

Competition and Collaboration in Higher Education: An (Auto)Ethnographic Poetic Inquiry

Qualitative Inquiry

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DOI: 10.1177/10778004231176278

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Abstract

Higher education is in flux with more precarity, a stronger focus on effectiveness, and productivity having resulted in a competitive and hostile culture. For this article, we take a proactive approach to counteract the narrative of silencing by exploring the opportunities collaboration may afford. Drawing on our personal experiences, professional knowledge, and research, we engaged in a collaborative form of poetic inquiry. Our contribution in this article lies with the links we make between collaboration, creativity through autoethnographic poetic inquiry, and translanguaging. This approach constitutes a model for collaboration which counteracts the silencing impact of the contemporary competitive academic culture.

Keywords

autoethnography, ethnographies, methodologies, poetic inquiry, investigative poetry, methods of inquiry, reconceptualizing collaboration, decolonizing the academy, pedagogy

Introduction

Higher education as a sector is in transformation. For the past decade, internationalization, globalization, and massification of higher education have opened opportunities for collaboration, capacity building, community building, and expansion (Bauman, 2008; Bok, 2015; Knight, 2013). However, these developments have also brought with them more precarity, and a much stronger focus on effectiveness and productivity, which, in turn, have led to a culture in academia that can be described as competitive and hostile (Luthar & Šadl, 2008; Taylor & Lahad, 2018). Reports on how individuals in academia feel silenced and what needs to be done to resist these processes of silencing are ubiquitous (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Erickson et al., 2021; Sultana, 2018). For this article, we take a proactive approach to counteract the narrative of dismissal and silencing by exploring the opportunities collaboration may afford. From the outset, we saw collaboration as an antidote to silencing, as silencing often occurs together with marginalization and othering, thus isolation.

Drawing on our personal experiences, professional knowledge, and separate and shared research, we engaged in a collaborative form of poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2019) that would effectively combine (auto)ethnography (Chang, 2016) with writing as a method (Richardson, 2000, 2003) and a translanguaging stance. Translanguaging extends beyond the facilitating of fluid movement between named

languages and its applicability to bi- or multilingual contexts. Translanguaging facilitates a recognition of the full meaning-making and semiotic repertoires that people bring to the sharing and the production of knowledge (García et al., 2021; Wei & García, 2022). It foregrounds silenced voices and recognizes knowing that is inseparable from the process of collaboration (Hua & Wei, 2020). As a decolonial paradigm, it acknowledges that to be creative is to be critical (Wei, 2011). Therefore, it is also applicable to studies on collaboration and the role of creativity in Higher Education. Our contribution in this article lies with the links we make between collaboration, creativity through autoethnographic poetic inquiry, and translanguaging. We argue that this approach constitutes a model for collaboration which counteracts the silencing impact of the competitive culture in the academy.

The main emphasis for our work was to use our personal experiences to explore the culture of academia as we found it in our professional and research settings, and to then investigate those by and through writing. The challenge of

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(auto)ethnographic poetry is to perform a focused crystallization of experience via lyrical aesthetics, such as arrangement, word choice, rhythm, rhyme, phrase, and line structure (Rawlins, 2018). Through that rigorously mindful, critical, and attentive process of crystallization, the poetic inquirer arrives at an emotional knowing that is sharp in focus (McAllister, 2022). Writing or analyzing through poems was for us a way to expand perspectives on human experience, to realize new or different ways of knowing with the potential for a variety of views and voices (McAllister, 2022; Vincent, 2018). Thus, we created evocative pieces of work that would be informed by personal experiences but would foreground the collective lived experience of academics we encounter in our everyday experiences. Within research, poetry as a form is in itself a kind of resistance for the researcher, the participant, and the reader (McAllister et al., 2021; Vincent, 2018). It offers the researcher freedom to explore their findings, the participant an amplifier for their voice, and the reader other ways of seeing.

What follows is the exploration of the two key themes of competition in Higher Education and active resistance to silencing through collaboration. We offer the outcomes of our collaborative poetic inquiry and contextualization, as well as our critical reflections. In our conclusion, we return to our model of linking collaboration with creativity through autoethnographic poetic inquiry and translanguaging by providing a critically, reflective evaluation.

Higher Education: A Competitive Environment

In an environment where zero-hour contracts and precarious employment are the norm, it is not surprising that culture becomes competitive. There are simply too few positions available and so, the focus on personal achievements and individual productivity vis-à-vis others emerges quite naturally.

For a long time, scholars, especially those interested in gender equality or inequality, rather, have highlighted that higher education as a sector reiterates a patriarchal society, where ambition and determination are embraced, as long as they were coming from men (Dlamini & Adams, 2014; Rollmann, 2013), and where the individuals at the most disadvantage are women early career researchers (Eddy & Ward, 2015; Morgan & Wood, 2017; Sardelis & Drew, 2016). Women have always been expected to take on the more caring, pastoral roles and to complete the kinds of labors that are linked with household-management (Lovin, 2018). The difference between women's and men's experiences of higher education became particularly prominent through the Covid-19 pandemic with researchers highlighting how women researchers were not as productive as their male counterparts,

and therefore had a disadvantage in developing their careers (Hosseini & Sharifzad, 2021; Muric et al., 2021). As a consequence, women find themselves working harder to maintain their trajectories and to compete in the world of academic work. In addition, the male-centered and dominated world of the academy not only encourages productivity or effectiveness, but it does so by encouraging an environment where emotions and feelings are seen as secondary to reason and logic (Butler-Rees, 2021).

Competition in the academy, ultimately, takes many forms. It is the tangible competition evidenced in people's scramble for furthering their career. But it is also the tension between individuals developing different ways of working to further their careers. It is the lack of support, or in some cases, the active withholding of support, for researchers entering academia. It is the devaluing of particular kinds of roles within teaching and administration in relation to the more prestigious tasks of research and research-related activities. The following two poems seek to address these open and covert forms of competition, as well as which consequences they lead to within individual experiences.

Compete

Meet the essential criteria.

Hit the desirables, several
publications. Not enough
experience in research.

Try again, but for now, work
harder.

High impact, full engagement, total
reach. Excellent research.

You're top of the game.

Outstanding. Not enough
experience in teaching.

Try again, but for now, work
harder.

How can I gain
experience, with no opportunity?
Someone, take a leap of faith?

Do more, still no
role. Unpaid
hours in research labs, lecture halls, seminar rooms.
For now, work harder, volunteer,

try again.

Another rejection, another “no.”
This is not right
for you. You’re overqualified.
You should have tried
last year.

Retreat

*I am aware
of your ambition
I heard you state it very clearly
but that’s not how it works.
If you keep this up
You’re going to put
some noses out of joint.*

Stay quiet.
Don’t let them think you think your thoughts
are big. Take the light and hide
it for a while; don’t let it be extinguished.

*I am sorry to not
be able
to support you.
I admire your ambition,
but your status doesn’t equal
your aspiration.*

Be satisfied. What does this mean?
Shrink a little bit.

*I don’t begrudge you
the opportunity
but if it was my choice . . .
you’ll see I indicated
I wouldn’t
make that choice.*

Why not me?

That wouldn’t be fair

Why others?

Well . . .

What is wrong
with me?

Áine: *Retreat* attempts to convey the emotional impact of a prior struggle to establish myself within a system that doesn’t recognize pre-existing accomplishments nor adequately supports the inherently human need to flourish uniquely. In contrast to the experience set out in *Retreat*, I have since had very real experiences and felt the positive emotional impact of interactions which are underpinned by a collaborative ethos. It is true, in the past I have felt silenced, as someone on a teaching contract, as someone without a PhD (yet), as a woman, as a working-class woman, as someone who experiences the compounded effect of intergenerational silencing imposed by patriarchy, Catholicism, capitalism, and empire (as a Catholic woman from a rural area in the north of Ireland). However, collaboration has supported me to use my voice. I didn’t say to find my voice, I have always had my voice. Leadership underpinned by a collaborative ethos, which led to a pivotal “yes, we will support you, what do you need?” conversation and leadership which recognizes my creative potential and ideas as valuable, have a profound effect on my sense of well-being and a sense of receptiveness to my voice. This leadership, which includes mentorship, has had as positive an effect on my well-being, confidence, and development, as the no’s and “not advisable for you’s” had a negative effect.

Nicole: In *Compete*, I address the ambiguity of collaboration in higher education. On the surface, it appears that collaborations are supported and encouraged. However, for many academics, especially those who are in their earlier career stages, the reality is that even for those so-called collaborative endeavors, criteria need to be met. A collegiate approach to collaboration would and should be possible. Truth is, there are barriers that need to be overcome first. Ironically, as I also highlight in *Compete*, once individuals have overcome those initial obstacles, they are then often seen as too experienced to be considered as “early careers” researchers, and consequently, are rejected, again. Competition is therefore setting individuals against external criteria, as well as against themselves, as they need to demonstrate experience, but not too much experience; a balance that is incredibly difficult to strike.

Active Resistance

To turn again to the epistemology of the transcultural turn in intercultural studies, we assert here that to engage in poetic inquiry and to write through poetry in academia is a way of “doing identity” (Hua et al., 2022, p. 315). It is a way for the marginalized to center themselves, to exercise agency, to resist symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001, Zhu Hua et al., 2022) and its “logic of inclusion and exclusion” (Swartz, 2013, p. 39; Hua et al., 2022). Poetic inquiry is an act of resistance. It is a way to have one’s voice heard in an arena in which there is an almost continuous effort to silence

those whose ways of knowing fall below the abyssal line of colonialism (García et al., 2021; de Sousa Santos, 2007) and its network of tributaries feeding the competitive neo-liberalized university; patriarchy, capitalism, the tyranny of reason, and the fallacy of objectivity. All of which fail to recognize both the creative as critical and feeling as knowing. Poetic inquiry challenges the Western epistemic traditions that prevail in the university and so, “suggests a way to decolonize knowledge production” (van Rooyen & d’Abdon, 2020, p. 2) and whose knowledge and ways of knowing are recognized as valid. Collaboration has this in common with poetic inquiry.

Collaboration characterized by a translanguaging stance offers “a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange” (Wei, 2018, p. 23), of possibility, creativity, and power (Wei, 2018). The following two poems were arrived at and written collaboratively in a space with those characteristics. Our collaboration began with critical and reflective dialogue about our own experiences. The poetic inquiry lens that we brought to our dialogue required us to be introspective and critically reflective, which fostered dialogue that was liberationist (Davis, 2021). The dialogue raised our consciousness about our marginalized positions as early career researchers whose respective established educational practices are not high value currency. It was liberationist because it also allowed us to reflect on the emancipatory collaborative experiences we have had and how we can proactively contribute to that paradigm. The first poem *Collaborate* is written in dialogic form to reflect the foundational role of dialogue in collaboration, creativity, and conscientização (Freire, 1970). It is meta; a poem in dialogic form which distills our analysis of our dialogic exchanges about the positive impact of open dialogue. It deals with the tensions between these invitational experiences and demands of the “real” work which move us further away from the possibilities and opportunities for development that we seek.

Although the “Ground Hog Day”-like repetition involved in careering in Higher Education may not be entirely explicit in the content of the poem *Career(ing): A Sestina*, it is implicit in the form. We chose the sestina because of its repetition of end words in a complicated, alternating order. This form reflects the repetitiveness of feeling othered, struggling to balance work and family, the sense of unbelonging, striving to navigate/understand the process, the challenge of trying again and again in different ways to reach goals which are so often just out of reach. Through the end words that we visit and revisit, we are able to convey the sense of stuckness that the sestina offers (Hass, 2017). For the sestina, we analyzed our written dialogic exchanges for the most commonly used words between us. Through further dialogue, we agreed on the six words that would most powerfully convey the

emotion of the relentless repetitiveness of our experiences. The repetition of carefully chosen words distills the important aspects of the narrative in the poem and therefore increases its potency. The words we arrived at were: connect, participate, research, work, process, and dialogue. Once the end words are chosen, the process of writing a sestina has been described as stepping into the dark by the Irish poet Paul Muldoon (Padel, 2002).

This tension between method and mystery that is felt when writing a sestina creates an excitement, nervous tension, and discomfort that can also be experienced through the unknownness of critical dialogue and collaboration. Here again, we see the synergy between poetic inquiry as creative method, collaboration and translanguaging. The possibilities and outcomes are unknown but require a radical openness and receptiveness to whatever may emerge. The wisdom of the child in the playground is offered as a metaphor for the power inherent in being open, and in recognizing knowing that may not be traditionally acknowledged. Both are characteristic of translanguaging and required of collaboration. We have arrived at this link through collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry and convey the assertion poetically.

Collaborate

I thank you for the question
you pose and the conversation
you have opened . . .

The pleasure is all
mine. There is so much
more to learn.

I am also very interested . . .

I agree. Yet
I don’t.

More work is needed.

Would you like to Zoom?

I’d welcome the opportunity
to catch up with you.

I think it is a great idea
link collaborate re/design with dialogue

We shall definitely explore the options.

I’m truly grateful
for your time.

Of course.
We collaborate.

I really appreciate that.

I wish I had the time to join your project

I've taken on too much, I'm completely overwhelmed with work, I'll try again next term.

Career(ing): A Sestina

Life is a series of marriages. We try to connect ourselves, the other, the work in which we participate.

I want my work to mean something; to do, to think, to share, to research.

I thought I'd come with open wonder to this work.

In the playground my child says hi to everyone, runs up, reaches out his hand. In the process some children answer and some are mortified by his attempt at dialogue.

Othered, ostracised, missing dialogue.

Day after day wanting to connect in academia. We must process being overwhelmed, needing to participate. It feels like a privilege, a calling, to work flexibly with others in research.

And I am hurt. How can I ensure that he (I) succeed(s)? I must research!

Wait, what I really want (for him) is to be "happy"—in creative dialogue

with life. How can I make sure my mothering works?

When I take my child to the child minder, I still connect to meetings in the car, so the work world knows that I participate

in everything, at all times. Yes, yes, yes, I say. I know the process.

An academic career is a process of learning to fit in, to belong. You research what it means to participate and follow the instructions, no dialogue. Somewhere along the way you forget to connect with yourself, with others. What remains is work.

I have wandered corridors, looking for an open door at work for a window, for a way in, through this labyrinth process.

Maybe a conversation at the copier will connect me to a chance and I will pass as someone capable of research.

"Oh, you know I'm into poetry, yes, and Blommaert J, and Freire P. and dialogue.

Oh yes, I'm really very smart and very keen. Could I participate?"

But how can you belong and participate when you don't understand the rules of work? You do, think, but don't share or dialogue because competition is part of the process. Faster, better, more impactful research is needed. There is no need to connect.

My child shows me the process at the park; how to participate.

I didn't research it or show him how play works.

He climbs the rope, turns to connect, uses his "let me help you" dialogue.

Concluding Thoughts

Collaboration, like poetic inquiry, is an act of resistance (McAllister et al., 2021) to the silencing apparatus within academia, particularly the competition fed by colonialism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, and Western epistemic traditions that favor some ways of knowing and erase others. It is an act of resistance that both educational leaders and early career colleagues engage in simultaneously if not conspiratorially. When leaders are guided by an ethos of collaboration, they act to recognize and enhance the innately personal contribution of all as valuable, without submitting to the reductive neoliberal elevation of the individual. The worthiness of collaboration is explored in this article through a collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry on the emotional impact of erasure and the silencing that occurs when competition prevails over collaboration. Autoethnography uses introspection to explore cultural phenomena and engage in robust analysis (Chang, 2016), while poetic inquiry is often employed in collaborative and participatory research contexts (Faulkner, 2019). "Poetry writing carries artistic and aesthetic features that touch the human emotions and make the work more powerful and influential" (Elbelazi & Alharbi, 2020, p. 662). In a study which aims to promote poetic autoethnography as a legitimate methodological approach in qualitative research and poetry writing as a healing practice to marginalized and traumatized individuals, they claim poetry writing is how they voice their silence. Disciplines as arguably diverse from literature as neuroscience have recognized the potential of poetry to foster profound emotional engagement (Wassiliwizky et al., 2017). Autoethnographic poetic inquiry proves itself to be

an effective vehicle for creativity which uncovers and conveys emotional knowing, which in turn informs a model for collaboration that enables and facilitates the critical and creative contributions of marginalized individuals within academia and therefore their career development.

Translanguaging theory is drawn upon for its recognition that to be creative is to be critical (Wei, 2011) and its understanding of the role of creativity in legitimizing knowledge, ways of knowing and ways of being which have been pushed into the abyss (García et al., 2021; de Sousa Santos, 2007). Ultimately, creativity is required because although collaborative working is lauded as a feature of the system for students, in reality, it is not facilitated for academic staff and so creative thinking is required to un-otherise it. The potential of translanguaging theory to inform a collaborative model to transform academic culture is a promising avenue for further exploration. This article has uncovered defining characteristics of transformative collaboration: It harnesses creativity to resist existing power structures which silence and misrecognize the marginalized, it facilitates leaders to resist on behalf of early career colleagues, and it emboldens early career colleagues to persist and to say no to the no's which silence them and delay their personal and career development.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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