting on / critiquing of culture and cultural practices,* (2) making *contributions to existing research,* (3) *embracing vulnerability with purpose,* and (4) *creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response* (Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013: 22).

Personal experience should be critically evaluated relative to cultural practices. Since it can be difficult to differentiate between an autoethnography and autobiography, "the intent to describe cultural experience marks this difference" (Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013: 23). Likewise, contribution implies the situating of the autoethnography within scholarly discussions relating to that theme.

Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013: 32) argue that the benefits of autoethnography include

> (1) disrupting norms of research practice and representation; (2) working from insider knowledge; (3) maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty and making life better; (4) breaking silence / (re)claiming voice and 'writing to right' (Bolen, 2012); and (5) making work accessible.

In other words, autoethnography provides the opportunity to express that which does not fit within traditional social science research practices, to offer enriched descriptions and insights, to handle difficult situations, to challenge taken-for granted attitudes, to bring to light sensitive and / or hidden issues and to engage with different audiences. Further it provides access to data off-limited to others (Chang, 2013).

2.2 Method
An autoethnographic approach is not clearly prescribed, instead, it can be a generative journey tormented with emergent crises and tensions which are necessarily embraced, as revealed by Guyotte and Sochacka (2016) in their narrative about writing a collaborative interdisciplinary autoethnography. Further, there need not be a delineated approach to the specific stages of data collection, analysis or interpretation (Chang, 2013), though Chang advises that researchers "think carefully and analytically about their research process" (Chang, 2013: 109). However, an autoethnography is likely to be an iterative process blending the different stages (Chang, 2013).

An autoethnography can draw upon many different sources of data, e.g. "memories, memorabilia, documents about themselves, official records, photos, interviews with others, and on-going self-reflective and self-observational memos" (Chang, 2013: 108). Physical evidence can "stimulate the researchers' multiple senses to connect the present to the past" (Chang, 2013: 114), aiding recall. Moreover, an autoethnography can presented in different formats (literary genres), e.g. monograph, biography (life history), memoir, novel, short story, photomontage, film, song, poem or play (Tedlock 2000; Chang, 2013). Indeed, Chang (2013) identifies four idealised styles of autoethnographic writing, ranging from 'literary-artistic' to 'scientific-analytical': imaginative-creative (e.g. poetry, dialogue), confessional-emotive (e.g. personal revelation), descriptive-realistic (e.g. rich accurate description), analytical –interpretative (impersonal, theory grounded). In contrast, Adams and Manning (2015) distinguish four orientations to autoethnographic research (social-scientific, interpretive-humanistic, critical, and creative-artistic) to), which draws attention to the different aspects of autoethnography as a process. Whilst there does not appear to be a one to one correspondence between the categories of styles and orientations, there is perhaps some overlap as revealed in Table 1.

Table 1: Writing styles (Chang, 2013) juxtaposed to orientations (Adams and Manning, 2015)

Chang (2013) 'styles of writing'	Adams and Manning (2015) 'orientations'
imaginative-creative (e.g. poetry, dialogue),	creative-artistic (emphasis is upon dramatic and evocative stories / narratives; different representational forms (e.g. blogs); avoids academic jargon) (e.g. Pelias, 2000, 2013; Boylorn, 2013)
confessional-emotive (e.g. personal revelation),	critical (personal experience provides insight into contentious issues; reclaims bias, by comment about what should or not exist) (e.g. Adams and Holman Jones, 2008).
descriptive-realistic (e.g. rich accurate description),	interpretive-humanistic (cultural emphasis; personal experience facilitates understanding; thick description; unrestrained by writing conventions) (e.g. Denzin, 2006)
analytical–interpretative (impersonal, theory grounded).	social-scientific (cf. analytic) (personal experience establishes 'interpretive' context; systematic data collection/ coding; concerned with bias, reliability, validity and generalisation) (Anderson, 2006, Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013)

Another form of autoethnography is collaborative autoethnography (Chang, 2013). This involves researchers sharing in some manner aspects of the research process. A full collaborative autoethnography involves the sharing of each other's experiences over the duration of a project, from conception to end. It allows, through intersubjective processes, e.g. communication and negotiation, the evaluation and challenging of views and assumptions (Chang, 2013).

2.3 Criticism – issues of 'laziness', quality and….
However, criticism has been levelled at autoethnography. It privileges one's own perspective (Chang, 2013), is self-indulgent (Sparkes, 2002) and is lazy (Delamont, 2007). Indeed, Delamont (2007) argues that autoethnography is 'essentially lazy', intellectually and literally, for reasons that include its attraction to the familiar, emphasis upon experience to the detriment of analysis and focus upon the 'powerful'. Also raised are the issues of a duty to "go out and collect data" (Delamont, 2007: 3) as well as the view that what a researcher

says is "not interesting enough to…" (Delamont, 2007: 3) and that such work cannot become published. Iterating the previous issues, Delamont (2009) subsequently critiques the attention to the "minutiae of the everyday" (Delamont, 2009: 57), whilst gives 'legitimate' reason to use autoethnography to explain 'two small crises' in a research experience. This argument draws the distinction between reflection and autoethnography:

> reflexive ethnography, where the scholar is studying a setting, a subculture, an activity or some actors other than herself, and is acutely sensitive to the interrelationship(s) between herself and the focus of the research; and autoethnography where there is no object except the author herself to study. (Delamont, 2009: 58)

Sparkes' (2002) rejoinder to the accusation of self-indulgence perhaps goes some way to addressing the other issues. Sparkes foregrounds the intimate disclosure of insights into the 'living of life' through autoethnography that otherwise would preclude these insights. Research cannot minimise the role of self from that in which self is a constituent of the other and vice versa, – they are not mutually exclusive, thereby rendering the notion of self-indulgence 'absurd'. Moreover, the literary genre of autoethnography is one of connection and engagement between the author's narrative and the reader.

However, more serious criticisms are levelled at the rigour of autoethnography, raising such issues as reliability (replicability), validity (appropriateness) and generalisability. These issues are not confined to autoethnography, having been aimed at qualitative research in general. Mays and Pope (1995) report views of qualitative research as being anecdotal and based on personal impressions, and thus exhibits strong researcher bias. Further, that there is a lack of reliability (reproducibility) and generalisability. In response, they draw attention to the selective nature of all research in terms of the skills and judgment to make decisions about the appropriateness of the approach to the questions. Likewise, the issues of reliability and validity need to be interpreted in a different manner for qualitative research when compared to quantitative research (Saunders. Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). Bias is an inherent feature of research, in particular, for qualitative research, so the challenge is to understand how a researcher influences the study (Maxwell, 1998). Mays and Pope (1995) propose the maintenance of 'meticulous records' and 'documenting the process' to enhance reliability as well as the use of triangulation to enhance validity. Due to the relatively small number of cases in qualitative studies, it may be contentious to make claims about generalisability. Maxwell (1998) suggests that rather than focus on sample size the emphasis should be on the theory generated from the study and its transferability to other situations.

More specifically in the context of autoethnography, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) equate reliability with credibility, validity with verisimilitude (e.g. possible, believable and coherent) and generalizability with reference to the relevance of the autoethnography to the experience of its readers, hence validating it. A more critical evaluation of rigour is offered by Le Roux (2016) who concludes that it is possible to identify five criteria to establish excellence: subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility and contribution, with ethics taken for granted. Nevertheless, Le Roux (2016), surmise that, whilst checklists or guidelines earns acceptability, they cannot be substituted for 'informed judgement' in assessing the appropriateness of criteria to the methods used. This resonates with Schwandt (1996: 70) who questions the notion of definitive or permanent criteria and grounds an argument in an orientation to praxis rather than episteme:

> What once was the critical problem of the correct criteria becomes the problem of how to cultivate practical reasoning… we do not look to following procedures or defining or specifying the right criteria but to the practices, consequences, and outcomes of our ways of deliberating.

Likewise, Garratt and Hodkinson (1998: 527), question the notion of 'universally accepted criteria' as well as

> appropriate preordained sets of different paradigmatic rules… [proposing that] …the selection of the criteria should be related to the nature of the particular piece of research that is being evaluated.

Criteria for assessing the quality of research are underpinned by how research is viewed and the applicability of these criteria to the research. Thus, as Sparkes (2002) concludes, predefined criteria (e.g. lists) are not abstract criteria but grounded in practices and so can compromise the acceptability of novel practices, unless they are modified to accommodate them.

This is pertinent in the context of autoethnography, which Adams and Manning (2015) reveal has four differing orientations. Whilst demonstration "of the social and/or cultural significance of, personal experience" (Adams and Manning, 2015: 360) is one criterion for evaluating autoethnographic research, others will vary according to orientation, that it is systematic (for a social-scientific orientation), rich in detail (interpretive-humanistic, critical and creative-artistic), foregrounding sites story telling (creative-artistic) - with criteria for one orientation perhaps being inappropriate for others.

2.4 Ethics
The ethics of autoethnography is raised as any account is likely to reveal associations with others who need not have had the rights of research participants made aware to them, e.g. of consent and anonymity. How does one maintain confidentiality including that of those implicated by their involvement in the situation (Adams and Manning, 2015)? This is a grey area as it becomes increasingly difficult to remove others from the account, the more immersed the researcher is in the observed situation. An action research project involving an internship appears on a CV as an internship, yet is reported as an anonymous organisation, raises the question of how to anonymise that which has a temporal position in a person's account of them self. It is due to this concern for those implicated in the study that Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2013: 673) argue that an autoethnography is "one of the most ethical methods of and approaches to research, especially because it recognises and tries to accommodate procedural, situational, and relational ethics".

3. A Case Study of Uncertainty and Ambiguity
It seemed a great opportunity for someone new to research in the social sciences, to join a research project to examine the introduction and use of an information system in the work-place that had been developed in a Higher Education lab. However, it proved to be a very challenging, difficult and emotional experience.

The aim of the project could be simplistically viewed as the development and implementation of a computerised information gathering, storage and reporting system to be used to support the "quality function" within a manufacturing environment. Originally perceived as a purely technical project, it had evolved into a multi-disciplinary project with four full-time members coming from computing, mechanical engineering and business (myself). Collaboration had been established with a local manufacturing organisation.

My enrollment onto the project, was the last appointment to the project and was nine months after its start. I was located in the Business School, where the research philosophy was to have all Business School researchers located within the same area to facilitate communication about individual work. My presence in this group was desired by the Business School management so that they could have some control over my work, which, from the outset, was viewed as different from that of the other researchers. However, other researchers were located in the Engineering Department in adjacent rooms and sharing the same lab.

Problems emerged fairly quickly as it became apparent that there were different views about the project aims and specifically about my role. Whilst, several of the project members viewed the technology development as the project's focus, the Business School view was that the project had a broader scope, taking a more company-wide view of quality and how technology could enable this. Although these differing perspectives were eventually explicitly acknowledged by all the project members, at no stage were these perspectives reconciled, with the outcome that there was little cohesion between the two viewpoints. Further, as the project progressed, it became apparent that there was not going to be a transfer of the technology into the host organization. This exacerbated the dilemma about the focus of my own study. As a novice researcher, I relied heavily upon the advice of my mentors. However, these problems were regarded by research colleagues as typical of the frustrations and hindrances of research activity, which were expected to be put up with and overcome as possible. It emerged that these problems were facets of a larger issue - that of the dynamics of a research project in the face of different views about aims, exacerbated by the locations where the researchers worked.

The next 14 months proved to be a personally challenging time in terms of trying to establish the focus of my study, with much time spent in the collaborating company examining how they functioned and how they handled quality. It was also a time involving extensive reading of relevant literatures, writing and what emerged to be the most important activity, that of recording my thoughts and feelings about what I was doing. 'Models' were developed to clarify what I was researching and provided me with a frame of reference. Thus, when I started, I had a clear statement about the 'objectives of the post' in the form of the advertisement for the research position. This together with the research proposal provided the basis for the first model of the proposed study. As the research activity proceeded, it became clear that the new technology was not expected to be functional until towards the end of my contract, with this and related aspects of the project becoming redundant. Four more, increasingly evolved, models were produced.

The final fifth model was an epiphany due to the realization that I was experiencing a 'messy' problem (Ackoff, 1974) for which a problem structuring methodology (Espejo's Cybernetic Methodology, 1988, 1992) was the ideal aid to make sense of what I was doing. In addition to addressing the topic of interest, the organizational

aspects of a company-wide view of quality practices, it drew attention to the research process. Further, it introduced a new language as well as an alternative way for thinking about my research. The research was shifting from an emphasis upon what I was expected to observe – the 'Observed System', to the challenge I was facing as an observer – the 'Observing System'. This resulted in a draft document which reviewed and reflected upon my experience, drawing upon my diary, memos, notes about meetings, and all other relevant documentation. Writing was guided by the Cybernetic Methodology to provide insights into the blended world of what constitutes the problem situation of which I as observer was observing, and the relatively distinct worlds of myself in an Observing System (the research project) and that of my Observed (quality related practices). This tripartite view provided a framework to organize my reflections to reveal where my attention and emotions were focused. The examples in Table 2 illustrate some of the issues revealed in the draft on specific dates:

Table 2: Capturing the narrative of the experience

DATE	RICH PICTURE / NAMING SYSTEMS	OBSERVING SYSTEM	OBSERVED SYSTEM
Date 1	Discussions held with researchers to establish how the research can be better integrated. The common link is the Information System under development, through which informal communication could be re-established. Although the differing issues addressed complemented each other, they are not perceived as linked.		
Date 2		My growing awareness of communication problems with the Engineering Department. Flow becoming increasingly one way into Engineering, with declining effort by all four researchers to improve communications.	My concern increases over the unavailability of a transferable technology to study/observe the effects of. As a result of the continuing examination of the literature, I am starting to feel unhappy with the word "Quality", which appears to be widely used in an ambiguous and vague manner. Further, Quality orientated behaviour is poorly documented.
Date 3		Entry for the 3rd June in my records: "general unease with the way the project is heading...Where is this heading? ...This has led to a reconsideration of the objectives of the project as defined by the job advertisement"	
Date 4			I feel frustrated when I find that the proposed method effectively duplicates my on-site activities conducted in July - August that year.
Date 5	Spend the early part of December reflecting over what I had accomplished then attempt to develop a simple logical model to provide a picture of the whole project and the fit of the Business School (my) research…. Finally, a statement is produced which explicitly defines my specific objectives		

The draft was never published despite the feedback of a well-respected academic: "This is a most valuable attempt to provide us with some insight into the problems of managing a research project…" I simply did not know how to get this draft into print. My recent discovery of autoethnography has prompted me to revisit this cherished record of a difficult time.

4. A Case Study on Giving Voice- the Value of Space
Almost everyone reading this now will have experienced those real life moments which last – the time when implicitly or explicitly you are told no – you're not good enough, you don't fit in or you just don't get "it". These are the moments that can catalyse you to move forward, to challenge those assumptions and the status quo; or equally can prove destructive and perennially hold you back. Reflecting on my experience as a mentor, event facilitator, trustee and researcher in makerspaces and related creative community settings, this is the core

theme that emerges as interwoven throughout. The need and benefits of space – physical, cognitive and emotional that can enable a pause for thought, peer to peer support and foster positive and sustainable change both individually and collectively.

The accumulation of experience alongside the perspectives gained from these different roles has led me to reconsider what constitutes knowing and the normative value of inquiry. As described by Richardson (2000); local, partial and/or historical knowledge is still a valid form of knowing. Moreover, there is a rich value to be attained in the sharing of, and reflection upon, subjective, unique and evocative "stories of experience" (Wall 2006: 3). In other words, what I - and we - experience and know matters and can make a difference. It demands us to ask – what could be better? What could be different? Indeed, the process of undertaking an auto-ethnography itself makes room for these other ways of knowing and brings them into sharper focus.

Critically, it emerges that the process of creation, and the artefacts produced in these settings, are of equal significance. The benefit comes from the connected experience, the act of making, doing and sharing (Dewey 1934, 1938), or "the path of getting here" as described by one participant who added ""my ideas just seem to flow better, things come together when I am working, reshaping and discussing with my peers". This facilitates different reflexive benefits, social sharing practices, sensory perceptions, new knowledge and enhanced capacities to act. By democratising participation and reducing barriers to access; an open, emancipative and trusting discursive or polyphonic space is fostered which can be manifested in the physical, cognitive or emotional realm depending on the individuals' experience and the community which evolves.

This is a liminal (Küpers 2011) form of progressive disclosure, a collective unfolding of narrative and at times, one of narrative (re)construction that can alter our relationships with phenomena, experiences, artefacts and people. It has encouraged me to seek to scale the availability of these spaces, to think more deeply and intra-actively about form and content, the represented and the representation. It also leads me to consistently challenge assumptions regarding the privileging of knowledge forms which can in my experience and research become restrictive and negate the value experienced by the "knower". This can be nothing less than transformative – changing habitual ways of thinking, acting, feeling and sensing and enlarging understanding for both the researcher and the researched.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The questioning of the validity of autoethnography as a method, instead of being an act of self-indulgence (Delamont, 2009), raises the question of what is an autoethnography, and what might be construed as the approach which underpins it. A cursory review of literatures reveals that it emphasizes critical reflection upon personal experience to provide contribution to knowledge particularly into issues which are difficult, sensitive or normally off-limits (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011; Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013; Chang, 2013). However, its growing uptake by researchers in an increasing number of disciplines reveals that there is not a single stance in terms of orientation of approach (Adams and Manning; 2015) or writing style (Chang, 2013). Instead, it can vary from a theory grounded analytical account to an imaginative and expressive dialogue.

The two case studies presented reveal personal and reflective insights about the handling of the challenge of uncertainty and ambiguity within experience. Their primary contribution is through providing insight into personal thoughts and emotions: the former about a research project, the latter about self-doubt. Both can be described as an autoethnography. However, they are written in quite different styles. The former reveals a systematic and disciplined approach to the generation of a reflective account, supported by a more formalized style. Its contribution is to provide a rich lens into the frustrations and challenges of working on a multidisciplinary research project. This could be deemed to an example of Chang's (2013) 'analytical-interpretive' style. The latter offers a grounded expressive and reflective testimony in a more open style of writing, which might be viewed as an example of a 'confessional-emotive' account.

In terms of quality, as different types of autoethnography, the criteria by which these cases may be judged is likely to be different. The criteria of reliability (replicability), validity (appropriateness), generalisability that typifies more conventional approaches is not appropriate in this context. Instead, the criteria offered by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) of credibility, verisimilitude and relevance to the experience of its readers is more appropriate. How often do we experience the frustrations of a research project not unfolding as expected, but we don't admit to it and share with our peers? Likewise, how do we overcome the destructive aspects of knock-backs and move forward constructively? There is no reason for these two cases to be fictional creations. Why

would there be an aim to deceive? Instead, they provide plausible insights that may resonate with, and aid, others. Le Roux's (2016) five criteria of subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility and contribution provides a more formalised approach, which acknowledges the critical self-evaluation of personal experience that is plausible, resonates with others and increases our understanding of the situation.

Whilst ethics may be 'taken for granted' as a criterion, in practice it becomes problematic. The latter case-study does not implicate anyone, but the former does. Despite the effort to anonymise the first case-study, it might be possible to identify participants. However, there is no intent to discredit to any of the participants as each had valid individual views. In raising this, can discreditation be used as a criterion to assess ethics? Irrespective, consent had been established at the time of writing the draft. However, this, in itself, raises the question of whether there a time-limit for consent when one writes about an event that was decades ago? Moreover, this raises the issue of whether those who have an impact in the situation are included in the autoethnography and is the selective exclusion of these others unethical in that it presents an incomplete if not misleading account? Indeed, is it misrepresentation or negating authenticity to not mention a person in terms of their direct involvement and all that this entails in respect to the emotional experience when engaging with that person, but rather to reference a document in the public domain and portray that individual in a 'neutral' manner?

The lesson from the literature and these cases is that it is not the prescription of the stages of a method that denotes a good autoethnography. Rather that the method of an autoethnography perhaps lies in the criteria by which it is judged in terms of rigour and ethics. However, in view that both Chang (2013) and Adams and Manning (2015) recognise such differences in approaches, then perhaps it is appropriate to consider how rigour for each of the different styles / orientations can be established and how ethical issues are addressed. The method of autoethnography lies not in how the autoethnography is undertaken but in terms of how it is judged in terms of its ethical deployment, its sincerity and its contribution.

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