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5-2-2021

## Reflexivity Through a Yoga Class Experience: Preparing for My Health Promotion Without Borders Excursion to Mongolia

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### Recommended APA Citation

Deibert, S. L., Ritchie, S. D., Oddson, B., Michel, G., & Tetzlaff, E. J. (2021). Reflexivity Through a Yoga Class Experience: Preparing for My Health Promotion Without Borders Excursion to Mongolia. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(5), 1401-1410. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4371>

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## Reflexivity Through a Yoga Class Experience: Preparing for My Health Promotion Without Borders Excursion to Mongolia

### Abstract

In this paper, I (S. L. Deibert) share my story of discovering the relationship between reflexivity, autoethnography, and yoga through a meaningful experience. Yoga has been an important influence on my physical and mental well-being for over a decade, but I did not consider its implications in my academic life until I was asked to write a reflexive assignment for a course. The task was exploring who I am in connection to my master's thesis project; the challenge was finding a starting point for my reflexive journey of self-discovery. Frustrated by the latter, I turned to yoga for refuge; instead of escaping the assignment, I found that my quest for self-exploration was intertwined with my yoga practice. The purpose of this paper is to delve further into my experience with yoga as a medium for developing reflexivity. Using autoethnography, I share my journey of developing critical thinking through a narrative related to my yoga class experience. Linking my research to my yoga practice allowed me to better understand myself as a person and researcher, become mindful of how my own views shape my experiences, and develop a deeper level of critical reflection. Overall, this work demonstrates the experience of a connection between yoga, reflexivity, and autoethnography, and adds to the sparse literature exploring the intersection of these three.

### Keywords

autoethnography, reflexivity, yoga

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### Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Robert Schinke for developing the assignment that initiated the lead author's reflexive journey. We are also grateful to Ms. Willa Paterson for instructing the yoga class that inspired the narrative presented in this paper.

# **Reflexivity Through a Yoga Class Experience: Preparing for My Health Promotion Without Borders Excursion to Mongolia**

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In this paper, I (S. L. Deibert) share my story of discovering the relationship between reflexivity, autoethnography, and yoga through a meaningful experience. Yoga has been an important influence on my physical and mental well-being for over a decade, but I did not consider its implications in my academic life until I was asked to write a reflexive assignment for a course. The task was exploring who I am in connection to my master's thesis project; the challenge was finding a starting point for my reflexive journey of self-discovery. Frustrated by the latter, I turned to yoga for refuge; instead of escaping the assignment, I found that my quest for self-exploration was intertwined with my yoga practice. The purpose of this paper is to delve further into my experience with yoga as a medium for developing reflexivity. Using autoethnography, I share my journey of developing critical thinking through a narrative related to my yoga class experience. Linking my research to my yoga practice allowed me to better understand myself as a person and researcher, become mindful of how my own views shape my experiences, and develop a deeper level of critical reflection. Overall, this work demonstrates the experience of a connection between yoga, reflexivity, and autoethnography, and adds to the sparse literature exploring the intersection of these three.

*Keywords:* autoethnography, reflexivity, yoga

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to share the story of my experience of reflexive growth through a yoga class, within the context of writing an assignment to gain experience with autoethnographic methods in preparation for my master's thesis. To make sense of this work, it is important to understand the practice of yoga through a review of related literature. It is also important to understand the nature of my master's thesis project and the autoethnographic method. Together, all of these pieces intertwine to form the framework of my constructed narrative. It is also important to note that in this work, "I" refers to the first author, S. L. Deibert. However, while the focus of this manuscript is on my experiences, the other named authors provided both a context of those experiences and, through discussion, helped develop the ideas and understandings of those experiences being presented.

## **Yoga**

Yoga today represents "a body-based meditation designed to better understand who we are and how we interact with the world around us" (Sparrowe, 2016, p. iv). The goal of

practicing *yoga* is to “‘unite’ or ‘bring’ the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions into balance” by connecting various postures, cues, and breathing techniques (Wertman et al., 2016, p. 191). Due to its multi-dimensional impact, as well as the multitude of other health implications associated with its practice (Ross et al., 2013), it is not surprising that the body of literature exploring the effects of yoga on well-being (Wertman et al., 2016) and yoga-based interventions for mental and physical health conditions (Field, 2016; Park et al., 2013) is growing.

This is also true within the context of education. Khalsa & Butzer (2016) state that while research on yoga in school settings is in its infancy, there is an interest in both research on the efficacy of yoga in elementary and secondary school settings and the development and application of yoga-based interventions in elementary and secondary school settings (see also Butzer et al., 2016). However, there are few qualitative studies exploring the perspectives of these students participating in yoga-based programs (Dariotis et al., 2016). In the post-secondary school setting, there are some examples of yoga-related research (Brems, 2015; Ganpat et al., 2013; Ganpat et al., 2014; Sheela et al., 2013); however, little of this reflects the traditions of reflexive research processes.

That being said, there is one yoga-related publication that stands out; a PhD dissertation titled, “Stories of (my)nd Body and Soul: An Autoethnography through Hockey, Figure Skating, and Yoga” by Popovic (2010). Popovic (2010) described yoga as a vessel for empowering “individuals to move in the world, and serve their communities, to inspire growth and transformation” (p. 174) and she used an autoethnographic approach to critically reflect on her own yoga experiences and perceptions as an academic, a yoga teacher, and a student. Overall, her work strongly resonated with me because it suggested that: (1) one’s yogi-self is entwined with other aspects of one’s life, and (2) yoga can be used as a medium for self-discovery.

### **My Master’s Thesis Project**

My thesis project was designed to explore the experiences of participants during an International Service Learning (ISL) excursion to Mongolia through the Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) Program. Since 2001, students at a northern Canadian University have been able to participate in ISL excursions facilitated through the HPWB Program. However, no formal research has been conducted on the HPWB Program itself or the experiences of its participants. To address this need, the first phase of my thesis aimed to explore the nature of the immersive experience through an autoethnographic look at my own HPWB excursion.

In preparation for my thesis project, I enrolled in a research-methods course the semester before my departure to Mongolia. Through the lectures and related readings (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Gallé & Lingard, 2010; Humphreys, 2005; Popovic, 2010), I discovered the importance of positioning my thoughts, values, and understandings within my research project. In other words, I learned the importance of being *reflexive*, or thinking about how I as a researcher “affect the ways in which the research is conducted and the findings are interpreted” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 19). However, when given an assignment to practice being reflexive, I realized that this concept was challenging to actualize.

Why was this so difficult? I recognized that there was much more to discover on my journey towards reflectiveness and mindfulness, but as a naturally introspective person, contemplating my place in relation to my research should not have been this difficult. Perhaps the challenge stemmed from the lack of confidence I had in expressing my own reflective thinking. I could develop my own critical awareness, but could I share this understanding with others in a meaningful and eloquent way? And even if I could express my thoughts, would the

implications be worth the risks associated with exposing myself so vulnerably to other readers? Furthermore, was I ready to be open? Was I willing to persevere through the difficult moments in order to grow and learn? These concerns made me think of a quote from Ellis & Bochner (2000): “if you are not willing to become a vulnerable observer, then maybe you ought to reconsider doing autoethnography. If you let yourself be vulnerable, then your readers are more likely to respond vulnerably” (p. 752).

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is “a forward-and-backward, in-and-out, around-and-around process of meaning-making that moves between memory, story, reading, individual and collaborative reflection, discussion, and analysis” (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017, p. 75; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Researchers engaging in autoethnography aim to “unite ethnographic (looking outward at a world beyond one’s own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one’s self) intentions” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 17) and use their “vulnerability, personal feelings, and emotions . . . to illustrate their experiences as well as construct and share knowledge” (Darling et al., 2014, p. 20). Furthermore, autoethnography aims to create work that is accessible and engaging to a variety of readers (Jones et al., 2016). Thus, autoethnographic researchers “appreciate storytelling as a way of knowing, sharing, and relating, and value a variety of representational mediums (e.g., performance, writing, film) and genres (e.g., poetry, prose, moving images)” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 56).

But why is this approach appropriate for this paper? What about this qualitative research method resonates with me and makes me think that employing it in a narrative format is the right choice for this study? According to Sparkes (2002), “writing autoethnographically has provided . . . a means to develop a greater sense of integration between the concerns that infuse the ‘private’ and ‘public’, or ‘academic’, domains of my life” (p. 105). Autoethnography enables the exploration of and development of connections between the different dimensions of one’s life. It also requires us to live “consciously, emotionally, and reflexively” and explore “how and why we think, act, and feel as we do” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 4). Thus, this qualitative research approach is the best way for me to find my reflexive footing before diving further into my master’s thesis project; this is because it allows me to think critically about who I am and my unique collection of experiences, and how they connect with and influence my research and those involved in it.

### **Findings, Revelations, and Discussion**

I was struggling for weeks to find a starting point for this reflexive writing assignment when I discovered inspiration in an unexpected place: my evening yoga class. Initially, I went to the class to forget about my long day of reading and unsuccessful writing attempts. Ironically, in the place I sought to escape the frustration and confusion of this assignment, I found clarity. The flow of instructions and poses aligned metaphorically with my concerns and ideas for the assignment, so I decided to embark on my first autoethnographic journey and create a narrative of my yoga class experience. Constructing this narrative began with a written reflection after a meaningful experience. It evolved through an iterative process involving discussions with my co-authors, further personal reflections and writings, and new insights from related literature.

The narrative serves as a driver of self-discovery (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) that looks to make sense of, and to further explore, my identity and how this identity influences my thesis project. The narrative is presented in italics and divided into three segments, through which I am “attempting to construct a window” that invites the reader to observe and reflect upon my

experiences (Humphreys, 2005, p. 842). After each narrative segment I then “intervene in the narrative and .... interpret events” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 80), further elaborating on the key ideas of that section.

### *Who Is This Person?*

*As I entered into the studio, I was surprised by the climate of the room. The temperature was cooler than I anticipated, and the air was dry. I supposed that I was used to the heat and humidity of the hot yoga classes and that I needed to allow my body a few moments to adjust to the conditions of this new practice style.*

*A nudge from my sister brought my attention back to the task at hand, finding a place to set our mats. I motioned for her to follow me, and led us to the far, back corner of the studio. Normally I would have preferred to be more central in the room, but today I needed to be tucked safely away in the corner where I could fall into my own practice without any distractions.*

*I carefully placed my grey mat on the ground and gathered my props - two blocks and a blanket - in preparation for the practice. I arranged my water bottle and props against the white wall and then discovered my spot on my mat and closed my eyes. I tried to block out the sounds of the room; the mats slapping the wooden floor as they were unravelled and set up for practice, the blocks and blankets being pulled from the shelves, and the opening and closing of the heavy studio door as people entered the room. Instead, I found myself giving into the energy of the room and my desire to share in it.*

*The instructor then took her place at the front of the class and prompted us to move into Goddess Pose to begin our practice. As I laid on my mat with my knees bent and falling open to the outer edges of my mat, the soles of my feet touching, my arms at my side, and my palms open to the ceiling, my attention started to wander from the intense sensation in my hips to all of the uncompleted tasks that remained on my day's to-do list.*

*I was trying to breathe into the pose and keep my thoughts in the room when the instructor cued us to, “focus on the feelings in our inner thighs, groins, and hips.” She then told us to, “pause for a moment and ask yourself, ‘Who is this person that is experiencing these feelings?’”*

*This question was unsettling. What does she mean - “Who is this person?”*

Who am I? What are the values, beliefs, and traits that shape my being? This segment of my narrative helped reveal to me many aspects of my personality, or how I perceive my personality. For example, I think of myself as being open-minded and willing to try new things, which is evident through my decision to try a different style of class. I also consider myself to be organized, but I am aware that I have trouble managing stress, as shown by the reference to my to-do lists and my inability to block out the thoughts of pressing tasks from those lists. These attributes, in addition to the other attributes revealed throughout the narrative, are based on my understanding in this moment of the structure of my person. Together, they shape my thoughts, actions, and perceptions. Therefore, the process of identifying and understanding these attributes is relevant in preparing for my research because they influence the decisions regarding my thesis project. In other words, in order to strengthen my thesis, I need to recognize who I am as a person and how that impacts my researcher persona.

However, I still wondered, “Why does my level of self-understanding matter to whoever is reading this?” “Will he or she care if I know who I am?” I realized though, that knowing myself not only helps to clarify my approach to research, but it is also critical in producing a relevant work that the reader can connect to. Ellis et al. (2011) stated that autoethnographers need to “consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must

use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (p. 276). Therefore, my self-understanding is necessary in order to relate to the reader and communicate knowledge in a meaningful and relevant way.

Additionally, Darling et al. (2014) state, “in this methodology, the researcher is an integral part of the story he or she seeks to tell through self-reflection on the experience” (p. 20). Thus, before I can reflect on how others would experience a situation, such as a yoga class or ISL excursion to Mongolia, I need to comprehend the impact that these experiences have on my own life.

*After Goddess Pose we then flowed into a twist on the right side of our bodies. The instructor listed off a number of variations in order of increasing difficulty. She then proceeded to encourage the class to take whichever option feels “right” for the body, but I had already decided to move into the most difficult version, whether my body realized it was “right” or not. After a few minutes, we repeated the same twist on the left side; once more, I positioned my body in the most challenging variation of the twist.*

*The instructor then guided us into our next pose, Happy Baby. Having done this pose many times in other practices, I immediately bent my knees, flexed my feet up towards the ceiling, laced my index and middle fingers around my big toes, and drew my knees inwards towards my armpits. As I focused on wiggling myself into a tolerable and somewhat sustainable position, the instructor offered the suggestion of placing a blanket or block underneath our heads to provide more support and comfort in the pose.*

*Having never tried this modification before, I reached for my blanket and carefully placed it on my mat. I inhaled as I repositioned myself back into Happy Baby, and exhaled, releasing the back of my head onto the folded blanket.*

*As I took my next inhalation, I could feel the strength increase in my arms and the sensations deepen in my hips. As I exhaled, the tension in my neck released and my body fell deeper into the pose. I spent my next few breaths enjoying the discovery of this new adaptation.*

*After a few breath cycles, we released our feet onto the mat and were instructed to take a bridge pose for a few moments. With our knees bent, hips lifted up towards the ceiling, and arms extended at our sides, the instructor then cued us to draw our attention inwards to our thoughts. She asked, “Is your mind busy? If so, take few moments to acknowledge and be okay with the busyness.” She paused, and then posed the question, “Ask yourself, ‘Who is this person that is acknowledging this busyness?’”*

*Again, I was taken aback by a different version of the same question.*

This narrative segment helped me explore both my personal identities and my research topic. My identities as a Health Promotion alumni, and former exchange student, led me to do my thesis research project on the experiences of HPWB participants. The value of health education was embedded in me through my undergraduate studies, and after spending a year abroad studying in Germany, I also experienced first-hand the powerful effects that immersing oneself in another culture can have on one’s being. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself to participate in the HPWB Program, I had a strong feeling that my month-long Mongolia excursion would be transformative, and critically reflecting on it would provide a rich source of knowledge for both the HPWB Program and myself.

However, the first paragraph of this narrative segment echoes some concerns I have with the route I chose for my research. According to Ellis et al. (2011), “when researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (p. 276). The first idea of deciding to write retrospectively or after the fact troubles

me; if I go into this experience prepared to write an autoethnography, how can I be sure that what I am experiencing is actually meaningful and not fabricated to produce a good paper? In other words, does my role as a researcher conflict with my experience as a participant?

To answer this, I needed to consider my personal motivations for going on this ISL excursion: I wanted a life-changing, powerful, and meaningful experience. Looking at the characteristics of autoethnography, the reflexive process may enhance and help me to make sense of my experience travelling to Mongolia; it may also allow me to derive greater meaning from my participation in the HPWB Program. Thus, this method may actually strengthen and add value to my ISL experience.

The second idea of “cultural identities” (Ellis et al., 2011) forces me to reflect on the groups that are explored through, or affected by, my research. I am a female Canadian university student, working through the HPWB Program and the Source of Steppe Nomads (SoSN) organization to promote health within Kazakh communities in western Mongolia. Therefore, my work involves several diverse groups of people. The question is, “How can I produce a work that positively impacts all of these groups?” My hope is to benefit the HPWB Program and other ISL programs by providing a sense of the experience to those who are considering participation, or to the coordinators and organizers that are unable to participate first-hand but are instrumental in excursion-operations. I also hope that my work better prepares HPWB and other ISL programs for partnering with international organizations (like SoSN) and working in their respective communities, which in turn improves the quality of support that locals receive during these excursions.

Lastly, for my work to resonate with and be helpful for readers, I need to satisfy the following questions, which Darling et al. (2014) propose: (1) “Is the story I am relaying to you catalytic—that is, does it inspire new thoughts or ideas? Has it engaged your thoughts and feelings and thus in some way pulled you in?” (p. 23) and (2) “Have I demonstrated a grounded understanding and perspective so that you are able to get a sense of my lived experience? Is it so abundant in concrete detail that you can feel and understand the partial truth of the narrative?” (p. 23)

*Shortly after, we transitioned into a lunge and then hamstring stretch on the right side. We held each pose for a few minutes and then began the same series on the left side.*

*With my left foot forward, knee over the ankle, right leg back, and knee resting comfortably on the mat, I began to breathe into my right hip, drawing it closer towards the ground. As the instructor brought us through the different elements of the pose, she told us to be mindful that the sensations on this side may differ from that of the other side.*

*After completing the sequence, we then moved into a wide-legged variation of Child’s Pose. I positioned my knees to the width of the mat, drew my feet together, released my backside towards my heels, and folded forward. With every breath in, I walked my fingertips closer to the top of the mat, and with each exhale, I pulled my hips back towards the wall behind me. As I found a balance in this pose, I began to relax and concentrate on the sound of the instructor’s voice and the prompts she delivered to the class.*

*She asked us to remain in the pose with our eyes closed, but to shift our awareness from ourselves to the sounds of the room, then to the other participants in the room, then to the sounds again, and finally back to ourselves. This was a challenging exercise. How do I remain rooted and immersed in my own practice while being actively aware of “the others” in my surroundings?*

*Following a couple more breaths, we shifted onto our backs and took Happy Baby once more as our last pose before final relaxation.*

*Head on the blanket, I laid back with my hands reaching towards my flexed feet and breathed into the hip stretch. The instructor cued us to, “remain still in this pose, and notice*

*the feelings experienced in the body without making any changes in your position.” She followed this by asking, “Is your body accepting or rejecting these feelings?” She then encouraged us to be vulnerable and open to these feelings as we remained in Happy Baby for another breath cycle.*

*We then released the legs onto the mat and extended the arms to the sides for final relaxation. Instinctively I reached for the blanket and unfolded it to cover my body.*

*The instructor guided us through the relaxation, and then we concluded our practice.*

*I opened my eyes and glanced around the room, watching as “the others” bowed forward to seal in their practice, each at their own pace. Slowly I made my way to standing, returned my props, and gathered my belongings. I thanked the instructor for the class and then followed my sister out of the studio.*

This last segment of the narrative voices my views (and concerns) of creating space for “the others”, the participants’ stories, within my thesis project. The cues of the instructor reflect my thoughts, revealing that I am still learning, and require the guidance of my supervisors and the participants themselves to help me through this process. The instructor’s cue to be mindful that the pose feels different on each side of our body shows that my experiences and perceptions of these experiences will be different from the participants, even the ones with whom I am travelling and working alongside. Furthermore, when the instructor asks the class to become aware without making changes, it speaks to the importance of understanding and accurately portraying the experiences of the participants. Lastly, the instructor’s prompt to become aware if our bodies are accepting or rejecting the feelings of a pose also speaks to the issue of making space without altering participants’ voices.

Overall, this segment allows me to reflect on the ways in which I, the researcher, can explore how the participants live through their ISL excursion. This is important, especially because I am travelling with, and therefore a part of, the ISL experience for the Mongolia participants. I need to ensure that I am telling their story as they feel and understand it, instead of how I see it.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

“I now ask *you* as readers of my own autoethnographic narrative to examine how you *feel* about it” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 850).

This paper guided you, the reader, through my constructed narrative of a meaningful experience, which acted as a medium to discover and convey thoughts and feelings. As a result of my exploration of self and reflexivity through a yoga class, I found a greater understanding of who I am, why I chose my research topic, and some of the considerations for my approach to this research project. Connecting my research to my yoga practice allowed me to better understand myself as a person and researcher, become mindful of how my own views shape my experiences, and develop a deeper level of critical reflection. Together, these lessons better prepared me for, and furthered my understanding of, writing an autoethnography. Although this narrative is uniquely situated within the context of an assignment to prepare for my thesis project, this paper also demonstrates the power of linking the kinesthetic practice of yoga to reflexivity and the autoethnographic research process. Further research should continue to explore the benefits of yoga and other similar kinesthetic practices for researchers, specifically as a tool to further critical thinking and self-reflection.

Overall, the writing of the narrative itself was an incredibly challenging process that generated many questions: Am I a *good* writer?; Was I open enough in my narrative and reflections?; Why am I doing this?; and Is this an effective way to communicate my ideas?

There were many moments when I wanted to scrap this style of writing and save myself from the suffering of pursuing such a creative approach to my assignment. However, it was in those instances when I heard my yogi voice saying, it's okay to fall; in fact, it's a good thing. I should welcome falling because I can get up. It means that I am pushing myself. It means that I am growing.

And I am still growing. Although this section includes "Conclusion" in the title, in many ways, this paper is only the beginning. This is my first time engaging in autoethnographic research and writing a narrative to share an impactful experience and the insights it elicited. I hope to build on this paper (and the readings that provided foundational knowledge on autoethnography, reflexivity, and yoga; the conversations with co-authors that sparked deeper reflection into my experiences; the feedback from reviewers that helped me to communicate my story more effectively to readers) as I explore my experience as a HPWB participant in Mongolia using autoethnography in the next phase of my research. Also, this paper is only one step in what I anticipate will be a life-long journey of discovering who I am and how that affects my experiences and interactions with others. Continuing to practice reflexivity is important so that I can navigate more complex contexts that challenge my understandings (e.g., the culture of the western-Mongolian communities we will be living in) and further evolve in my self-awareness and my connection to those around me. Lastly, I suspect that my yoga practice will become further entwined within my autoethnographic and reflexive journeys. This paper gives me a new appreciation for yoga and offers a glimpse into the breadth of its benefits. With that in mind, I look forward to returning to my mat and the future lessons I will uncover there.

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**Acknowledgement:** We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Robert Schinke for developing the assignment that initiated the lead author's reflexive journey. We are also grateful to Ms. Willa Paterson for instructing the yoga class that inspired the narrative presented in this paper.

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#### Article Citation

Deibert S. L., Ritchie, S. D., Oddson, B., Michel, G., & Tetzlaff, E.,(2021). Reflexivity through a yoga class experience: Preparing for my health promotion without borders excursion to Mongolia. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(5), 1401-1410. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4371>

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