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Cross-institutional collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as an inclusive and flexible way of researching EAP pedagogies and practice

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Following our collaborative workshop at the BALEAP 2019 Conference, we were invited to contribute to a volume in the Bloomsbury Pedagogies in EAP series (Carr, Maxwell, Rolinska & Sizer, 2021). The study for the chapter aimed to investigate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogies within the creative disciplines, which are relatively under-represented in the EAP literature. Our purpose was to gain an understanding of the link between EAP and creative arts pedagogies and to consider the implications for EAP practitioners working in similar contexts as well as broader implications for English for (Specific) Academic Purposes (E(S)AP) practice in general.

As four EAP practitioners working in various creative arts contexts across four different institutions, we were already aware of the benefits and challenges presented by our working contexts. We were keen to capture our individual experience but also explore common themes, and we felt that a collaborative autoethnographic approach would allow us to explore these aspects in depth (Carr et al., 2021).

Autoethnography ‘seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’ (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 1), while collaborative autoethnography offers the opportunity to engage in collaborative and dialogic reflection in order to gain a more ‘meaningful understanding of sociocultural

phenomena' (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2012, p. 24). We agreed that this approach would allow us to maintain our individual voices and experiences, yet be able to combine them to gain a much richer, deeper account by identifying common themes and practices (Chang et al., 2012, p. 24).

Our aim in this paper is to showcase our use of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a research method for investigating pedagogies and practices in the context of EAP in the creative arts. Following a brief outline of our approach to CAE and the process we undertook, we explore the perceived impact of the CAE process in

terms of a journey as individuals (auto), as EAP practitioners exploring our practice and contexts (ethno) and as EAP scholars (ography). We conclude by suggesting ways in which CAE can be a useful and valid approach for further EAP research projects.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of reflecting on the research process adopted in the original study, it felt appropriate to replicate the same CAE approach as used in the study itself. We thus embarked on a similar cycle of dialogic reflection: Table 1 below outlines

Table 1: Our CAE process (based on Carr et al., 2021) adapted from Chang et al. (2012) and Adamson and Muller (2018)

Stage	Description	
1	Identifying frames for reflection Original study: Frame 1: Chronological account. Frame 2: A critical incident. This study: Retrospective reflection on the CAE process.	Reliability checking
2	Data collection 'Joint narrativisation' (Adamson & Muller, 2018): Writing individual reflections corresponding to the frames identified in Stage 1. Sharing individual reflections via Google Docs: Deepening individual reflections via the use of probing questions and responses between participants using the 'comments' function in Google Docs and online conversations on Zoom.	
3	Data analysis and identifying themes Recurrent themes identified in the original study were: 1) spaces; 2) spoken communication; 3) written genres; 4) collaboration. Recurrent themes identified in this study: 1) our journey as scholars; 2) our journey as practitioners; 3) our journey as individuals.	
4	Further reflection 'Reflections on the reflections': Responding to Stage 3 in writing and in online conversations via Zoom.	
5	Data reflection and reporting Further individual reflection and reading, each on one particular theme, for a richer, deeper understanding before writing up.	

each stage of the process used (Carr et al., 2021). For the purposes of the conference paper, we generated our data by reflecting retrospectively on the CAE process and its impact on our understanding of our contexts and practice (Stage 1). It is important to note that, as in the original study, we were able to check understanding of the content of our reflections by way of continuous written and spoken dialogue (Stages 2–4). This ‘reliability checking’ is an essential part of CAE to ensure that subsequent representation of the data is accurate (Adamson & Muller, 2018; Carr et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

OUR JOURNEY AS SCHOLARS. ENGAGING WITH THE CAE PROCESS

A recurrent theme in all our reflections was our changing perception of ourselves as scholars. Our reflections showed that our engagement with CAE represented a journey, which in some ways mirrored Campbell’s (1993) hero’s/heroine’s journey in three ‘acts’: departure, initiation and return. The invitation to write a book chapter (Carr et al., 2021) marked the start of our journey, which represented a departure from sharing practice via the BALEAP workshop to more active engagement in scholarship and sharing of practitioner research.

One particular area of focus in our reflections was our choice of the CAE method. Before embarking on the study itself, we first had to cross a threshold and identify a research approach that represented our shared understanding of research and scholarship. The reflections demonstrated

we had concerns about how CAE might be received by others, particularly in terms of academic rigour and trustworthiness, so it meant venturing into the unknown, and this was not without risk. For example, Clare Carr (CC) reflected on CAE as potentially being ‘challenging to explain and justify to colleagues’ while Clare Maxwell (CM) expressed similar feelings of anxiety about the method ‘potentially lacking rigour’.¹ Although CAE has occasionally been used in similar contexts (see Adamson & Muller, 2018; Clarke, Kirkpatrick & Cunningham, 2019), the method was not only new to us as scholars but is also relatively unknown within the Teaching English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) community.

On further reflection, CAE felt appropriate as our research design was purposely qualitative, focusing less on scientific measures of validity and reliability and more on Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) qualitative criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In addition, the autoethnographic approach seemed closely aligned with our interest in insider’s perspectives of a context (something that Lillis (2008) refers to as ‘emic’) and in reflective practice and practitioner research as ways to explore our own practice and experiences (Ding & Bruce, 2017). Our CAE reflections were deliberately more analytical than evocative (Anderson, 2006) to promote analysis and interpretation of practice; and, importantly, as our reflections demonstrated, we were convinced of the validity of our own experiences as the subject of our research. Nonetheless, we were reassured by the ‘reliability checking’ process, which is

¹ Initials correspond to the author-participants. Direct quotes from the reflections, including single words, are presented throughout using single quotation marks.

central to CAE (see previous section), and we were careful to ensure that this was applied thoroughly and rigorously throughout.

Having crossed the methodological threshold, we moved into the research stage and were supported in this shared endeavour through our collaborative analysis of reflections and literature searching. The cyclical/iterative nature of reflections with multiple interpretations, coupled with subsequent in-depth dialogue, encouraged not only deeper reflection but also thicker and richer ethnographic descriptions (Lillis, 2008) of context and practices. Jennifer Sizer (JS), for example, observed that ‘External outsider-researchers may struggle to uncover some of the practices featured in [our] reflections without sustained, deep ongoing engagement with context.’

This would have been difficult to achieve without continued dialogue which deepened our understanding of our own and each other’s contexts. Such sustained engagement encouraged reflections to go beyond snapshots of practice and become more ethnographical and longitudinal. Finally, this shared endeavour was also helpful in terms of secondary data collection. Research can be isolating and time-consuming, but through our collaboration, we could pool knowledge and resources as well as identify areas for further exploration.

After completing our research, by way of this BALEAP Conference paper, we were able to return and share our experiences of identities being reshaped (Ding & Bruce, 2017) and practices being questioned and/or transformed with greater confidence in ourselves as researchers and scholars as well as individuals and practitioners. Researching our own practices and contexts, alongside a team of fellow scholars, was not only empowering but also provided a renewed

appreciation for the value of practitioner research and EAP practitioners sharing voices, reflections and research.

OUR JOURNEY AS PRACTITIONERS: CYCLES OF REFLECTION

It is perhaps unsurprising that we all felt the process had contributed to our development as practitioners, teachers, course designers, materials writers, collaborators. Two key themes relating to our EAP practice emerged from our reflections on the CAE process: 1) professional development and growth and 2) understanding of our disciplinary contexts (see Figure 1). The opportunity to engage in deep, retrospective reflection, resulted in us all – often for the first time – taking stock of how much we had developed as practitioners since working so closely with our respective creative arts disciplines. The reflective process highlighted our accumulated knowledge and increased understanding of our teaching contexts, as well as enabling us to explore our individual approaches to, and understanding of, English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) itself.

It seems it was the collaborative nature of the reflective process that enriched this understanding and increased awareness, shifting it into the realm of professional growth. Sharing our individual reflections gave us insight into each other’s contexts and journeys as practitioners, giving us two diverse perspectives. On the simplest level, we gained a glimpse into each other’s worlds, with new ideas and perspectives for practice, not only in terms of teaching, but in all areas of our practice. Significantly, this included varying approaches to collaboration within our respective departments, for example, CC noted that she had ‘unearthed a wider range of tools in my collaborations toolkit’.

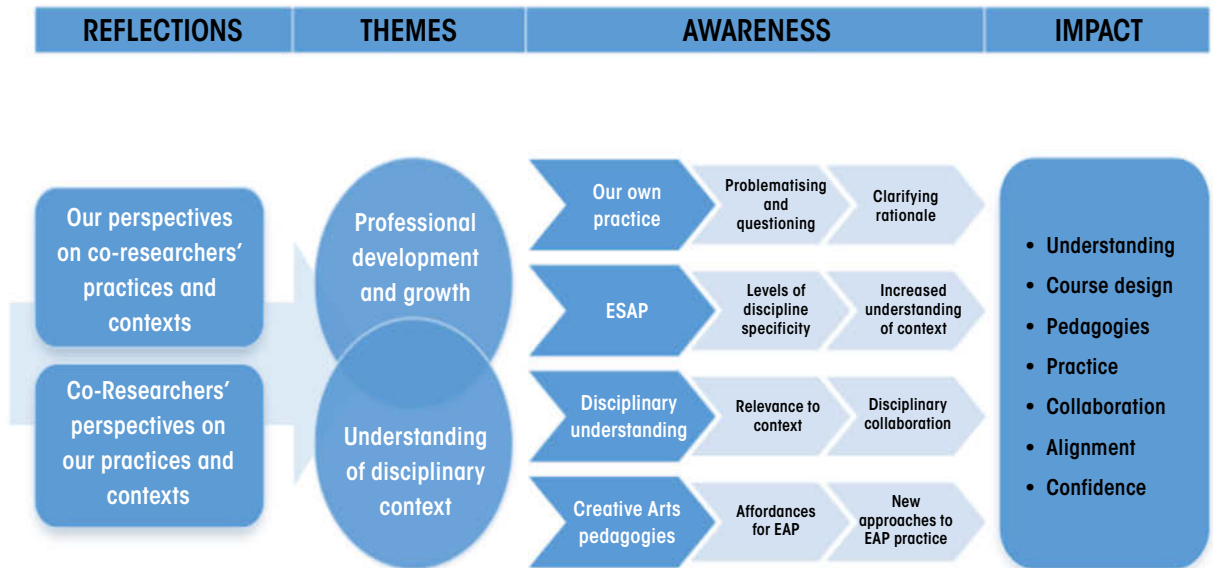


Figure 1: Our CAE journey as EAP practitioners

This suggests that engaging in collaborative research to explore pedagogies and practice can be much more holistic, allowing for professional development in areas that other means, such as lesson observation, might not afford. In addition, exploring each other's practice in this way highlighted areas of common practice, giving us a new perspective from which to evaluate our own practice. Seeing others adopt similar approaches allowed us to self-evaluate our practice from a more 'neutral position', often leading to affirmation of our choices and, consequently, boosting confidence.

At a deeper level, through the process of collaborative reflection, we also gained the perspectives of others on our own reflections. Reading about each other's experiences led to an ongoing cycle of reflection, and the resulting dialogue led to us each interrogating our own contexts and situations, as we viewed our own practice through the eyes of others. Observations raised in one reflection often became a point

of focus for all, leading to 'mini-discoveries' about our own practice that we hadn't previously considered:

It brought to light some things I hadn't noticed.

CC

and:

It was something I had never really asked myself.

CM

While reflection is an inseparable part of professional and personal development (Ding & Bruce, 2017), one of CM's reflections raised an honest question:

How often do we actually have time to sit down and do it properly?

The CAE method provided a sustainable framework to reflect rigorously and over a period of time, not only about future but also past development, and we all noticed that this reflection resulted in us raising questions about our practice that we had not asked ourselves before. This was a valuable

and powerful process, making ‘the familiar strange’ (Lillis, 2008, p. 372), and pushing us to question and ponder on aspects of our own practice and/or teaching contexts; to explore, understand and exploit them more effectively, to think carefully about rationale and to consider alternatives.

Evidence of seeds of change in our practice emerged during reflection and discussions focused on creative arts practices and pedagogies that had taken us out of our EAP comfort zone. We had all grappled with the experience of working in ‘alien’ teaching spaces, for example, and having to unpick and understand what for us seemed ‘unorthodox’ assessment genres. The CAE process helped us see the affordances of these disciplinary differences for our own ESAP pedagogies. We recognised the value of embracing, rather than simply tolerating, or worse still, refuting them. Most importantly, we saw how we had already adapted our approaches accordingly. Ania Rolinska (AR), for example, noted how, during the process of our collaboration, she moved away from an emphasis on reading and writing development towards teaching in the studio and focusing on oral communication development, having realised that this was what her students needed:

I could see the journey I was on, and how I was evolving as a teacher; I started to deal with uncertainty, I was prepared to embrace it more fully.

Meanwhile, having not previously considered the significance, CM acknowledged how she had adapted her approach to the use of teaching spaces, enjoying the flexibility afforded by more fluid and creative spaces.

We all found that through the CAE process, we had gained a deeper understanding of the purpose of ESAP

and the nature of our creative arts disciplines, and we had uncovered aspects of disciplinary difference that we hadn’t previously considered, such as pedagogies and spaces. The process, therefore, made for a transformative experience. In addition, the cross-institutional nature of our collaboration gave us an insight into the differences not just between disciplines but also within and into the impact that context, including institutional context, can have on the practices and discourse of the disciplines. Inevitably, this led to discussions recalling Hyland’s (2002) question of ‘how far should we go?’ in terms of specificity, yet our shared reflections also allowed us to identify the commonalities between our contexts and practices. These are important in contexts where an ESAP approach may not be possible, and courses may need to sit towards the general end of the EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes)–ESAP continuum.

OUR JOURNEY AS INDIVIDUALS. INTROSPECTION AND IDENTITY WORK

What was equally interesting was the fact that apart from featuring our development as scholars and practitioners, our reflections consistently referred to our journey as individuals. Engagement in an autoethnographic study means the researcher becomes the researched, and this requires embarking on an introspective journey, a potentially uncomfortable and vulnerable process (Chang et al., 2012; Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; Lapadat, 2017). The discomfort related to divulging details of one’s professional practice, including failure and challenges, is likely to increase in the collaborative and cross-institutional context. Being still relatively new to the disciplinary context, the method and to each other,

this vulnerability became evident in our reflections. JS admitted that the process felt ‘exposing’, and she acknowledged how the inner critic made her doubt the value of her reflections, while AR feared her accounts were too personal and felt ‘embarrassed’ to share them. However, reading each other’s reflections and holding regular discussions helped us understand that the self-doubt and vulnerability were shared, and this openness led to increased trust and confidence, which in turn led to deeper analysis and reflection in line with Lapadat (2017) and Chang et al. (2012) respectively.

Throughout the process, we each reported experiencing a boost in confidence and greater empowerment and motivation in regard to different aspects of our pedagogical and scholarly practice, as seen in the previous two sections. JS emphasised her realisation that:

her voice is valid and does contribute to the understanding of contexts and practices we are part of.

AR simply said she felt validated. CC indicated an increase in confidence as the key impact, while CM saw in CAE the powerful opportunity to:

tell our own stories as practitioners.

The collaborative aspect of the CAE method provided much added value as it created a safe space where a group of like-minded people could exchange existing knowledge and experience and, through this, broaden perspectives and reconsider choices of teaching approaches, either leading to affirmation and consolidation or encouraging adjustment. Ultimately, it became clear that CAE has the power to facilitate considerable professional and individual identity work.

CONCLUSION

While researching our pedagogical practices, we found CAE to be an empowering and potentially transformative method which generated multiple perceived benefits in terms of our development as both practitioners and scholars. The impact on us as individuals was no less important, as the opportunity to build a relationship of trust and critical friendship was both affirming and confidence building. This was enhanced by the cross-institutional nature of our collaboration, which gave us wider insights into the disciplinary context and helped take us ‘out of the silo’ (Bond, 2020, p. ix). Impact was not the primary focus of our study, therefore, in the future, it might be interesting to explore the transformational potential of CAE, perhaps using a framework such as Mezirow’s Transformation Theory (2000).

On a practical level, we found that the approach was flexible and accessible, since we could engage in reflection and analysis at our own pace without having to rely on data collection from others, as we ourselves were the subjects of the research. Having established the structure, frameworks and approach, we found CAE to be systematic and inclusive, allowing for our individual and diverse EAP practitioner voices to become a central part of the study, particularly as an affordance of flexibility was built in during the data collection and analysis process. As with all research, it is worth acknowledging the importance of ethical considerations, which should be taken carefully into account both in terms of ensuring careful reliability checking throughout the process and of ensuring informed consent of all participants.

It is essential to note that, in our case, there was already a compatibility between us in terms of ways of working and professional values, and this may be one of the reasons the method worked so well for us. This should be considered before embarking on collaborative autoethnography, particularly since building the required levels of trust can take time. Additionally, the level of engagement and introspection needed for CAE research requires an ‘autoethnographic disposition’ (Bochner, 2017, p. 71), that is, being open to self-interrogation, which may make the method more challenging for some practitioners in some contexts.

That said, we feel that CAE could offer numerous opportunities as a method for other areas of EAP research. Our experience suggests that it could be a fruitful means of exploring pedagogies and practices in other learning contexts, both within and across departments and institutions. It could be used to explore experiences of co-researchers from different roles within higher education (HE), such as between EAP practitioners and students and/or subject specialists working together, and, whilst being mindful of the potential power dynamics involved, it can be a democratic and equalising process (Chang et al., 2012). Finally, there are numerous possible frames for reflection, providing limitless possibilities in terms of focus of study.

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