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Incorporating Open Educational Practices in Graduate Education: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract
In this paper we describe the early steps of our journey through a collaborative autoethnographic research project and share preliminary findings. As distance educators who work at an open, online university, we embrace a philosophy of openness, drawing on open educational practices to facilitate collaborative and flexible learning. As faculty members who support masters and doctoral students, we conceptualize our virtual learning environments as spaces where reciprocal learning takes place between and among learners and professors in a form of co-mentorship. We chose collaborative autoethnography because it is an approach that allows us to interrogate our practice using experiences, archival data, and artifacts as accessible and reliable sources of information. Collaborative autoethnography, which permits us to both *individually* and *collectively* critique our practice, requires us to consider our personal experiences in relation to our identities as distance educators within the cultural context of an open and online research university in Canada. The initial data analysis process has uncovered three emergent themes to date. These themes include values linking open educational practices with student engagement and facilitating effective open educational practice through learning design. This research project enables us to experience the power of collaborative autoethnography as a research approach and to further our understanding of the potential of open educational practices in graduate education.

Keywords: open educational practice, co-mentorship, graduate education, collaborative autoethnography

Introduction

The authors are faculty members at Athabasca University – we are colleagues, co-researchers, and co-mentors implementing open educational practices in professional graduate education. In this paper we describe the early steps of our journey through a collaborative autoethnographic research project. Our work connects to the 2022 OTESSA conference themes of *transitions* and of *sustaining positive change.*

As distance educators who work at an open, online university, we embrace a philosophy of openness, drawing on open educational practices to facilitate collaborative and flexible learning. As faculty members who teach and supervise masters and doctoral students, we conceptualize our virtual learning environments as spaces where reciprocal learning takes place between and among learners and between students and supervisors in a form of co-mentorship. Since the word *supervisor* connotes a top-down hierarchical relationship that is incongruent with our values we have chosen to refer to our role with learners as *mentor.*

Practicing openness, we aim to empower learners and to reduce the hierarchy in our relationships. As reflective practitioners we seek answers to questions that will help us become more effective online educators, in part by moving beyond a traditional discourse approach to teaching and learning. The goal of the study is to provide recommendations that may enhance practice by critiquing the teaching and learning strategies that we currently use when mentoring graduate students. Our journey is in response to the changing landscape of higher education, and we hope for transformation of ourselves and our students along the way.

This short paper takes the following structure. We provide our working definitions as a foundation. Next, we describe our methodology, which is collaborative autoethnography, and share very early findings. Finally, we offer a conclusion that summarizes what we have learned to date and what we will focus on as our research moves forward.

Definitions

Two terms central to our investigation are *open educational practices* and *co-mentorship*. Our conception of *open educational practices* is evolving (Bozkurt et al., 2019). For now, our working definition, which is grounded in, but expands on, the work of others (Andrade et al., 2011; Cronin & MacLaren, 2018), is the use of teaching approaches and academic practices that draw on multiple open technologies and pedagogies, to facilitate collaborative and flexible learning. This may involve professors and students engaging in the co-creation of learning experiences, using open resources as appropriate, doing research and publishing together, co-teaching courses, collaboratively presenting at conferences, and so on. *Co-mentorship* is a relationship where colleagues work in thinking partnerships to support and extend one another's learning; it builds on traditional notions of mentorship (Kumar & Coe, 2017), where one party is more knowledgeable than others, but extends this notion to partners and collaborators where expertise is distributed (Rymer, 2002; Huxhold & Lackey, 2016). We also enact our co-mentorship in our work with students as we are learning from and with them. This results in reciprocally beneficial relationships and a mutually supportive learning system.

Methodology

We chose collaborative autoethnography because it is an approach that allows us to interrogate our practice using experiences, archival data, and artifacts as accessible and reliable sources of information. Collaborative autoethnography requires us to consider our personal experiences in relation to our identities as distance educators within the cultural context of an open and online research university in Canada. It also allows us to both *individually* and *collectively* critique our practice.

To conceptualize autoethnography, we consider three interrelated components: *auto* refers to personal experiences; *graphy* refers to beliefs and practices; and *ethno* refers to the identities of a culture (Adams & Herrmann, 2020; Chang et al., 2016) Autoethnography uses personal experiences to describe and interpret beliefs, practices, and identities of a culture. This necessitates rigorous self-reflection and a stance of reflexivity to illuminate and interrogate cultural assumptions and practices. The key is not only *telling a story* but also *situating* the story within a larger social context, using cognitive, behavioural, and emotional processes. Collaborative autoethnography can be messy and requires rigorous attention to detail. Thus, collaborative autoethnography is uniquely suited to a reflective exploration of our open educational practice.

Research Questions

Our research questions are: What open educational practices do we use with graduate students? What are the outcomes for students and ourselves? How can we improve our practice as open, flexible, and distance educators?

Positionality

We acknowledge that our positionality influences our research. We are faculty members in an open university that is "dedicated to the removal of barriers that restrict access to and success in university-level study and to increasing equality of educational opportunities for adult learners worldwide" (AU, 2021). As distance educators, we work in an open, social, and distributed context and are influenced by Holmberg's description of guided didactic conversation as a key instructional strategy in the design of distance education courses (1994).

Data Collection and Analysis

Our diverse data sources, which support and supplement one another, include artifacts, individual written reflections in response to writing prompts, and recorded dialogic conversations involving the researchers. Artifacts – such as student comments, course evaluations, assignments and course designs, recordings, and transcripts of our conversations – authenticate our personal memories of experience. Written reflections emerge from self-reflection and self-analysis and involve careful thought and evaluation of our own artifacts and experiences. Conversations allow us to challenge ourselves and one another, convey and clarify meaning, and substantiate and build on each other's experiences and views. As we worked together, we were inspired by the term *interthinking* (Littleton & Mercer, 2013) and discovered that it applied to our process. We found that our dialogic conversations linked individual insights to solve problems, stimulate creative thinking, and generate new ideas.

Data analysis, which is ongoing, is an iterative process where we individually, and then collectively, code data and engage in collaborative interpretive meaning-making to arrive at agreed upon themes (Saldaña, 2020). Subsequent data collection may become part of the process if the researchers agree that supplementation is required. Research ethics are central in collaborative autoethnography to protect the confidentiality of implicated others such as our students, and to ensure trust among researchers. Before engaging in the study, we sought and received Research Ethics Board approval.

Findings

In this paper, we are reporting preliminary findings that emerged from the self-reflection data. We coded and analyzed a total of 12 reflections (four written by each researcher). To date, we have identified three emerging themes. While these initial themes are positive, we have not yet reflected on how we can improve our practice. We anticipate that further critical examination of artifacts and archival data through self-reflection and discourse on our experiences of using open educational practices and co-mentorship strategies in online learning environments will lead to new insights into our beliefs, assumptions, and practices. Additionally, we have yet to thoroughly examine the outcomes of our co-mentorship practice. There is evidence in existing literature that effective mentoring is associated with higher student success and retention rates, student-faculty research collaboration, reciprocal learning, higher rates of publication after graduation, and increased faculty member career satisfaction (Kumar & Johnson, 2017). We can attest to enhanced personal fulfillment in our work.

Emergent Theme 1: Values Alignment

We found that our self-identified values (which include *respect, trust, care, empathy, and ethical practice*) are aligned with open educational practic*e*s described in the literature. For example, care includes focusing on student potential and on the inherent worth and uniqueness of individuals. This focus leads to the opportunity for genuine collaboration and supports power re-distribution between students and teachers since no voice is considered superior to another (Noone et al., 2020). A demonstration of this value is evident in teaching practices that facilitate student-centered partnerships where learners are invited to move from being consumers of knowledge to be co-producers of knowledge.

Emergent Theme 2: Fostering Student Engagement Inspires Learning

We recognized our commitment to engaging with learners in ways that inspire learning. Along with values such as *trust*, cognitive and emotional competencies underpin our engagement practices. For example, if students don't feel they can trust the instructor and class members they are not likely to take risks, be creative, and fully engage. As another example, we may ask students to create a learning journal as a course assignment and prompt them to connect their new learning with learning acquired through their professions or other experiences including experiences that were *not* positive.

Emergent Theme 3: Learning Design Facilitates Effective Co-Mentorship

We discovered that our processes such as good learning design and purposefully crafted activities such as co-creating assignments with students are aligned with open educational practices. Other examples of deliberate design that facilitate effective co-mentorship include providing students with choice to facilitate individualization of learning activities, partnering with

students to publish products of learning, and inviting students to set the agenda and lead meetings related to their research projects.

Conclusion

We are encouraged by the opportunities we are seeing for open pedagogical practices and co-mentorship to benefit both students and faculty. We personally are experiencing the power of collaborative autoethnography as a research approach that moves us beyond our traditional research practice. Zacharias and Shleykina (2021) propose that collaborative autoethnography can lead to "innovative and attitudinal change that faculty might not achieve individually" (p. 11). Our process is enabling us to think critically and to work creatively and productively together, contributing to our professional growth and development as learners and mentors. Our growth thus aligns with the conference themes of transitions and sustaining positive change as we continue to explore our practices in supporting graduate students. On a broader level, as we learn and write about open educational practices, we are sharing our insights with other educators for their consideration and possible implementation in their own work. This has the potential to influence the social context of open education more generally. As learners and practitioners in the global open and distance education environment, we have become more aware of our responsibilities as open educators due to this research project. In the next phase of our investigations, we expect to further explore our practices through data collection and analysis. We plan to use a critical lens to focus on recommendations for ourselves and others for enhancing open educational practices in graduate education.

Authors' Contributions

The three authors contributed equally to the research design, conduct of the study, analysis and interpretation of data, and the writing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this research through the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Since this research project is not yet complete, we are not able to provide access to the data upon which our paper is based. Further, our research methodology (collaborative autoethnography) cautions against revealing the identities and contexts of implicated third parties. The researchers may be able, at the end of the study, to share selected data upon request.

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