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Salmon swimming upstream: a cross-disciplinary online encounter about autoethnographic research and thesis writing

Abstract:

Responding to Savin-Baden's (2008) argument that scholars must reclaim learning spaces within their institutions, this paper presents a case study of how online environments existent within many Australian universities can be used as spaces for cross-disciplinary dialogue. To achieve this, it discusses an online encounter between two researchers undertaking autoethnographic research projects from different academic disciplines (Business and Arts) within the same tertiary institution.

The site for this encounter was a wiki (a website in which pages can be collaboratively created and edited by multiple users) that was used by the authors for the asynchronous sharing of perspectives on autoethnographic research and thesis writing. In this endeavour, form and content were interlinked to create a space of potential for encounter without rigidly predetermined parameters. This collaboration involved an ongoing, evolving and dynamic written encounter between the two authors for a period of four weeks. This writing was supplemented with synchronous web-based audiographic conferencing to facilitate the writing of this paper. All stages of this project used tools available within the Southern Cross University online environment.

This paper discusses the role of online, collaborative tools in research journeys and identifies the benefits of grass-roots cross-disciplinary encounters. It examines how the online space impacted upon the written dialogue that emerged between the authors and identifies how differences in disciplinary background, age, career stage and gender shaped their interactions. In presenting the encounter as a case study, this paper shows a possible model for facilitating cross-disciplinary conversations while arguing for the value of such encounters. It explores how online spaces can facilitate alternative modes of academic writing and collegial connection, arguing that such encounters are vital for scholars working within an academic culture that is increasingly informed by economic imperatives.

As online tools and environments now hold a central role in many Australian universities, this paper provides insight into how researchers can use the online spaces available within their institutions to facilitate mutual support and engage in constructive dialogue with a wider range of colleagues. In doing so, scholars may share the struggles and triumphs of the frequently arduous research journey swimming upstream: learning from others while offering the self. They also provide themselves with invaluable, low-risk professional development in adopting online technologies.

Biographical note:

Nollie Nahrung is an Honours student in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University (Lismore campus). Her Honours project explores polyamory and queer heterosexuality. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Queensland and a Bachelor of Multimedia Studies with Distinction from Central Queensland University.

Steve Rowe is a CPA and has been a university lecturer in auditing (and advanced accounting) for over 25 years at Southern Cross University. He has been disseminating his online learning and teaching practices at national and international conferences since 2001 and been recognised with institutional, national and international awards. His PhD is exploring how and why institutional and sector changes have influenced his decisions to move his teaching online.

Savin-Baden (2008, 2) argues that 'learning spaces' (spaces in which to write, think and reflect upon academic practice and identity) are increasingly absent for academic staff in contemporary tertiary education institutions. This facilitates a fragmented academic identity, hallmarked by feelings of isolation and disconnection, which negatively impacts the intellectual health of academic communities. To counter this, Savin-Baden asserts that reclaiming and even redefining learning spaces within the academy is a critical project. Using Savin-Baden's arguments as a call to action, this paper takes a case study approach to explore how online collaborative environments can act as cross-disciplinary learning spaces for scholars. It examines how these spaces can facilitate opportunities for shared learning and reflection in a climate of significant cultural change wrought by the heightened economic imperatives that drive today's Australian tertiary institutions.

In the contemporary Australian tertiary landscape, academic staff experience performative practices and modes of measurement, control and accountability that increasingly articulate corporate values (Marginson & Considine 2000, 4; Thornton 2004, 163; Savin-Baden 2008, 52). In this environment, academics are experiencing low morale and high levels of job dissatisfaction, stress and burnout (Anderson et al. 2002, 96). A 2011 report commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on reconceptualising academic work demonstrates that these concerns remain major issues for the sector (Bexley et al. 2011, xi). For students, the picture seems similarly woeful, with a recent study of all enrolled students at two large Australian universities finding that the majority surveyed were highly stressed and unable to cope with their studies (Stallman 2010).

In this context, academic staff and students face increasing pressure to specialise and publish within their discipline in order to succeed (Mehlenbacher 2009, 61). Yet the perceived value of research connections across and between disciplines in Australia was highlighted by the 2003 publication of 'Emerging issues for cross-discipline research' by the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) (Grigg et al. 2003). While the DEST report focuses on organisational and economic factors that can encourage or impede cross-disciplinary research, with specific concern for scientific research, this paper examines a more grass-roots cross-disciplinary collaboration between the two authors of this paper, who are both staff members and students at the Lismore campus of Southern Cross University (SCU).

Steve is a PhD student and academic staff member in the SCU Business School, while Nollie is an Honours student in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, and a general staff member. As both authors are currently undertaking autoethnographic research for their respective theses, a desire to discuss autoethnography and the thesis-writing process was the basic premise for the online encounter that forms the case study for this paper. While Davie (2008), Muncey (2005) and Wall (2006, 2008) each discuss the autoethnographic process from their individual disciplinary perspectives, the intention of this paper is to show how cross-disciplinary encounters can enrich individual research perspectives and practices within an institutional environment that evidences diminished space and time for such exchanges.

The authors staged their encounter within the standard Blackboard Learn © Learning Management System accessible to academic staff members and students of SCU. Within this system, the first technology employed by the authors was a wiki, a website that enables multiple contributors to add or edit content via simple tools within the user interface. The second technology, Blackboard Collaborate © (formerly Elluminate Live!), is a synchronous online technology that was employed to facilitate the writing of this paper, and is dealt with later herein.

The authors used the wiki for a period of four weeks as a space for reciprocal collaborative exchange in which written text, images and other files (e.g. extracts from their work in Word and PDF, and links to associated readings) were provided and accessed. The asynchronous nature of the wiki accommodated the time needs of other projects, as each author could contribute and respond at times suited to their individual schedules. The simple set-up and interface of the wiki enabled each author to rapidly focus upon content, while the capacity to add material, restructure content, or link between pages and documents remained possible throughout the project. As den Exter et al. (2012) illustrate in a recent paper regarding more complex examples of wikis in cross-disciplinary student learning, the inherent flexibility of wikis enables their structure and scale to be customised to meet the need of diverse projects, according to intended purpose and scope.

As the parameters for discussion were not rigidly predetermined, the wiki structure chosen for this project was very simple, with one page for each author and 'our' shared page for ideas about writing this paper. As the encounter progressed, each author began moving more comfortably between pages, and the spatial distinction between 'Steve' and 'Nollie' evaporated as the wiki writing took a predominantly conversational form where each author's page became 'our' page. This shows the evolution of the wiki into a digital dialogic space 'in which critical conversations occur and ones where change and challenge take place' (Savin-Baden 2008, 53), allowing insights and understandings to emerge through dialogue (Mezirow 1985, 19).

This dialogue addressed a broad range of subjects, including auditing, polyamory, poststructuralism, queer theory, educational theory, teaching practice, note taking, time management, writing practice, procrastination and multiple points in between. While this range indicates the significant difference in topic between the autoethnographic research projects discussed, it also reveals common ground shared by the authors as student researchers. In the dialogic space of the wiki, a rejection of rigidly predetermined discussion topics enabled an organic and far-ranging conversation to evolve, demonstrating Savin-Baden's (2008, 52) argument that holding a broad agenda rather than a 'script' can be beneficial and productive for academic engagement. Overall, the broad agenda for this encounter was a desire to discuss the thesis writing process and learn about each author's use of autoethnography as research method, in ways that located points of similarity while also respecting and accommodating difference.

In such cross-disciplinary encounters, epistemological differences and/or disciplinary specific language can make it difficult for scholars to effectively communicate, as

highlighted by Crowley and O'Loughlin (2008). An insight into this difficulty occurred early in the project when the authors discussed whether they conceptualised their encounter as inter- or trans-disciplinary. As Strober (2006, 318–19) explains, the terms cross-, inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinary are often used interchangeably, although they have different meanings. Further compounding this confusion is that different authors use these terms in different ways.

In responding to whether he conceptualised the encounter as inter- or cross-disciplinary, Steve produced a diagram (included below) that visualised the differences he perceived between these terms, with 'inter' represented as a series of overlapping and intersecting circles, while 'trans' was outside these overlaps and intersections.
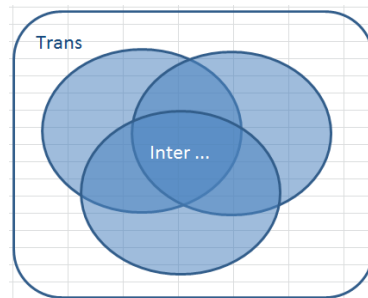
Here, for Steve, examining these terms was about illustrating their literal meaning, while Nollie was seeking to question their definitional boundaries. As this example illustrates, disciplinary background is not just a field of knowledge, but a way of thinking that shapes understandings of the world and our relationship to language. Polkinghorne (1995) calls this paradigmatic cognition, a term he attributes to Bruner as being the traditional logical-scientific mode of knowing. In this project, paradigmatic differences were more than theoretical assertions: they rapidly became an integral part of the conditions of the encounter.

Further, Nollie (whose thesis concerns queer sexualities) explained to Steve that when she saw the terms 'inter' and 'trans', she 'automatically' thought of them as abbreviations for 'intersex' and 'transgender'. This small example illustrates how scholars bring (often unconscious) contextual references from their research to engagements with others in different contexts. For each author, the discussion about inter- and transdisciplinary research created a practical awareness of the need to 'work through' potential stumbling blocks for communication caused by epistemological differences. Through this experience, each author was offered a valuable chance to think outside their respective project, and become conscious of the 'habits of the mind' (Strober 2006) that are cultivated through discipline-specific scholarship.

In doing so, the insights that emerged enabled each author to learn about, acknowledge and begin to understand the paradigmatic differences between the research projects being discussed. Subsequently each author was required to demonstrate their learning through explaining their ideas in language that was sensitive to difference yet also sought to translate across disciplinary boundaries. In this process, each author was required to enact a dual role as both teacher and student. Following Strober's (2006, 318) definition, the authors agreed that they

conceptualised their encounter as cross- or multi-disciplinary, in which two different disciplines informed the discussion, but were not integrated fields of knowledge. Yet, while being predominantly cross-disciplinary, the common research method of autoethnography also facilitated an inter-disciplinary aspect to the encounter. Here, the authors shared a belief in the value of lived experience in research, although paradigmatic perspectives, informed by disciplinary location, resulted in marked differences in how they understood and used this experience in their research projects.

This provided a practical reminder that autoethnography can be understood more as a broad approach to scholarship rather than a set of static and stable practices (Gingrich-Philbrook 2005, 298). Indeed, it may be drawn that the flexibility of autoethnographic research approaches, in addition to focus on lived experience, is particularly suited to facilitating communication across and between disciplines. In this project, significant differences in topic and paradigmatic locations may have made it difficult for the authors to find a connection if knowledge about and belief in the value of autoethnographic research had not been shared. The way that lived experience, in interpersonal communications and in research, can form bridges between diverse individuals is indicated by Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 415) who write that '…experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others'.

Although the self is always connected to others, autoethnographic research can lead to feelings of isolation, perhaps in contrast to projects that require more obvious and ongoing engagement with other research participants. Such isolation can be compounded by the thesis-writing process, which further requires largely individual work. For students undertaking autoethnographic research projects, supervisor contact is an important channel for sharing work and gaining critical feedback. In this encounter, both authors were additionally able to share their writing with another student who was similarly experiencing the challenges and joys of writing about the self. Through providing excerpts of their work in progress, each author located a new critical friend: one who read from a different disciplinary background yet held an understanding of and empathy for the intent of the research approach. Thus, a key benefit of this encounter was the facilitation of new forms of peer support and review for each author's work across disciplinary boundaries.

As this discussion evidences, online spaces can facilitate a fluidity of movement between troublesome and transitional spheres. Savin-Baden (2008, 67) describes this state as liminal, 'an oscillation … it is a betwixt and between state … often on the way to a new and/or different state'. In the wiki environment this was especially dynamic, as individual reflective and reflexive writings were merged within a dialogic space (Savin-Baden 2008, 56). The wiki thus enabled a space for soliloquy while simultaneously guarding against solipsism due to the openness of such writing to critique by the other author. The writing space of the wiki, which was variously an individual, reciprocal and collaborative event, revealed how telling is also a way of becoming, in which subjectivity of self and other operate in a fluid and evolving space of flux and possibility (Jackson & Mazzei 2008, 305).

In this fluid process, the wiki operated as a shared 'writing space' in which each author could experiment with authorial voice and writer identity (Savin-Baden 2008, 41). Here each author practised writing from a range of standpoints including student, teacher, peer and, in producing this paper, co-author of an academic publication. Importantly, the immersive environment of the writing space also led to two significant benefits for the authors. The first of these was sparked by enacting a teacher identity in the wiki writing space, as going 'back to basics' was necessary for each author to successfully explain their research project to the other. In going back to locate key readings and draft work to share in the wiki, each author uncovered thesis resources that they had forgotten about. For Steve, this included papers about his teaching practice and for Nollie, a draft literature review.

The re-emergence of these 'lost' resources provoked questions about how the wiki acted as the impetus for their rediscovery. One perspective held that, as a direct result of engaging in the wiki space, each author went proactively looking for material to share and subsequently re-examined all their research artefacts with greater awareness. Alternatively, it was suggested that writing in the wiki facilitated a subtler re-engagement with the broader research picture, which led to 'thinking back' and connecting with earlier stages of the research journey. This resulted in finding material that became overlooked as each research project matured and the authors became focused on more discrete elements of their thesis writing. In evaluating these perspectives, the authors concluded that the writing space of the wiki created a fortuitous combination of timing and intellectual climate that led to the rediscoveries.

The second benefit from engaging in the wiki writing space was that the authors produced new writing for their respective theses, in addition to writing wiki content. As Stafford (1994, 231) reminds us, writing is both a process and an activity that requires regular practice. Writing in the wiki required a commitment to regular writing practice for each author, within a space that gave scope for experimentation. Through engaging in regular wiki writing, each author became enmeshed within the 'thinking space' necessary for writing while also taking advantage of the wiki as a 'practice space' in which to write. This combination of thinking and practising resulted in new individual research writing for each author's project. This outcome seems to illustrate what Clardy (cited in Ladd 1979, 6) has eloquently noted, that '[w]riting is as much the cause as the result of having something to say'.

In addition to the epistemological differences that shaped this encounter, differences in career stage, age and gender between the authors also played an important role. Steve's PhD project, which employs a backward-looking lens to examine his teaching, evidences his career maturity. This is enhanced by his experience as a researcher who has attained a Masters degree and written and spoken extensively about his experiences, overcoming what Palmer (1993, 8) has called 'the privatization of teaching'. In contrast, Nollie is an Honours student, taking her 'first step' in postgraduate research. Further, while both being students at SCU, Steve is an academic staff member at this institution while Nollie is employed as a general staff member.

This highlights the institutional hierarchies that construct difference between the authors, in addition to their differing research topics and disciplines. In examining difference in relation to academic identity, a useful conceptualisation is Gould's (2003) model of hedgehog and fox. In this model, hedgehogs have a single strategy for success, which they consistently apply to their work, and remain firmly embedded within a specific disciplinary field of knowledge. In contrast, foxes devise and employ multiple strategies for success across their work. In considering this model, Strober (2006, 16–18) argues for the necessity of being both kinds of academic animal, as knowledge in one's own disciplinary field is an important asset brought to work with others, while being open to alternative approaches is integral to the success of such work. Strober argues that age is an important factor here, because as scholars mature into disciplinary expertise they feel more freedom to consider other approaches, and investigate alternative knowledge paradigms. Steve's career evidences such maturity, as a teacher with many years' professional expertise in his chosen field. As a consistent early adopter of technologies, Steve is also foxlike in his approach, continually looking for ways to expand and enhance his teaching practice, and exchanging knowledge with members of the university community across Australia and internationally.

Although Nollie is at the beginning of her academic career, inviting Steve to collaborate with her in this project demonstrates fox behaviour. This project indicates how novice researchers might find ways to take advantage of the 'more varied store of memories and experiences' of experienced researchers to enhance their ability to make connections that may otherwise not be noticed or understood from within their more narrow, early-career perspective (Ladd 1979, 4). Further, it can be seen that gender (as highlighted by Strober 2008, 17) and disciplinary training also influenced Nollie's approach, as exposure to womens studies in her Arts degree and undertaking a major group project during her Bachelor of Multimedia Studies provided experience in collaborative project work and a belief in its benefits. Nollie also takes a fox approach to her thesis project, which invites participation by readers. Therefore, this project was valuable in encouraging flexible fox cross-disciplinary skills for both early- and later-career researchers at a time when they were also undertaking thesis writing to develop their hedgehog disciplinary knowledge. Meeting each other in the online learning space enabled institutional hierarchies to be challenged as both authors variously performed multiple roles as teacher, student and peer. Thus, the fluid space of online encounter helped address the power disparity that can restrict interactions between novice and experienced scholars in university environments.

Along with gender, age, career stage, and disciplinary background, differences in technological expertise also played an important role within this project. In using the wiki each author had previous experience with this technology, so aptitude and experience in writing online was comparable between authors. In contrast, there was a marked difference in author experience using the synchronous online technology, Blackboard Collaborate ® (formerly Elluminate Live!), employed to facilitate the writing of this paper. Blackboard Collaborate ® enables live conferencing over the web, with facilities including voice and webcam, text messaging, an interactive whiteboard and the ability to share files. Importantly, sessions can be recorded for

later review and whiteboard content can also be saved and printed from the live session or the recordings. At the time of preparing this paper, Steve was an experienced user of Blackboard Collaborate ®, a champion for this technology at SCU who runs ongoing training sessions for staff, in addition to using it comprehensively within his teaching. In contrast, Nollie was a novice user. Participating in Blackboard Collaborate ® sessions with Steve was highly valuable for Nollie as a practical learning exercise, and she went from being a resistant user of this technology to a competent and engaged contributor.

Although regular training sessions for Blackboard Collaborate ® are offered by SCU, not having a compelling reason to attend (e.g. not currently teaching with this technology) can make learning without subsequent practical application seem unappealing. Through Steve's encouragement and enthusiasm, Nollie came to appreciate the benefits of this technology, in addition to becoming skilled in using it. In these engagements, Steve was able to 'teach' Nollie while both people discussed this paper as equal co-authors. Thus, the synchronous aspect of this engagement evidenced both hierarchical and egalitarian aspects, illustrating the potential of online spaces to both facilitate and overflow identities such as student and teacher. This example further demonstrates how liminal sites between transitional and transformative spaces can provide experiential engagements that ultimately produce practical learning outcomes for participants (Savin-Baden 2008, 67).

Importantly, this project was a risk for both authors as it required time and commitment to undertake. In an increasingly time-poor, results-driven Australian tertiary environment, it would appear that both academics and students have no time to pursue such 'non-vital' projects, and that doing so would evidence a poor ability to determine priorities and manage time. And yet this climate perhaps also speaks of the absolute necessity of 'finding time' to engage in such encounters with each other, to share the joys and frustrations of research and to help counter the isolation and stress of contemporary academic life. In making time for such encounters, perhaps a modest rebellion might occur, in which staff and students reassert the value of their universities as a site of both formal and informal relationships that facilitate intellectual exchange in an environment that is supportive yet also constructively challenging.

Yet are such encounters really rebellious, even in a modest way? It can be seen that such projects are actually compatible with the needs of the 'enterprise university' (Marginson & Considine 2000), as they offer a practical opportunity for staff and students to undertake self-directed training in the online technologies that are increasingly part of contemporary learning environments. In doing so, online encounters between scholars provide professional learning opportunities at a relatively low cost to tertiary institutions. Whether done in conjunction with formal training sessions or not, as this case study demonstrates, such encounters can enable scholars with similar or different levels of technological skill to collaborate in online environments existent within their institutions, achieve tangible results, enhance the ability to communicate across disciplines and learn about the online technologies available to them.

Perhaps it can be summarised that such encounters both accommodate and acknowledge the time-pressured environment of contemporary universities while also breaking free from some of the rigidity and control that they increasingly evidence. In this project both authors found a sense of freedom in connection with another to discuss difference and common ground, based on nothing more formal than an interpersonal commitment to undertaking this project and a belief in the value of engaging with each other. Through taking advantage of the online tools available within their institution, the authors explored a range of hierarchies and boundaries, to think about how these might be respected or challenged to share insights about writing, research, disciplinary thinking and the development of academic identity.

As Savin-Baden (2008, 51) argues, many academic staff (and, arguably, students) can feel a lack of space for intellectual engagement in their academic lives, and forget that finding such spaces is an important and necessary part of their responsibilities. In reconceptualising online environments within the university as potential spaces for diverse encounters, staff and students can reassert the value and necessity of sharing with each other, to locate new modes of collaboration, cement collegiality and engage in intellectual debate. While acknowledging that the controls and regulations that enable universities to manage risk and provide services to staff and students are important, so is having the freedom to experiment and explore through a range of diverse online encounters within our institutions. As Savin-Baden (2008, 116) forcefully argues, 'staff need to know that spaces that they have created for writing and reflection are seen as valid spaces by the leadership of the university, so that they can be productive spaces and not interrupted spaces or patrolled spaces'. The authors of this paper believe their encounter illustrates a practical example of how online spaces for experimentation and dialogue can lead to productive collaborations that achieve positive outcomes for both scholars and their institutions.

Through this approach we can endeavour to more fully exploit the boundary spaces within our institutions, to use their digital spaces as dialogic spaces 'to be framed, delved into, argued for and prized' (Savin-Baden 2008, 65). In the time-poor, increasingly corporatised climate of the academy, connection to each other is vitally important to making a stand for the kind of academic identity we value and wish to hold. As Savin-Baden (2008, 65) powerfully reminds us, '[t]o speak, to be entitled to speak and to share our perspectives is a vital space in academic life, and must be reclaimed so we are neither rendered, nor render ourselves, voiceless'.

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