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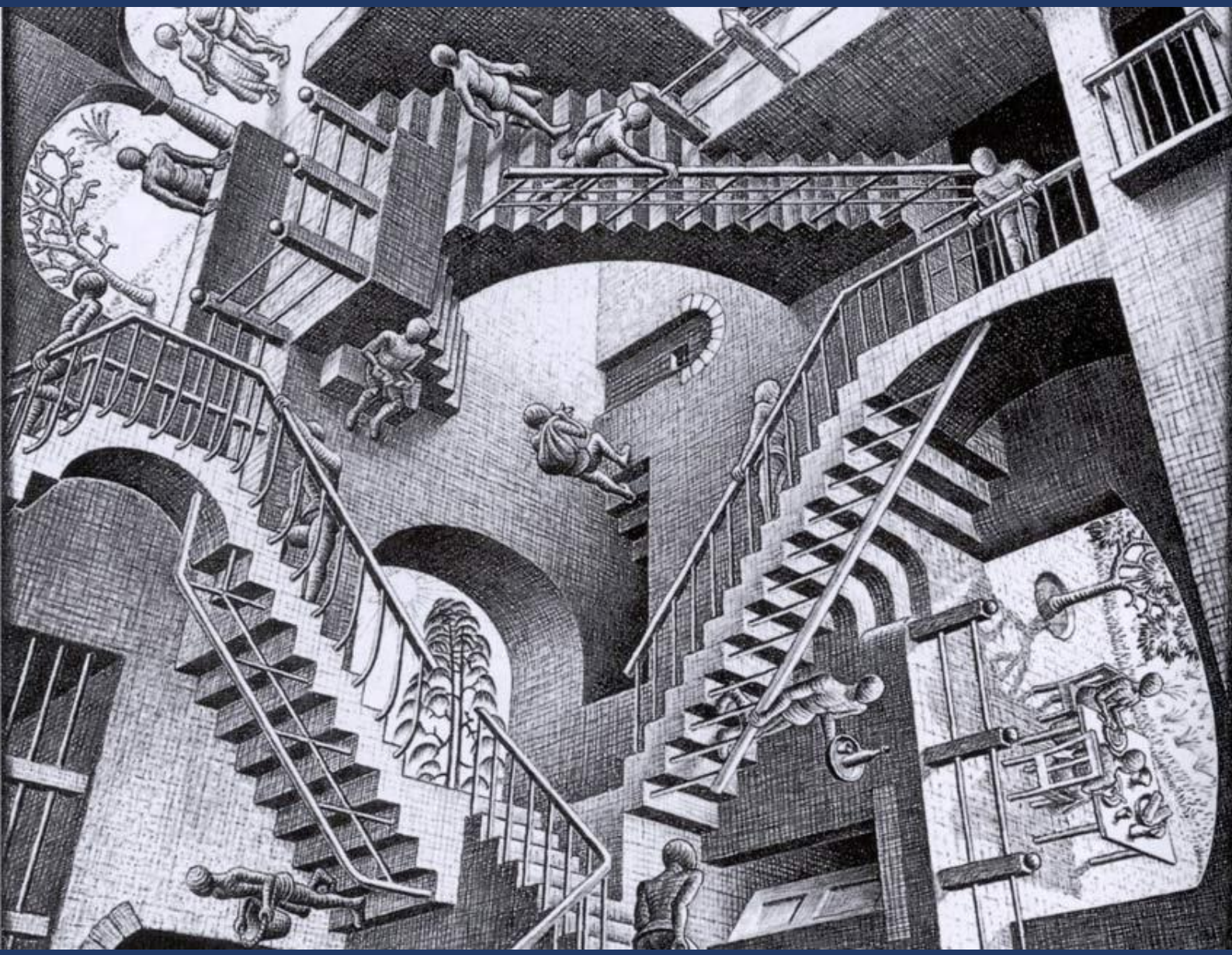
School of Education Journal



Volume 7, November 2022

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Journal and volume

Hillary Place Papers, Volume 7 (November, 2022)

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Hillary Place Papers Issue 7 (2022)

Welcome to Issue 7 of Hillary Place Papers!

Hillary Place Papers provides an opportunity for early career researchers to experience the peer review process as used across the world of academic publishing and the opportunity to see their work published under the auspice of a leading research university.

But HPP goes one step further by providing post-graduate students with the opportunity to experience the publication process from the editorial and publication perspective. So, in line with the previous three editions, the editorial team consists of post-graduate researchers working alongside faculty members of the University of Leeds School of Education. This approach is now an established feature of Hillary Place Papers and has been adopted to provide experience of the peer review process to post-graduates and provide authors with feedback within a relatively short period of time in order to expedite the process and support their development as researchers.

The experience of working as part of an editorial team of enthusiastic post-graduates working with and being guided by experienced academics provides a rich insight into the publication and peer review process. Every member of the editorial team would testify to the benefits of such a collegiate and friendly experience, and it is an opportunity that is open to all post-graduate researchers at the School of Education.

And it goes further than writing or reviewing papers! For example, it offers the opportunity to develop the website content and presentation, or to use social media to call for papers and promote the issues. It also provides experience of working as a team, managing the process and communicating with faculty members and authors, and much more. So, there is a range of ways in which you can contribute to the process.

If you are interested in getting involved in the next issue, either as an author or as part of the editorial team, our advice would be to keep an eye on the website and get involved at the earliest opportunity!

https://hpp.education.leeds.ac.uk/

Introduction to the 2022 Edition of Hillary Place Papers

The theme for this issue of the Hillary Place Papers, ***Flexible Research in Mind-Bending Times***, was decided at a time when the Covid pandemic still cast a much darker cloud over the world. Looking back on those experiences is an opportunity to understand, with fresh perspective, the impact of those world changing events on the way that PGR research was conducted. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the creativity and flexibility of the research community at Hillary Place (and beyond). We hope that these papers will lead to consideration of what our community has learned, individually and collectively about how to do research. They certainly suggest that our resilience, and our responses to many different challenges, have changed and developed our identities as researchers. This creativity, resilience and our collective development are explored and celebrated in these papers.

The first paper, ***Conversation with Contemporary Scholar, Dr James Simpson*** is a discussion between PGR Helen Robinson and her supervisor Dr James Simpson about his new academic role in Hong Kong. The paper touches on topics ranging from the challenges of moving, teaching and researching during the Covid-19 pandemic, to the level of freedom in the new environment with a strict national security law. The pros and cons of living in Hong Kong, research flexibility and the feeling of belonging are discussed, with concrete advice for researchers considering a change of scenery. This paper is the starting point for important themes in this issue, such as the importance of developing understanding and insight between supervisors and PGRs, and between researchers and participants.

In the second paper, ***Taking time to appreciate the scenery: an exploration of PhD supervision as pedagogy***, Edward (Ed) Collyer and his supervisor Dr Clare (Kate) Lawrence offer a refreshing visual and creative methodological approach to examine their conceptions of the role and relationship of PhD supervisor and supervisee during the Covid pandemic, and the nature of PhD research itself. Ed and Kate highlight the need to explore “fundamental apprehensions of what research should be about, that are subtle and emotionally charged” (Johansson et al., 2014, p. 613). This paper could benefit both supervisors and supervisees, providing an engaging reflection on this complex relationship at the core of every PhD journey.

The third paper, ***A Reflective Analysis on Strategic Approaches Implemented in Accessing and Conducting Interviews with Elites in Sri Lanka*** describes and analyses the challenges Sasheeka Karunanayake faced in gaining access to and conducting interviews with elites. As well as sharing her successes and ‘failures’ in dealing with gatekeepers, Sasheeka recommends that researchers develop a flexible and creative approach, as well as ‘silent strategic patience’ when negotiating access

to interviews. Her data collection experiences show that merely obtaining consent and conducting an interview does not guarantee a successful interview. Developing a rapport and establishing trust between the interviewer and interviewees are crucial elements for the success of the interview and the quality of the data (McClure & McNaughtan, 2021; Darbi & Hall, 2014). Anybody interested in research involving elites, gatekeepers or the Sri Lankan context, will certainly find this paper insightful.

Our last paper is a Conference Report by Marianne Talbot. In the report, which covers the ***TEALfest 2021 (Technology Enhanced Active Learning), University of Warwick, May 2021***, Marianne shares her 'lightbulb moments' from the TEALfest 2021. This thought-provoking and extremely well-organised online conference inspired reflections on the evolution of digital teaching and learning pedagogy and practice in Higher Education, through and beyond Covid-19. Marianne reports on strategies to maximise student engagement in digital teaching environments, whilst also addressing the challenges technology can bring. This paper is an excellent example of the multiplicity of insights one can gain from academic events and offers suggestions to develop successful teaching and learning communities.

The editorial team would like to thank again all those who submitted papers, all the staff reviewers and those who helped by reviewing papers, advertising the call for papers, and contributed in lots of ways to help bring this edition to publication.

Conversation with Contemporary Scholar, Dr James Simpson

Helen R. Robinson, School of Education, University of Leeds.

Abstract

PGR Helen Robinson talks to Dr James Simpson about his new academic role in Hong Kong which has opened up interesting research opportunities. James' areas of expertise comprise, inter alia, language education and migration, adult ESOL, multilingualism, and language education and development. Covering some of these areas in the context of challenges posed by moving countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, this conversation offers insights into work-life dynamics in strangely different circumstances. With an interdisciplinary audience in mind, it is hoped that this will not only encourage current and future researchers to push boundaries in the pursuit of knowledge and development of collaborative partnerships, but also to reflect on the human side of academia, occasionally navigating troubled waters.

To read James's up-to-date profile and publication list, see:

https://huma.hkust.edu.hk/people/james-simpson

Introduction: 2020 – a year to remember?

The constraints of COVID-19 on academia since 2020 have become the subject of numerous papers and conferences, with many including the words 'pandemic' or 'challenging' in their titles. In the area of language and migration studies, as many others, the crisis has presented a rich research field – much of which in the early stages necessitated a speedily learnt shift to online working – a balancing act which in some cases made career progression and research output grind to a halt. This semi-structured conversation, the first of its kind for Hillary Place Papers, follows the journal edition's theme of 'flexible research in mind-bending times', looking back on the past two years through a longer lens, framing language and migration in the context of academic mobility and reflecting on the practical and political tensions involved in research development. Helen's questions in direct speech are in bold print **(H).** James's direct responses are in italics *(J).*

Following the now-traditional form of a transnational TEAMS dialogue, our conversation began just after my English breakfast as the academic working day in Hong Kong was drawing to a close. On March 23rd 2022, exactly two years after the first UK lockdown, my supervisor Dr James Simpson kindly agreed to discuss his

recent appointment as Associate Professor of Humanities at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), including the personal intricacies of taking his family across the world to a politically volatile country in the middle of a global health hiatus. Some HPP readers may have known James in person as Senior Lecturer in Language Education at Hillary Place since his arrival in 2004, or, in the context of their own education studies, may have read his work but, having experienced only two visiting professorship posts away from the UK during his period of employment at Leeds – both in Jyvaskyla, Finland – James was ready to move on. I was interested first in the impact that the pandemic had had on his work at Leeds and if this was a factor in his decision to move.

Teaching and research output in pandemic mode

James described how he had found the move to online teaching a useful and interesting experience: In the midst of what he termed as *'traumatic industrial action'* (with which, he emphasised, he was in full support) adding to the stress of the time, the virtual classroom became a physical reality within the space of about a week and for many staff the spare room transformed overnight into the office. This had obvious effects on family and work-life routine but, when not teaching online, James said that he and his wife actually enjoyed the challenge of supporting their three boys – all at different stages of education – Masters, A levels, and GCSEs. But how did research and writing fit into this? James explained how his modus operandi had changed:

J: *Once I decided to put research to one side and focus on teaching, it enabled a lot more thinking time, forcing me to concentrate on content and delivery. I was scripting lectures, as were many others, and it did make me think carefully about what I was trying to convey and how best to convey it, so in some ways it was a very useful experience. In fact, in Hong Kong, people have been working online since Autumn 2019 because the pro-democracy protests forced campuses to close. There are students here who have barely spent any time on campus at all.*

Mobility and resettlement: from Leeds to Hong Kong

Academic papers do not usually include details of the practicalities of career progression but I was curious to know how James had coped after seventeen years at Leeds, clearing out the office, packing up his vast library, and I wanted to understand what 'migrant researchers' could expect when moving abroad to work, not just to study. James described how, after three full carloads, his work zone in Hillary Place was finally empty and its contents packed off to Hong Kong in July 2021. Then, an unforeseen and disastrous shipping experience left him and the family high and dry

when just before Christmas they discovered that the container was still in the UK! Fortunately they were able to cancel the shipment and send it back to their home in Leeds but, consequently, James hasn't got all the physical literature he is used to. Nodding at the depleted bookshelves behind him in his new office, James admitted that this makes him feel less permanent than he would like, preferring hard copies to online reading for inspiration.

H: So, did the pandemic conditions precipitate your decision to leave Leeds?

J: *No, in fact, it was a decision taken pre-pandemic. In migration policy people talk about 'pull and push factors', but it's never quite that straightforward. Leaving Leeds was at least in part because seventeen years is a long time in one place; coming to Hong Kong was fundamentally a family decision – we all wanted to try something new at a point in our lives when we still could. Before family responsibilities increased, my wife and I considered ourselves very mobile people. I'd lived and worked in Greece and the Gulf; my wife had grown up in Spain and had lived in Turkey and Singapore, so it was quite shocking to realise that we had been in Leeds for so long and were not particularly mobile after all. We wanted to experience life in another country, in a very different place, and we didn't want to wait until we were too old to enjoy it.*

This caused pause for reflection upon the forced migrant research participants with whom I myself am working, who have no choice but to leave their home country and find a safer haven. James was in fact choosing a much more *unsettled* part of the world to migrate to. I queried his motivation for this:

H: What made you choose to move to Hong Kong in its current heightened state of unrest?

James explained that he was invited to consider the position in early 2020 by a former Leeds colleague now based in Hong Kong. After applying and being accepted, the family decided together that this was a good idea, but between that point and their departure, they faced regular household debates regarding whether or not it was right to set sail. This was not just a matter of relocating possessions and jobs, but involved a shift of ideological context which, as James reflected, could have more than serious implications for him as an academic:

J: *It did feel like a huge decision, not just moving in the middle of a global health crisis but because of the politics in Hong Kong. The region has pivoted politically to align with Beijing in the last two to three years since the suppression of the Pro-Democracy*

movement and the introduction of the national security law, which came into force in June 2020, bringing with it sweeping but vague powers. Vague in the interpretation of concepts like sedition, and sweeping in the sense that it can encompass more or less anything, plus, the punishment can be as harsh as the government wants.

Hong Kong had become a much more authoritarian place politically in between applying for the job and arriving in the country, and this, James acknowledged, did cause him several sleepless nights. So in fact, the political context was much more of a concern than health and family worries during the pandemic.

Migration journey and resettlement challenges

I asked James how this uncertain context, (including enforced close confinement with his teenage son initially), had shaped his first impressions of his new home in Summer 2021:

J: *That was an interesting initial experience, but not necessarily one to repeat in a hurry! My youngest son and I had been due to fly to Hong Kong ahead of my wife, so that I could start my job and my son could start school. Then, flights were cancelled, pandemic restrictions put in place, and you could no longer fly directly from the UK but had to stay in a country from which you were allowed to travel into Hong Kong.*

James and his son therefore spent three weeks in Greece where they could at least move about freely in what has become known as 'the washout'. On arrival in Hong Kong, three more weeks were spent together, this time in hotel quarantine. (Hong Kong has some of the most stringent anti-coronavirus-spreading rules in the world which kept the virus out effectively until early 2022). This made James's arrival context much more restrictive than he had anticipated, stepping out of quarantine straight into his new role, welcoming lecture theatres full of students to their new university, which was quite a shock. There was no time to get used to the idea of being in the country and work out the political situation before starting work.

H: How did this turbulent situation affect you as you settled in?

J: *My wife and I had always said we would never move anywhere permanently without spending some time there first but the pandemic made this impossible. It did feel very hectic at first and I was probably not as calm as I had hoped I would be, starting my new job.*

Academic freedom

This led me to reflect further on James' migration choices and how his academic voice had been affected. As a respected western academic, seeking to stretch and refresh his work, his migration experience, although testing, had not been soul-destroying. Mobility, after all, 'constitutes a characteristic of Homo sapiens' (Piller, 2017, p.101). To migrate is human, it might be said, and James had already emphasised how *unsettling* he had found it to be so settled in Leeds. I wondered how his voluntary relocation to such a politically charged environment had affected his freedom of speech and movement as an academic.

H: Is the new national security law of concern to you now in your working life?

J: *It hasn't affected me personally at all but it's a really interesting question. The way that it's framed for academics here is always around academic freedom and self-censorship. Academic freedoms are protected, and nobody is obliged to adjust their teaching or research development, but within a political context, it's reasonable to suppose that academics are bound by the same laws as everybody else. The fact that academics don't seem to be a target is good, but it still causes me great discomfort to be in a place where journalists, lawyers, opposition politicians, etc. can be – and are – jailed.*

Although James said that he himself does not feel particularly restricted, he admits that, as nobody really knows where the red line is in terms of criticising the Hong Kong government, it would not be advisable to be the one to cross that line just to find out.

H: How far does your work veer towards that red line? Are you in any danger of serious reprimand?

J: *Although my research area of language and migration does bring me into political territory, I don't think I do the kind of work that would cause the architects of the national security law any great concerns.*

As a humble UK postgraduate researcher, I had to confess that these responses were quite startling and I could not immediately imagine working under these conditions. James' work is progressing nonetheless and in fact, unexpected liberties are cropping up for him, as we shall see.

Developing research in challenging contexts

One of James' new key roles is directing the Masters programme in International Language Education alongside an undergraduate course in Language and Migration. It's a very different working atmosphere and I was keen to know if it was worth the trouble of all the upheaval.

H: So how does the Hong Kong context differ from your role at Leeds in practice?

J: *The teaching and administrative loads are certainly lighter in Hong Kong. With a full-time personal administrator looking after that side of the programme, this leaves more time and space to develop a research programme in a brand-new context, which was one of my main aims in coming here.*

H: What research foci have you taken with you and how are these developing in Hong Kong?

J: *Much of my research at Leeds was in the area of language education for adult migrants in the School of Education. In Hong Kong, I explicitly wanted to broaden out into language migration more generally, exploring other areas of concern in the sociolinguistics of mobility and migration. I do retain an interest in education, but it's no longer my main research theme. I particularly want to look at labour migration and language policies as they relate to migration, for instance. I'm especially interested in the notion of belonging as the social dimension of identity.*

From a sociolinguistic migration perspective, as James highlighted, identity is a crucial concept in the study of language migration. Wanting to explore the relationality of identity to a variety of factors in more depth, James has been granted 18 months' funding from October 1st 2022 for a project entitled "*Navigating Belonging: Exploring settlement of South Asians in Hong Kong through narrative and participatory geography".* I wondered how this notion affects everyday settlement processes in Hong Kong's troubled context:

H: Given the more pressing political concerns you have raised, is identity such an important consideration for everyday Hong Kong residents?

J: *In my background reading about the history of Hong Kong, I recognised that the South Asian population was (and always has been) really important to its past as to its future. It's a useful starting point for exploring notions of identity and belonging in such an interesting place.*

Prompted by discussions with colleagues and others, and in answer to recurrent key questions such as 'what is Hong Kong identity?' and 'who is a Hong Konger?', James has initiated the *Belonging Research Network* (https://nexusbrn.hkust.edu.hk/) which he hopes will open up important conversations in the coming months, as he observed:

J: *The concept of belonging is such a big one but discussing it in relation to the geographical and political space of Hong Kong gives us some structure. Our interest in the intersection of language, creative practice and narrative education helps to frame our thinking.*

Within this framework, James explained, there is much scope for some genuinely interesting and productive discussions. It is hoped that the new *Belonging Research Network* website will include a series of events and seminars exploring understandings of belonging in contemporary Hong Kong at a time of major political change during and in the aftermath of a global health emergency, all this, James stressed, in a globalised world so often in turmoil.

James had prior experience of establishing a number of important ventures in the UK, notably the ESOL Research Forum for researchers and teachers interested in adult migrant education, and the *Migrant English Support Hub (MESH)* a charity connecting teachers and learners to accessible English classes in Yorkshire and the Humber. I was interested to learn how heavy the bureaucracy in Hong Kong was compared to the UK and if leaving Britain meant that grant-seeking for such ventures was more arduous. I was surprised by James' answer to my question:

H: How do the processes of setting up research initiatives such as the *Belonging Research Network* compare in Hong Kong to the experiences you had in the UK?

J*: It's very much easier here when you're exploring ideas and wanting to create links between academia and support organisations. Everybody is delighted, both within the institution and beyond, that the questions I'm interested in about language and belonging in Hong Kong, are being explored from an academic perspective in a way that bridges researchers and research participants. Funding and support are easier to secure and finding people to work with is less of a problem. If you have a good idea, it's easier to get an initiative off the ground.*

Of course, Hong Kong is a smaller place, and the bureaucratic structures are less embedded. My university here is younger – only 30 years old – and richer too, comparatively.

Research flexibility

Tempting though it was to explore further the notion of why such processes are easier in Hong Kong, our time was limited, and I wanted to ask more about flexible research methods in Hong Kong, in line with our publication title.

H: What personal or professional adaptations have you had to implement since moving, in terms of work/life balance?

J: *I'm still involved in the Migrant English Support Hub (MESH) and I still manage the ESOL Research Forum. These are labours of love really – things that I'm most proud of during my time at Leeds, which in the end became activities outside my university role. Online communication makes such things possible. We wouldn't be talking now if it weren't for digital technology, but the different time zones can make things difficult.*

James explained that he has a permanently full, two-hour window in his daily schedule between16h00-18h00 Hong Kong time where he can meet with colleagues in Europe without disturbing work or family routines. He outlined a large project funded by the EU with which he has been able to continue online.

J: *The Carewell TF Project (*https://research.reading.ac.uk/transnational-families/) *is an interdisciplinary endeavour on which I was co-investigator before leaving Leeds and with which I am still involved even though I'm in a very different, distant place. The project concerns transnational families in Europe caring for family members across generations. As a transnational person myself now, this topic is close to my heart. Back in March 2022, not long after I had moved, my parents both came down with coronavirus and I thought that I'd have to be involved in transgenerational, transnational care. Both parents are fine now, but it did bring it home to me that the concerns being investigated on this project are shared by many people worldwide.*

The technological flexibility which the pandemic has brought has facilitated many projects across the globe and James is also working with colleagues in the UK and

Europe on a project funded by the IELTS Research Fund. (IELTS, as many will know, is the International English Language Testing System which speakers of languages other than English must hurdle to gain access to higher education). James explained more:

J: *Leeds colleagues have been quite successful in the past in getting small but prestigious grants for such projects. My colleague, a former Leeds PhD researcher, is in Italy, I'm in Hong Kong, but we're carrying out mainly online research in the UK investigating potential barriers that IELTS presents to forced migrants aspiring to higher education in the UK.*

This is a particularly timely venture, given the number of forced migrants in the UK who want to access universities to continue their career progression and regain lost forms of capital. So, home and abroad, it is possible to maintain fluid research pathways with collaborative teams even though online dynamics can be a little patchy. But how has James' own sense of belonging as a researcher in a country not (yet) his own developed?

Belonging and communication

For many migrants – especially forced migrants to the UK – there is an obligation to learn English as an immigration status requirement and this can be problematic in terms of 'integration' (see Favell, 2019; Schinkel, 2018) into UK society. "No language - no integration", some politicians would argue (see Simpson, 2021). For James, now living and working in a country where English is not the main dominant language, I asked how he feels about his own sense of belonging and ability to settle when he knows little of the language most residents use to interact?

J: *I'm careful about how I talk about my language learning. In the past I have been very critical of my lack of competence and abilities but then I realised that I was talking and thinking about myself in ways that I would never dream of doing about anybody else struggling as a language learner, so I thought – why be so unfair on yourself? I do find your work (Helen) on language learning and communicative repertoire, and that of your PhD colleague, Ana, whom I also supervise, on investment in language, really useful here. Working with colleagues, doctoral students, and examining PhDs in*

this area, I'm gaining a deeper understanding of such concepts, particularly motivation and investment in language learning.

I could not avoid drawing the contrast between the privileged voluntary migration of (often white) migrants from the global north, usually referred to as 'ex-pats', and forced migrants from the global south. The economic, linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) the latter have accrued over time are often lost in the migration process (Blommaert, 2010; Piller, 2016). One might assume that James' journey was quite the opposite, given his high status as an academic, and that his existing forms of capital travelled with him. Was this an accurate assumption? I was not expecting James's reply:

J: *I do in fact feel I've lost linguistic and cultural capital – I don't speak Cantonese, and I don't really understand a great deal of what's going on here, culturally and socially.*

H: So, in terms of language investment and finding your bearings in a new place, are you trying to pick up Cantonese?

J: *Yes, trying! I tried Cantonese lessons and an online course when I arrived here. Although neither of them went particularly well, I am determined to try again. I don't just want to be able to speak Cantonese, I want to engage better in the learning process, chat to my neighbours, interact in shops and have proper conversations. I'd like to learn how to read Chinese too, because I think that I miss a great deal by not being able to read the language at all. Considering what's going on in Ukraine right now, I think the English medium Chinese press is printing some very different stuff for outside consumption than what's printed in Chinese for locals.*

H: From my own research into the deployment of personal communicative repertoire, I'm interested to hear how you interact with people at the linguistic stage you are now, not yet having the spoken or written language to a standard you feel is adequate. Does this gap in communication affect you?

J: Oh, very much so but it's not insurmountable. There are plenty of people here who don't use Cantonese, such as many of my MA students from the Chinese mainland. It's possible to get by in English, as Hong Kong has a trilingual bi-literacy language policy where the spoken languages are English, Putonghua (Standard Mandarin Chinese) and Cantonese. English and Chinese are the written languages and although

a high proportion of people here are Cantonese-speaking Chinese people, English is widely used and understood.

I had not considered the effect of loss of capital from James' perspective as an academic. This prompted questions about how highly qualified migrants, proficient in dominant languages other than English, regain lost linguistic and cultural capital when resettling. How appropriate are language learning opportunities provided for such learners? How is identity affected by this loss and recovery of capital? What effect do mono- or multilingual practices have on learners in these contexts? These questions echo aspects emerging from my own research among four forced migrant women learning English in the UK and how their respective sense of belonging and investment in language is linked to their motivation to communicate at deeper levels. Such questions are beyond the scope of this piece but they present stimulating areas for future research into support for highly qualified migrants who do not speak English at a level yet considered 'competent'.

Research motivation

Turning to James' own research output, the conversation returned to flexibility of research during the pandemic:

H: Anecdotally, research motivation seems to have been affected to a greater or lesser degree by the pandemic and by subsequent difficult circumstances. Has the pandemic propelled your research into new areas, or have you struggled to find motivation, after all?

J: That's a great question, and I think that the pandemic has been a very difficult thing for researchers to work through. I'm sure there are colleagues who have capitalized on the time and space that they had during lockdowns to write prolifically, but I've written very little in the last year or so – partly because of the pandemic and the demands of online teaching, and partly due to a sense of coming to the end of the line in Leeds. But the other side of that coin is the invigorating sense of renewal that comes from being in a new place, and especially such a challenging and beautiful place as Hong Kong. I don't think I would have felt that way had I stayed in Leeds. Politically yes, it's tough, and the pandemic seemed to just drag on and on with very severe social restrictions, and of course it's difficult to be a long way from friends and family, but it's also very exciting and I do feel fortunate to be here.

Advice for would-be movers

I find the notion of 'an invigorating sense of renewal' appealing. I sense this factor alone could be a constant pull from and to *anywhere*, yet in these difficult times, it is not easy to make such enormous decisions: politics; wars and rumours of wars; pandemic unknowns across the globe; family ties … I asked James what advice he would give to researchers contemplating leaving familiar waters at this point, pondering their next academic ports of call. Here are his three key (and very honest) takeaways:

#1 *Firstly, it does seem to be the wrong time to be half a world away from nearest and dearest. So do think very carefully about whether such a big move at such a difficult time is actually what you want. Obviously, we did think about that, but hard on the heels of that question was: "If not now, then when?"*

#2 *Secondly, if you're determined to take the plunge, make sure you find out much as you can about what you're taking on, what you're entitled to and if that's going to enable you to live or not. I'm very fortunate, I have a good contract at a good university, but I've heard horror stories about people taking jobs in Hong Kong and finding out that the very high cost of living cancels out any immediate or even longer-term benefits of what on paper looks to be a very generous salary.*

#3 *Thirdly…I remember when I first moved to Greece aged 22, for my first teaching job abroad. I was there for four years in the end. I absolutely loved it and was completely distraught when I left but I had forgotten how difficult I found the first six months and how terribly homesick I had been. Similarly, for the first three months or more here in Hong Kong, I thought I'd made the biggest mistake of my life and it was very tough indeed. Not yet belonging here did make me long for home. As the weeks and months go on – I've been here for nine months now (March 2022) – those feelings are receding. So, I suppose, my advice would be – be prepared to tough it out. See how it goes. If you persevere and think positively enough, even somewhere as difficult and as problematic as Hong Kong right now, there are gains as well as losses from being here, and actually – swimming against the stream is often quite exciting. People are leaving Hong Kong in their thousands. To be moving in the other direction is an interesting experience.*

H: So, persistence and positivity can bring unexpected benefits in spite of inevitable homesickness?

J: *Yes, these experiences all develop resilience. Also, if we hadn't have come, we would possibly always regret it. Asking quite a few people before I came what the benefits would be, knowing what a problematic place it was politically, the best response was from my own former PhD supervisor who said: "Well, what possible benefit is there to Hong Kong if you* ***don't*** *go?" which I found extremely helpful.*

It is encouraging to hear that there is a continuing and robust academic presence in Hong Kong. As we neared the end of our conversation, I threw James a light-hearted curved ball:

H: If you could return to any point in history, where would you migrate back to and why?

J: *Oh, there are probably all sorts of clever answers I should give, but I'm a big Bob Dylan fan and it's exactly 60 years since the release of his very first album. I would probably give anything to be in Greenwich Village, New York in the early 1960s. The excitement of the beginning of the sixties in America must have been really something.*

What an interesting migration destination! In closing, I asked James if he feels the proverbial prevailing wind might ever bring him back to the UK?

J: *Well, we still have great attachments to friends, family and place – Otley is still my home more than Hong Kong is but, thinking in rather crass, crude terms about pushing and pulling, I think that there would have to be something terribly amiss here pushing me away rather than something really tremendous in the UK that would pull me back. But I will be very pleased to have been here, even if it turns out to be only for a couple of years.*

With that telling final comment, I thank James for his time after a busy working day, for sharing so many generous and helpful insights into his work and current experience in Hong Kong, and for giving such valuable advice to those making difficult career choices.

Time and space do not permit a more detailed academic discussion here of the many factors affecting language and migration, mobility and resettlement, identity and belonging – but our discussion has provoked interesting questions about the ways in which host countries deal with highly qualified forced migrants as they struggle to achieve requisite levels of language proficiency, for example. We hope this conversation has also prompted readers not only to look beyond current comfortable harbours to explore research from a novel compass point, but also to consider the part they themselves can play in other academic contexts that might benefit extraordinarily from their expert input. And to observe – sometimes from afar – the unexpected and flexible research opportunities presented by 'mind-bending times'.

多謝 一會見！ (Thank you and see you soon!)

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Bio

A Y3 PGR at Leeds researching language learning and communicative practices in the resettlement processes of women refugees in rural UK, Helen's teaching experience spans secondary, community and HE contexts. She has a BA Hons in French, a PGCE in French/German Leeds, an MA Translation (English/French) and is

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Taking time to appreciate the scenery: an exploration of PhD supervision as pedagogy

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Abstract

A PhD generates new knowledge and builds new links with existing research literature – by definition a 'mind-bending' exercise, even without the additional challenges brought on by Covid-19 restrictions. As an undertaking, it is both self-directed and requiring of sustained independence (a part-time PhD may require sustained investment for up to eight years) and demanding of trust and effective communication between candidate and supervisor. This project used visual and creative methodologies to explore an emerging PhD supervisory relationship as it developed during the lockdown restraints of the pandemic. It sought to understand this relationship through the development of a visual and creative methodology designed to help both parties understand the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research project. Visual artefacts and literary extracts were discussed as metaphors for the supervisor/supervisee relationship and the PhD 'journey', providing an exploration that proved valid and valuable to both supervisor and candidate.

Introduction

This study investigates the concept of flexibility as explored through the roles and relationships of PhD supervisor and supervisee. It grew out of necessity during the Covid pandemic lockdown of 2021, where supervision was required to move online, changing the dynamic of supervision sessions. The PhD supervisor (Clare) sought to challenge what she felt to be an underlying concept of research held by her first-year PhD candidate (Edward). Edward's research project involves exploration of trainee teachers' perceptions of English teaching, with this framed specifically within Edward's own understanding of pedagogy in that context as an English teacher. Edward's personal pedagogy rejects a didactic approach instead preferring to support emergent learning, and he further rejects the end-point, examination driven curriculum in which he feels he has to teach and of which he is himself a product.

Curiously, though, as he embarked on his doctorate Edward repeatedly framed his research in an inflexible, output-driven paradigm. Although the *content* of what he was

researching rejected this approach, his understanding and personal context meant that the *methods* he proposed to gather, interpret and articulate data remained firmly embedded within it, as did his conceptual framework. This proved a challenge for Clare as his supervisor who felt that the restrictive nature of lockdown teaching, coupled with the remoteness of the supervision session, was hindering Edward's ability to step back and critically evaluate his positionality. Brew suggests that 'an important task facing postgraduate supervisors is to develop an understanding of the different ways in which research can be conceptualised, in order to be in a position to help the research student articulate their understanding' (Brew, 2001 p. 283), and Clare was concerned to find a new way to do just that, within the confines in which they were working.

This account reports our response in addressing these various challenges in a project, co-incepted, co-created, co-developed, co-analysed and co-written by the two researcher/participants.

Literature

The purpose of PhD supervision is to 'steer, guide and support students through the process of conducting a doctorate' (Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts, 2008 p. 72). To achieve this, a good supervisor should 'be accessible, provide timely feedback of good quality and in a constructive way… and ensure that their evaluations of the progress of the trajectory are communicated regularly to the PhD candidate' (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015 p. 218).

Some elements of the supervisory role remain similar to that of 'teacher', although its position regarding the student is unique in the education world in that supervisors are not expected to 'know more' than the candidate they supervise; that candidate is moving towards the creation of new knowledge, and as such is the expert in their own area. However, the supervisor is nevertheless expected to guide the candidate and the feedback, judgments, and affirmation they give will inevitably impact the self-esteem and confidence of that candidate (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015). Just as in other educational fields, supervisors may also increasingly find themselves required to fulfil an ever-lengthening list of responsibilities, functions and tasks (Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts, 2008). There is an increasingly anxious focus within institutions on the need to support candidates to achieve timely completion of PhDs, with high-quality supervision seen as a success factor for achieving this (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015). Just as in other educational settings, as the arbiter of when (and if) the candidate is advanced through the doctoral process, the supervisor holds considerable power, and this

imbalance may be a 'complicating factor' (Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom and Klabbers, 2015, p. 219).

At the core of this teacher/pupil, guide/guided, facilitator/independent relationship is the two parties' understanding of what research actually 'is'. For the relationship to be successful the parties must share 'fundamental apprehensions of what research should be about' (Johansson, Wisker, Claesson et al., 2014) and a shared understanding of the 'conceptual approach' (Lee, 2008) of what they are doing. Fundamental contradictions at this level may be challenging for the parties to resolve; when a process of inquiry is discussed these underlying concepts about the nature of research are likely to underpin everything that is said and done (Brew, 2001). These concepts 'influence the types of projects researchers feel comfortable in pursuing, the choice of methodology, the questions, ideas and issues pursued, and the ways in which the work is carried out (Brew, 2001, p. 282). This is true even without the imposition of external factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Where the subject matter under scrutiny is teaching and teacher identity, the pedagogy used to guide the candidate needs to be sufficiently flexible to enable both parties to transcend the immediate while still acknowledging it.

The project reported here explores the pedagogy of considering research methodology. It took as a starting point the postulates of the Critical Communicative Methodology (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010), specifically those of 'No interpretative hierarchy' and 'Same epistemological level'. This respected that Edward and Clare's ontological presumptions could have equal validity, and that both could give equal (if different) emergent meanings. It also means that each would have the same ability to 'know the phenomena investigated from our respective roles' (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010 p. 22). It further sought to utilise the approach of 'gentle Socratic inquiry' (Jackson 2001). This suggests that the 'gentle' implies a cooperative approach that 'accepts that there is no right answer' (Lee, 2008 p. 273).

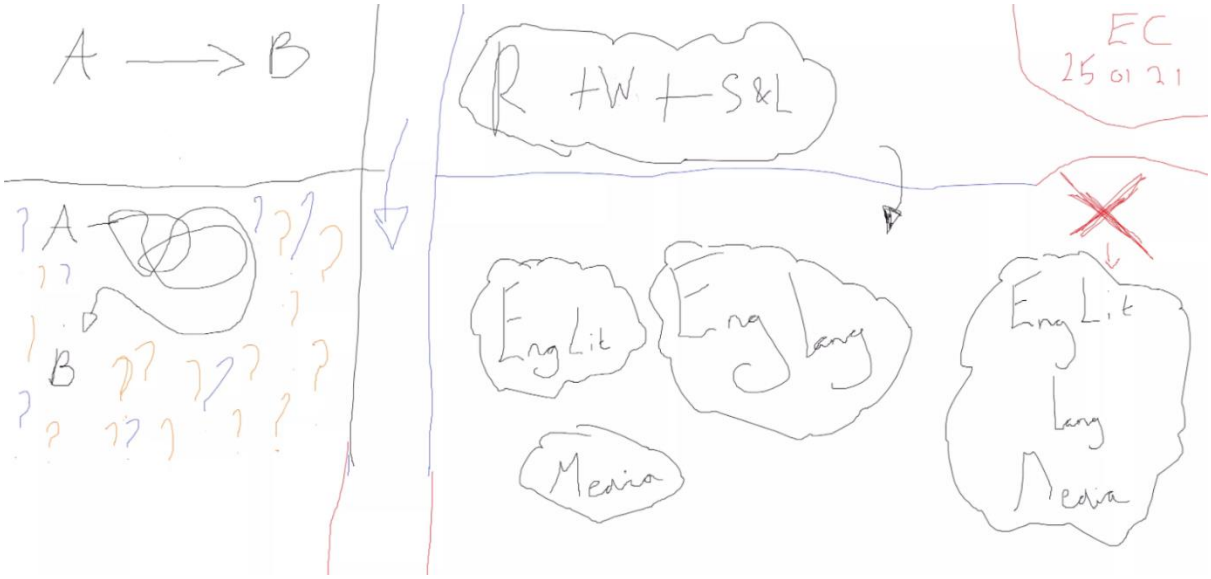
Method

Having agreed that there was an issue in our different conceptualisations of research ('problematising'), we worked together to find connections that would help us through this issue, working within and even embracing the restrictions that we found ourselves under. We determined to create 'spaces of dialogue [where] both of us [would] have the same opportunities to contribute our respective knowledge' (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010, p. 22). The vehicle for these 'spaces' was agreed to be a visual-methodology approach. This is a method 'where visual mediums (images or objects) can be generated by the researcher or participant (which they have found or created)'

(Bartoli, 2019 p. 1009). This was chosen, pragmatically, as one that worked effectively remotely, and was a medium relatively new to each of us and therefore one of equality where knowledge might be created dialogically. This dialogic knowledge was understood to be neither viewed from a positivist perspective (where there is a 'truth' to be discovered), nor from an entirely interpretative perspective (where each person's truth could exist apart from the other's). Instead, the purpose of the study was to build a shared understanding of 'truth' through dialogue, as it is through 'intersubjectivity that we share interpretations, points of view, and arguments, and thus we reach agreement on the interpretation of reality' (Gómez, Racionero and Sordé, 2010 p. 22). To this end, neither of us was positioned as either 'researcher' or as 'researched' as we each assumed both and equal roles.

However, we also acknowledge the impossibility of eliminating all power imbalances. For instance, in writing this paper, we have made the linguistic choice to place 'supervisor' before 'supervisee' implying, in a society where we read from left to right, that the 'supervisor' is more important than the 'supervisee', despite this not being our intention.

The initial input into the project was for each of us to "Provide an image that reflects the experience of the PhD". This task was kept deliberately vague in order to give maximum flexibility of response. These images (figure 1 and 2)



(Figure 1. Edward's first image)

(Figure 2. Clare's first image. Musée de Cluny.)

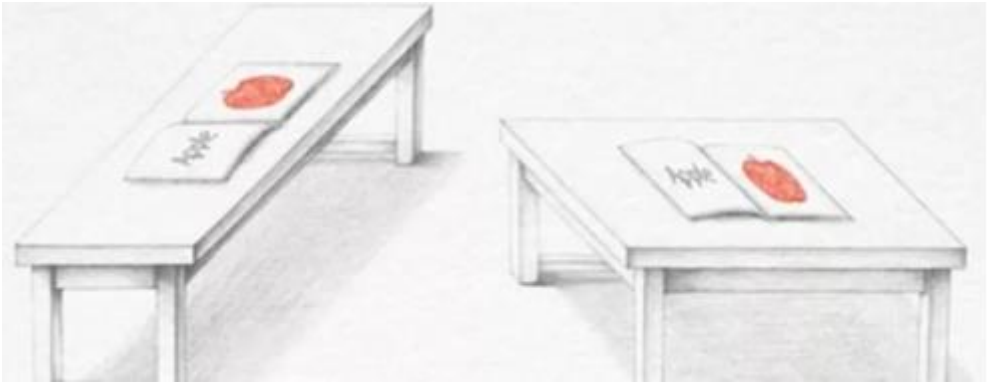
were not shared in advance so as to harvest initial impressions through 'live' online discussion. We decided that these impressions would be recorded as the image receiver's response initially, and then – when both images had been considered – each of us would describe our own rationale for our chosen image. In each instance, the commentary was recorded in note form by the other.

These impressions were then coded by each (separately) for themes. This resulted in similar codes, most notably the theme that Edward described as 'The journey' and Clare as 'Gaining insight'. This suggested the beginnings of Lee's 'shape of an answer' and they decided to undertake a second round of prompts that might further elucidate this emerging theme, in this instance by production of an 'artefact.' Edward's artefact was an extract from Stephen King's *The Body* (1982) where the characters are running away from a train:

> I screamed, 'TRAIN!' and began to run.
>
> Vern looked back over his shoulder. He saw my attempt at running and knew straight away that I wasn't joking. He began to run himself. Far in front I could see Chris stepping off the bridge and on to solid ground. He was safe. I was glad for him, but I was also jealous as hell. I watched him drop to his knees and touch a track. My left foot almost

> slipped, but I recovered and ran on. Now I was just behind Vern. We were more than halfway across, and for the first time I heard the train. It was coming from behind us, from the Castle Rock side of the river.
>
> 'Oooooh, Jesus!' Vern screamed.
>
> 'Run, you pussy!' I shouted, and hit him on his back with my hand.
>
> 'I can't! I'll fall!'
>
> 'Run faster!'
>
> 'Gordie! I can't!'
>
> 'YOU CAN! RUN FASTER, PUKE-FACE!' I shouted at the top of my voice . . . and was I enjoying this? (p.331).

Clare's artefact was of Shepard's tables, an optical illusion (figure 3).



(Figure 3. Shepard's tables)

Responses to these artefacts were again recorded by each of us, and the results, including any 'uncovered concepts' that had emerged, were discussed.

Findings

The Insightful Journey

This was the overarching theme to emerge from our discussions and was clear in each coding. It summarised how both of us agreed that the PhD is not about the eventual end point, but the experience gained in getting there. This theme is explored in three sub-themes: *The Impact of Educational Experience, Developing Trust* and *The Value in Time, Effort and Experience.*

Brew identified four dimensions of concepts in research (2001): domino conceptions, trading conceptions, layer conceptions and journey conceptions. Her description of the trading conception which foregrounds products, end-points and publication is

closest to Clare's understanding of Edward's starting point in his research. The journey conception, which foregrounds a 'personal journey of discovery' is closest to Clare's own perception, and to a perspective that she wanted Edward to consider. In this conception, the subject under investigation is deemed to be less important than the questions that the investigation provokes (Brew, 2001).

The Impact of Educational Experience

In feeding back on his first artefact (Figure 1), Edward explained how his previous education has impacted his current PhD experience. The A à B symbolised at the top left of Edward's artefact, suggested that he believed the PhD would be like his previous education; GCSEs and A-Levels culminated in exams and, although not exam focussed, Edward's approach to his undergraduate degree was framed very much with the end-point in mind. However, the representation in the bottom left-hand side of Edward's image, he explained, represented how his initial assumptions of the PhD being a straightforward journey were erroneous. In grappling with his personal understanding of epistemology and ontology and with the confusing and ever-changing demands of the times in which he was working, Edward described how things became more complicated the more he read, researched and lived. His visualisation of 'messiness' in his image is that the straight line from A to B not only becomes tangled, but the positioning of B is altered. Not only is his path towards the end-point of his doctorate becoming more muddled and indistinct, but his destination may not be where he had believed it to be.

Lee (2008) describes her belief that there are two fundamental influences on the doctoral supervisor: their concept of research, and their own experience as a candidate (Lee, 2008 p.267). Edward's belief is that he is a product of a 21st Century education system that is end-focussed and 'transactional'. Clare's school-based educational experience was rather different, spanning as it did the 1970s. Perhaps this influence is reflected in her initial image of a 16th Century Flemish tapestry ('*Manorial Life – Hunting'*, Musée de Cluny – see figure 2). This features a hunter with a falcon on his fist, a servant carrying an axe and a hunting dog. Clare's intention was to convey the difference between the hawk (the PhD candidate), who is essentially in partnership with the hunter (the supervisor) and the servant and dog, who merely obey (pupils at school). The relationship between the hunter and the hawk is one of mutual trust and is built on respect. The hunter does not teach the hawk to fly and nor can the hunter fly himself, but he does support and guide the hawk to have the best chance of success.

Edwards's perception was that the central figure looks out of the image to a space that cannot be seen by the servant, the dog or – in fact – the person viewing the

tapestry. Edward conjectured that this might imply the relationship between the supervisor and candidate, where the servant/supervisor sees the hunter/candidate as they exist at that time and in that place, and must therefore only see the research through the candidate's eyes.

Developing Trust

Trust became a more central issue in the overarching theme of '*The Insightful Journey.'* In the extract from Stephen King's *The Body* provided by Edward, Gordie must trust Chris and Vernon that it is safe to cross the bridge. They cajole him into doing so, and the incident very nearly ends in disaster. Edward identified the bridge-crossing episode as 'the one that everyone remembers' from the book and expressed enthusiasm for the excitement and even the element of danger that the metaphor implies for his readiness to embrace new concepts of research as a result of trusting his supervisors to stretch him academically. In contrast, Clare's second artefact (*Shepard Tables*, see figure 3) was, in fact, an illusion and involved an element of trickery. Clare initially asked Edward how he would seat pupils around the tables in a classroom to ensure all pupils benefitted. He argued that there would be some element of disadvantage, no matter which table was chosen. Clare then revealed that each table was, in fact, the same size and that the picture was an optical illusion. This could be seen as a betrayal of trust, and a deliberate undermining of the supervisor/candidate relationship. Yet, as Clare explained, this represented the 'messiness' of reality and how supervisors share their versions of reality uncritically without, perhaps, knowing what 'reality' is for themselves. The reveal that the picture was an illusion was a comment on how the supervisor can 'lead' the supervisee but that ultimately the doctoral candidate will inevitably have to make their own decisions relating to their own project.

The emphasis on the relationship between supervisor and candidate, and the extent to which both rely on trust, came across strongly throughout this project. In its very inception it sought to create research that was democratic and egalitarian, and which relied on the mutual cooperation and engagement of each party. Underneath the project was, though, a tension in that Clare was challenging Edward to examine and perhaps to alter his perceptions of research. She was asking for his trust that this exploration would be fruitful, and that the endeavour was worthwhile. This tension was managed amicably throughout the project (perhaps itself an indication of a strong relationship), but the tension created remains important. Johansson, Wisker, Claesson et al. in their study, *PhD. Supervision as an Emotional Process* (2014) suggest that 'During a four- or sometimes five-year process it is probably impossible

to avoid conflicts and emotional turbulence' (p. 612), although they also suggest that these conflicts may sometimes lead to valuable outcomes.

The Value in Time, Effort and Experience

Edward brought his own created image to the project in the first round, which was the only occasion that either party did so. This itself shows a commitment and a personal approach. Clare's image – the tapestry – was 'borrowed', but nonetheless was designed to indicate something of value, that takes time and attention to make and that requires commitment for its execution. Interestingly, Edward's interpretation of the image was of 'something two-dimensional' (referring to the lack of realistic perspective in the image). He speculated as to whether this might represent 'the limits of the form', wondering if it might 'represent … the ultimate point of 2D words on the page?'.

Edward's speculation regarding the two-dimensional nature of the tapestry is interesting. It shows a continued perspective that the doctorate 'is' the thesis and further indicates his continued focus on an end product. He does not speculate on the intricacy, the detail, the time invested, nor the skill of the creators of the tapestry, seeing it only as an object that depicts a scene. Tapestry as a medium was partly chosen by Clare because of its association as archaic, perhaps heraldic. It is a form that implies something that is 'not of modern times', just as the PhD, with its long history and its traditions of oral defense of a thesis is itself something that may be seen as archaic and formal.

This discussion of time and effort led us to speculate about the success of future PhD students. The educational experience of pupils who experienced the pandemic restrictions may impact them in ways not yet known. These further restrictions are occurring within an education system in England that already focusses on exam results and accountability. The emergence of multi-academy trusts as a result of the Academies Act (2010) has led to some schools adopting highly restrictive approaches to their curricula and pedagogy (Keddie, 2016; Collyer, 2020). When education in England focusses on short term goals, Clare wondered how pupils educated in this manner will manage when presented with PhD study, which could take up to eight years.

Of interest is Edward's perception, as expressed during this project, of experiential learning. His discussion of the Stephen King artefact suggests that he is starting to 'value the exploration of intellectual challenges by doing, not just by reading about them second hand', an educational experience greatly threatened during Covid's on-line learning. It is through 'doing' that experiences 'becomes firsthand' and the 'part

to remember'' (feedback on artefact session). His positioning of reading as learning that is 'second hand' here reflects Brew's manifestation of the trading conception of research, where there is 'a focus on reading … reading to understand the ideas of other people. (Brew, 2001 p. 278). In this case, Edward's description shows a clear movement towards a more journey-orientated conception.

Conclusion

The doctoral supervisor/supervisee relationship is an important one for both parties. For each, the research represents a considerable investment of time and a commitment to engage. Between them (although, clearly, the primary responsibility lies with the candidate) they share a project, resulting in an output that is both a written thesis and – importantly –a defence of what has gone into it and been left out of it at viva.

To do this, supervisor and candidate need to explore 'fundamental apprehensions of what research should be about, that are subtle and emotionally charged' (Johansson, Wisker, Claesson et al., 2014, p. 613). Brew's 2001 paper exploring research conceptions provides a 'useful tool in performance review discussions' (Brew, 2001: p. 282). The visual-methodology, discursive and dialogic approach taken in this study has similarly provided an exploration of research that has proved valuable to both of us, particularly in the context within which we were working. We enjoyed the opportunity to discuss, to explore and to develop our ideas even within these times of restriction. As we emerge into less 'mind-bending' times we hope that Edward's continuing journey will be one that will take in some interesting scenery for us both.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Clare's co-supervisor for Edward's PhD, Dr Sheine Peart, for providing external moderation for this project.

Bio

Ed is an English teacher and PhD student based in East Anglia. His PhD explores the lived experiences and identities of trainee English teachers and how they perceive their roles and responsibilities. He is interested in English education and how school management and leadership cultures either support or hinder the progression of the subject.

Dr Clare Lawrence is a Senior Lecturer in Teacher Development at Bishop Grosseteste University, where she is English subject lead. She thoroughly enjoys the opportunity within this role to supervise doctoral candidates, and the co-operative venture with Ed explored in this article is an example of why this is such fun!

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A Reflective Analysis on Strategic Approaches Implemented in Accessing and Conducting Interviews with Elites in Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

In this paper, I intend to share my experiences and reflections on the process of how the organisational elites, the gatekeepers and the participants of my study, were accessed and interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The three-fold objectives of this paper are: negotiating access, the strategic approaches implemented by me as the researcher in accessing and conducting interviews, and sharing my lessons with novice researchers, who work in similar contexts. In the discussion, an emphasis is placed on accessing and interviewing elites attached to national, provincial and school-level in Sri Lanka, by considering them as single-type elites and different groups of elites as introduced by Li (2021). The discussion is based on my experiences and supervisory records that I maintained during the data collection process.

Introduction

My doctoral study focuses on the new policy introduced to develop Sri Lankan school leaders as professionally advanced human resources. I investigate how the execution of this policy meets the professional development needs of novice principals in Sri Lanka. In line with this idea, different stakeholders (policymakers, policy implementers and policy receivers) were interviewed to understand their feelings, perceptions and expectations regarding the new policy implementation. Within this study, the administrative officers attached to the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Provincial Ministries of Education (PMoE) were identified as the policymakers and implementers, while the novice school principals were identified as policy receivers. The study stakeholders were also identified as elites who were attached to the Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Service and Sri Lanka Principal Service as well as being highly skilled, knowledgeable, and busy.

With reference to the elite interviews, Liu (2018) states that they are difficult, and require careful planning (p.2), based on her experiences during her doctoral degree. Taking Liu's experience into account, I will first discuss the methodological literature on elite interviews. Afterwards, I will be sharing my experiences as a novice researcher in accessing and conducting interviews with elites who are educational administrators

in Sri Lanka. The discussion is based on my own experiences and reflections included in the field notes and the supervisory records maintained by me. It covers two aspects; how I planned and executed the selection and how I gained access to elites for interviews in conducting interviews.

Elite Interviewing as a Method

In academic literature, the term 'elite' is defined and used in different ways. Zuckerman (1972) provides a comprehensive explanation to the term elite as, ''…they are very top, a typically thin layer of people who exhibit especially great influence, authority, or power, and who generally have the highest prestige within what is a prestigious collectively, to begin with'' (p.159). In line with Zuckerman's (1972) definition, many researchers have identified the elite as a small segment of people in society who have close proximity to power (Vergara, 2013; Liu, 2018; McClure & McNaughtan, 2021). Further, in organisational research, elites are defined as people occupying senior organisational positions (Empson, 2018), such as government policymakers. Generally, they occupy leadership roles (Scally et al., 2021), policymaking roles, decision-making roles and implementation roles (Maramwidze, 2016), which influence the behaviour of others within the organization and society. In light of the definition of elites in organisations, the next section examines how elites in organisations were interviewed.

Numerous studies have attempted to explain interviewing elites in different contexts such as political, sociological, economic, and educational. It is also pointed out that interviewing elites differs from interviewing non-elites in any context (Mikecz, 2012; Empson, 2018). Li (2021), who examined recent literature on elite interviewing has identified two aspects of interviews, namely, interviewing a single type of elite and interviewing different groups of elites. The first aspect provides a common understanding of elites while the second provides an opportunity to understand the activities, values, attitudes and evident patterns of conflicts and concerns among different groups of elites (Hoffmann-Lange, 2007). Further, Li (2021) highlights the lack of systematic understanding when interviewing different elite groups in the literature, which is needed at present. In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper discusses how to access and conduct interviews with single-type elites and different groups of elites in educational institutions, who are both professionals and organisational elites in the field of education in , during the data collection process of my doctoral study. Further, it will also discuss how I worked under pressure and how I had to change/adjust my plans on conducting interviews, owing to difficult circumstances like the global pandemic and the industrial action that the school principals, who are one group of stakeholders in the study, were engaged in.

Process of decision-making and procedures implemented

Maramwidze (2016) states that the "process of gaining access to elites depends entirely on the category of the elites being pursued" (p.159). In line with the explanation on elites in organisations, I carefully thought of whom to access first, how to access them and how to build and maintain a trustworthy relationship throughout the interviewing process. In addition, I also paid specific attention to the BERA Guidelines (2018) which stress that "researchers should think about whether they should approach gatekeepers before directly approaching participants" (p.10). This guided me on which path to follow. In line with this, my engagement in the pre-interview stage in accessing gatekeepers and how I progressed to interviewing single-type elites and groups within the Sri Lankan context are discussed in detail below.

Accessing Elites Who are Gatekeepers

To commence the fieldwork, it is important to receive preliminary permission from the gatekeepers to access the research site. Therefore, my first engagement was accessing the MoE in Sri Lanka because it guards access to research sites as a central gatekeeper as illustrated by Busher & James (2012). In reflecting on the access of the national and provincial level gatekeepers, I identify two stages of access: while being abroad and while being in the country.

Attempts while being abroad

In order to contact the MoE, my plan was to send an email because by this time I was continuing with my doctoral study in the UK. Therefore, as suggested by Maramwidze (2016) I checked the official website of the MoE, but I could not get proper information on whom to contact. Therefore, upon my request, one of my colleagues at the Open University of Sri Lanka visited the MoE with a copy of my request letter to ascertain the procedure to obtain a permission letter to collect data for my doctoral study. Her visit helped me to receive the official email address and the WhatsApp number of the officer to begin the necessary initial permission process.

After receiving the contact details, I sent an informal text message and an official request letter as an email to the officer. In response, the officer agreed to issue a permission letter, but asked me about the template for the letter, which took me by surprise. I was under the impression that the MoE would have a standard letter format to grant permission, as there are many who come to the MoE requesting permission letters to access and conduct research within Sri Lanka. I suggested that I would send a draft template to the officer, to which he agreed. When drafting it, I referred to the sample transfer documents of postgraduate researchers that were posted in the online space provided for Post Graduate Research students in the School of Education, at

the University of Leeds. The sample permission letters were very helpful when drafting mine. I received the permission letter to access national, provincial and school-level officers to collect data for my study within a very short period. I believe that my request was well accommodated, as it was forwarded through a senior academic of a national university and an administrative officer in the MoE. This experience provides evidence that personal and influential contacts work better than the formal procedures within the Sri Lankan context. Situations like this must be quite common in developing countries like Sri Lanka because the procedures are not formalised with follow-up mechanisms. The permission letter from the MoE was instrumental for my ethical clearance, as it provided evidence of following the proper procedure in conducting the study ethically as illustrated in the BERA ethical guidelines (2018).

I had no problem in contacting the respective sample of elites who are high in ranks in the profession directly, as I had MoE's approval which authorised me to contact the necessary administrative bodies for research purposes. To start off the process, I sent an email introducing myself and the study and requested the details of the study from the relevant institutional heads who are administrative officers at national and provincial levels. This was important for two reasons. Firstly, based on the ethical dimensions highlighted in BERA (2018), I thought that it was ethical as well as polite to inform them as they act as gatekeepers and to also obtain their support to conduct the study. Secondly, they had the details of the study participants I needed to recruit to interview, for both piloting and the main study. I was aware that the necessary details would not be given to anyone at once for reasons like privacy, official responsibilities, and ethical considerations. Therefore, sending an official written request was a necessity. In contacting and making the request to the relevant administrative officers, my options of communication were restricted to email and telephone, as I was in the UK continuing with my doctoral study. Due to the pandemic, officials worked from home, and I was unable to contact the respective administrative officers on their office numbers. Therefore, my contact with them was restricted to email.

When sending the initial email to request access, I pondered over the choice of language. Although the official languages in the country are Sinhalese and Tamil, the linking language for official purposes in Sri Lanka is English. However, I had my doubts about the receiver's fluency when sending the email seeking permission and relevant details solely in English. Therefore, I decided to send the email in Sinhalese and attached a translation of the email in English. This could be a situation that many researchers face when sending emails for research purposes where English is not the mother tongue.

I sent emails to selected national and provincial authorities requesting help to obtain details in conducting the research, as I was unable to return to Sri Lanka for data collection due to restrictions imposed in the UK and on international travel. As I did not receive any response to my emails, I contacted one of the provincial administrative officers through a WhatsApp message. In the message, I introduced myself and mentioned my need as it was convenient and popularly used as mentioned by Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya, 2015. The reply was 'I will contact you', which did not happen. Being a native Sri Lankan, I had doubts about receiving a reply to my email as there were instances where emails went unanswered by respective officers. As I neither had the contact details of the study participants nor access to documents, I could not progress with the data collection. Further, within the Sri Lankan context, face-to-face conversation is needed in order to progress in accessing elites who are administrative officers attached to national, provincial and school levels. In my case, I believe that they were not motivated in replying to an unknown email. As I failed to contact the authorities in Sri Lanka, it was essential to move to the site of the study (Sri Lanka) as soon as COVID-19 travel restrictions were lifted in 2021. This return was vital to meet the officials face-to-face and progress with accessing and interviewing in the collection of data for the study.

Attempts after return to Sri Lanka

Prior to my return to Sri Lanka to commence the data collection, my supervisors advised me on access, negotiation and how to conduct interviews with elites as a novice researcher. In the discussion, one of my supervisors advised me,

> ''…best-laid plans always change. So, you just have to be ready if something happens. If somebody says, 'Oh, I can't make this interview' or 'I have to drop out' or whatever, 'OK? No problem'. You just have to be very flexible. It happens to everybody''.
>
> (Supervisor X on 24th April 2021)

The above words rang in my mind every time I contacted organisational elites. They helped me to maintain my position as a doctoral researcher, and not as an academic from a university. In addition, they helped me to remain calm and unaffected each time my request was rejected and I felt low due to rude responses, unanswered calls and unanswered emails during the process.

At the beginning of the process, I faced problems in obtaining physical access, as the office premises were closed and work from home was implemented due to lockdown restrictions. The only option left was to contact the relevant officials over the phone. In identifying whom to contact, checking the official directories as suggested by

Maramwidze (2016) and checking the official website was very useful. To contact the three national-level officers who were in charge of relevant departments, I called their personal numbers which were gained through known official contacts as their official numbers were unanswered. When making the call, I first introduced myself as a lecturer attached to a national university in Sri Lanka cum doctoral researcher from the University of Leeds, and secondly, I introduced my study which is on the training needs of school principals. Finally, I explained the purpose of making the call to the respective administrator and the reasons for seeking help. As gatekeepers at national level, they were very supportive and made arrangements for me to visit soon after the lockdown restrictions were eased for work purposes. During these visits I accessed documents and obtained contact details of national and provincial level officers.

As I received a positive welcome and maximum support in obtaining permission and contact details to contact national level officers, I thought that I would receive the same support from provincial officials as well. However, my experience with them differed and it was quite unexpected. As I had to collect data from two provinces, I called the head of the department in both respective provinces during office hours, to gain permission to obtain details of the study participants. In failing to contact them through official numbers due to their busy schedules and limited work hours because of the pandemic, calling them on their personal contact numbers given by the national level officers was an option. When doing so, I introduced myself as a doctoral candidate as well as a lecturer and conveyed my research need. One such official's aggressive and impolite response was "how are you conducting research without our permission?" disregarding the ministerial approval. His authoritative response made me feel really low and I did not want to contact him again. But I had to collect data, so I decided to change the approach when contacting provincial level officers in the respective province A. In the next instance, I called one of my colleagues who is a good listener and also a good adviser as I wanted to ease the frustration I was experiencing due to the former conversation. When reflecting on my experience, I believe that it is important to share the highs and lows of the doctoral journey with someone who is close to you, as it helps to ease the tensions that you are experiencing.

By referring to the literature of Glas (2021) in 2014 as a doctoral researcher, I managed to gain access to a provincial administrative officer through one of his colleagues with whom he had a good professional relationship. I implemented the same strategy followed by Glas (2021) as I believe it was an effective lesson to learn in order to gain access. This colleague called the provincial administrative officer, conveyed my need to him and got an appointment on my behalf to have a telephone conversation with him to get an appointment for the interview. This strategy was a success because the administrative officer considered a request coming from one of their colleagues, as

opposed to an external request. I implemented this strategy by recruiting senior administrators to conduct the interviews for both the piloting and main study. Glas (2021), reflecting on his own experience, stated that the elites apologised for not attending in the first instance. In contrast, in my experience, they never apologised or even acknowledged or mentioned the receipt of my emails, WhatsApp messages or calls. Facing this experience, as a researcher, it helped me in learning how to handle and negotiate with different people in different ways. Further, as a researcher, I learnt not to take rejections personally which is very important, especially when working with elites who are probably working very hard in extremely demanding situations during the pandemic.

However, in Province B, I experienced a totally different response from Province A. Here I received the contact details of the administrative officer from the MoE.

Though I contacted the officer in province A through a known contact, I had no such opportunity to contact the officials in province B. So, I directly contacted him and requested permission to enter the site as a gatekeeper and requested them to take part in the study as a participant as well. Being an experienced principal and a mature administrative officer, he agreed to join as a study participant without hesitation. His positive response and helping hand pleased me and made me comfortable in continuing the process of interviewing not only him but also the other participants as well. This positive response of the administrative officer is quite motivating, helped develop my self-confidence and also gave a positive feeling in progressing with the interviewing.

Access Elites as Study Participants

In contacting the elites for interviews I implemented two strategies. The first was obtaining their contact details (official and personal phone numbers) from the MoE and PMoE in order to contact them for research purposes. Secondly, I used the snowball sampling method in finding some of the study participants who were both administrative officers and principals. Implementing the snowball method, I selected individuals who had similar experiences first and then they were asked to nominate others who had similar experiences to them as explained by Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010), which was a success.

All the contact details which were on papers were stored in a locked cupboard and the computer and the phone were password protected and only accessible to myself. These measures were implemented in order to ensure data protection.

I contacted each participant individually through a voice call as a form of initial contact. During the call, I provided a self-introduction and details of the study verbally. The

participant information sheets, consent forms and meeting details via Zoom were sent to all participants through either email or WhatsApp as requested by the participants. The replies on WhatsApp messages were received in the means of a thumbs up (👍) or smile (😃). Thus, it was seen how top-level senior officers were very polite and sent their willingness to join the interview without any hesitation through email. Their reply to my email was short and to the point, which was similar to the experience of Zuckerman (1972) as a PhD candidate. A simple example is shown below:

> Dear Sasheeka
>
> Sorry for the delay.
>
> I have completed the form with Signatures and sent it herewith.
>
> Shall we have the meeting on 20.09.2021 *Poya-day* [Government Holiday in Sri Lanka] around 10.00 am?
>
> Highest Regards,
>
> (National Level Administrative Officer -1)

On the other hand, some elites at national and provincial organisations proved to be challenging. They replied with a "yes" but neither gave a date nor responded to the WhatsApp messages or calls. This reminded me of my supervisor's words on how to respond to rejections as "Ok, thank you". Unfortunately, the interviews to be conducted with the two administrative officers were significant due to their exclusive involvement with the leadership training provided for school principals at national and provincial levels which is the focus of my study. After failing to contact them for three months, I finally drafted the following message:

> Hello! Hope you are doing well during these challenging times. I understand that you are very busy. Therefore, I shall be thankful if you can nominate any other administrative officer similar to your rank, whom I can contact for an interview about the principals training offered by your department. Thanks for your help throughout.

For the above message, both of them had the same immediate response stating, "I can join you for the interview tomorrow…". I feel that this shows their attitudes towards interviews. They may have delayed in joining the interview due to their un/occupied schedules un/intentionally. However, when I sought their help to find another administrative officer, they did not like another person commenting on a programme that was in their hands. This might be one of the reasons that they joined the interview at the last moment.

I experienced that principals were quite flexible and friendly when compared to the administrative officers. Further, although they were supporting industrial action at the time, they were positive in giving their consent for the interview, as this is an academic project, which provided them with an opportunity to share their experiences. In contacting them, I directly called them and sent all the details either as a WhatsApp message (which was preferred by almost all) or as an email. The most helpful response I received from them was them coming up with a convenient date and time for conducting the interview within a day or two.

Conducting Interviews

There is much literature highlighting that merely obtaining consent and conducting the interview does not make it a successful interview (Goldstein, 2002; Darbi & Hall, 2014; Li, 2021). In order to get good quality information and conduct a successful interview with elites in organisations, developing a rapport and establishing trust are crucial (Darbi & Hall, 2014; McClure & McNaughtan, 2021). Therefore, I always maintained a friendly and confidential atmosphere within the process by means of verbal communication and action. Before commencing the interview, I introduced myself, my research, data storage, making the data anonymous, analysing the data in detail and allowed the participants to make clarifications about anything they needed. Further, as I was also affiliated with a higher educational organisation, my personal identification as an academic could not be concealed when accessing elites. Therefore, I was always cautious and mindful about making clear I identified as a doctoral researcher.

In preparing to interview, the questions were developed in line with the research questions covering four areas namely personal details, induction training needs, professional development needs, and changes to be expected based on the new policy introduction for school leaders in Sri Lanka. I had more than 35 sub-questions planned for 90 minutes which was reduced to four open-ended questions covering the four areas in line with the supervisor's feedback. Thus, the sub-questions were kept as prompts to be used. Further, they only needed to be used if the interviewees had not mentioned any of these points in their response to the main open questions.

Before conducting the interviews, at the supervision meeting, supervisor Y said "I think out of many important things, the first one is to listen very carefully to what is being said so that you can follow it with probes to look into things more deeply" (on 28th July 2021). This guidance was very helpful as I listened carefully to what was being said and picked up on the expressions, feelings, and comments made by the elites in mining for more information. Further supervisor Y said, "…the skill of the interviewer is so important in what we call the co-construction of knowledge. A very good interviewer will get much more knowledge and information from the same person" (on

28th July 2021). This informative discussion assisted me in gathering more details from each interviewee through probes by way of follow-up questions as mentioned by Given (2008). For example, one of the principals said, “I wanted to develop a creative school…” so my follow-up question was “Oh, that's very interesting. Could you tell me a little bit more about the skills and assistance that you require as a principal in developing a creative school?”, which led to digging deeper into his training and development needs and the present context of training which is relevant and useful for my study. I was able to gather such detailed new insights that were possible only through careful listening.

There were, however, a few instances where the follow-up question was complicated as I added more information to it and that confused the interviewee. As a result, the interviewee asked me to repeat the question or rephrase the question to be clear about what was being questioned, which made me realise my mistake. At the same time, I felt both excited to have recognised the mistake and ashamed of having made the mistake, however, I had the confidence to not show my excitement but continue the interview from that point onwards carefully. Learning a lesson from this, I was very careful to ask a follow-up question only on one point and keep notes on what to ask further, from thereon.

Most of the time, the administrators and principals answered the question to the point, by relating their views to their experiences at national and provincial level policy development and implementation. Further, within the interview, I experienced that they are strategic in covering up the institutional weakness when implementing the policy introduced in the context. This is a very similar situation experienced by Empson (2018), when senior professors who were highly skilled at answering avoided difficult questions during the interviewing. However, there were instances where few of the participants expressed ideas out of topic. In such instances, I had to patiently wait and rephrase the question at a different point during the process of the interview as explained by Kaliber, 2019. This strategy helped in obtaining their ideas in a deeper manner, as by then, the interviewee had already passed the point where they had deviated from the question. Sometimes the participant himself realised that he had deviated from the question and asked the question again to answer.

In academic literature, papers written by doctoral researchers have mentioned that their experiences with elites were difficult. Explaining the experiences, they stated that there were instances where elites avoided difficult questions and some elites were horrified during the interview process by the use of hard words with long faces (Rice, 2010; Empson, 2018). In contrast, although I had difficulties in accessing participants, the interviews were friendly and informative with rich insights and experiences. Even

though all the interviews were conducted via Zoom, a friendly atmosphere was created throughout, with smiles and initial greetings and I both welcomed and thanked the officers for joining the interview. Quite importantly, my self-introduction allowed them to ask me anything about myself and my research, which created a friendly and trustworthy relationship when meeting for the first time via Zoom.

The use of technology

Prior to, and when conducting, the interviews via Zoom I faced technical difficulties which were generated by the system. When I used Zoom for the first time, I used the free version to set up the meetings and some of the official IT systems generated automated warning messages which requested participants not to use the previously sent link. In overcoming this problem, I switched to the paid version of Zoom, provided by the University of Leeds. In addition, there were instances where the interviews were interrupted as interviewees had no data, technical problems with the internet and no signal due to bad weather or distance (rural), to continue with the interview. In such instances, I had to wait until they fixed their problem. Further, connection problems and low bandwidth were problems that I experienced, which are very common in developing countries like Sri Lanka. All the interviews were recorded from the beginning and stored in a password-protected M: drive at the University of Leeds.

In addition to the above, I experienced how most senior officers who were very busy, selected a weekend or a government holiday to participate in the interview as they wanted to be actively involved in the interview without interruptions. Furthermore, they told me that it was a pleasure to join in with the knowledge construction and share their experiences for research purposes.

Reflections

My experiences showcase how the traditional face-to-face method is still at the forefront in accessing gatekeepers when obtaining their permission to access the field. I observed that not using technology or formal procedures were main reasons as to why the officials opted for face-to-face methods when granting their permission as gatekeepers. On the other hand, as gatekeepers, they could also have been concerned about researchers either being or not being scrupulous when adhering to ethical principles. In line with the concerns and intentions of gatekeepers, these situations are very common in developing countries like Sri Lanka. Based on my experience, I think that researchers need to have a sound understanding of the context and the intentions of gatekeepers in safeguarding the participants.

Nevertheless, new communication apps like WhatsApp and platforms like Zoom have made communication during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic way easier than before. Further, during the initial stage of access it was witnessed how all types of elites widely use modern forms of communication like WhatsApp rather than telephone or email. I observed how WhatsApp messages were faster in contacting elites than email or telephone communication. It made it easier for me to see whether the recipient has seen my message or not, as the read messages were denoted by the blue ticks.

In the above sections, I explained how some elites neglected my efforts to contact them. Most often, they did not respond or contact me again despite stating “I will contact you”. In this situation, I felt reluctant to send messages over and over for multiple reasons. Firstly, I felt that they were busy and had no time to accommodate a request from an unknown source. Secondly, since I was out of the country and the official could not see me in person, I realised that it was difficult for them to trust a mere message. Thirdly, I did not want to trouble them but wanted to be strategic in obtaining details and in recruiting the officer as a study participant for interviewing purposes in the future. All these made me be patient, think critically and work practically. Further, when I first experienced failure during the process of accessing gatekeepers, that I developed my patience which I call ‘silent strategic patience’. I had to practice this throughout the whole process of access, communication and negotiation. Following my initial negative experience, I thought both forward and backwards about any act of mine and waited patiently for the response before contacting the elites. When thinking forward about my acts, I thought about the best time to contact them (either before office hours or in the evening before 7.00 p.m.), and that it was best not to contact them during the weekend or a holiday. I also thought about the best way to draft a message which was simple and whether it will be possible to keep my camera switched on throughout the interview as the researcher. Thinking backwards, I carefully thought about my strengths and weaknesses along with the mistakes and added them to Diaro, a reflective journal which I electronically maintain. Entering both my highs and lows within the process was very useful when planning for the next steps within the process. There were times where I had to wait longer than expected in getting an appointment for the interview. This waiting delayed the data collection process to some extent. However, any doctoral candidate could face these challenges and I believe sharing my experience will help in shaping their processes in accessing and conducting interviews with elites in organisations, in similar contexts. Further, I believe that when facing challenges or difficulties, developing 'silent strategic patience' within a researcher is vital in accessing and interviewing the elites at different levels in any context.

In addition, I have shared my different experiences with elites as individuals and as groups as explained by Li (2021). I experienced differences in access depending on

their power relations, knowledge, decision-making power and availability. Further, I believe that I implemented strategic approaches in accessing and conducting interviews such as giving ample time to respond, accessing through known channels, and wording the messages in a manner that motivated the participants. In addition, I believe that it is important to identify the personality of each individual as well as a group, especially in accessing and negotiating.

When reflecting upon the experiences gained by accessing and negotiating with national-level and provincial-level elites in organisations considered as a group, I feel that direct access to administrators at the national level was a little difficult due to their tight schedules. Irrespective of this initial difficulty, after contacting the national-level administrators, I was able to infer that they gave priority to fulfilling my research needs because they were interested in supporting junior researchers like me. Further, it shows that national-level elites gave up their free time on weekends and national holidays to talk to me which was extremely kind of them. It emphasizes their commitment to research, to support researchers, and also their professionalism. Additionally, when comparing national-level administrators with provincial-level administrators, I feel that national-level senior officers were much more supportive and understanding in providing support for research purposes compared to provincial-level administrative elites.

Further, when considering administrative officers as individuals, I experienced that those who have directly joined the administrative service as administrators without prior experience were more difficult to access as compared to administrators who had experience in teaching or principal service. When reflecting upon the experience in contacting the elites in organisations as a group, I feel that their maturity, experience and long years of service in the field of education as a teacher or a principal act as an influence in accessing them as gatekeepers. Further, I feel that as individuals reflect upon their own personal experiences faced while being involved in research for their postgraduate studies, their official involvements made them interested in providing help without any hesitation.

The school principals generally being busy were difficult to contact due to school activities during the day. However, I managed to contact them and get an appointment easily due to two reasons. First, they were working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions imposed. Secondly, the principals were involved in industrial action during the period, which provided me with an opportunity to get a time slot from them to conduct the interview without any hassle. Further, I appreciate how despite being engaged in industrial action during the period, all of them agreed to join in for interviews via Zoom without hesitation. This shows their positive attitude in supporting

academic engagement and also their willingness for knowledge construction by sharing their perceptions, experiences and understanding the new policy introduced on principal training in Sri Lanka.

I experienced the power relationship more acutely within the process of access and interviews with principals rather than with administrative officers. I feel that the principals felt that there was a hierarchical difference between them, being attached to school, and me to a university. Therefore, being contacted by an academic for research purposes was considered as a difficult and important job by them, a job that was respected. Further, while working with the principals, I felt that they saw my engagement as a difficult job with knowledge construction. So I realised that their understanding led to the development of the power relation between me as the researcher and the principal as the participant.

Further, all the principals addressed me as 'Madam' throughout the process whereas all the administrative officers addressed me by my name which was a significant difference between the administrative officers and the principals. I felt very comfortable when being referred to by my name, rather than being called Madam. However, I did not request to be called by my name, as I forgot to do so due to being more focused on the conduct of the interview over how they addressed me. On the other hand, I was careful to pay due respect to principals as school leaders as well as elites within the school context. I always addressed the ladies as 'Miss' and the gentlemen as 'Sir', in order to give them their respect. These are commonly used phrases in the context, which also helped to minimize the impact of power relations between me and the principals who were the participants of the study.

Conclusion

In this reflective article, I have shared my experiences about accessing and interviewing elites who are administrators in different capacities within different educational organisations in Sri Lanka. The process of contacting the elites was challenging due to their busy schedules and the imposed COVID-19 restrictions. Within the process, I had an overall plan and an idea of ‘what next’. Although the overall plan was implemented, steps within the plan had to be changed due to unavoidable circumstances, like the busy schedules of the elites. There were instances where my plans and expectations were not met as expected. In such instances, I had to wait, rethink or re-start from another angle. In my experience, I believe that there is no hard and fast rule to follow when accessing and conducting interviews with elites. According to Goldstein (2002) “getting the interview’ is more art than science” (p.669). Therefore, I believe that being successful in accessing and interviewing is an artistic and strategic

skill that is developed by novice researchers by being theoretically skilled while being engaged in the process. In addition, I believe in the importance of engaging in constructive discussions with the supervisors about how novices plan to conduct the interviews. These discussions are extremely helpful to prevent oneself from falling into pitfalls within the process, as the supervisors who are experienced researchers are well aware of. Further, I believe that novice researchers should be strengthened from their own strategic approaches to access and negotiate with organisational elites, by having a sound understanding of the context. This lays the foundation for developing trust and understanding between the novice researcher as the interviewer and the elites as the interviewees. All these points collectively matter for the successful completion of the interview as an effective tool for data collection. Finally, every step within the process and the qualities of the researcher cannot be easily learnt from books, but rather, are embodied and also conferred from experience.

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Bio

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Conference Report: TEALfest 2021 (Technology Enhanced Active Learning), University of Warwick, May 2021

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Abstract

TEALfest was a week-long "online festival for sharing technology enhanced active learning practice, research, ideas and experiences", organised and facilitated by the University of Warwick's Learning Design Consultancy Unit in May 2021 (University of Warwick, 2021). The festival consisted of a series of 41 events led by colleagues and guest speakers, focused on the theme of 'Beyond the bubble'. The organisers aimed to expand their horizons and look for inspiration outside their own practice, disciplines, university and indeed beyond the UK. The conference was free to attend and was hosted almost exclusively in MS Teams. I attended 11 sessions during the week, and I have collated my key learning points and 'lightbulb moments' from those sessions, with the aim of sharing best, flexible, and innovative practice in the online higher education learning space. I will do this by drawing out some of the key themes from the conference and reflecting upon my experience of attending a purely online conference.

My experience of attending TEALfest 2021

Serendipity, also known as LinkedIn, led me to TEALfest, hosted by my local university, the University of Warwick. That was of course immaterial, as it was held entirely online, so I and it could have been anywhere in the world. At least, I didn't have to deal with any time difference, which made it easier to work out which of the 41 sessions I could attend. Attending approximately a quarter of all sessions gave me, I think, a good idea of the substance and quality of the conference.

It was extremely well-organised and the technology mostly worked well. Sessions were 30-60 minutes long and the ones I attended each had 10 to 30 attendees. They were often co-led by two or more Warwick academics, with a few guest presenters from other universities or organisations, such as Jisc[1]. All presentations and workshops were well-led, interesting, and often thought-provoking. However, rather than report on them all individually, I have compiled my notes under four themes which emerged during the week: Learning and evolving; Maximising student engagement; Connecting a teaching and learning community; Usefulness and accessibility of technology.

The four key themes

Learning and evolving

Participants frequently mentioned the appetite for change and innovation in relation to digital teaching and learning, coupled with the need for training for all users, but especially those designing and delivering online teaching. Collaboration (between academic and professional staff, and with and between students) was seen as essential to best meet the needs of learners and their teachers, as well as using creativity to respond organically to emerging situations. Synchronous versus asynchronous sessions, and hybrid teaching (teaching students in the room and remotely at the same time – terminology is not always consistent, so it is important to be clear and define any new/ambiguous terms in this space), were much discussed, with top tips swapped and shared throughout the week. A recurring theme was the suggestion to be pragmatic and evolutionary, to start small (pedagogically and technologically), and to consider pedagogy, space, and technology in combination (Wilson & Randall, 2010, p.1096): "The idea of 'classroom' now incorporates the use of both physical and virtual space". Balancing positives, negatives, risks and benefits, also featured highly, such as balancing the benefits of recording a live session for some students against the risks of intrusion or invasion of privacy for some other students.

Another sort of balance was that of cognitive and emotional loads; teaching and learning online can be exhausting. Team teaching can help from both the teachers' and students' points of view; one delegate said that "*it just feels better*". Taking time to reflect on online practices was also seen as a key factor in successful and always evolving online teaching and learning.

Maximising student engagement

Much time was spent discussing the pros and cons of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning, but the consensus for both seemed to coalesce around a few key areas:

- Teaching small (size not defined) 'chunks' of learning interspersed with short interactive segments
- Making transcripts available for all recorded lectures/presentations (whether originally delivered live or as a recording)
- Indicating the content and length of any recordings, so learners know what to expect and how much time to set aside
- Using interactive activities and formative[2] quizzes

- Using reflective activities without necessarily right or wrong answers to promote deeper thinking
- Designing activities that can be used both online and in person

One session focused on a case study which I found especially interesting. The case study reported on 'immersive sprints', short but intensely focused sessions designed to develop and empower female undergraduate confidence, discussion, and presentation skills. The sprints were previously carried out in person over three full days plus a half-day session eight weeks later. However, since the start of the covid pandemic in 2020, the sprints have been run online as six four-hour sessions over two weeks, plus a seventh four-hour session eight weeks later. This required lots of intense preparation and working together, mainly behind the scenes, but was deemed successful. However, if given the choice, the organisers plan to deliver a hybrid version in the future, with some in person and some online sessions.

Connecting a teaching and learning community

Of particular interest to me and my area of research, was a strand of sessions focused on ways of promoting and connecting a teaching and learning community. This might include teachers supporting each other, swapping and sharing resources, and discussing and developing new ways of working, for example. Emerging ideas included such communities needing an initial nurture phase, which might be quite high maintenance for the organiser(s), in order to eventually become self-sustaining. Early nurturing actions might include asking potential members what they need or want from such a community. There are likely, of course, to be multiple perspectives, but a consensus will need to be reached, although there is nothing stopping a community hosting several sub-communities with slightly different though related focuses. I noted eight features of successful communities which I have used to build the following graphic representation:

Figure 1: Features of a Successful Teaching & Learning Community Model (author provided)

In any successful community, there is likely to be a small core of more active, leading members, a slightly larger group of moderately active members, and the rest of the members who might only be occasionally or rarely active (Wenger, 2002). Time is key, as nurturing, maturing, and moving to a sustainable model will take months or even years, and will depend on ongoing contact, communication, interaction, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. Time, shared events and activities, and individual relationships are all essential to help to create a sense of identity, belonging, and bonding, all of which are critical to the success of any community.

It was pointed out that virtual spaces mimic physical ones, so they should feel welcoming, comfortable, purposeful, and not solely utilitarian, and of course will continue to evolve once built. Communities should of course welcome new members or those who are interested in the subject matter but do not want to become members (but who might bring valuable input and points of view). Wenger (2002, p.112) says that “Effective community design is built on the collective experience of community members” but that the perspectives of outsiders to “develop and steward knowledge” and “help members see the possibilities” can be invaluable.

Usefulness and accessibility of technology

As you would expect, a range of technologies and applications were used and discussed across the 40+ sessions. The event was hosted exclusively in MS Teams, and most presenters spoke to a set of traditional PowerPoint slides. However, some used video, chat, and breakout rooms. Sessions were mainly quite interactive, sometimes using a Padlet (https://padlet.com for virtual post-its, colourful and collaborative), for example. Other platforms used or discussed included:

- Miro (https://miro.com for an infinite virtual whiteboard, also uses post-its, very flexible)
- Blackboard Collaborate (https://www.blackboard.com/en-uk/teaching-learning/collaboration-web-conferencing/blackboard-collaborate for interactive whiteboards, hand-raising, chat, polls, breakouts)
- Vevox (https://vevox.app/#/ for live polling, quizzes, Q&A)
- Canvas (https://www.instructure.com/en-gb for a flexible learning hub, lots of tools)
- MS Whiteboard (https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/microsoft-365/microsoft-whiteboard/digital-whiteboard-app for drawing, writing, and adding post-its)
- Jamboard (https://edu.google.com/intl/ALL_uk/products/jamboard/ for writing, adding images, connecting people)

This diversity of platforms (and I am certain I did not capture all that were used or discussed) reflected people looking for "practices that support and surround learning and teaching" (Phipps & Lanclos, 2019, p.68). Phipps & Lanclos argue for continued innovation in the use of technology to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment, describing the need for educators to persist in "experimenting with and growing their teaching practices, both with and without technology" (Phipps & Lanclos, 2019, p.83). There was discussion of *how* to gauge the usefulness and accessibility of tools. Figure 2 below, shows a series of questions it was suggested it would be worth considering when auditing tools.

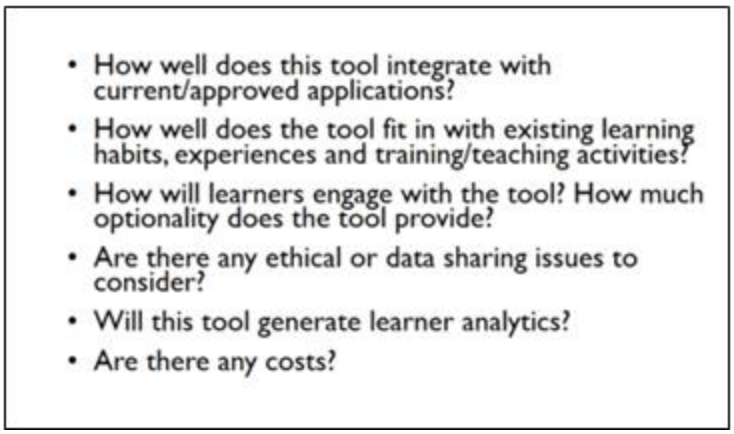

Figure 2: Questions to ask when auditing online tools (screenshot of slide, Dr Sarah Penny, University of Warwick, with permission)

As well as considering these questions, there was discussion at some sessions about practitioners feeling overwhelmed by the perceived multitude of available tools, and the impossibility of becoming an expert in all of them, in terms of their purpose, utility, and cost, let alone having time to test and practise sufficiently with them. It was acknowledged that some tools might work better for teachers but might not work so well from the learners' point of view, and vice versa. This was seen as an insoluble conundrum that only time, experience, and further consideration might help to solve.

Conclusions

My overall impression of the conference was that everybody involved was keen to learn from each other and to keep the good bits of the digital pivot from March 2020. There was clearly some anxiety about the impact of that pivot on learners and staff, but discussion mainly steered away from that towards practical tips and support. The collaborative nature of the sessions led to rich knowledge sharing and co-construction of new knowledge as dialogue developed.

There was considerable "space agnostic learning" (Bryant, 2021), where practitioners were wary of technology taking precedence over pedagogy, and wanted to ensure that high quality teaching and learning could be delivered in different ways in different spaces. There was a strong suggestion that technology (in the broadest sense) should be carefully audited and matched to what needs to be taught.

Some attendees expressed anxiety about their duty of care to learners, which is not the same as academic engagement or participation, and about disengagement, or perhaps disconnection or potential disengagement, which can be tricky to judge or monitor remotely. This related to another strand of concern, which is organisational delays in decision-making related to technology policy and/or purchasing, which can create uncertainty and frustration for staff and students alike. These concerns align

with a need for clarity about what is possible, what is permissible, and what is desirable, which are of course not necessarily the same thing.

Overall, I found the conference stimulating and extremely interesting, both from a pedagogic point of view, and as an exercise in attending an exclusively online extended event. The content and networking opportunities were both immensely valuable to me as a researcher, and as an educational professional. I welcomed making some new contacts at Warwick and I followed them up with one-to-one conversations over the following weeks.

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Bio

Marianne Talbot is a PhD researcher at the University of Leeds School of Education. Her area of interest is the impact of professional development in educational assessment on qualified teachers, their assessment practice, and their influence on others around them. Her experience is in qualifications and assessment development and evaluation, project management including impact assessments, and course leadership for the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors, based at the University of Hertfordshire.

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