Weaving the Threads Between: Collaborative Auto-Ethnographic Reflections on Experiences of Migrant Learning and Teaching in Australia

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Abstract
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Keywords
collaborative auto-ethnography, Australian migrants, reflection, transformative learning, cultural identities, pre-service teachers

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This article aims to use the two authors’ life experience, as English teachers, and university academics in the U.K., China and Australia, to improve an understanding how life trajectories can assist exploration of cultural difference and changes. Our experiences can be utilized as a means of understanding how responses to change and cultural differences can be influenced. Using a collaborative auto-ethnography research method offers readers opportunities to engage with the text through encountering the cultural nuances in these transitional journeys. The analysis is undertaken through the theoretical lens of transformational learning, cultural identity, and space. This paper will be of benefit both to academics in multicultural settings and to pre-service teachers in postgraduate programs. First, it will assist in sensitizing readers to become more culturally aware and competent through understanding how change across cultures can be beneficially accomplished and, second, by showing how constructive change can influence all evolving cultural identities within vibrant, multicultural and multilingual contexts such as we experience in Australia.

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Introduction

Situated in the strand of exploring our transformational learning and teaching across space and time, this collaborative autoethnography has allowed us to present our cultural nuances while working as English teachers and university academics in a transitional life journey, from China, U.K., to Australia. We share some of our life experiences and stories of being involved in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs drawing on our earlier reflections from teaching sessions, research seminars and conference presentations. Our inspiration for this paper was to help us, and other teachers, through our responses to cultural change in our own lives, to improve understanding of students who are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In doing so, through collaborative auto-ethnographical explorations, an opportunity is provided for reflection on the wider implications of this process for research practices in higher education institutions. It is significant in demonstrating that observation and understanding of the transformative nature of life trajectories involving cultural difference can improve responses to life challenges.

Numerous studies have highlighted the profound influence of learners’ different identities, life experience, and cultural nuances on the development of their intercultural communication, teachers’ professional skills (e.g., Ai, 2015; Lu, 2018), and understanding of international students (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Rose, 2029). With a poststructuralist perspective, our purpose is not to make complaint by using a “subjective” way, but we intend
to use these multilayered texts to evoke readers’ empathetical response. Although the paper is based on our personal experiences, the personal is a facet of the bigger holistic picture, and readers may find new insights as well as commonalities with their experiences or understandings of aspects related to English teaching. To interpret this narrative study, we used revisited transformational learning theory and related concepts to shed light on our cultural transition moving from China and from the U.K. to Australia. Our identities overall evolved throughout these moves to Australia with our cultural identities coming into sharper focus as we shifted between host countries. Our shifted spaces provided us with a good opportunity to reflect, revisit and re-examine the influences of our experiences on our current working and living context.

**Theoretical Framework**

In the following section, we revisit transformational learning theory, and the concepts of cultural identity and space. Both of us are first-generation immigrants who completed higher education; one in the East and the other in the West. The way we were brought up and our early learning trajectory have had a significant influence on our teaching careers in Australia. We used a range of resources (i.e., meeting reflections, memoir, and diaries) to provide a window through which both “we” and “others” from a similar cultural background can explore our cultural identities to assist teachers and students to reflect and develop personally and professionally in a more culturally compatible environment. Our shifting spaces have brought us many transformative opportunities and challenges, and they have also inspired us to reflect on our teaching and learning in a sustainable and ecological way.

*Transformational Learning Theory*

Transformational Learning Theory, according to Mezirow (2000), goes beyond learning of knowledge or the skills to attain or interpret subject matter, and emphasizes that learning needs personal change or transformation in beliefs, values, and world view. To achieve this, Mezirow (2000) suggests several stages of transformation in our learning. Key stages include Disorienting Dilemma which is, in effect, a life crisis that we are faced with and that has no simple solution, but through engaging with the crisis we learn and grow personally. A second stage of Transformational Learning is Self-Examination which emphasizes critical reflection on possible options to resolve the crisis by examination through a personal lens of beliefs and values. Reflection is a significant area in transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000), and is regarded as critical in adjustment to change. Mezirow (2000, pp. 23-24) asserts that, “A mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner makes an informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight.” Mezirow describes our expectations from the views we hold as meaning perspectives and meaning schemes.

The next phase is where reflection and review of personal beliefs and values is made according to critical assessment and evaluation of options of resolution of the crisis. Drawing together and reflecting includes provision of new information that might be relevant to action in the crisis. This includes stages such as A Sense of Alienation where we discussed the difficulties we were faced with in the cultural changes and what we already knew and had believed in our previous lives.

The last stage is the Recognition of New Perspectives where the mulling of personal beliefs and values with new information gained and the options available related to the crisis, all interact. This can be challenging and is a major element in Transformational Learning Theory through having the Knowledge to Implement Plans stage as well as Planning a Course of Action.
Reflection on transformational teaching in our TESOL experiences was essential as “a mindful transformative learning experience” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3). Indeed, the range of different and difficult choices in arriving, learning and teaching in a different culture can lead us to examine our own identity within this different cultural setting.

In the Reintegration stage of Transformational Learning Theory what is decided is enacted in the context of the crisis or change. What has been transformed is not just the learning from the crisis but through personal involvement of values and attitudes a deeper sense of personal change occurs.

Through following the process selected individual choice of the life lived has become, by necessity, more self-directed. Life experiences assist in self-construction, allowing individuals to “construct present selves out of what they choose to notice from their immediate and distant pasts” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 171). Planning our own life courses has become complex. Usher (1999, p. 69), suggests that our identities are re-shaped through a self-reflexive process of “reflexive biographies,” confirming Mezirow’s (Mezirow, 2000) advocation of reflection as a key area in transformational learning.

We used this theoretical framework as it is believed to be beneficial when applied to “any form of joint productive activity” (Wyatt, 2009, p. 48). Our collaborative work interacts and integrates our experiences and outcomes through joint endeavors. The collaborative teaching, learning and reflection process we have shared could bring preferences for understanding our specific and unique ways of interaction. As two teachers, we used this framework to revisit cultural conflicts that have arisen in our cross-cultural experiences. We demonstrate compatibility through understanding, in contrast to when cultural groups don’t recognize other forms of assistance as being valuable to achieving their goal (Wyatt, 2009). We may experience frustration sometimes with the groups whose culture is resistant to us. This needs both parties to view and find ways to break old patterns of thinking and be committed to a common goal. In this process, we have sought to find the ways the unique patterns of communication and interaction have benefited our understandings rather than focus on our individual cultural aspects.

**Cultural Identity**

Transformation occurs in the changes enacted and responded to within our life trajectories. Cultural identity and space are key areas of response to transformational change. Cultural identity is related to the local cultural environment. It includes the way we communicate, the ethnic groups we belong to, and the religions we believe in. Although it is difficult to define rigorously, we believe cultural identity is the “status, experience, enactment, (co-)creation, (re)negotiation, and/or contestation of group memberships and social identifications (often through communication) within particular contexts” (Chen & Lin, 2016, p. 2). To interpret someone’s cultural identity cannot isolate them from the groups they are members of and communicate with. Cultural identity could be perceived in different contexts and host spaces. Heisey (2011), for example, compares the views on cultural identity of selected scholars from Iran, China, Britain and other parts of Europe and finds that scholars have different perspectives on the local context when defining their cultural identities. Ai, a Chinese scholar (Ai, 2015), however, believes that his Chinese identity has a significant influence on his studying and communicating with Australian people and believes this transparent identity has even influenced his academic career as a Chinese overseas returnee. Ai (2015) felt puzzled about his identity after he reentered the home country so that he believes that the “best solution is to achieve a hybrid identity.”

The way we each perceive our cultural identities is not alienated from our unique education and work contexts. Education and work contexts are dominant social and cultural
sites where discourses gradually become part of our conscious selves, and this process of transformative socialization provides a framework and conditions for the individual and personal self to develop. Often, we re-visit our identities when there are changes to work contexts and colleagues in our lives. In the global world, better understanding of the cultural identity could assist our understanding when “tensions emerge as the struggle to be economically independent demands priority at the expense of the traditional emphasis on relationships” (Heisey, 2011, p. 67).

**Space**

Space is the medium where we interact with others and develop social relations, the “producer of material objects and social relations” (Gottdiener, 1997, p. 129). In the process of social activities, social relations are produced and reproduced in turn. In practice, social space is “relationally constituted out of the simultaneous co-existence of social relations and interactions” (Barker, 2008, p. 376). Through communications, we gradually constructed our space. This process included how people set up social relations with others and produce their space, which provides the context of their evolving identity (Ai, 2015). However, due to mobility and resettlement, Gottdiener (1997) believes that people and activities are re-centralized in a new space rather than in a familiar space because of restricting of their settlement of migration.

When we shift host spaces, we might perceive ourselves differently as each host space has its culture and history, which ultimately influences our performances in that space. We live in our own host space and this space is different from others. As such, shifting between spaces or entering a new host space might bring discomfort and challenges. Therefore, personal cultural identity is constructed and perceived differently in these host spaces. We transform ourselves through our changing perceptions of our cultural identity.

With the purpose of supporting more migrant teachers with a better understanding of challenges facing them, we have reflectively shared how our change across cultures can be a potential benefit. With this aim, we have used collaborative auto-ethnography writing to present transnormal learning experiences we gained in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

**Collaborative Autoethnography as a Research Method**

If you want to walk fast walk alone, if you want to walk far walk together.

(African proverb)

Motivated by this proverb we use collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a research method to show our life trajectories and unique identities, culminating in becoming TESOL academics in Australia. CAE allows us to engage as auto-ethnographers in a research team to pool our “lived experiences on selected sociocultural phenomena and collaboratively analyze and interpret them for commonalities and differences” (Hernandez et al., 2017, p. 251). This collaborative method provides opportunities to draw our relational connection and the “seemingly limitless possibilities of combining our various self-stories to see what they could teach us, and perhaps others, about the complexities of social phenomena” (Hernandez et al., 2017, p. 251). Compared with single-authored autoethnography, writing collaboratively provides us with a valuable opportunity to pause, discuss, compare, and re-visit at different stages for reflections on our life stories. In the process, we are more valued as “we” instead of “I.” Meanwhile, we feel more intimate in producing scholarship using CAE. Chang et al. (2013) believes that collaborative auto-ethnographers are both observers and contributors and
this allows them to think and talk about the unique contributions this method can make to the field of self-narrative research.

In recent years, autoethnographic research has been popularized across research disciplines, including in education (Taylor et al., 2014), social work (Trotter et al., 2006), and communication (Geist-Martin et al., 2010). Indigenous ethnography, communicative autobiography and performance collaborative autoethnography also provide examples of multivocal autoethnographic approaches (Chang et al., 2013). More importantly, adopting this method, we could be engaged in an interdisciplinary team to have consistent critical and emotional self-reflections, and continuous dialogues to allow ourselves to be inventive, creative, imaginative (Gannon, 2017), and to reflect on our previous life experiences as an opportunity for self-study (Trinh, 2020; Yazan, 2019). Thus, we believe that CAE is the most suitable research method in this case.

Following the structure of Hernandez et al. (2015), we divided our process of collecting and analyzing data into four phases. In Phase 1, we conducted regular scheduled virtual conversations via text messages, emails, and online meetings such as Zoom and Skype. This accords with the Disorienting Dilemma stage within Transformational Learning Theory. At this phase, we explored our cultural identity across space and time in academia while building a common research interest in using collaborative auto-ethnography to write on ourselves. During these interactions and conversations, we kept records of our communication and dialogues, which were saved as preliminary data. After looking at the data, we agreed to focus on the salient topics of writing on our transformative teaching and learning reflections in academia for our collaboration. During Phase 2, we began the process of collecting additional, detailed data related to the topic. To accomplish this, we agreed on creating a shared document where each of us could write individually about this topic from our perspectives. After writing individually, we then shared with each other, and met to discuss how to improve each other’s narratives in the form of comments or suggestions.

A strong element in our discussions throughout this phase was self-reflection which we viewed as important to self-understanding of our experiences. The review of an experience, in terms of discovery as a basis for modification of actions involved in the experience, could include a wide range of activities:

…making inferences, generalizations, analogies, discriminations, and evaluations, as well as feeling, remembering, and solving problems. It also seems to refer to using beliefs to make an interpretation, to analyze, perform, discuss, or judge – however unaware one may be of doing so. (Mezirow, 1990, p. 5)

In Phase 3, we engaged in data analysis and interpretation after enhancing and completion of the sections of introducing ourselves, Helen and Paul’s individual teaching and learning trajectories of this manuscript. At this phase, we continued our regular communications through text messages, emails, and virtual meetings where we discussed the data we had produced individually and analysed all the data—first individually and then we did it interchangeably, which follows Chang et al.’s study (2013). The detail of the process is illustrated in Figure 1. In the process, following Transformational Learning Theory stages, we further considered and reflected upon the data engendered from our activities based on the alienation and seemingly unsolvable difficulties we had encountered in our described life trajectories. The realization of the ways we had adapted and changed in ourselves, and our teaching dawned on us through these communications. These perceived changes emerged in the process of data analysis, where we identified patterns through open coding and connected emerging themes with available literature. The two most salient themes emerging from our data
analysis included (1) successful teaching and learning in shifted cultural identities, and (2) our teaching and learning trajectories build competencies to transformative learning. Once an initial draft of the manuscript was completed, in the last step, we reviewed our article multiple times individually and together as a group until we were both satisfied with the final manuscript. In the following sections, starting with our “auto” presentations, we show our defining cultural experiences in childhood and adolescence interspersed and finally reflect on experiences of teaching and learning.

Figure 1  
The Data Analysis Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preliminary data collection</th>
<th>Subsequent data collection</th>
<th>Data analysis and interpretation</th>
<th>Writing</th>
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<td>Individual writing and reflection</td>
<td>Individual writing and reflection</td>
<td>Individual meaning-making and drafting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual writing and reflection</td>
<td>Regular meetings and discussions</td>
<td>Regular meetings and discussions</td>
<td>Narrative creation as a group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing with each other</td>
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<td>Collective meaning-making and themes-search</td>
<td>Collaborative writing and revision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Helen’s Early Formative Experiences

If you love her  
Bring her to New York  
For it’s heaven  
If you hate her  
Bring her to New York  
For it’s hell

(A Native of Beijing in New York, Cao 1)

This lyric is ironed in my memory as they were first shown in the Chinese TV programme entitled A Native of Beijing in New York (北京人在纽约), which was one of the most popular series in the 1990s. This TV soap opera not only shows how the first Chinese generation migrants felt that they struggled but also demonstrated how determined they were in pursuit of their dreams of life in New York. It also explored every moment that these Chinese migrants felt both passion and depression. The main actor Wang Qiming and his wife Guo Yan were academics with stable and decent jobs in China, but when moving to New York from
Beijing, they soon encountered unforeseen difficulties. After many years, they both achieved and lost a lot, which is not a focus in the media, but demonstrated tremendous nuances of happiness and tears that only someone who has experienced them could understand.

In the past, I never anticipated that I would end up studying and struggling to work in a Western country. However, I often recalled this lyric when I tried to come to terms with my experiences studying and teaching in Australia. My narrative encounters cross time and space and my journey provides me with rich happiness and tears experiences on which to reflect.

I was born in a working-class family in the 1980s. Influenced by the One-Child Policy in mainland China, I am the only child in the family. Both of my parents worked in a university, so my grandma took the responsibility of looking after me most of the time. My childhood was light-hearted and full of joy. I can remember being chased by kids to play with sand, riding bicycles and rolling snowballs in our neighborhood. At five years old, I was taken away from my grandmother and sent to pre-school by my parents. From that moment on, I have been expected to achieve what my family expects: a good student with high academic performance in schools and universities; a highly competitive global talent graduate; and an independent female with a decent salary. To realize this in China, I had to achieve as many “A” levels in subjects as I could. Since my parents and extended family members were almost all university academics and sharing the same host place, I have been greatly influenced by values of “social mobility, educational attainments, employment opportunities, and labour-market return.” I found I could not get rid of this “imposed identity” (Ang, 2001, p. 9) until I met Mr. and Mrs. Robert when I was ten years old.

Mr. and Mrs. Robert were appointed by the government from Canada to work in my parents’ university as English language experts on a one-year contract. They often asked their son to learn Chinese from neighbors’ children, and in return, they read us English storybooks. Once, when they read me the story of Helen Keller, I was encouraged by her strong will to learn and was deeply moved. When I got back home on that day, I told my parents that I named myself “Helen” and this English name has followed my Chinese name for many years in my life even if it has never been written formally in my passport. This “new identity” inspired me deeply in my later life when choosing my professional career.

After completing the College Entrance Examination, I did not follow the traditional way as was expected and choose a discipline with a “promising future” in China. Being impressed by Helen’s story, I was motivated to be a language educator like her. My family did not believe that I could have such a bright future because they thought that being an English teacher could not allow me to reach the higher social status that they valued and expected.

**Paul’s Formative Childhood Experiences**

Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid. (Goethe)

My childhood, to the age of eleven, was lived in Northampton in England. The house that my mother, father, two brothers and a sister shared was a Victorian terraced with no spaces between the houses and a pocket-handkerchief back garden. How we lived made me what I am today.

Winters seemed to last for most of the year, and we were cold. I would never have imagined then that I would eventually live in the relatively warm climes of Australia for more than half of my life. Australia was at the end of the world both geographically and in my daily view of life from the damp grey back streets of my hometown. Australia was the colour movie to my childhood black and white.

I never remember having a coat, when young, though there was a woollen aunt-knitted jumper with darned fraying holes filling up the elbows that I wore a lot. I ran hard to school to
get warm, but I don’t remember wearing a coat. Sometimes it was so cold at school, that the miniature bottles of milk given at break, were frozen solid and had to be thawed out in a crate by the single corner radiator. It was Arctic, right from the moment of waking. Even my morning clothes slept under the covers, because everything left out became moist and damp.

Freezing grey days seemed to last all through the long winter. A winter full of mud; I can remember playing football just about all the time. Kicking a threadbare tennis ball along the pavements leading to school and, in the breaks, in a mass of kids chasing the tiny ball further round the tarmac-covered playground - like a moving bunch of grapes. Kicking out hard at the ball, and at anyone who got in the way. I usually had muddy knees; and permanently purple hands, that turned into a hot ache in warm water, and I had a nose that ran faster than me! Chilblains grew in the cold then itched in red clumps and caked calamine lotion helped not a jot. I was often stopped from sitting on the radiator at school because, “You’ll get piles,” whatever they were.

And in the evenings at home, we were huddled round a tiny coke fire in a smoky room. All four of us kids jostling for the sight of the fire and toasting in the embers the soft white presliced Wonderloaf bread that was inclined to collapse off the fork. It was part burnt, part not done but, with salvation, tasted like heaven. It was eaten hot with melted margarine breaking up in your mouth. But there’s no coat that I can remember, just the bitter biting cold.

These reflections on my childhood assist me to understand that the forming of my identity came from these experiences and my response to them. Coming from a childhood where there was little money and even less comfort in terms of warmth and possessions, was instrumental in my belief in not expecting to be given anything and to expect to work hard to create opportunities for myself.

Helen’s Studies on an American Campus

My professional career in English education began in 2004 when I decided to go to the United States to study as a postgraduate with a subfield/specialisation of TESOL. This journey was (ful)filled with struggle during which I made myself “Helen” as discussed/mentioned earlier in this paper. To understand my cultural identity more deeply, I have narrated/share reflective memories from my diary:

On the orientation day, while walking casually on campus, I found that I was like a square peg in a round hole. Almost every American student, holding a coffee, cheered each other with some informal English that I could not understand and passed me playing loud Rock and Roll music. I noticed that many had tattoos in their arms and legs. In my twenty years’ formal education in China, I was often told that only bad guys or naughty students would have tattoos. Suddenly, a guy, on a skating board, patted my shoulder and greeted: “Hey guys!” I was stunned as I felt confused that why he called me a “guy.” I learnt from my English textbook and the word “guy” only refers to a male. I am a girl, why I was called a guy? While thinking, he came closer and asked: “Where are you from?” I just opened my mouth and hardly pronounced “tchina,” he quickly ran away. I felt extremely depressed as I did not see anybody who was friendly to me.

Cultural identity is viewed as “crucial to maintaining heritage, traditional beliefs, and other aspects of native cultures at risk from conquering or dominant cultures” (Baskin, 2016, p. 2). Traditionally everything I was taught was influenced by Confucius culture. In Chinese moral lessons, teachers told us that “our bodies - to every hair and bit of skin - are received by
us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them.” This sentiment is the beginning of filial piety. So, we cannot do anything that destroys our body and skin otherwise it means that we do not respect our parents. Moreover, in Chinese old history, persons with tattoos symbolized that they broke the law and were being punished as these tattoos could easily make them visible. It has allowed what Bhabha calls: “remembering” – the “putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present,” a process both painful and disorienting (Bhabha, 1994, p. 90). From this point of view, I could not have a good impression on someone with tattoos by nature.

After looking back and re-reading this diary memoir, I could not help laughing at myself. The guy greeted me with casual words, but I did not answer at all. At that moment, he might have thought that I was rude. But he did not know that I had not had access to any authentic English learning materials before I moved to the West. The rote-learning process was what I followed until university. This surface approach is not encouraged in our teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2011) as the rote-learning process with note taking and formula memorizing cannot help students to successfully achieve the deeper learning objectives relating to knowledge transmission and knowledge construction.

The student who only memorized the important points but did not provide any information could not get a mark as good as those who understood first, then synthesized and finally reached conclusions in their writing assignments (Ramsden, 2003). However, in my early English learning journey, most Chinese students and other Asian learners were driven significantly by the examination-oriented educational system. Students needed to finish a large body of assignments and papers every day. Not every student had the capacity to finish knowledge assimilation, transmission and apply it in practice in the short time available. In this case, I needed to learn based on the surface approach that is to memorize and to achieve a satisfying score in different examinations. Although this approach is unlikely to provide a depth of understanding and knowledge it can be an effective strategy to achieve successful examination results.

Paul Migrates from London to Tasmania

Cultural change is often thought of as being between unfamiliar cultures such as the differences between an Asian and Western culture or even between a non-English speaking background and an English speaking one, as discussed above. But my change was between England and Australia, which are both English speaking. The original migrants to the country of Australia were initiated by and sent from England.

However, when my migratory change occurred between London and the Australian state of Tasmania in the 1980s, there was most distinctly a cultural divide between the two countries. My experience of London in the 1980s was of a society polarised by a prime minister driving wedges between England’s North and South. England at that time was in the forefront of changes in technology. The first publicly utilised “personal” computers were emerging, music with punk “in your face” abrasive sounds, and culture generally being “cutting edge” with changes in art and film, as well as in sport’s television satellite coverage being presented to and absorbed by multi-millions. This was especially noticeable in the capital, London, where I was situated. As a teacher, my evolving experience of education was of being part of a system focused increasingly on quantification with the main direction being on achievement in terms of numerical outcomes. These were mainly classified by money expended and resources developed with educational theories and non-quantifiable aims slipping down the priority list. For example, reading and writing was being discussed in terms of the attainment of different numerical and comparative levels leading to the beginnings of league tables of achievement between competing schools.
It felt like a strong challenge to choose to leave behind the country of my birth, even with its growing societal conflict and to move to the uncertainties of the mountainous island at the other end of the world. In common between Australia and England was a language, though Australian English and the various English dialects of English could be viewed as challenging at times. I’m reminded of a Ken Loach (1991) directed film Riff-Raff, set on a building site in London where a variety of United Kingdom workers came together. Scouse (Liverpoolian), Geordies (North Easterers), Irish, Glaswegian and cockneys (Londoners) tried with great difficulty to understand each other. The film humorously (but aptly) solved the communication difficulties with sub-titles for these English utterances of different dialects in the United Kingdom.

There were no sub-titles when I arrived in Tasmania but an underlying label of being a “Pommy” (thought to have originated from Prisoner of Mother England) was quickly affixed to me. There were unexpected language differences. Australians tend to finish sentences going up with a sudden high final tone. They also are well known for speaking without spaces so that words come out as one elongated word. Such as in greetings like “howyagoing” or “g’day.” At that time Australia was generally thought to be five years behind England in fashion, technology and ideas. Tasmania, however, was thought to be ten years behind! Ten years seemed too short a time lapse sometimes even then. Communication-connecting telephone calls to England had high prices for short contact and were saved for momentous occasions like birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas.

These changes narrowed significantly in the next decade or so. For my part, changing countries and adapting to new ways of perceiving brought surprising rewards. My teaching experiences in England had not led to me changing the practice and theories of educational learning I was expected to follow. However, being in a different system in Tasmania made me question my learned theories and the beliefs they were founded upon. Cranton (1998, p. 198) maintains that:

Often our perspectives have gone unquestioned. We do not know where they came from and have never examined their validity. When we are led to question our assumptions, critical reflection, the central process in transformative learning, takes place. We can question the content, the process or the premises of our assumptions.

Educationally Tasmania was more open to challenging ideas and theories than England. For example, reading in the United Kingdom was fixed overwhelmingly into phonics-based practices. Tasmania was addressing and adjusting towards recently espoused and developed psycholinguistic reading theories (Goodman, 1969). Writing practices were making similar shifts, adjusting to writing for purpose and audience. A larger nationally directed education process in the United Kingdom struggled to address significant change, whereas Australia with smaller and differentiated state-based education departments could act in isolation and be more willing to actively transform. I became more aware of my understanding of differing approaches to learning and teaching enabling reflection and ongoing evolution of not only “what was” but also “what could be.” This led to my engagement in research in these areas of potential change where I presented papers nationally and later internationally. Initially these were on a parent-reading programme I developed based on psycholinguistic reading theories, encouraging skill development through emotional connection between children and parents in shared reading.

The change wasn’t occurring solely in educational areas but in learning about myself. Edwards et al. (2002) further describe learning as, “the transformation of understanding, identity and agency.” I was transforming my learning about educational matters but also the
cultural shift was influencing changes in my identity in terms of my beliefs, advocations and levels of confidence through ongoing self-interpretation. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) is advocated as a view of learning in response to change. In terms of Mezirow (2000, p. 3), “Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action.” The future action came unexpectedly.

Joint Reflections on Language Learning and Teaching Experiences

We have strong attachment and reaction to our childhoods incorporated their experiences of childhood adversity and was transformational in responses to difficult times in their lives.

In responding to the cultural changes, they experienced, both of us constructed knowledge about themselves from ongoing self-understanding assisted in further reflection on events in their lives. Heinz (1996, p. 50) discusses Kohli’s view that “…social changes that characterize modern societies demand more biographical self-reflection and flexible coping strategies by the individuals.” The importance of self-reflection was discussed earlier regarding transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000), and the subjects’ narratives also affirm Seligman’s (Seligman, 1994) view regarding our capacity to change ourselves.

We discovered in our discussions that attitude and response to change were regarded as more significant than the events themselves. However, a crucial aspect in the changes we have made in our lives relates to the events we feel that we had control over and those that we did not control. For example, significant main adversities were experienced in our childhoods where there was less of a sense of empowerment.

Whilst descriptions of any extreme difficulties or hardships are not mentioned in detail, Helen describes what was happening for her at that time as her “imposed identity” and for Paul, metaphorically as well as practically it was as, “a winter full of mud.” The reviewing of important events in our lives emphasises the re-creation of our identities through the catalyst of what might be viewed as adversity.

The turning points of major changes in different places could be regarded as being those of opportunity and challenge. Mezirow (2000) discusses how adults undergo transformative learning when faced with crisis or adversity. The transformation occurs through the creation of a new cognitive construction in response to the disorientating dilemma, in essence, re-mapping thinking. The crisis or adversity has the effect of forcing the respondent out of a “comfort zone.” For Helen, “I have been expected to achieve what my family expects.” Later she discusses feeling like “a square peg in a round hole.” She later indicates her resilience and way of responding to adversity by light-heartedly commenting on her fresh perceptions of events as, “I could not help laughing at myself.” The area of resilience focuses upon individual adaptation to adversorial change, with an individual enabled to “bounce back” (Benard, 1991) from adversity and assist themselves in regaining autonomy. Furthermore, it can be suggested that resilience is reflected by a capacity for recovery.

Mezirow (2000) emphasises the importance of critical reflection in transformative learning, assisting individuals to take charge of their own learning. He refers to an “informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 23-24). Comments within the narratives, such as Paul’s to, “expect to work hard to create opportunities for myself,” indicate the utilisation of self-understanding as a basis for reflective decision-making. Mezirow (2000, p. 11) also refers to “awareness, empathy, and control” in authentic transformational learning, all of which I think are illustrated in the narratives. While studying and working in Tasmania, we regularly conducted language and culture seminars for
international students. Being involved in the seminars motivated us to undertake further reflective projects using other students’ discussions, presentations and writing pieces. One student mentioned that as a result of teaching in Hong Kong:

There have been a lot of bumps on the road, but I wouldn’t change a thing. My experiences made my life a little more interesting and moulded me into the person I am today. There are countless aspects of Asian culture that I will never completely understand, nor will I ever truly “fit in.” However, the best I can do is to keep an open mind, assimilate, and remain culturally aware.

Students also realised and often discussed how they felt their own students learnt best by having some understanding of the culture of the language they were learning. Similarly, when they were teaching in a non-English speaking country, they found themselves starting to learn the language of the country through the cultural experiences they had in that country.

Learning in narratives is influential on identity. Wenger (1998, p. 215) asserts, “Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming.” For both of us, learning more about ourselves can be viewed as a means of re-creating identity in terms of Barone’s (2001, p. 165) declaration that “The organism strives for coherence.” For example, we both continue to negotiate a coherent identity that constantly regenerates through the changes in our lives across cultural settings and what we have learned from those changes. An illustration of this occurring was when Paul experienced cultural incompatibility while he was supervising a Chinese postgraduate student:

This was the second consultation time with Chao, a Chinese mum, who wanted me to actually edit and correct her essay. After I mentioned that I was not able to re-write parts of her essay, and that I had another appointment, she seemed very angry and upset about our discussions. From Chao’s point of view, it was an unsatisfactory meeting. She felt strongly that I hadn’t helped her much. She asked me to read the essay and wanted me not just make suggestions but to make changes for her. Whilst she listened and nodded her agreement to what was being said she didn’t add any comments. When I mentioned we must stop before my next appointment. She became unhappy and said that “In China, I would do it for her and not just talk about it!” I suggested we could meet again to discuss it more after she had made alterations to her essay. She was unhappy with this suggestion but agreed to return the next day at an agreed time. She then again brought with her the assignment essay due for the unit she was studying with me. There were no changes made from the previous day. She again loudly insisted I edit and rewrite it. She declared that in China her request would have been complied with. A conflict had arisen, and it was clear that there were different outlooks. I felt sad that we did not have the same expectations on her learning progress.

A week later, Paul caught up for coffee with the co-author, Helen, and discussed with her about Chinese teacher-student relationships. She mentioned that Chinese students indeed all had a high expectation on teachers on their learning. I realised that Chao and I had a cultural mismatch as I did not understand her home culture. In China, students show a higher respect on teachers as teachers have been compared to “sunshine,” “big tree,” and “candles” (Xin et al., 2018). For teachers, these positive metaphors indicate that students have a strong belief in teachers’ hard work. For example, “Candles” symbolize teachers’ selflessness and self-
sacrifice, which is related to traditional culture of China. This could be sourced from the poem “The silkworm dies after spinning all the silk thread, just like the candle dries up at the last guttering” written by Li Shangyin, a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty. All the words as metaphors of teachers could be considered as a reflection of the students’ views on their teachers’ efficiency, beliefs and attitudes in Chinese cultural context. However, in the West, students have been regarded as independent, individual and active agents. They are in the center of the learning process instead of teachers. In the various teaching activities, teachers only play the role of a supporter, facilitator, and guider. Teachers in the Western context cannot ‘feed students’ as passive machines.

Chao and Paul’s cultural incompatibility led to a conflict within the teacher-student relationship. As Chao was not satisfied with Paul’s assistance, she turned to ask another colleague and caused a lot of misunderstandings between colleagues and peers. The negative experiences they experienced could lead to how they respond to their future students as well.

Although Paul and Helen both had extensive teaching experience in Asia, we are aware of the differences in cultural context every time we teach a new group of international students that hinders us from fully understand the world of the student. We were invited to conduct a research seminar for both students and academics in a Chinese university in the summer of 2018. This provincial university is in the middle of mainland China, with more than 7000 full-time students. At the beginning, we prepared all the seminar materials that both of us believed could be suitable for our audience. However, on the day of our seminar, we found most of the students who attended the seminar were there compulsorily (and using their mobile phones) rather than really showing their interest in attending the research seminar. We were stunned and surprised at this situation. After the seminar, we had a long talk with the Dean of Research in the school who invited us. We were told that students had been given credits for attending this seminar because they were not research students. They had very few research students and most had left for holidays. So, they found some others to attend the seminar. We realized that the university wanted us to have an audience numerically suitable for our lecture, but despite numbers attending there was a demonstrable lack of interest. The major reason for few staff attending was that they had a very heavy teaching load and most of them could not attend as flexibly as we do in Australia. For small universities, this overload might be worse. Academic staff were pushed hard to be both teaching and research productive otherwise universities could easily lose funding from the government.

The high expectations of research productivity have also been discussed in different areas of the world. For example, Quimbo and Sulabo (2014) studied the research productivity of academics in Philippines and found that academics understood that research activities were essential for their careers, but their educational attainment and teaching load were found to significantly affect research self-efficacy. Due to the global mobility and requirement of qualified academic teaching and research, the demand of research production is in an increasing trend. The space of migrants shifted between countries in this global mobility plan also influenced academics research productivity. Lu (2019) used the empirical evidence to show that the heavy research workload required for those who are academic overseas returnees working in different rankings of Chinese universities.

On the way back to the hotel, we recorded the following dialogue to express our feelings as an aide memoire to keep us moving ahead with the reflective writing pieces:

Paul: How did you feel Helen?

Helen: I felt disappointed that the academic staff and students were pushed to attend this seminar. But it might be the case in China.
Paul: Yes, I wondered about that. It seems that the organizers looked stressed…

Helen: Yes, from the Dean, Head of School and staff. They have to be evaluated by the number of research papers, teaching, and seminars that they completed every year.

Paul: So, a lot had to be forced to come…

Helen: Yes, they had to…

Paul: So much happening beneath the surface.

We did not believe that our research seminars would have interested all the students in that Chinese university, but we did improve our understandings of the research culture and underlying contexts occurring in small Chinese universities. For us, there was a different and sometimes deeper reflection occurring through informal talking with others who had lived similar experiences.

In our university involvement in Australia, we created open weekly forums reflecting on TESOL and associated cultural and linguistic concepts. In these sessions there is often a passion that arises in talking about TESOL experiences through engaging our emotions. Frequently, we listened to the animated chatter of the people around us. Philosophy is usually regarded as an intellectual venture but to sit amongst engaged people drinking coffee and talking energetically about TESOL experiences and theory also brings out our reflective nature. In effect, we share our coffee experience in an ordinary, human way where we share ideas as a learning community, not in a clinical setting but a relaxed and informal environment. This community, while occurring within Australia, included students of many countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, America, China, Turkey, and Iran.

There are notable differences in student involvement between our Chinese lecture and our TESOL forums. Obviously, there are significant differences in the contextual settings, objectives of learners, facilitator’s objectives and expectations, nevertheless the energy and intention related to the learner involvements and responses demonstrate what can occur in diverse learning contexts.

Wenger (1998) has discussed the importance of involvement in social learning networks that he refers to as “communities of practice.” The emphasis in a community of practice is on the sharing of attributes such as skills and knowledge. Falk et al. (2000) describe attributes of a community of practice as including shared purpose, learning interactions, linked networks, commitments and shared values. Being involved with the cross-cultural challenges of the students whilst also experiencing cross cultural involvement ourselves as a part of the learning community we had established, enabled us to further consider and reflect upon the cultural identity challenges and changes that were occurring for us all. In effect, this emphasised the benefits of the creation of a community of learning.

Postscript

This collaborative auto-ethnographic project presents our life experiences and narrative stories to evoke and stimulate thought and perceptions relating to pre-and in-service language teachers in the Australian context. Professional involvements and interactions have led to changes in our cross-cultural views and perceptions. These include professionally, within the ESL setting, an evolving insight into teacher student interaction where mutual respect from
acceptance of differing cultural backgrounds, as well as the importance of language in communicative situations such as greetings, respectful speech and in conflict situations across cultures. However, it is the change in our own identities that we are most aware of.

Awareness of cultural identity and learning from experiences weaved the threads that triggered reflections and identity transformation for us both. For Helen, cultural identity was influenced by events such as orientation day, as well as learning difference and cultural compatibility through interaction and reflection. Similarly, Paul reflected on cultural compatibility and cultural identity through finding unexpected language differences and assumptions of the type of educational thinking, such as the openness to educational theories he found in Tasmania.

We are motivated to continue to collaborate in regular reflective meetings via social media, even though the second author is now undertaking research projects in Europe and the first author is still in Australia. Our identities, cultural narratives and TESOL teaching and learning experiences have been shared to show varied cultural nuances to interested readers. But these findings are not the end of our collaborative reflective research journey, we are constantly reflecting on every moment:

Life can only be understood backwards. In the meantime, it has to be lived forward. (Soren Kierkegaard)

References


**Author Note**

Dr. Paul Throssell is an adjunct academic staff member at the University of Tasmania. He has rich experience in teaching and undertaking research projects in the United Kingdom, Australia and Asia. Moreover, he also writes, presents and consults internationally on areas related to global educational change, T.E.S.O.L, Agelessness, and Lifelong Learning. He finished postgraduate study and obtained his PhD at the University of Tasmania. He is actively engaged in writing on educational change, autobiographic pieces, and preparing for a book publication on Agelessness.

Dr. Jinjin (Helen) Lu has over 15 years of international experience in educational research and professional roles in education. Dr. Lu obtained her M.A. from the University of Wisconsin in the U.S.A and her Ph.D. in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania. After she finished her Ph.D., Helen successfully completed a range of education research projects in interdisciplinary teams in Tasmania and New South Wales in Australia. She has developed her professional and academic skills in China, Europe, USA and Australia and her leadership skills as a leading researcher. Between 2018 and 2020, Dr. Lu attracted a large amount of funding from the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme in Europe. In the last two years, Helen closely collaborated with senior staff at the Czech Ministry of Education and Early Start UOW, Australia to assist multilingual and multicultural young children and their families in Europe and Australia: Corresponding author: Jinjin.Lu@xjtlu.edu.cn.

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