Research, Writing, and Creative Process in Open and Distance Education: Tales from the Field

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7. 1001 Nights of Research: The Good, Bad, and the Ugly Magic Carpet Ride

Jennifer Roberts

According to Webster and Mertova (2007), narrative inquiry is a methodology that researchers can employ that provides a "rich framework through which they can investigate the way human beings experience the world, as told through their own individual stories" (p. 3). In the same light, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) say that what we know about education comes from sharing stories of our own educational experience with other people.

As an academic researcher, I cannot help myself: I need to find a theoretical framework to guide my story and journey. This chapter provides a rare opportunity for me to cast aside the formalities and rigour of academic writing for a short while. So, faced with this exciting challenge, I will weave my academic stories together to form a narrative — my journey through academia and the world of academic publishing. As a unapologetic teacher, my hope and wish is that I can impart some insight and wisdom to a new generation of distance education researchers.

There are underlying themes running through my academic story and I will touch on each of these as I write, and then try and interlace them into a comprehensive whole. As I sit and write now, at the beginning of this process, the first theme that comes to mind is that I am a late arrival to the world of academia, and I found myself drawn into distance education by being in the right place at the right time. My story

will be told as one who entered academia later in life, navigating a world that was alien to the business field where I had previously worked.

I will also touch on some personal aspects of the reasons for doing a PhD (mid-life crisis, acrimonious divorce, development of self-efficacy) and my journey through the field of distance education, both as a student and then later as a researcher/professor (This will also include the very real condition called Imposter Syndrome and my views on the prevalence of narcissistic traits prevalent in some academic spaces).

In addition, if space permits, I would like to include publishing aspects relevant to authors from developing countries such as cognitive or confirmation biases of editors towards researchers from "other" countries. As a research professor residing in a developing country (South Africa), I find this to be a very real issue and so I will relate a few stories that have led me to explore this phenomenon and present this evidence.

Distance Education: An Interdisciplinarity Field

It is only in recent years that distance education has been acknowledged as an academic field. An academic field is often defined by the research that has been published in that field. Distance education is relatively new and initially attracted a fair amount of criticism for its lack of theoretical frameworks, for being descriptive, and for the use of poor research methodologies (Bernard, Abrami, Lou & Borokhovski, 2004; Perraton, 2000). Part of the scepticism of distance education as an academic field of study stems from its interdisciplinary nature.

I am inquisitive and detail-oriented by nature. It is a standing joke in my family that I can recall insignificant details of events that occurred many years ago (the colour of a dress that someone was wearing at a party over forty years ago — you get the gist!). This remembrance of minute details led me to pursue undergraduate studies in statistics and sociology, a masters in socioeconomics and finally a PhD concentrating on curriculum design in distance education. As such, I consider myself to be a truly interdisciplinary scholar and it is this interdisciplinarity that cascaded me into the academic field of distance education. Distance education is by its very nature an interdisciplinary field and draws on the nexus of other academic fields which may include education,

technology, sociology, psychology, communication, and philosophy, amongst many others.

My Own Stories

My first story concerns my own PhD study, which, as mentioned earlier, was an interdisciplinary one, where I stated a research problem and addressed it through various sub-studies, each with its own paradigm and methodology. My concluding chapter brought together the assorted studies that I had conducted to answer the research question from a holistic point of view. As is customary, my final thesis was sent to three different examiners. It is often challenging to appoint examiners (and reviewers for journal articles and book chapters) when they include different fields of study in the research work. In my case, two of the examiners understood the concept of interdisciplinarity and provided interesting and sound reviews, which I willingly incorporated into my final thesis submission. The third examiner however, stubbornly refused to acknowledge that a PhD could be extensive rather than intensive. He dug his heels in to insist that I should take one of the individual studies and extend the scope and depth of it — and ignore the other data that I had collected. I am happy to report that a fourth examiner was appointed who overwhelmingly saw the importance of my comprehensive approach to answering the research question and integrating all the findings. The moral of this story is that the field of academia is dynamic and evolving rapidly, and in some instances, scholars are resistant to changing their epistemological viewpoints.

Before my academic life, I worked in the retail industry, using my statistical knowledge to forecast buying trends, patterns, and sales. Retail management is not for the fainthearted as it is driven by accurate forecasts and profits. It is a "just in time" environment where each small error could convert into the loss of large sums of money. Another interesting aspect to the retail business is that it employs people who are creative, vibrant, and sometimes viewed as "slightly eccentric." This is the nature of the business. Drama, histrionics, and a sense of urgency dominate this landscape. There are big personalities and egos at play, and one would be unwise to think that this is the opposite to the

confines and rigour of the field of academia. I will discuss this further in the chapter when I reflect on my experiences of academic vanity.

At the age of forty, I underwent my first midlife crisis, and instead of joining the bridge club, engaging in risqué adventures, or travelling the world to "find "myself, I decided to continue my academic studies and enrolled in a master's programme, which was presented in a hybrid format through a university in the United Kingdom. The lecturers travelled to South Africa every six weeks, and we would convene for an intensive weekend session with them. During the time that they were not available, the studies continued in correspondence mode. This is where the concept of self-directed learning became apparent as we were totally on our own for the six weeks between visits and this was in the very early days of email and internet. Communication was thus limited or barely existent, as those were the days before the advent of technology-enhanced education through social media.

At this time, I felt myself drawn to the library at one of the South African universities where there was a reciprocal arrangement with the UK university. I spent days, and even weeks, immersing myself in the library, and opening a world of knowledge that I could not even had imagined existed. I was a rookie researcher and knew that I had to find all the information for myself as there was no one to hold my hand. I am grateful for this opportunity because it was the perfect training ground for my future career as an academic researcher. If there is one piece of advice that I would like to pass on to new and emerging scholars, this is it: You are the master of your own development. Read deeply and find the right people to answer your questions.

The next story relates to my later-life PhD studies and the importance of aligning yourself with a substantive mentor. The value of mentoring in the academic journey is often bypassed and its positioning is not fully understood. I was undergoing my second midlife crisis, as well as recovering from an acrimonious divorce. I needed a new focus, and I will admit that I used the PhD study as a crutch to see me through this trying time of my life. Around that time, I met a fellow parent at a school committee project meeting — an esteemed academic professor. He saw something in me and provided encouragement to immerse myself in and complete my PhD study. We spent a great length of time debating, questioning, and arguing; and in his sage and gentle manner, he guided

me on my PhD journey. He must have had the patience of Job, but most of all, he believed in me and encouraged my journey to its conclusion. One of the most special times in my life was at my PhD graduation when he was the guest speaker. He quoted from that classic movie "The King and I" when Anna sang to her pupils, "It is a very ancient saying, but a true and honest thought, that when you become a teacher, by your pupils you'll be taught." This is true mentorship: When it becomes reciprocal — as much as he taught me, he also learned from me.

I fell into the field of distance education. I had completed my PhD at the University of South Africa (Unisa), which is the oldest distance education university in the world, and my research topic for my thesis had centred on curriculum design at a distance education university. I was clearly ahead of my time as I incorporated virtual reality, new learning pedagogies into my research and used mixed methods which were novel then. The Institute for Open and Distance Learning (IODL) at Unisa had advertised for research staff for their research institution, and after a series of interviews, I was offered a senior researcher position. I thought that I knew all about distance education; little did I realize that the field was rich with theoretical frameworks, pedagogies, research methodologies, and philosophical stances.

I was thrown into the deep end and expected to create my own research identity and forge niche areas.

There was no training, orientation, or guidance — just an expectation of research outputs and postgraduate supervision success. This is where I had to draw on the lessons I had learned in self-directedness. To me, self-directedness is when you take responsibility for your own learning and career advancement. You understand that you cannot rely on anyone else to guide you and that you are accountable for your success. In my case, this involved extensive reading (once again back in the academic library), arranging meetings with senior academics to "pick" their brains, attending as many seminars, conferences and talks as possible, and most importantly, being the catalyst for arranging regular debates, presentations, and discussions with colleagues.

The Nature of the Academy

I was intrigued to find that, while I met up with Unisa colleagues at international conferences where they presented interesting research papers, the audience included very few academics from my own organization. Somehow this felt wrong to me — that our own university faculty did not get the opportunity to listen to these presentations. I then created a "Research Café" back at Unisa, where these colleagues were invited to present and share their work in a collaborative environment, understanding that, as academics, we are keen to create an international audience for our research, but we need also to be mindful that our own contextual environment is just as important. Through these Research Cafés, I was also able to disseminate my research within my own university, which led to collaborations with other departments. An example is my work on the future and changing roles of distance education staff. This research had been presented in Australia and India, but when I shared it at my own university, members of the Human Resources (HR) department invited me to assist with their Talent Management programme. In addition, I entered an interdisciplinarity collaborative project with the director of the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) department to continue this research as a longitudinal study.

Academia was like no other job that I had done before, and I could see how easy it is to lose yourself in its bewildering maze. I wished that someone had told me that this was going to be the scenario. I also found out how judgemental this field is: you are often engulfed in the pejorative frame of mind that is possessed by many academics, and my fear was that this mindset would become inculcated into me as well. My experience is that there is no handholding or encouragement — that is the nature of academia. I have often said that this field forces your skin to grow thicker and teaches lessons about overcoming sensitivities and insecurities.

I have seen many new academics faltering in this environment, and I believe that this is not unique to Unisa or developing countries such as South Africa. Many colleagues from various countries have echoed these sentiments and thoughts; my perception is that this is a universal reality as many other colleagues have expressed the same views about

their countries. However, I do not wish to sound victimised nor negative. It is difficult to express the sense of achievement when you have been pushed far out of your comfort zone and dug deeper than you thought possible, but, at the end, achieved success.

Publish or Perish

My very first published research article is an example. This article was based on aspects of my PhD thesis so I thought it would be a straightforward process, not realizing the complexities of academic publishing. I was therefore distraught when the article was returned from the reviewers and minor corrections were necessary. Little did I realize that this was the easiest article that I would ever publish, and the voyage would get far more competitive and difficult as I forged ahead into my article publishing journey. I refused consolation from my mentor and did not really believe him when he told me that this was one of the best reviews that he had seen, and that I should be elated.

I have recently read the review reports for an article submitted for publication by esteemed colleagues who are highly rated researchers; they were harsh. Their article has subsequently been published in a high impact journal where the readers would not imagine that the article had been brutishly reviewed. This, however, is the name of the game and it is why I mentioned the need to overcome personal fragility and self-doubt.

My advice is to find a niche research area and prepare yourself to be competent in your knowledge and expertise, so that you can present critical arguments from a point of self-confidence. I became an "expert" in staff development in distance education as well as the development of research capacity and training in developing countries. Too often we try to be all things to all people and find ourselves lost in the pool of researchers. My most cited single-authored article centred on a study into the future roles and competencies of distance educators, in light of the move to online teaching and learning. Currently, I am participating in a project to design an ODL research framework for developing countries and have already published a few articles on this topic.

The Value of Networking and Conferencing

Networking is paramount and, in my experience, the optimal way to do this is through attendance at local and international conferences. This is not straightforward, though, as it involves bureaucratic and challenging administrative issues to obtain funding for such travel. I was fortunate to be awarded with a research grant that enabled me to travel extensively. I have attended and presented my research at many ICDE and EDEN conferences and as a result received invitations to present keynote lectures at other conferences. I cannot overemphasize the importance of putting yourself out there, even if this is not in your nature. As a result of the networks that I created by attending some of these conferences, I am now a "permanent" conference organiser for a digital learning conference in Eastern Europe, have presented seminars in India and was a founding member of the international organization, the Centre for Open Education Research (COER) which is funded by the German government.

Serving on the Australian ODLAA executive committee provided me with exposure to the Australian distance education environment and certainly broadened my narrow landscape. A highlight was when I was appointed programme director for their international conference in 2017. Presenters represented many countries and afforded me the opportunity to meet and discuss differing perspectives of distance education globally. The community of distance education academics in the world is not large and therefore the opportunity to meet and interact with some of the top players in this field was priceless. The networking opportunities are the groundwork for future collaborations, international project teams and invitations for speaking at international conferences. It is the gateway to your academic future. A bonus is that I have managed to form friendships that go beyond that of being just colleagues. I have fond recollections of sailing up and down the Bosphorus in Istanbul with a colleague from China, late night dining (rather raucously) in Oldenburg in Germany, walking along the Yarra river at night in Melbourne, watching the Kremlin Ballet company production of Swan Lake in Moscow and singing loudly in the Irish pubs in Dublin.

Perceptions of the Professoriate

I mentioned earlier the perception of academics as wise, grey-haired, elderly teachers who desire to impart their knowledge to the next generation. One conjures up the image of a gentle, humble person who is enthusiastic about his or her subject, as well as engaging in teaching and learning. I typed in the word "professor" into Google Images and most of these images confirm this stereotype. I am certain that many of these professors do exist, but in my experience, they are rare. Rather, I have encountered many people in academia who think very highly of themselves, need admiration, believe others are inferior, and lack empathy for others. I do not profess to be an expert on personality traits, but my experience, research, and reading have led me to gain a richer understanding of the motivational drives present in many academics.

I have been to international conferences where a certain sector of the audience would delight in asking difficult and unnecessary questions, particularly to novice researchers; and then seemed to derive satisfaction from embarrassing them. I have often felt that this profession lacks empathy and nurturing which are two qualities necessary for effective teaching. In some cases, chasing the limelight seems to be the perceived goal in academia, whereas my feeling is that we should be working co-operatively to enhance education. However, I remind myself that for each of these people who need a sense of entitlement and require constant, excessive admiration, there are many others who have made my career so fulfilling.

I have a close friend who occupies a senior position in a financial institution. Her career success can be seen by her material acquisitions — annual dividends and bonuses allow for the purchase of a new vehicle at regular intervals, a holiday house by the sea and high-end fashion garments. Career success in academia is judged differently, through publications, presentations, awards, and self-acknowledgement. Opportunities for publication in high impact journals are limited and the supply far outstrips the demand. Many universities operate in a managerial style and are policy-driven. Success is determined through a system of metrics and can become extremely competitive. Journal article reviews are often conducted by peers who are competing for the same space as you in the narrow pool of academic journals. It is therefore

understandable that the hypercritical stance taken by some reviewers certainly exists. How often have you heard of an article that received a scathing review from some reviewers and editors, only to be accepted by a similar journal with minor changes needed?

In my own experience, I have found that sometimes the new researcher "treads lightly" on the toes of more experienced ones, resulting in the wiser ones feeling the need to protect their knowledge. Be aware that the open education movement, which incorporates Open Education Practice (OEP) and Open Educational Resources (OER), relies on transparency and the free sharing of ideas, knowledge, and concepts. Academia is still, in my opinion, very hierarchical and competitive.

I gave a presentation to a group of senior academics at an international seminar a few years ago. I was asked to present an explanation and analysis of the role of colonization on higher education from a South African perspective. The presentation was well received by most of the delegates, and I was thrilled to hear from a highly esteemed academic that this was one of the best explanations and analyses that she had heard on the topic. A short while later, I heard through another delegate, that someone else had told her that my work was sub-standard and superficial. So, whom do you believe and how do you respond? You must believe in yourself.

Most research emanating from developing countries is context-specific and centres on the unique challenges of these countries. Many developing countries face challenges with regard to broadband connectivity, access to wi-fi, lack of funding for hardware, an inconsistent electricity supply as well as insufficient levels of digital literacy skills (Daya, 2020). There is a perception that the quality of research originating from developing countries is below the accepted standard for international publication (Harris, 2022; Salager-Meyer, 2008). My experience is that editorial bias exists and that some journal editors have an inherent cognitive bias towards researchers from "other" countries. This is called the *availability heuristic* and it is the tendency for someone to estimate the probability of something happening based on past examples (Giblin & Stefaniak, 2021; Yamashiro & Roediger, 2021). It could also fall under the guise of confirmation bias where the editor possesses an existing or previous belief that research from developing countries is inferior (Schuum, 2021).

Believe in Yourself: Self-confidence and The Imposter Syndrome

The judgemental nature of academia can also lead to the prevalence of the Imposter Syndrome (IP) that occurs when persistent doubt concerning one's abilities or accomplishments are accompanied by the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of one's ongoing success. Many of us accept the negative remarks that are thrown at us and dwell on them, rather than celebrate the positives. According to Brookfield (2002), critical reflection can be a worthwhile intervention. In particular, he describes group reflection as providing an environment that can alleviate the isolation a teacher/academic feels due to fear of exposure. Recognizing that colleagues also experience similar feelings can go a long way to providing relief from the anxiety caused by IP.

A colleague is currently finalizing his PhD which focuses on IP at my own university. I was selected as a participant in his research, which involved an in-depth interview. I found the process to be cathartic as it was the first time that I understood the extent of this syndrome and this interview provided the impetus for me to critically reflect on the reasons for this fear that I had developed. I began to understand that in my previous jobs, I had never felt like a fraud and imposter; and that this syndrome, in my case, was specific to my academic persona. Self-reflection forms a necessary part of self-directedness and the joy here is to find the nexus between understanding the cause of our heightened anxiety and fear of exposure and curtailing the possibility of developing self-aggrandizing traits.

As a new researcher, you must understand that negativity can indeed breed self-doubt. Reflect on the disapproval, understand where it is coming from (and, in many cases, it is our own uncertainty and insecurities); dust off your tiara, straighten your crown, and move on.

In Conclusion

In summary then, I would offer the following advice to new academic researchers:

- Embrace distance education as an interdisciplinary academic field where you can integrate academic disciplines by bringing together different perspectives.

- Find a mentor who believes in you and encourages your development.

- Understand and fully incorporate self-directedness into your academic development. You are your own north star.

- Believe in yourself without becoming arrogant or egotistical.

- Accept criticism without becoming oversensitive. Understand that you are not being critiqued as a person.

- Do not fall into the trap of feeling like an imposter. Remember to practice regular self-reflection and maintain frequent conversations with other colleagues.

As my own academic career moves into its latter years, I am excited to see that a new generation of enthusiastic researchers is entering the exciting field of technology-enabled open, online distance education. I would like to see interdisciplinarity, openness, and a culture of care and mentorship dominate the future landscape of this exciting and rewarding field of research.

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